

The Hypocrisies of Wonka's Chocolate World: Flipping Dahl's Story Inside Out

Paige Min

In a Tortoiseshell: *In the following introduction and excerpted body paragraphs from her final Writing Seminar paper on Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Paige Min adopts an **against-the-grain argument**. She complicates the mainstream understanding of the text, namely that good children like Charlie who resist capitalistic temptations are rewarded while bad children who succumb to their desires are not. Paige frames her **motive** and **thesis** by **orienting** the reader to this common argument. Based on a **close reading** of the text, she argues that the story actually normalizes dangerous elements of capitalism and teaches children to blindly accept authority.*

Excerpt

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory by Roald Dahl illustrates with fantastic detail what may be every young child's sweet-toothed dreams, with a magical factory and a small, fairy-like man named Willy Wonka, the sole innovator of impossible sweets and candies. The book is commonly understood as a moral of good and bad children, in which the good child, protagonist Charlie Bucket, is graciously rewarded by Wonka with a lifetime supply of supernatural delicacies and the factory in which they are made, while greedy children are met with misfortune. Dahl's bad children depict uniquely extreme embodiments of overconsumption, building what appears to be a criticism of greed, the spoiled wealthy, and consumer culture. In fact, scholar David Rudd argues that Wonka exhibits hypocrisies that capture perfectly the essence of modern capitalism and its allure, allowing Dahl to successfully impart his lesson through a deserving Charlie who resists such enticement. Yet the simplicity of this narrative – with punishment for antagonists and a happy ending for the good hero – is immensely deceiving. Wonka's hypocrisies and the insidious capitalistic elements in Dahl's story actually condition young readers to the exploitation and colonialism that characterize toxic consumer culture, perpetuating the very ideas that Rudd claims to be the subject of Dahl's criticism. Perhaps more concerning, Rudd fails to recognize that such ideas prompt an essential reconsideration of what it really means to be a good child in Dahl's story: our child hero Charlie and Dahl's chocolate fantasy in truth socializes children to the idea of blindly accepting authority.

Wonka is the epitome of glorification, his otherworldly image creating a mysteriousness that allows Dahl to pass him by as the dreamy exemplar of good and splendor. But as Rudd elaborates, there is more to the enchanting man than his candy and chocolate. Wonka's curious assembly of workers, Oompa-Loompas, are portrayed as cheerful little men, but are the first of Wonka's hypocrisies that allude to colonialism at the roots of consumerism, a malice that is conveniently, and disturbingly, justified. Wonka proudly explains that his Oompa-Loompas were "imported direct from Loompaland" (61), "smuggled ... over in large packing cases with holes in them," a commodification of people that evokes thoughts of colonialism and enslaved workers (63). Yet, we are quickly offered an appeasing explanation, which Rudd calls "a fairly standard colonial response" (Rudd 127): the "poor little Oompa-Loompas" would otherwise have to live on a meager diet of awful green caterpillars and in constant fear of "the whangdoodles and the hornswogglers" (61). [...] Rudd notes colonialism is often justified in this way, "conceal[ing] the forced migration and enslavement of many victims in the process" (Rudd 131). However, he does not consider the ramifications of obscuring such messages with cheerful faces. Scholar Herbert Kohl, in his exploration of *Babar the Elephant*, quotes Frantz Fanon to argue that "internalization of the colonists' culture [is] one of the deepest forms of dehumanization experienced by victims of colonialism" (Kohl 21). The fact that the disturbing nature of Oompa-Loompa labor is qualified and normalized rather than criticized undermines Dahl's lesson by letting perhaps the greatest sins of capitalism slip by. These evils of consumerism that taint Wonka's morality are both overlooked and comfortably internalized when the attention is drawn to his charming factory and its happy, whimsical Oompa-Loompas instead.

The very foundations of Wonka's fantastical world are brought into question, and we are forced to reconsider what, therefore, it really means to be a good child in Dahl's story, and whether Charlie's happy ending is really just a pleasant miracle. The charm and innocence of candy makes it "easy to accept," without question, Dahl's story as it is given to us "and even to internalize some of the attitudes and ideas it presents" (Kohl 5). And according to Rudd, Dahl effectively allows the reader to identify with Charlie and his depravity, "nurturing our own feelings of desire" (Rudd 140). Perhaps this is what blinds both Rudd and the reader from the most concerning part of Charlie and his "good hero" character: that he is absolutely obedient and complacent, that he is rewarded for such behavior, and that he is wholly oblivious to the fact that Wonka propels the very system that oppresses both him and his family.

Charlie is essentially powerless to Wonka. Like Kohl says of Babar the elephant, he “does what is told, is as passive as a paper doll and as uncomplaining,” and it is hard to imagine him ever opposing the maker of his beloved chocolates (Kohl 7). Rudd quotes scholar Jackie Stallcup to speak of a “‘good lesson’ about the rewards of ‘proper’ behavior” (Rudd 126), but what is really conveyed to children is “that blind acceptance of authority is good behavior” (Kohl 20). Charlie’s goodness comes only from the fact that he conforms to Wonka’s consumerist system, and he otherwise lacks any input and perspective on Wonka or his ultimate decision, making this “thoroughly undemocratic way of governance seem natural and unquestioned” (Kohl 21). The unexplored potential consequences of this kind of obedience may be harrowing: in effect, Charlie undertakes the institution that subjects him to poverty in the first place. He appears to be unaware that he is being put into power of a system that profits from taking advantage of those like his father and neither does he realize the reality of the Oompa-Loompas’ role as laborers, thus, unknowingly feeding the monster that is exploitative consumerism.

Author Commentary

Paige Min

As a kid, I was an avid reader and loved creative writing, but both hobbies were naturally pushed out of my life as I got older. Assigned as part of Professor Moran's class "Imagining Childhood," this essay was one of the first revitalizations I experienced as a writer. I was drawn to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* because Roald Dahl was one of my favorite authors as a child: I loved the quirky stories and Quentin Blake illustrations.

Before my first read-through, I knew that I barely recalled the story at all. If anything, I went in with more preexisting knowledge about some of the popular scholarly arguments than the actual plot itself. Surely, from the start of the book, something felt very holistically unsettling. Out of this persistent feeling, my motive formed like a cloud of vague and indistinguishable thoughts: my job was then to pinpoint and put into words this obscure discomfort and what exactly made the book feel so wrong.

With a subversive attitude, I decided that the culprit wasn't necessarily found in one aspect of the book – the Oompa Loompas or the consumerism – but in a much larger notion that I felt traces of in every page. It was at that point that I started to flip the story inside out. Establishing that there was something fundamentally disturbing about the book in its entirety was a refreshing idea that made me eager to argue for my perspective. My primary goal became to illustrate, as clearly as possible, this broad impression so that my reader could experience *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* the way I experienced it.

Throughout the writing process, I felt an invigorating creative freedom in trying to paint a picture of my perceptions within the scope of academic writing. With the help of Professor Moran and fellow classmates, I learned a lot about building strong theses and positioning myself in the scholarly context. Improving these skills felt, rather than like limitations, like dependable tools that could help me communicate my ideas more effectively than I could have without them. Like this, my nagging hunch began to materialize into an essay.

Editor Commentary

Ellie Shapiro

Recognizing and admitting to confusion or uncertainty while reading a text can be difficult. As Paige illustrates in her essay on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and expands upon in her commentary, it is often in these feelings of confusion, uncertainty, and skepticism that we find the most original and exciting **arguments**.

Starting with Paige's **introduction**, each sentence serves a clear purpose in challenging our preconceived ideas about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Her **introduction** hooks us with a reminder of the sweet, candy-filled world of Willy Wonka, and puts our fond memories of the story's good and bad children into the context of scholarly analysis. Paige **orients** the reader to David Rudd's argument and introduces the themes of "greed, the spoiled wealthy, and consumer culture." After establishing the common understanding of the story, she quickly changes course with the single sentence: "Yet, the simplicity of this narrative [...] is immensely deceiving." She indicates that her essay will dare to counter this mainstream reading, the trademark of an **against-the-grain argument**.

In proving her **against-the-grain argument**, Paige's essay is effective in part because of its **close reading** of the text, exemplified in the second excerpted paragraph. The **evidence** Paige draws to illustrate the themes of colonialism in the book serves a dual purpose: it fleshes out the mainstream understanding of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as put forth by Rudd and, later in the paragraph, helps support her own interpretation. In doing so, we can see the reasoning behind Rudd's argument, specifically where it is lacking, and how Paige's **analysis** fills in those gaps.

In addition to performing a close-reading of the text, Paige demonstrates the sophisticated move of using a secondary source, Herbert Kohl, as a theoretical framework to bolster her original **analysis**. While Kohl focuses on a different children's book, *Babar the Elephant*, his theory proves useful in analyzing *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Paige takes advantage of Kohl's ideas of obedience, complacency, and passivity in Babar the Elephant to draw similar conclusions about Charlie's character.

Paige ultimately crafts a compelling and well-supported argument that causes even the most devoted *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* fans to reconsider the implications of the story. As we all learn in Writing Seminar, a great thesis says something surprising, maybe even a little strange. It may or may not also say something that forever changes the way we read a seemingly innocent childhood favorite.

Professor Commentary

Patrick Moran, Princeton Writing Program

The Italian writer Italo Calvino wrote that there should “be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth. Even if the books have remained the same . . . we have most certainly changed, and our encounter will be an entirely new thing.”¹ Paige Min does exactly this in her analysis of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, arguing that the book’s simple lesson about goodness and just rewards isn’t so simple after all. Willy Wonka’s fortune is built on the colonial exploitation of the Oompa Loompas, and his amazing innovations in the chocolate world condition children to become insatiable consumers in a toxic capitalist system. Paige builds on the work of other Dahl scholars who have begun to point out Wonka’s hypocrisy. In particular, she challenges David Rudd, suggesting that he overlooks the most concerning part of the book’s lesson: Charlie is rewarded for being a “good” boy, but what does it ultimately mean to be good in a culture that is fundamentally bad? In effect, Charlie’s reward for outlasting the other greedy children is something of a poisoned chalice, or in this case, a poisoned chocolate bar; he inherits the very system that has oppressed his starving family. Paige argues that *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* isn’t a book about a good boy being rewarded for his goodness but rather for his dangerous complacency. As it turns out, Wonka’s factory not only produces Everlasting Gobstoppers, but also the next generation of imperialists. It’s a bold and uncomfortable claim that forces us to read against the grain of our earliest impressions of a beloved classic.

¹ Italo Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?,” *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1986), 127.

Works Cited

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Bios

Paige Min, '24 is a prospective AB Computer Science major. She loves the arts and hopes to carry this lifelong passion into whatever work she does in the future. At Princeton, Paige is part of Matriculate, *The Daily Princetonian*, and Business Today as of her first year. Paige wrote this essay as a first-year.

Ellie Shapiro, '21 is a senior majoring in Electrical Engineering. To satisfy her love for teaching, discussing writing, and analyzing rhetoric, she devotes approximately 50% of her time to working at the Writing Center as a Head Fellow and Editor of *Tortoise*. Ellie spends her free time reading, cycling, and sailing on the Long Island Sound off the coast of Connecticut.