

How does Roald Dahl create ambiguity between the concepts of 'good' and 'evil' through the characterization of giants and humans in *The BFG*?

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INTRODUCTION

The BFG by Roald Dahl is a children's fantasy novel that engages with concepts of good and evil through a plot-oriented narrative, in which an orphan girl named Sophie is kidnapped by the eponymous BFG (the Big Friendly Giant) and taken to Giant Country. There, she encounters danger in the form of nine other human-eating giants, and plots with the BFG to put an end to their murderous appetites. Mirroring the typical conventions of a quintessential children's tale, the fantastical and powerful antagonist race (the giants) is defeated by the young heroine, eliminating the threat to not only herself but also to human society as a whole.

As customary in children's literature, the narrative appears to exemplify Aristotelian poetics—the heroes and the villains are divided clearly into an opposition akin to a dichotomy, characterized by either 'nobility' or 'baseness.'¹ In *The BFG*, this polarity is furthered through Dahl's creation of two species with inherent and opposing traits. With giants portrayed as terrifying and revolting both in appearance and in actions, aided by readers' preconceived notions of giants as a fantasy species (in folklore, for instance, they are typically antagonist forces)², the struggle between humans and giants in the narrative can be interpreted to be equivalent to the struggle between good and evil.

However, being published in 1982, *The BFG* can be considered a work of the postmodern period—a cultural movement whose doctrine challenges the values of society. Its philosophy champions cultural, moral and athletic relativism while contesting any notion of inherent human

¹ Nikolajeva, "Aesthetics of Character," 442

² Huot, "Outsiders," 2-12

nature.³ Through the lens of this view, which Dahl is argued to incorporate in his works⁴, the dichotomy between humans and giants (especially when appearing in the form of traits inherent to two distinct species) is a drastic oversimplification that merits further analysis. Thus, this essay explores the construction of an ‘innate nature’ for humans and giants and their respective association with ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ as well as the ways in which Dahl conveys skepticism towards his created dichotomy throughout. This raises the question: *How does Roald Dahl create ambiguity between the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ through the characterization of giants and humans in The BFG?*

Considering that the use of postmodern aesthetics and the ambiguities between moral dichotomies is a recent development in popular content intended to be consumed by children, Dahl’s incorporation of these concepts into *The BFG* can provide insight and even be indicative of cultural changes in mindset, especially due to the didactic nature of children’s literature⁵. The question will be answered by examining the external representation (comprising description, narrative statements, and presentation of actions)⁶ of giants and humans that construct their inherent traits and characteristics. Following this, I aim to identify the ways in which these traits are subverted or challenged within the text, either in terms of their innate connection to either species or their association to either end of the dichotomy presented by Aristotelian poetics.

³ Duignan, “Postmodernism”

⁴ Hodgkins, “Alternative Sentimentalities,” 42

⁵ Hodgkins, “Alternative Sentimentalities,” 41

⁶ Nikolajeva, “Aesthetics of Character,” 442-443

I. SIZE

Physical description of size plays a vital role in the external representation of giants and humans. As the most evident and unchangeable characteristic that separates the two species, size defines their essential difference; a giant is not a human due to his colossal scale.⁷

The difference between species is highlighted through the portrayal of human beings as the standard or the default that the existence of giants disrupts. Due to their size, the giants' attempts at fitting into the human world causes chaos. To be able to accommodate seating for the BFG, the Queen's butler constructs an impromptu chair out of a '*chest-of-drawers*' and a '*grand piano*.'⁸ As this violates or overturns the intended purpose of these objects as perceived by humans, this demonstrates that the BFG's size causes a disruption or a sense of instability with regards to the way the world should function. Additionally, this creates imagery that seems absurd to the point of humor, utilizing the incongruity of the giant in the human world to create the impression of a clearly defined separation. Both symbolically and literally, giants cannot fit into the human world.

The size of giants is communicated to the reader through descriptions in which the giant appears disjointed, creating an atmosphere of terror. The BFG's hand is described one part at a time—'*a huge hand with pale fingers came snaking in [...] followed by an arm, an arm as thick as a tree-trunk, and the arm, the hand, the fingers*.'⁹ The use of sparse and erratic repetition, some in the form of anadiplosis or anaphora, mimics the uneven heartbeat or thought process in

⁷ McGurl, "Gigantic Realism," 404

⁸ Dahl, "The BFG," 152

⁹ Dahl, "The BFG," 15

situations of creeping panic, while the piece-by-piece description through the form of extended merism is reminiscent of dismemberment. This also gives a sense of the eyes traveling, only able to take in the giant's hand one part at a time due to its enormous scale. Thus, this establishes that giants are incomprehensible beings due to their size—they are entities that can be taken in bit by bit, an assembly of somewhat human parts but distinctly inhuman. In this context, this is something to be afraid of, and thus the emotional association with size is negative; the giants' appearance is a physical manifestation of their 'evilness'.

Simultaneously, the size of human beings is the cause for their weakness and helplessness. As the human reader automatically sympathizes with humans in the narrative (sharing the same experience of physical size), this constructs a sense that the humans are undeservingly victimized. Giants refer to humans as '*human beans*,'¹⁰ the very label itself invoking imagery of food of minuscule size—humans are equated to a mere bean from a giant's perspective, both in terms of their perceived function and their size. True to this, humans are quantified in terms of food servings; as a giant can swallow a human like '*frumpkin pie, all in one dollop*'¹¹, further reinforcing the notion that the size of humans makes them an easy meal for the giants. Because fear of this physical harm stems from the differences in sizes, and because giants are the aggressors or the perpetrators of this fear, giants are established as the 'evil' species.

However, the connotations of villainy and physical size are not fundamentally linked. As Sophie befriends the BFG, the connotations surrounding the description of his size change from

¹⁰ Dahl, "The BFG," 22

¹¹ Dahl, "The BFG," 30

negative to positive, the opposite to that of other giants. The scale of other giants remains associated with evil or terror—the eyes of the Bloodbottler are described as ‘*black holes*,’¹² connoting size through comparison with an astronomical object characterized by its darkness and inescapability, thus inciting terror. In direct contrast, the BFG’s eyes are ‘*two stars*’¹³, creating imagery of large, bright astronomical objects (common symbols for guidance or hope) without the associated fear. Despite size itself appearing to be inherent to giants, Dahl demonstrates that it is not inherently associated with ‘goodness’ or ‘evilness’—the association being dependent on the actions of each giant—and thus destroys the blanket association of size with monstrosity.

Furthermore, it can be argued that size itself is shown to be relative though the BFG. Though he is undoubtedly a giant compared to humans, he is a self-described ‘*runt*’¹⁴ amongst other giants. He is ostracised for his size; as shown by the repetition that reinforces his comparatively smaller scale through the other giants’ mockery of ‘*Shrivelly little shrimp! Mucky little midget!*’¹⁵, his size a point of conflict, highlighting an ambiguity even within his own species. Moreover, the other giants’ size even gives them power over the BFG in the same way that size gives giants power over humans, making him the undeserving victim as they use him as a ball in their game of catch, causing him to feel as if he was ‘*free falling from the Niagara falls*’¹⁶. In comparison with the BFG, the other giants appear as powerful a force of nature as a notoriously large waterfall—the ease at which they can throw him makes him helpless, paralleling the helplessness of humans and thus is regarded with the same sympathy by the

¹² Dahl, “The BFG,” 51

¹³ Dahl, “The BFG,” 41

¹⁴ Dahl, “The BFG,” 50

¹⁵ Dahl, “The BFG,” 70

¹⁶ Dahl, “The BFG,” 69

reader. This is a visual representation that the BFG does not belong as a giant, and even draws a proximity to humanity.

To extend this further, the notion that size is the definitive sign of belonging to the species is challenged in the aftermath of the climax. Having been imprisoned, the giants attempt to eat the BFG. Knowing that ‘*giants is never guzzling other giants,*’¹⁷ the other giants’ willingness to cannibalize the BFG signifies that he is no longer part of the species by any metric of belonging from the perspective of the other giants, his physical traits notwithstanding. This challenges the significance of size—physical qualities are not absolute, and even something as pre-determined as species can be interpreted as relative through a shift in perspective.

II. INTELLIGENCE

The intelligence of giants and humans is an inherent trait that separates them, both in folkloric portrayals of giants and in *The BFG*. Typically, humans are depicted as mentally superior, able to utilize trickery to compensate for their lack of physical power—the brain and the brawn, as a common dichotomy, is exemplified here as the opposing characteristics that define the difference between the two species.

The giants’ lack of intelligence is evident in the external representation of their actions. This is shown through the peculiarities in the way that they speak; their grammar is wrong, with none of the giants having grasped even basic conjugations that the child reader would find

¹⁷ Dahl, “The BFG,” 67

obvious. The BFG himself concedes that ‘*I is speaking the most terrible wigglish.*’¹⁸ The wording of his statement itself proves its own point, as he uses the incorrect verb tense and a bizarre new word composed of a mix of the words ‘wriggle’ and ‘English.’ Although improper grammar is not necessarily portrayed as nefarious, it does appear to have a proximity to ‘evilness’ as the words spoken by most of the giants do communicate ‘evil’ intent—with language being the medium for their expression, it is consequently closely associated.

Sophie, as a human, is characterized as intelligent by the role she plays and the ability she displays when plotting the capture of the giants—she is the one who reaches with ‘*the answer*’¹⁹ that leads to and facilitates the giants’ defeat. Thus, when contrasted with the BFG who insists that it is nonsense (or, in his words, ‘*crodswoogle*’²⁰) without understanding the entirety of the plan, Sophie appears to be the more intelligent party in their dynamic. With this, the human fulfills their expected role in the dichotomy. Because this leads to a ‘good’ outcome, human intelligence is thus linked with ‘good’ as well.

However, Dahl avoids the outright condemnation of a lack of intelligence and arguably challenges the definition of intelligence itself. Although the BFG speaks using improper grammar, he also creates new words and new meanings through his wordplay. The word ‘*babblement*’²¹, for example, is not a real word, but rather a combination of two different conventions of the English language in a portmanteau—the use of the onomatopoeic verb ‘babble’ denotes talking, and the attachment of the common suffix ‘-ment’ transforms it into a

¹⁸ Dahl, “The BFG,” 47

¹⁹ Dahl, “The BFG,” 107

²⁰ Dahl, “The BFG,” 107

²¹ Dahl, “The BFG,” 24

noun inferred to mean ‘conversation’. Furthermore, the use of the pun ‘*am I right or am I left?*’²² draws upon the meaning of ‘right’ both as a signifier of direction and as a status of correctness, allowing the reader to derive humor from ‘*seismic instability*’²³. The crudeness of the BFG’s speaking also does not hinder his self-expression—in fact, the BFG exclamation of ‘*How wondercrump! [...] How whoopseysplunkers! How absolutely squiffing!*’²⁴ conveys his excitement more convincingly and effectively, demonstrating giddiness through an apparent stream of thought bursting with so much elation that real or ordinary words cannot contain it. The BFG’s wordplay embodies postmodern attitudes regarding language; meaning is not static, and can be manipulated through different connotations.²⁵ Through this, Dahl conveys that BFG’s shaping of language arguably makes him a master of it; he is intelligent perhaps not according to the rules of English, but in accordance with its use.

The roles of humans and giants in the intellectual dichotomy itself are also subverted and reversed in the climax of the narrative. To capture Fleshlumpeater (the last giant), both trickery and brute force are used, but not by the expected parties. As a human, Sophie is expected to have an intellectually sound plan. However, her thought process of ‘*She must do something! She must! She must!*’²⁶ demonstrates a mantra-like conviction that utilizes epizeuxis and exclamation points to demonstrate the emotion and irrational desperation instead of a measured and thought-out scheme as may be expected. Her impulsive physical action of stabbing Fleshlumpeater is instrumental in his defeat, but it needed to be complemented by the BFG’s intellect. He is

²² Dahl, “The BFG,” 73

²³ Hodgkins, “Alternative Sentimentalities,” 47

²⁴ Dahl, “The BFG,” 48

²⁵ Duignan, “Postmodernism”

²⁶ Dahl, “The BFG,” 175

portrayed as more rational, analytically ‘[seeing] his chance’²⁷ and tricking Fleshlumpeater into a position of defeat. Here, the intellectual role is played by the giant instead of the human, therefore overturning the assigned inherent traits by embodying its opposite at the most vital point in the narrative.

Moreover, the BFG is shown to progress in his intellect. Dahl concludes the book by revealing the BFG himself to be the author of the book, having progressed into a ‘*splendid intelligent pupil*’²⁸. He demonstrates the capacity for change and growth—he now evidently has the grammatical knowledge to be able to write with proper prose. This redeems any faults seen in his lack of conformity to the rules of English, changing his characterization to be a now-intelligent figure in the mind of the child reader. In addition to being stylistically postmodern by being self-referential,²⁹ this demonstrates that intellect is not innate in giants, as it can be learned. Any lack of intellect apparent in the giants’ species is more so due to the environment than it is due to a naturally-hardwired intellectual failing; this element of the dichotomy is ambiguous as it is not inherent.

III. NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Dahl associates human beings with technological developments, while also emphasizing the close connection that Giants have to nature. The two species, therefore, seem to be

²⁷ Dahl, “The BFG,” 176

²⁸ Dahl, “The BFG,” 187

²⁹ Duignan, “Postmodernism”

characterized to embody the dichotomy between technology and nature to demonstrate that the two species are innately separated.

The giants' inclination towards the natural world and their lack of technological development is illustrated by their primitive living conditions. Description of their appearance depicts them as battered by the elements—their skin is '*burnt brown by the sun*,³⁰ connoting both the harshness and intensity of burning and the implied pervasiveness of the sun's presence as indicative of their relationship with nature. Even the BFG, a giant established to be more intelligent, lives in a natural structure—his home is a '*cave*,³¹ drawing parallels with humans during caveman times as the commonly accepted lowest level of human development, from which the giants have not progressed past. This appears to be portrayed as negative, assuming comfort and civility are valued in the young reader.

Dahl establishes humans' affinity for technology as a trait appearing to be innate as well—humans' dependence on technology is to such an extent that it is interlinked with (or even indicative of) their capabilities. Dahl assigns technologies and man-made constructions symbolic power in the narrative; the '*sheer size*'³² of the Palace is the attribute that '*stagger[s] the BFG*'³³, demonstrating a feat of human construction which gains the scale (and thus the associations of physical power) of the giant species. The use of technology to defeat the giants furthers this—humans' lack of power due to their size is compensated for by technological advances, which acts as the only element that levels the disparity in power in terms of physical prowess.

³⁰ Dahl, "The BFG," 29

³¹ Dahl, "The BFG," 19

³² Dahl, "The BFG," 131

³³ Dahl, "The BFG," 131

With this being the only way for them to complete their aims, technology is depicted as a tool to facilitate the humans' 'nobility'.

However, the external representation of giants in relation to the natural world is not implied to be exclusively negative. The BFG is connected to nature through the claims that he can hear everything around him, from 'little ants' to 'plants.'³⁴ This is due to his miraculous ears, a physical and innate feature. Flora and fauna are personified with the claim that '*if [...] I is picking a lovely flower, if I is twisting the stem of the flower till it breaks, then the plant is screaming*'³⁵. As the juxtaposition between 'lovely' and 'screaming' is jarring (having first established a sense of pleasantness and then seeming to torture it away) this is emotionally impactful, demonstrating the higher importance placed on non-human aspects of the world from the BFG's viewpoint. This connection to the natural world due to innate physical features is a display of the BFG's ability to empathize, despite also being a signifier of difference as it is something that humans cannot comprehend. Through this, association with nature gains positive (or at least a net neutral) association—in itself, proximity to nature is not inherently bad, and is more of an indication of differences in worldviews rather than a difference in morality or 'nobility'.

Despite technology being associated with the 'good' species, human technologies and structures are given the predominantly negative connotation of destruction, with particular emphasis placed on the use of technology to cause harm. This is exemplified by the BFG's statement that humans are '*shootling guns and going up in aerioplanes to drop their bombs on*

³⁴ Dahl, "The BFG," 39

³⁵ Dahl, "The BFG," 40

each other's heads every week,³⁶ which implies that the direct consequence enabled by technology is indisputably and mindlessly violent. This conflates technology with death as to create a negative association. Even if the outcome is not death, it is nevertheless criticized; the function of '*helicopters*'³⁷ within the narrative is to capture, and '*mechanical contrivance[s]*'³⁸ are used to build a prison dubbed as a '*pit*'³⁹. Although this use of technology is necessary for the eventual triumph of the humans, they do so through distasteful and '*anti-aesthetic*'⁴⁰ solutions of brute force and punishment. Even protective structures outside the Palace walls in the form of '*fearsome-looking spikes*'⁴¹ are obtrusive; from the perspective of the protagonists, they act as a literal and symbolic gatekeeper due to their formidable appearance and purpose. The emphasis on militaristic developments in technology and its association with violence aligns with post-war criticism of technological development (as often expressed in postmodern works)⁴², imparting the sense that technology is not uncritically good even if the aims of the humans are ultimately sympathetic. Through this, Dahl challenges the extension of the 'nobility' associated with humans to all their traits and behaviors.

IV. ETHICS

The giants' representation as a species exhibiting 'baseness' or immorality is conveyed through their cruelty and disregard for human life as they consume humans. From their view, humans are '*guzzly and glumptious*.'⁴³ The alliteration utilized in the phrase has connotations of

³⁶ Dahl, "The BFG," 73

³⁷ Dahl, "The BFG," 165

³⁸ Dahl, "The BFG," 182

³⁹ Dahl, "The BFG," 182

⁴⁰ Hodgkins, "Alternative Sentimentalities", 46

⁴¹ Dahl, "The BFG," 130

⁴² Duignan, "Postmodernism"

⁴³ Dahl, "The BFG," 55

glee, gluttony and greed, showing that they do not consider eating humans to be something to be remorseful over but rather something to be indulged in. Similarly, the fact that humans are ‘juicer’⁴⁴ is used as the casual justification for why the Bloodbottler prefers to eat humans rather than vegetables. This is a shockingly gruesome description—it describes the mouthfeel of human beings being consumed, giving no consideration of their consciousness in any capacity. By engaging with the sense of taste, an intrinsic disgust or repulsion that is the natural reaction to cannibalism is instilled in the reader. This casts the giant, who clearly condones this action, to be morally repulsive as well, shown to be governed only by greed and hunger and absent of all the moral objections that a reader may have.

However, the BFG challenges humans’ understanding of themselves explicitly through his narrative statements; his argument is clearly communicated through his debate with Sophie. He challenges the preconceived notions that Sophie has—that giants are evil because they eat human beings; after all, in the giants’ perspective, humans eating animals or the ‘piggy-wig’⁴⁵ is morally equivalent to giants eating humans. Even Sophie’s disgust at the giants’ consumption of human beings is out of fear as much as it is out of moral objections. Sophie’s argument is that ‘*eating people is horrible! [...] It’s frightful!*’⁴⁶, implying that the two gut reactions are too closely linked to be clearly separable—the use of the exclamation point as a signifier of Sophie’s tone is the same for both clauses, giving them equal importance. Because the giants are eating humans, thus putting Sophie in direct danger, they are portrayed in her perspective as ‘evil’. Yet Dahl does not portray it as inherently immoral—in fact, it can be interpreted as a negation of the fact that giants are unethical at all, as the moral condemnation is constructed as merely a human

⁴⁴ Dahl, “The BFG,” 52

⁴⁵ Dahl, “The BFG,” 73

⁴⁶ Dahl, “The BFG,” 30

perception out of self-preservation. The BFG even goes as far as to suggest that *‘human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it’*⁴⁷, implying that humans are the species more deserving of the characterization of ‘baseness’, as giants *‘is not killing each other’*⁴⁸. This illustrates the moral relativism that postmodernism upholds⁴⁹ through analogies—the different species or cultures have different rules, and neither is objectively superior or correct. With this, the very existence of the dichotomy between ‘nobility’ and ‘baseness’ is uprooted and subverted—these traits are inherent to neither of the two species. The dichotomy itself is embedded with ambiguity.

Despite the explicit but momentary glance into the giants’ perspective, which may allow the reader to perceive the giants more sympathy and consider their actions in a way that is less black-and-white, the extent to which ambiguities within ethics is explored is extremely limited. This may be due to constraints of childrens’ literature as a genre—a conflict involving a sympathetic protagonist and an antagonist that readers revile is the very plot itself, and thus portraying neither side as the victor or the side with the moral high ground would undermine the narrative. Thus, outside of the debate between Sophie and the BFG, the BFG’s points are seemingly disregarded; despite his defense of the morality of giants, he nevertheless believes that his own kind needs to be contained. Therefore, while Dahl negates ‘good’ or ‘evil’, he does not extend this further to fundamentally change the dichotomy of giants and humans in the overall narrative.

⁴⁷ Dahl, “The BFG,” 72

⁴⁸ Dahl, “The BFG,” 72

⁴⁹ Duignan, “Postmodernism”

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the fantasy narrative of *The BFG* operates on the premise of the ‘good’ humans discovering and capturing the ‘evil’ giants, thus removing the threat they pose to humanity. This necessitates the establishment of the dichotomy between humans and giants, which Dahl creates by assigning them with inherent traits that seem to be dichotomies themselves. Humans, as the more sympathetic species, are small but intelligent, morally righteous and are presented as developers of technology. In direct contrast, Dahl characterizes giants as large in scale but generally lacking in intellect, at best amoral and closely connected to the natural world. As humans and giants seem to be opposites in terms of external representation, they appear to straightforwardly embody opposite moral forces.

In the construction of this dynamic between humans and giants, however, Dahl also incorporates postmodern aesthetics, which is something not often encountered in children’s fiction. This is evident not only in the value he places on wordplay and his condemnation of human developments in technology, but also in the skepticism with which he treats the established differences between species. By establishing every ‘inherent’ trait—from ethics to physical size—as relative, highlighting ambiguities and demonstrating the ability for change, he narrows and obfuscates the difference between giant and human as to convey a postmodern worldview to a young audience. Furthermore, Dahl extensively challenges the very notion of either species being associated exclusively with being ‘good’ and ‘evil’; he is critical of human nature, facilitating interpretations in which the designation of the heroes and the villains of the narrative can be questioned. These ambiguities communicate the complexities and

inconsistencies of concepts appearing to be clear-cut, serving to subvert or even transcend the very dichotomy of 'good' and 'evil' or 'giant' and 'human'. Through this, therefore, Dahl creates a compelling fictional world in *The BFG* that is reflective of the ambiguities and nuances that exist in reality.

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