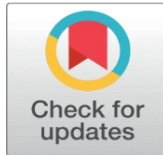


THE VULNERABILITY BEHIND THE TERROR: AN ADLERIAN SKETCH OF AGATHA TRUNCHBULL FROM ROALD DAHL'S *MATILDA*

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ABSTRACT

The paper provides a brief introduction to Roald Dahl, one of the most beloved children's authors of all time. Aside from witty punch lines, fascinating worlds and iconic literary characters, Dahl's works serve as a reservoir of diverse villains. The paper focuses on *Matilda's* tyrannical villain Agatha Trunchbull, well-known for her outrageous savagery. For anybody familiar with Dahl's work, the villain deserves strong condemnation for her child-endangering actions. The paper takes a psychological approach to explain the hostile nature of Miss Trunchbull utilizing the theory of Individual Psychology as postulated by Alfred Adler. It constitutes an attempt to unravel the psychological vulnerabilities that plague the menacing villain.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, Matilda, Villainy, Trunchbull, Adlerian Individual Psychology, Alfred Adler, Inferiority, Superiority

1. INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl, born on 13 September 1916, was an acclaimed British author in the literary arena of children and young adults. His work continues to mesmerise young readers worldwide through well-appreciated novels: *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), and *Matilda* (1988). The colossal successes of his stories have led to several theatrical and screen adaptations over the years. In a 2017 poll by *Canon UK* of over 2000 adults, Dahl surpassed Shakespeare and Dickens to emerge as Britain's Greatest Storyteller of All Time. The Welsh-born author of Norwegian descent died

on 23 November 1990, leaving a legacy of iconic fictional characters such as Willy Wonka, Mr Fox and Matilda Wormwood [Kemble \(2017\)](#).

Although Dahl's writings cater to young readers, they contain macabre themes with villainy concerning borderline disturbing imagery. The intensity of graphic violence is toned down by the presence of comical scenes and whimsical plotlines. Dahl's books feature dark humour and ruthless injustice where adult antagonists are usually the perpetrators and child protagonists remain at the receiving ends. In *James and the Giant Peach*, Dahl presents a grim picture of James' childhood as his parents were devoured by a carnivorous rhinoceros. The boy then is left to the mercy of his cruel aunts Sponge and Spiker who subject the boy to cruelty and harm. James secures his revenge in the end as his aunts meet their ends as a giant peach crushes them to death. Given its dark and grotesque themes, the novel's UK release came six years later (1967) than its 1961 US release. [Cameron \(1972\)](#) In 1972, Eleanor Frances Cameron, critic and Dahl's contemporary in children's literature vilified the latter's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for being what she described as sadistic, shallow, hypocritical, and distasteful. A 2023 article on BBC Culture addresses the author's supposed portrayal of mortality, violence, profanity, and celebration of juvenile disobedience which seems to offend the puritanical audience. The article probes into Dahl's penchant for dark humour and how there is a possibility that he drew inspiration from grim circumstances in his life. Barbara Basbanes Richter in her paper "Roald Dahl and Danger in Children's Literature" (2015) asserts that young readers are drawn to sinister themes. She further states that children display the preparedness to face real-life challenges by reading about dangerous situations in some distant land. Richter addressed the controversy surrounding *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* where misbehaving children are subjected to severe disciplinary action by Willy Wonka. However, the themes associated with danger in Dahl's books (where sadistic adult villains expose children to peril) are what one may call, in Richter's view, instructive tools of teaching and learning. Literary works such as Dahl's juvenile stories

act as guides and allow for critical examination of societies where danger is ever-present. Children may take some comfort in reading them, but the stories explore themes that are frightening and difficult to understand. The experience of childhood is full of anxiety, and fanciful stories that address those fears are essential tools needed by children to navigate the complexities of their world. [Richter \(2015\)](#), p. 334.

Villainy thrives where danger and injustice are at play. Dahl's novels, despite the age of their readership, contain cathartic villainous moments where the sufferers languish from physical, verbal, and mental abuse. He created villains that left lasting impressions on the young fascinated yet terror-stricken readers. Among Dahl's literary inventory of diverse antagonists, Agatha Trunchbull from *Matilda* stands out for her terrorising persona and condemnable crimes against children. Agatha's deep-rooted prejudice against children forms the basis of her motivation for her diabolical designs against helpless children. Although the principal storyline is meant to be lighthearted, the nature and intensity of her villainy rouses one's curiosity regarding her psyche. Miss Trunchbull seems to be desperately clinging to her goal of waking up each day to hurt a child for no apparent reason. She instantly gets agitated by the sight of individuals who embody qualities and physical attributes she lacks and in the process displays violent outbursts. Hence, the paper shall endeavour to unravel the psychological vulnerability that lies beneath Miss Trunchbull's menacing exterior from the perspective of Adlerian Individual Psychology.

The Trunchbull and Her Reign of Terror: Miss Trunchbull, the primary villain of *Matilda* is a ruthless fifty-something-year-old woman who serves as the headmistress of Crunchem Hall Primary School. She is the maternal aunt and legal guardian to Jennifer Honey, also a teacher at the same school whose soft demeanour serves as a stark contrast to Trunchbull's aggressive conduct. It is strongly implied that Trunchbull murdered Magnus Honey, Jennifer's father, and made it appear a suicide. The Trunchbull as she is commonly known in the novel has masculine features with strong and athletic limbs and exhibits the aggression of a beast. What seems striking to the observant reader is her disdain towards children—little girls to be precise—to the point of provoking her violent impulses. Miss Trunchbull holds discipline in the highest regard and dresses in military garb, accentuating her masculine features to intimidate those around her. Dahl describes her as an imposing and fearsome woman with an unattractive face. It remains a mystery as to how the eccentric educator secured her present job at a children's school.

The inspiration for Miss Trunchbull's towering physique and athletic traits appears to have been drawn from the historical athlete Faina Melnik. The discus thrower won gold at the Summer Olympics in 1972, an event that finds its parallel in Dahl's *Matilda*. The novel's hubristic villain is a former decorated Olympic athlete who represented Britain in the hammer throw sport—an achievement that remains her lifelong obsession. In the novel, Miss Trunchbull's fixation on her physical prowess, particularly the strength of her right arm, influences her disciplinary punishments on students. One of Dahl's traumatic childhood experiences inspired the scene from the chapter "The First Miracle" concerning a juvenile prank played on Miss Trunchbull. The villain's fury echoes the revolting temperament of a confectioner from Dahl's boyhood years whom he refers to as one Mrs Pratchett in his autobiography *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. The inspirational source for the pseudonym of Mrs Pratchett is attributed to a certain Mrs Katy Morgan Ballinger (2016) who ran a sweet shop in Llandaff, Cardiff where Dahl lived until he was 9 years old. The author recalls getting severely canned by his headmaster after the sweet shop owner reported on a distasteful prank.

Miss Trunchbull's terrorising appearance has been cinematically immortalised by actress Pamela Ferris in the 1996 adaptation directed by DeVito (1996). In her rude and coarse speeches, one can deduce the human side of the fearsome and stoic educator. The villain candidly proclaims her abhorrence for young children. Here, the question of why she harbours such sentiments for innocent children arises. In the chapter titled "Miss Honey's Story" readers get a glimpse of Miss Trunchbull's dark history. She subjects her orphaned niece Jennifer to physical, emotional, and verbal abuse so much that her niece likens her to a demon. Jennifer's traumatic experiences leave a lasting impact on her as she grows into a timid adult haunted by childhood horrors. She also insinuated that Trunchbull murdered her father Magnus and made it appear to be a suicide. Jennifer is further deprived of her rightful inheritance and is forced to live a life of poverty. The headmistress subjects deviant children to psychological torture by locking them up in a dark room called the Chokey. The cupboard-like room has broken glass shards and rusty nails on the walls so the already frightened children could not sit down. Not only is the Chokey hazardous, but it also evoked claustrophobia in its confined captives.

Throughout the novel, Miss Trunchbull bullies and abuses students. She punishes Amanda Thripp for styling her hair in pigtails by grabbing her by the hair and tossing her in the air like a hammer throw; makes Bruce Bogtrotter eat an 18-inches wide cake and smashes the china plate on his head after he succeeds; throws Julius Rottwinkle out of the window for the offence of eating candy during lesson

hours; grabs Rupert by the hair and lifts him up before dropping him on the floor and injuring his scalp; and stretches Eric Ink's ears using her bare hands and holds him aloft for failing at spelling.

Dahl describes Miss Trunchbull as an abusive person in every sense. Not only is she violent, but she also hurles abusive words at children. The book has plenty of instances where Trunchbull throws unpleasant words and threats to intimidate children. Miss Trunchbull often declared her contempt for children and wished that they should never have been born. "I've never been able to understand why small children are so disgusting. They are the bane of my life...they should be got rid of as early as possible" Dahl (2003), pp. 233-234. She is known to laugh and revel in the suffering of children after inflicting harmful punishments in the guise of correcting their indiscipline.

An Adlerian Sketch of the Socially Depraved Miss Trunchbull: The villainy in *Matilda* as displayed by Miss Trunchbull and her various hateful statements make the reader wonder what could have caused a supposed caregiver and figure of guidance like Agatha to exhibit a ruthless persona. The stoic educator stands firm by her rigid motto and utters, "That's the way to make them learn...it's no good telling them. You've got to hammer it into them. There's nothing like a little twisting and twiddling to encourage them to remember things. It concentrates their minds wonderfully" Dahl (2003), p. 227. Such an utterance among many other similar sentiments expressed by Miss Trunchbull gives the impression that she revels in perpetrating violence more than caring for the welfare of children. In the novel, the villainous headmistress' actions go unnoticed by society and ironically, it is described that she enjoys the position of a respectable intellectual. In yet another disturbing instance, Miss Trunchbull proclaims with pride that in her years of experience as an educator, she discovered that kindness does not benefit children. She goes on to cite the example of Mr Wackford Squeers from Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* to support her belief in rigid corporal punishment for children. In her extreme practice of rigid discipline, the villain becomes the very embodiment of fear and anxiety for children; and turns into a diabolical individual who is arrogant, violent, narcissistic, and sadistic.

To understand Miss Trunchbull's depravity and rigid personality, the villain shall be studied from the perspective of Individual Psychology as postulated by Alfred Adler (1870-1937). Adler in his essay "Individual Psychology" talked about a connection between a person's psychological traits and certain physiological weaknesses present at the time of birth. An individual's physiological degree of excellence has a role in shaping his or her mental development.

Children born with hereditary organic weaknesses exhibit not only a physical necessity to compensate for the defect, and tend to overcompensate, but that the entire nervous system, too, may take part in this compensation; especially the mind, as a factor of life, may suffer a striking exaggeration in the direction of the defective function (breathing, eating, seeing, hearing, talking, moving, feeling, or even thinking), so that this overemphasised function may become the mainspring of life, in so far as a "successful compensation" occurs. Adler (1965), p. 97.

Adler's holistic approach to understanding an individual's psychology emphasised the role of goal-oriented compensatory practices that shape one's mind and behaviour. Although Dahl did not provide details about Miss Trunchbull's early life, there are aspects of the villain's behaviour through which one can deduce her intense inclinations towards superiority. Individual Psychology theorises that humans are constantly striving for superiority, although the degree of success may

vary from one individual to another. The villain of *Matilda* repeatedly seeks validation as a figure of authority in Crunchem Hall by terrorising the staff and children through her appearance and actions. She carries herself in such a manner as walking in long strides holding a riding crop that her silhouette in the hallway strikes fear in the young beholders. Each day she finds a helpless student to bully, and upon releasing her aggressive impulse, she feels a great sense of achievement. For instance, in the chapter titled "Throwing the Hammer" she flings Amanda Thripp across the playground in her classic hammer throw fashion and upon her successful feat lets out a satisfactory remark "Not bad...considering I'm not in strict training. Not bad at all." [Dahl \(2003\)](#), p. 167 Adlerian psychoanalysis focuses on the effect of the body on the mind and how an individual's external relations wholly affect the adult personality. Adler expounded that an individual is born with a sense of inferiority that he or she feels the need to overcome upon interaction with the external environment or society. What Adler terms "organic inferiority" motivates an individual to compensate for deficient qualities, in the process leading to overcompensation in some individuals which results in excelling in the concerned areas. For instance, [Woodworth & Mary \(1951\)](#) illustrate how an individual inflicted with a visual defect may pay significant attention to remedy the shortcoming and in the process develop a passion for visual stimuli. In such a case, overcompensation may turn the individual into someone who excels in the field of fine arts. In the literary case of Miss Trunchbull, she excels in the sport of hammer throw and is described by the author as having represented Britain in the Olympic games. Although there lacks historical evidence about the athlete's suffering from any physiological deficiency, Dahl left ample clues to suggest that Miss Trunchbull regularly and obsessively devoted herself to perfecting her athletic prowess. She loves physical training, the result of which is evident in her "bull neck, in the big shoulders, the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs" [Dahl \(2003\)](#) p. 115. Her obsession with physical training implies that Miss Trunchbull is self-conscious and perhaps she tries to overcompensate for her inferior feelings associated with her appearance by adhering to a strict workout and bulking up. Dahl mentions that she does not possess an attractive face and coupled with her large build, a young Agatha growing up must have felt dissatisfied with her appearance. One can conjecture that she must have been ridiculed and bullied in school, the very place where she now is a figure of superiority. The enormously large villain is described to be particularly proud of her right arm which she profusely trains by lifting and tossing weights. She believes that large boys prove useful for practice as they, according to her, weigh almost the same as the metal ball used in a hammer throw. According to Adler, a malfunction in a body part may affect the body as a whole including the person's psyche. The organ inferiority that plagued Miss Trunchbull is unclear, yet there is a possibility that she strove to overcome some physical features that her subjective perception interpreted as defects. It could be related to her movement of limbs or her uniquely huge physique that caused her physical and mental discomfort. Adler's focus on organ or bodily inferiority gradually moved to socially inflicted inferiority. This kind of inferiority may be developed as a result of socio-economic disadvantages and upbringing. It is possible that Miss Trunchbull's inferiority intensified as she struggled to assimilate with ease into her social circle. An individual's inferior mechanisms occur within the framework of the society he or she is exposed to. Miss Trunchbull never fit in the traditional mould of her sex and transpired towards a masculine appeal so far as to detest girls and boys with long hair. Her aggressive drive seems to paint a kind of delusional arrogance. Miss Trunchbull denies ever having been a child herself aside from one instance in the novel where she claims she was not a child for very long

and became a woman quickly. "I was never a small person...I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way" Dahl (2003), p. 221. Further, vulnerable traits of Miss Trunchbull that can be regarded as a sign of weakness in the formidable villain are her intense fear of amphibians and the paranormal. Her first phobia surfaces in an event in which she panics and lets out a barrage of foul language in a state of agitated frenzy upon seeing a newt followed by a violent outburst. Miss Trunchbull's fear of the supernatural is significantly severe that it drives her to leave the town in the end. These troubling events for the villain are conducive to the theory that Agatha Trunchbull's sense of inferiority partly arises from her phobias. All feelings of fear, discomfort, suspicion, or even hostility are connected with one's sense of inferiority. Hence, while Miss Trunchbull is helpless about her organic phobias, she compensates for her inferiority by becoming an accomplished athlete and a figure of threat.

Individual Psychology propounds the concept of the aggression drive in an individual's psyche. Adler theorised that the aggressive force—present since birth—coupled with feelings of inferiority may affect a person's professional choice in life. An individual's aggressive force manifests in career paths such as education, medicine, law, or preaching. Such vocational paths present an individual with the opportunity to dominate others in society. Miss Trunchbull's role as Crunchem Hall's headmistress allows her to not only feel powerful but also to instil fear among students and teachers alike. In the school, she is a figure of tyranny and in society, she is a respectable educator charged with the noble goal of disciplining children. Miss Trunchbull's aggressive expressions find outlets through personality traits such as conceit, apathy, criminal behaviour, condescension, and fury. She also displays a deep aversion for young girls and interestingly in one instance, the reference to married women provokes her irritation. Miss Trunchbull infamously states that girls are more dangerous than boys and expresses how much they disgust her. Her outrageous remark arising from the delusion that she was never a little girl represents what Individual Psychology would describe as "guiding fiction" Woodworth & Mary (1951), p. 301. Trunchbull's exaggerated fictional goal in her quest for supremacy perhaps led her to adopt masculine practices and renounce her biological attributes. Further, Adler's concept of the style of life asserts that an individual adopts lifestyle practices based on his or her ideal vision of the creative self. This theory explains the villain's lifestyle patterns, routine practices, and clothing habits—her outfit choices include dressing in a military uniform with a riding crop as a power-wielding accessory and her hair set in a tight bun. Individual Psychology implies that "man is not the product of infantile repressions nor even of the physical nor social limitations which his life history may record. He 'creates' himself by the attitudes he takes toward such accidents of his existence." (p. 303) In that regard, Miss Trunchbull successfully created a unique persona for herself where she lives her ideal. Crunchem Hall is her territory of which she is the supreme commander and she has maximum control, thus achieving her sense of superiority.

2. CONCLUSION

Miss Trunchbull's villainy can be understood in light of the Adlerian principle, in that she gravitated towards aggression and violence as a result of her insatiable need to achieve dominance. The villain's hostile nature—abusive vocabulary, violent impulses, arrogance, and apathy— stems from her innate feelings of inadequacy. Based on Adlerian psychoanalysis, an individual's insufficiency is relative to the social environment around him or her. Prompted by her interaction with the external world, Miss Trunchbull spiralled towards rigidity in her attempt

to adopt her ideal image to fill the void of her inferiority. The goal-oriented theory of Adler lucidly sheds light on the violent tendencies of Dahl's villain. Miss Trunchbull's rudeness and the insatiable need to prove her dominance show that she tries too hard to assert her authority even when the situation does not demand it. And yet, beneath the domineering exterior of Miss Trunchbull, we see a paranoid individual who dedicated her whole existence to meeting the demands of her ideal notion of superiority and in the process becomes a destructive force for those around her. Her perception of the ideal self is an individual that is difficult to admire, appreciate or pity given her history of criminal behaviour. Nonetheless, beneath the mask of tyranny, and besides wearing the hat of an over-achiever, lies Agatha Trunchbull's vulnerable self-shrouded in intense inferiority.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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