

# THE SUBVERSIVE DAHL: WHEN VILLAINS GET WHAT THEY DESERVE

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**Abstract:** Roald Dahl's literature will be considered a vehicle for carrying Primary Education students to emotionally meaningful learning. They will be gradually discovering Dahl's world throughout some of his well-known heroes and most evil characters in order to analyze not only their behavior, but the treatment given to them by the author and the relation to the different responses of children as readers. In this way, personal involvement and empathy will be fostered in our students. By contrast, villains more often than not will receive what they deserve. Would it be one of their favorite aspects when reading Dahl's stories?

**Keywords:** Roald Dahl, Children's' Literature, Education, Emotional-Intelligence, Heroes, Villains.

**Resumen:** La literatura de Roald Dahl se considerará un vehículo para conducir a los estudiantes de educación primaria hacia un aprendizaje emocionalmente significativo. Paulatinamente, descubrirán el mundo de Dahl a través de algunos de sus héroes así como de sus malvados villanos para analizar no solo su comportamiento, sino el tratamiento que éstos reciben por parte del autor y las diferentes respuestas de los niños/as como lectores/as. De este modo, se fomentará la empatía, incluso a través de los villanos, que en la mayoría de los casos, recibirán su merecido. ¿Será la parte favorita del alumnado al leer a Dahl?

**Palabras clave:** roald dahl, literatura infantil, educación, inteligencia emocional, héroes, villanos.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with, it would be interesting to reflect to reflect about the following question; is it possible to adapt sensitive and controversial issues to students in a critical and attractive way? Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students, staff and members of the educative institution in general become a collection of a multitude of different ethnic, cultural,

religious and ideological backgrounds. Current learning communities represent a wide diversity in language, personality, abilities, values and cultural backgrounds. In this way, this heterogeneity is embedded in our educative institutions and probably in all aspects of the current life in countless ways. "Teaching, advising, administering, and communicating within this diverse contexts requires multicultural skills, knowledge, and awareness for effectiveness" (Ibarra 2011:151).

Having considered this statement it is clear that students as well as teachers must be aware of the importance of valuing the multitude of talents that each person could offer regardless of its cultural background or customs. Consequently, the following proposal is intended for those who believe in the development of the children as open- minded and critical beings and understand ethically the course of a lifetime in the world we are living in. It also seems to me essential to provide these students, especially in the Primary Stages with the required tools drawing their attention to the concept of empathy and the way emotions are involved in the process of education. Moreover, using as means of transport "glorumptious" Roald Dahl's literature they will experience different conflicts and attitudes towards them not only from the heroes point of view, but from the villains' perspective.

Whether it is assumed that fiction can be a portrait of reality in the way characters are emotionally linked to readers, Dahl's narrative characters, especially the villains will be the point of departure of the analysis that will be carried out by means of Greimas' actant model (1966) and will include the schematization of all those character being centered on evil figures, but not as it has been done up until now. In the case of this paper, the negative aspects of all those characters would be pointed and emphasized as tools to be worked on with students in a positive way, taking advantage of the fact that this supposes one of their favorite aspects together with the punishment that they receive. This would help teachers to make students aware of the importance of avoiding falling in stereotypes. Thus, it is crucial for students at these ages to distinguish between the ridiculous image that Dahl reflect of the villains and the reality in which we are living in; in which no matter how someone looks or the conditions people may have when a person behaves correctly and empathetically with others.

Moreover, when considering current research in Children's Literature, it is shown that Children's and Young People's literature commonly receives relatively little attention and few academic scrutinies. With "relatively" I mean that this is actually considered a field of research well renowned for some academics but in many occasions tend to be ignored for others who account that this area should not be compared at the same level of other literature strands such as; comparative literature or universal literature. Conversely, prior research reveals how these texts intended for the youngest form a complex web not only literary, but pedagogic in terms of appropriateness and implementation. Apart from the literary discourse they also involve language learning, culture, gender and multiple values. This is the reason why I am mainly interested in the dynamic relationship between children's literature and its cultural, social and emotional environment, especially in the context of English Language Learning.

Supporting this idea, in *Understanding Children's Literature* points that "Children's books are a matter of private delight, which means, perhaps, that they are real literature

– if ‘literature’ consists of texts which engage, change, and provoke intense responses in readers” (Hunt 2006:1).

Ultimately, this proposal reflects the vindication of the value of written books as emotional tools to educate and help students in understanding what values are for. Moreover, the relevance of making children and youth aware of the importance of acquiring reading habits will be also considered, especially for their own entertainment and pleasure. As it is reflected in *A Guide for Using Matilda in the Classroom*;

A good book can touch our lives like a good friend. It can stimulate our imaginations, inform our minds, inspire our higher selves, and fill our time with magic! With a good book, we are never lonely or bored. And a good book only gets better with time, because each reading brings us new meaning. Each new story is a treasure to cherish forever (Grace 1998: 3).

## 2 ANARCHIC AND SUBVERSIVE DAHL

The world-wide known Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is considered for many a prominent figure in the field of literature, not only for children, but for adults. This is one of the reasons for choosing him for the Foreign Language class; while children learn and enjoy English at the same time, they become increasingly more interested in reading by themselves. In this way, they could become life-long readers and critical-thinkers since their early ages. In relation to this, it is important to add that students will also have the opportunity to get in touch with different peculiar stories and characters and to discover one of the most important features of his writing: the unexpected endings that keep the reader (child or adult) hung up on since the very beginning to the end of the course of the plot. The fact of being one of the most successful British authors will also lead children to be immersed in many aspects of the British culture and ways of living.

Apart from these practical applications of his works, as the most representative feature of his writing, is that he mainly reflects the reality in which we are living in through problems, negative and heroic attitudes, realistic situations of real people, and many other aspects that will be detailed in the subsequent analysis of some of his best- sellers for children, all of it under his peculiar and ironic style of expressing ideas through fantasy and imagination. It could be considered a way of never hiding the truth even though he is writing to children.

In order to make reference to some of the critic made towards this author I would like to firstly clarify that children’s literature criticism in general includes both generalist discussions of the relationship among literature for children and literary theory; and literary analysis of a specific work intended for children. In both ways, Roald Dahl has been in the spotlight in many occasions, especially when it is depicted the way he arouses controversy including such “adult-intended” topics in children’s works. So that his popularity and success went hand in hand with negative judgments that triggered mixed reactions among experts and critics.

Dahl began his writing career when Cecil Scott Forester asked him to write about his most exciting experiences during his time in the Royal Air Force. His story was sold to *The Saturday Evening Post* as a resounding success, from this moment and on he began writing

other stories for different newspapers and magazines. It was by this time, when writing factual stories that some changes occurred in his writing; in *A Guide for Using Matilda in the Classroom* it is possible to find some quotes related to this fact: “As I went on, the stories became less and less realistic and more fantastic. But becoming a writer was a pure fluke. Without being asked to, I doubt if I’d ever have thought of it” (1996: 7) it was also during this period that Dahl developed his original and unusual style known for its special sense of humor. When he was later asked about writing books for children, he thought at first that he wouldn’t be capable of doing so, but suddenly he started to use all his ideas to focus on this issue, especially after his first successful attempt with *The Gremlins* (Dahl, 1943). “When an idea for a story comes popping into my mind, I rush for a pencil, a crayon, a lipstick, anything that will write, and scribble a few words that will later remind me of the idea...” (1996: 6) Sometimes it took him five or ten years to use one of his ideas. Although he knew children liked perfectly: suspense, action, ghosts, treasures, chocolates, magic, giggling, heroes and especially villains, all of it under a “first-class plot”.

When he died November 23, 1990, he left behind so many stories which are considered masterpieces. Therefore he is the perfect tool for engaging readers in literature since their childhood to the rest of their adult life, possibly awaking the pleasure for literature and making them lifelong readers.

But, as it is previously mentioned, it wasn’t only gold that glitters; according to Catherine Butler in her introduction of *New Casebooks: Roald Dahl* “Dahl is a writer who tends to polarize opinion, dividing critics into detractors and defenders” (2012: 2) it especially occurs in his literature intended for children. In an article entitled “Roald Dahl and the Darkness within” for the BBC (2002) the children’s book critic Amanda Craig asserted that in Dahl’s works there was also a “streak of rather unpleasant misogyny” In a Freudian sense it means that female characters are either warm and loving like the “supportive, luscious peach” or “evil like the wicked aunts”. So, she argues that this simple duality is the one that children are used to.

On the other side, there are also many defenders of his style, <sup>th</sup> which especially evidence his countless bestsellers and his figure as a phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Hall and Coles, as it is posed in “Author popularity: An exploratory study based on Roald Dahl” (2002) are generally positive about the author when suggest that his success may derive from such elements as; the use of many words (included invented words) and noises, the inclusion of humor and wittiness, the typical fast-moving plots, and the identifiable character types among others. But, what seem more important are children’s opinions about their usual predilection for this particular author. As many questionnaires such as the one intended for 10 years old students carried out by Scott in this same article note that; “children were able to mention such characteristics as exaggeration, effective description, unusual ideas, and extraordinary words as reasons for enjoying Dahl’s books” (2002: 156).

In addition, author Peter Hollindale notes “it was the irreverence, darkness and even sadism of the text that adults disapproved” (qtd. in *Popular Children’s Literature in Britain*. Hollindale 2008: 7) It is in this kind of critic that subversion can be explicitly seen when Dahl is anarchically breaking the rule of hiding the dark side of life to children in order to protect them from the morally incorrect. To support this idea, I would like to mention Disney culture for instance that is clearly conserving stereotypes and values aiming not

only entertain the youngest but educate them in an ethic sense. Thus, it is this perception that has caused that in many stories, the evil not to appear or suddenly disappear from the plot. In this way, years of research has evidence that the general perception that implies the term “Children’s Literature” not necessarily involves endless carousels, fantastic animals or families happily sitting around a bonfire, being Dahl one of the clearest examples of it. His stories are commonly known for satisfying children’s appetite for violence, disgust, or punishment for the guilty without ignoring sweets, magic, tricks or friendship.

Even his stories are full of the grotesque, from Mrs. Trunchbull drinking the glass of water with the newt inside, Mrs. Twit substituting worms for Mr. Twit plate of spaghetti, to George poisoning his wicked grandma; punishment and consequences appear everywhere, serving to parents, educators or adults in general as a powerful tool to rise empathy for the victims or to warn children from certain attitudes. In *Reading for learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children’s Literature* we will see the evidence to this fact: “Reading characters’ states of mind from their actions is a better simulation of real life. In practice, though, it seems that the more we know about characters’ interiority, the stronger we engage with them emotionally” (Nikolajeva 2014: 81). And in this line, Dahl is especially careful with descriptions of the characters, offering to the reader not only the physical features in a detailed way, but the way these characters think and act as well as their background, provoking in them the sense of empathy as an essential social skill. This could also be seen as an exception for many unambiguous characterization in which many literary critics place literature for children.

Apart from literary content and according to Perry Nodelman in “Decoding the images: how picture books work” there is also a vital role played by picture in children’s literature and place the “process of reading pictures” in a privileged position since “both the text and the picture place the human depicted within a social context” (Nodelman 2006: 132). It is in this moment, when Quentin Blake is worth to be mentioned since he supports outstandingly reliable what Dahl express with words by means of his drawings in a powerful manner.

### 3 DAHLESQUE VILLAINS: CHARACTERS’ ANALYSIS

The following analysis will be divided in many sections, addressed to the main objective of placing the villain characters under the writer’s and the readers’ perspectives in order to propose debate about the following matters intended for students in the last cycle of Primary Education: Firstly the conflict between the villain (commonly an adult) with respect to the hero (a child), deepen in certain behaviors and aspects of their dark personality; and secondly, the physical depictions of these evil characters, which is also a typical Dahlesque resource that will provide extra- information and context in his stories. At last resort, the way all those evil-characters receive a reprimand by the author will be a central part of this paper attending to the manner the villains suffer the consequences for their acts getting what they deserve. In this sense, the works to be analyzed are *Matilda* (Dahl 2002) first published in 1988; and *George’s Marvellous Medicine* (Dahl 2007) first published in 1981. In a more precise way, I seek some common features considering Greimas’ mentioned perspective (associated with the villains of these stories) in order to contemplate Dahl’s construction of the characters and possible responses of children as readers.

In the article “Power and its Mechanics in Children’s Fiction: The Case of Roald Dahl” it is outlined another important fact to bear in mind about the author and it is referred to how Dahl follows narrative hierarchies towards his characters as well as his self-inscription by means of his own experiences as a child. It comes latent through the discourses between characters and the complex relation webs created between children and adults. According to Chen-Wei Yu:

If his alignment with well-behaved child characters against authoritarian figures is an attempt at subversion, drawn from his experience of being oppressed as a child, then his punishment of those ill-behaved characters also seems emblematic of a position he adopts from those adults who used to oppress him (2008: 157).

Furthermore, following Greimas’ actant model theory developed in *Narrative: A critical linguistic introduction* (Toolan 2012: 82). Villains, commonly represented by adults, will be enclosed in the “opponent category” in opposition to main characters or heroes belonging to the “subject category”, mostly represented by children. In general, the way Dahl normally represents the characters’ conflicts in his stories responds to Greimas’ proposal in the way that events come subordinate to the character.

As general categories, he suggested that there are six roles clearly defined in all narratives, or “actants” as he coined them, comprising three interrelated pairs:

Giver + Receiver

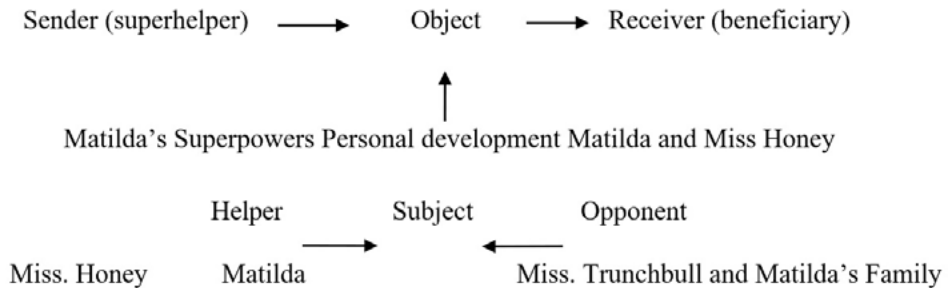
Subject + Object

Helper + Opponent

**Figure 1.** *Qtd in Toolan (2012: 82)*

It is also noticeable the way Dahl pays almost the same attention to heroes than to villains. It is clear when complete chapters or nearly the major parts of some of his stories are centered on the evil characters that tend to appear as funny close to ridiculous anti-heroes. In the case of Matilda, we could find some examples when we consider that one of the first chapters is called “Mr. Wormwood, the Great Car Dealer”, another complete one entitled “The Trunchbull” referred to the dictatorship character performed by the headmaster of Matilda’s school or even “The Parents”, where Dahl describes Matilda’s dysfunctional family highlighting the extra-ordinary and formidable features of Matilda. In the case of George’s story, we find chapters entitled “A Crane for Grandma” or “Goodbye Grandma” among others. In such a way, the following sections will be focused on the characters represented by Miss Trunchbull and George’s grandma, regardless of that many other minor villain characters appear in one way or another. Before placing emphasis on the villains themselves, I will represent Greimas’ diagram on character types in order to discriminate Dahl’s main characters according its roles distinction.

The case of Matilda:



**Figure 2.** Adapted from Greimas' actant model in *Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction* (2012: 82).

As pointed in “The War of Ages” (2012: 6) the fundamental binary relationship is that between the hero or the subject, Matilda, and adults. Even it is characteristic of Dahl to create this dichotomy in which adults are evil and ugly villains or according to Greimas, opponent characters. Being easily recognizable in this story, the evil characters at this stage are Matilda’s family (especially her father) and the nasty headmistress of Matilda’s school, which will be the object of study of this section. Miss Trunchbull, as a main adult villain character in *Matilda* (2012), will be a central point at this stage of the paper because of her principal role marked by her appearance and her cruel behavior during the story. She hates all little children even further it is as unusual and brilliant as Matilda, being her nasty behavior always directed by her cruel punishments. Her identity as a gigantic military figure, which is an expert in hammer-throwing, is full of negative connotations that perfectly could match with her behavior.

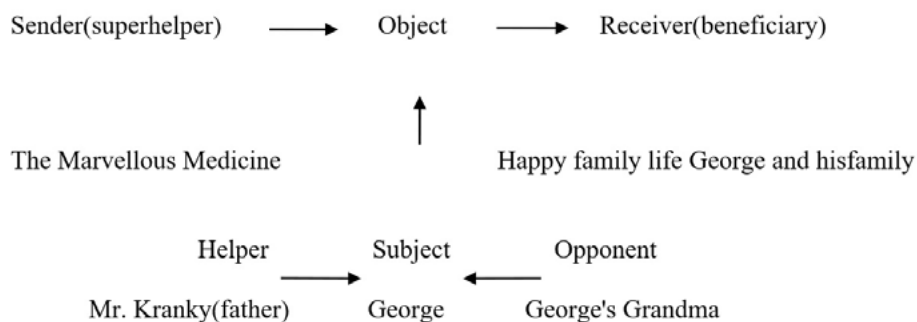
In order to introduce her physically, Dahl referred to the Trunchbull as follows: “She had once been a famous athlete [...] you could see in the bull neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs.” *Matilda* (2012: 76-77) this initial introduction portrays the reader to an image of a violent enormous person that is closer to a male description. Another evidence of this assertion appears when it is described the way she expresses herself as “She hardly ever spoke in a normal voice. She either barked or shouted” (2002: 79) being a clear sign of the children-hatred that she manifests during the whole story.

Apart from her appearance, it is her attitude and the way she treats children what makes the character to be a malicious villain, she even carries a horse-crop that frighten to the bravest person of the school. In addition, her acts go from breaking children’s bones when throwing them across the window to make them eat till almost exploit or to retain them in the “Chokey” (the prison cupboard). Whether the verbal and physical abuse Miss Trunchbull directs to children is exaggerated and severe, the way the author penalized her could be seen as extreme too. In this case, and according to Greimas’ actant model theory, the presence of a “superhelper” that is actually presented by means of Matilda’s superpowers will permit the Trunchbull to receive a “deserved” punishment for her acts.

The punishment itself comes in the form of three “miracles” as Dahl designates them and will be the results of her final vanish when a certain ghost of the past appears to force her letting her cottage to her step-sister daughter, that will result to be Miss Honey (Matilda’s teacher and her strongest support during the course of the story). She didn’t finally disappear until she receives these disciplinary consequences the last one in front of all the children that she tortured before.

It is in the last quarter of the story when Matilda is told with the real story of Miss Trunchbull and Miss Honey, showing the reader the reasons of this bizarre violence. It is now where controversial issues such as childhood traumas, death, and mistreatment appear more explicitly to explain the unjustified hatred from the headmistress not only to children, but to Miss Honey. These aspects are worth to take advantage of especially in an educative context where many questions can arouse. For instance: Do you think that her aspect is closely related with her behavior? Why? Is it fair to treat people the way here appears? Are there other alternatives to warn the Trunchbull? Among others, these matters could serve to boost students’ emotional awareness and empathy to problems and their correspondence resolution. Furthermore, through reading group they have to be able to reach consensus in finding solutions and discussing those aspects while the teacher monitors the whole process and enhances offering many possibilities.

The case of George’s Marvellous Medicine:



**Figure 3.** Adapted from Greimas' actant model in *Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction* (2012: 82).

In *George's Marvellous Medicine* (2007) we can infer many similarities with Matilda's story in the way that we find again Dahl's typical dichotomy of the adult as a terrible villain versus the hero that in this case is George, the charming child that comes from a humble family. As well as in Matilda, we can perfectly deduce the family disruptions in this case between the hero and his grandma, which seems to be the devil herself. Thus, the relation between the mentioned subject, George and his terrific grandma, the opponent, is dominated by the high demands and the derogatory language that the grandma subjects to George. This, together with the continuing allusion to negative emotions such as: selfishness, bad temper, anger or even disgust creates an environment of creativity among George's plan



and ideas, which despite these are not the best to teach younger students, seem to amuse them ravishingly.

In this work, the characters' actions are continuously supported by many other linguistic resources provided by Dahl. For instance; lexical and non lexical onomatopoeias: "Oweeeee", "whoosh" (2007: 39) "plop" (2007: 41) "crash" (2007: 47); and rhymes:

Will she go pop?  
 Will she explode?  
 Will she go flying down the road?  
 Will she go poof in a puff of smoke?  
 Start fizzing like a can of coke? (2007: 16)

As we can see at the very beginning of the story George's grandmother is presented as "grizzly old grunion of a Grandma [...] She was a selfish grumpy old woman. She had pale brown teeth and a small puckered-up mouth like a dog's bottom" (2007: 2) in the same way as in the previous work, Dahl's description is full of connotations relating her physical aspect towards her wicked actions towards George. Making clear the presence of unjustified hatred that a villain (even being a grandma) could feel towards a little boy, no matter whether they belong to the same family.

In this sense, George's revenge comes mainly from the dictatorship attitude of the grandma together with the derogatory language that she uses to refer to his person. Thus, we can find some expressions such as: "Mummy's as stupid as you are" (2007: 7) "You, stupid boy" (2007: 54) "Oh you horrible little boy" (2007: 69). All these expressions as well as the continuous mentions to revulsion make her a mean and nasty person; and probably the funniest character under the children's gaze. Once, in order to frighten his grandson, she asserted "Whenever I see a live slug on a piece of lettuce, I gobble it up quick before it crawls away. Delicious" (2007: 7) in other tries such as this, George finally reproaches her "That's beastly!" and encourages him to prepare his deserved punishment.

This punishment comes in the form of a beverage, prepared by the own George. In this medicine the most unimaginable dangerous products are used such as: care products that he finds in his house: golden gloss hair shampoo, brown shoe polish, gin, chili sauce; animal pills; paint; and many other stuff such as: anti-freeze oil for cars or horseradish. Would it be excessive for such a wicked person? This is a good question to work on with students, as well as the care that teachers need to have in warning children not to try and recreate this at home. As it is pointed at the beginning of the book "WARNING TO READERS: Do not try to make George's Marvellous Medicine yourselves at home. It could be dangerous" (2007: 1).

Other crucial aspects presented in this Dahl's work such as; aversion for others, the expressions used by the grandma or the final attitude of George's father driven by his own interest would raise emotional awareness among students, which would also propose other alternatives to the final outcome of this story.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

As it is argued in chapter 4 of *Narrative: a critical linguistic introduction* (2012) some keys to understand the characterization of a particular author depends on the way we match textual facts and ideology to extra-textual identification. Consequently, it will be easier to identify why Dahl depicts villains as he did in the way that he is portraying the reader to his own experience during his times as a child. As he recognized to the BBC “I am totally convinced that most grown-ups have completely forgotten what it is like to be a child between the ages of five and ten... I can remember exactly what it was like. I am certain I can”, that always seems to him the key point to be such a successful figure among children.

In further studies, in an attempt to explain why children often laugh at that which adults may find disgusting, children psychologist Paul E. Ghee, quoted in “The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl’s Humorous Writings for Children” clarifies the idea that certain things or actions that are disgusting or unpleasant for adults are usually quite attractive for children because of their cognitive development at those stages. Moreover, in a first glance of Jauss’ theory in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), while looking for possible responses by readers as children, I realized that it is also crucial to consider the role of characters under many variables such as social conditions or author’s background among others to be presented to students. As discussed in this proposal, the exploration of the author’s insider or outsider status is closely related to the culture represented in the text. In this way, students could understand that such judgments that they made only with the action of reading a particular work are not universal, that they are influenced by social, historical and political conditions together with the writer’s personal experiences.

Besides, in Dahl’s stories, we cannot forget physical appearance and behavior of the characters, especially in the case of the villains. As it is previously mentioned, this is always correlated with many explicit connotations that will clearly classify characters in heroes and villains. It is a feature easily recognized in his stories since the evil is always under an adult aspect full of exaggerations and distinctive horrendous characteristics that immediately portrays the reader to a contextualized situation. Therefore, considering current research in the field, it is an evidence that children tend to love what parents disapprove or think unsuitable for them, aspects of which adults may consider and take advantage to.

For instance, all this will lead to discussions not only about literature, but to raise emotional responses useful to learn in a significant way and to think critically about the world students are living in. Furthermore, the fact of something to be funny, tricky, and hilarious and all the adjectives that could be applied to Dahl’s villains is not to say that is the general rule or the most correct treatment to people. But it is a positive point for teachers to be used to broaden children’s knowledge through emotions, not only positive emotions, but negative ones too. To involve them in fictional stories would also permit them to perceive reality in a different way.

As a final conclusion I would like to mention that values, morals, roles and beliefs mentioned in the stories chosen are also worth to be taken into consideration. At this pre-adolescent phase, the relationship between cognitive aspects and affective ones seems crucial. By means of a proper connection, students will be able to develop their capacities in the right atmosphere for interacting, expressing opinions and communicating in a different

language. Thus, the traditional vision of the school during centuries should be avoided; teachers, methods and also students should innovate in the way that the complex process of teaching-learning becomes a common activity in which everyone gives as much as she/he can and the most important thing, they enjoy themselves while they are doing it.

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