***The Witches***

***Chapter 21***

***Off to Work We Go***

***Summary:***

* That same night at dinner (a nice Norwegian feast), our narrator asks his grandma what will happen now that they have destroyed The Grand High Witch.
* When Grandmamma tells him that someone will replace her, and that all the witches won't disappear, he is not pleased. He worries that everything they did was for nothing.
* Once again, it's Grandmamma to the rescue. Through her cunning, she had called the Chief of Police in the town where Hotel Magnificent was located and managed to get the home address of the GHW. This very same address is where the new GHW will be living with all her assistants, and guess where it is? Norway. Boo-yah!
* Grandmamma and her grandson dance around in excitement, anticipating our narrator's journey into the castle where the new GHW will live, snooping around, and of course, giving Mouse-Maker to all the witches inside. They know the recipe, after all.
* One little problem, though. How will they kill all the witches once they've been turned into mice? They couldn't take them on alone, and of course the witches are too smart to be lured into traps. But wait, there's a solution: cats.
* Once the mice-witch are all kitten dessert, Grandmamma and her grandson will go through the records of the GHW and find the names and addresses of every witch everywhere in the world.
* They will take an around-the-world trip and turn all the witches throughout the world into mice. It will keep them busy for the rest of their lives, but they're up for the challenge.
* Most importantly, it will sure be fun.

***Brief Synopsis:***

Over dinner, the boy and his grandmother discuss the next steps to take in their plan to destroy all witches. The grandmother says that there must be another Grand High Witch by now, which upsets the boy; he feels as if his being turned into a mouse was for nothing if a new Grand High Witch can still keep control over all the other witches from other countries. However, the grandmother reveals to him that as soon as they got home from England she called the Chief of Police in Bournemouth and pretended to be the Chief of Police of Norway and got the Grand High Witch's address from the hotel. They realize that they can make plans to sneak in there, find out about all the other witches in the world, and take them all down one by one by turning them all into mice and releasing cats to catch them. The story ends with the grandmother and the boy anticipating much work and excitement ahead of them.

**Critical Analysis(Ch17-21):**

The boy does not have much time to explore life as a mouse, and so even during a time of extreme danger he shows the childhood delight in recognizing one's talents and identity. As he swings from his tail, he almost forgets where he is, which causes him to get hurt but not killed, perhaps representing the difficulties and ultimate triumphs of identity-formation in childhood.

Following the boy's success in the kitchen, it is interesting to compare the reactions of adult men, adult women, and children when they see the witches turn into mice. Dahl writes that, "All over the Dining-Room women were screaming and strong men were turning white in the face and shouting 'It's crazy! This can't happen! Let's get the heck out of here quick!'...Only the children in the room were really enjoying it. They all seemed to know instinctively that something good was going on right there in front of them, and they were clapping and cheering and laughing like mad" (180). Dahl again represents a gender difference he sees in society, and perhaps problematically reinforces this dichotomy for children, by specifying that the adult women in the room do not take action but only act helpless and frightened when a problem arises (except, of course, the grandmother). The adult men are also seen to be ineffective, but they must hide their emotions under words and proposed action. Children are shown to be intuitive and joyful, positive qualities that juxtapose the negative view Dahl has so far given of children other the protagonist in the character of [Bruno Jenkins](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-witches/study-guide/character-list#bruno-jenkins).

Similar to the section in which the boy compares the relative advantages of life as a mouse and as a human, with life as a mouse perhaps being the better of the two, here the boy has a discussion with the grandmother about death, in which he seems to possess both uncanny optimism about his situation and wisdom far beyond his years. The boy surprises the grandmother and likely the reader by saying that he is glad he only has around 9 years to live because he doesn't want to live without the grandmother. This might be a way of gently introducing to children the difficult, but unavoidable, topic of their own mortality.

Dahl also shows the reader how important motivation is to life. Though the grandmother and the boy have succeeded in their short-term goal and even come to terms with the fact that neither has long to live, they nevertheless proceed to make a complex, difficult plan to carry out for the rest of their days. Interestingly, they seem to see the destruction of all witches as purely their responsibilities, not trying to include the authorities of England, Norway, or any other country or authority, even though the grandmother is clearly comfortable contacting them. They may think that, as is demonstrated in their interactions with the Jenkins parents, they would not be taken seriously. At the very least, they see a way to execute their plan and want to get started as quickly as possible.

While the book's resolution ties up most of the plot, a few mysteries are left unsolved, mainly revolving around the grandmother. We are never given further details of the grandmother's own childhood encounters with witches. Most importantly, her missing thumb is never mentioned again after the two early mentions in the book, and the boy does not seem even to contemplate asking her. Perhaps, like the mouse-boy's chopped tail, the missing thumb was simply a momentary but tragic loss included by Dahl to represent the scars that one carries from childhood into adulthood.

***Critical Study (Mr. Jenkins and His Son – It’s Off to Work We Go):***

Mr. Jenkins and His Son – Mr. Jenkins demands to know where his son is, believing Bruno and the narrator are off causing trouble somewhere. Mr. Jenkins then says he believes Grandmamma is a part of things too, for her joke about the mouse. Grandmamma explains it is no joke. Bruno then appears from the purse to say hello. Mr. Jenkins is stunned, but vows to care for Bruno. He wants to know how such a thing could happen. Grandmamma then explains what has happened. Mr. Jenkins is enraged, and storms over toward the Grand High Witch.

The Triumph – Before Mr. Jenkins reaches the table, the witches begin to shout and scream as they begin to transform into mice. The narrator is thrilled that his plan is working. All the normal people in the dining room stop and watch as the witches continue to yell and scream. As the witches transform fully into mice, the diners shout and flee. Bruno is reunited with his parents, while the narrator and Grandmamma head outside for a taxi to the train station. Meanwhile, the mice-witches are smashed and hacked apart.

The Heart of a Mouse – The narrator and Grandmamma return to Norway. There, Grandmamma begins to build gadgets, furniture, and other odds and ends that will make life easier for the narrator’s life as a mouse, such as buttons to turn on the lights located on the floor. One night, the narrator asks Grandmamma how long mice live. Grandmamma explains that the ordinary mouse lives about three years, but an extraordinary mouse like the narrator could live nine years. The narrator explains this is great news because he doesn’t want to live any longer than Grandmamma, who is 86. Grandmamma reveals that the heart of a mouse beats 500 times each minute. Grandmamma asks the narrator if he minds being a mouse. The narrator responds that it does not matter what someone looks like or who someone is, so long as that someone is loved.

It’s Off to Work We Go! – The narrator asks Grandmamma what will become of the rest of the world’s witches without the Grand High Witch. Grandmamma explains that a new Grand High Witch will take her place. Grandmamma goes on to explain that she has learned the address and real name of the Grand High Witch-turned-mouse, where she was known as a charitable Baroness living in a Norwegian castle. All the members of her inner-circle must be done away with. After those witches are turned into mice, Grandmamma says she will let cats loose after them. After this, she will collect the castle’s records of the names and addresses of all the witches worldwide. Then, she and the narrator will travel the globe, eliminating all the witches in the world.

As the novel comes to an end, the narrator watches with glee as his plan works. The witches – including the Grand High Witch – have all consumed the soup, thereby transforming them into mice which are quickly killed. The witches have changed appearance and cannot be recognized as what they really are. Meanwhile, Mr. Jenkins comes to accept his son, Bruno, for his newly-acquired appearance. Bruno is now a mouse which Mr. Jenkins vows to care for. To Mr. Jenkins, it is not the appearance of his son that counts, but it is that his son is his son that counts.

The same is true later for the narrator, and for Grandmamma. The narrator, although now a mouse, tells his grandmother that he’ll be okay as a mouse because he does not wish to live longer than she does. Grandmamma still worries about the narrator being a mouse, to which the narrator wisely responds that it doesn’t matter what one looks like, so long as one is loved. Here is the summation of the author’s contention regarding appearance and acceptance in the novel. It is not what is on the outside that counts, but what is on the inside – love. The narrator is perfectly content as a mouse because he knows he is loved by his grandmother.

For the narrator, life has not turned out exactly as planned. Beyond the death of his own parents, the narrator himself will now have a very short life – perhaps no more than nine years. This is certainly not a typical happy ending for a children’s novel, where resolutions are reached and everything returns to as normal as possible. The author makes it very clear that life does not always work out the way it is expected to, and that people must make the best of even difficult situations. It is a dose of realism for young readers to understand that they may not end up with everything they want, or think they should.

And to help make this point, the author has used horror to do it. Indeed, the entire horrific story of murderous witches can be seen as a way for the author to reveal important ideas and important points to children. He isn’t merely giving them thrills and shocks, but preparing them for the real world. Yet, despite the harsh realities that life can bring, the author reminds his young readers that this does not make life worth living, but that every life has worth. This is certainly the case of the narrator and Bruno, who, though they may be mice now, are still important.