***The Witches***

***Chapter 2***

***The Grand High Witch***

***Summary:***

* In the beginning of this chapter, we get some bad news from the will of the narrator's father: he and his wife wanted their son to stay with his Grandmamma, of course, but in England. Neither of them wants to go, but they respect the wishes of his dead parents and plan to head back to England, the Land of Strange Spelling.
* The night before they leave, Grandmamma reveals a little more information about witches: There are more witches in Norway than in England, but the English ones are the meanest. In fact, English witches like to create powders that can transform a child into a creature hated by adults, so that the adults will then kill their own children. (Grandmamma wasn't kidding about them being the meanest.)
* Also, witches are different in each country (in some places, they even make adults *eat* their own children). Each year, all the witches from each country get together for a secret meeting and listen to a lecture from The Grand High Witch Of All The World, ruler of all the witches. She's powerful, of course, and she's also rich because she creates her own money. (By the way, this is illegal.)
* Now Grandmamma admits that she's a retired witchophile, which means that she used to spend her time trying to track down The Grand High Witch.
* And with that, the narrator and his grandma move to England.
* One day, the narrator is working on the tree house that he and his friend Timmy have been building. Along comes a woman (with gloves!) who offers him a snake. Hmmm.
* She tries to lure him down, but he refuses and instead climbs high up into the tree until his Grandmamma comes out and assures him that the woman is gone. He has officially seen his first witch.
* He tells his Grandmamma all about it, and it frightens her, too. After that whole scenario, the narrator becomes really paranoid about witches, and for good reason – it turns out this wouldn't be his only encounter with a witch. Dun dun dun!

***Brief Synopsis:***

The next day, a man arrives to discuss the boy's parents' will with his grandmother. The will states that the boy's grandmother should care for him back in England where he can keep attending school. She agrees to do this, and they leave a few days later so that he can be back in time for school to start again. The boy asks his grandmother if there are witches in England as well as in Norway and she responds that there are fewer but they are some of the most vicious witches in the world. The boy continues thinking about what happened to his grandmother's thumb, but he doesn't ask.

The boy asks his grandmother what kinds of things English witches do to children. She tells him that they especially like to mix up potions that change children into other creatures, especially those creatures hated by adults. She gives him examples of children being turned into slugs, fleas, and pheasants, causing adults, even their own parents, to squash or shoot them. The grandmother says that witches are different in every country and that there is a Secret Society of Witches in every country that allows all of the witches to come together to meet and plan. Witches from different countries do not communicate with one another, but keep organized by all being visited by "[The Grand High Witch](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-witches/study-guide/character-list#the-grand-high-witch)Of All The World" (32) once every year. Supposedly, these annual meetings are held at normal hotels; the women act normally while there, but sometimes strange things occur during their stay.

The boy asks his grandmother how she knows all this, and she says that "witchophiles all over the world" (34) have been trying for a long time to learn more about The Grand High Witch, the societies of witches, and the annual meetings. She tells the boy that all witches can have as much money as they want because The Grand High Witch has a money-printing machine.

The next morning, the boy and his grandmother return to England and school starts again. Soon, the boy has his first encounter with a witch. He is working on the tree house he has been building with his friend Timmy when he sees a woman standing on the ground below the tree and smiling at him. He notices that she is wearing a small black hat and black gloves. She tells him that she has a present for him in a voice with "a curious rasping quality" (36). She shows him that she has a small, green snake in her purse. The boy climbs quickly further up the tree and stays there for hours. Eventually, his grandmother comes out and calls for him; he asks if the woman is gone and then comes down. His grandmother takes him inside and gives him cocoa. They are both very shaken by the encounter and he sees her glance down at where her thumb should be while they sit together. The chapter ends with an eerie line, foreshadowing what's to come: "that was my first witch. But it wasn't my last" (40).

***Analysis(Ch 0-3):***

One of the most important moments in the book, if one looks at what has been discussed by both scholars and a wider reading public, comes on just page 3: "A witch is always a woman. I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches *are* women. There is no such thing as a male witch." Because of this passage and the portrayal of women throughout the book, many critics called *The Witches*and Dahl himself a misogynist and even protested for the banning of the book in schools in the 1980s and 1990s. However, other critics have argued that what Dahl meant to communicate through the deceptive normalcy and even beauty of the sneaky, terrifying witches was the idea that things are not always what they seem.

Just after this section, in the same chapter called "How to Recognize a Witch," Dahl makes an interesting narrative choice only used once in the story. Specifically, he creates a meta-textual moment in which he speaks directly to his assumed audience, school children being read to by their teacher. This moment is quite interesting, as it has the spooky effect of blending a reader or listener's real world and surroundings with the fantastical world within the story. However, it should be noted that this authorial move is risky in that it alienates readers who do not fit Dahl's supposed audience (such as older school children reading to themselves).

A good deal of foreshadowing is done in this section of the book, as is common in children's books. One important motif that is set up here is that of mice, which are mentioned multiple times. The boy notes that his grandmother filled up an armchair so much that even a mouse couldn't fit in it with her. In addition, the grandmother foreshadows the idea of children being turned into small, dirty animals (especially in England) by suggesting that English witches might turn children into slugs or fleas.

An important facet of the book that might slip by young readers is allusions made to religion, especially in the chapter "The Grand High Witch." In this chapter, the boy is in a tree when a witch approaches him and beckons him to come to her. When he doesn't come, she shows him the snake she has in her handbag, but he climbs further up the tree away from her. This moment parallels, but contrasts greatly with, the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. In this Bible story, Adam and Eve are not supposed to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, but a snake convinces Eve to, who then convinces Adam. Biblical commentary refers to this as man's original sin, and alluding to it calls even more attention to Dahl's portrayal of women as evil.

It is important to keep in mind the ways in which Dahl has drawn upon his life in his works, especially in *The Witches*. Dahl's parents were from Norway, though he was born and raised in Wales, making his connection to Norway quite similar to that of the young boy in the story. Furthermore, Dahl has at least one quite positive female in the book - the grandmother. Dahl has made it known that the grandmother character in *The Witches*(as well as others of his stories, as this same character, with some variations, occurs many times throughout his works) was based on his mother.

Quotations:

***Quotation 1:***

I kept looking at the hand with the missing thumb. I couldn't help it. I was fascinated by it (4.15)

***Explanation 1:***

Grandmamma is missing a thumb (from an encounter with a witch, we're led to believe). But our narrator isn't grossed out by <em>this</em>. Stumpy witch feet? Yeah. Missing Grandmamma thumb? Nope. We wonder if the situation were reversed, and all the witches were missing thumbs and Grandmamma was missing her toes, would the narrator's reactions be different?

***Quotation 2:***

"I've known English witches," she went on, who have turned children into pheasants and then sneaked the pheasants up into the woods the very day before the pheasant-shooting season opened."  
  
"Owch," I said. "So they get shot?"  
  
"Of course they get shot," she said. "And then they get plucked and roasted and eaten for supper." (4.23-25)

The words "of course" are striking here. In the world of <em>The Witches</em>, it's not surprising for children to get turned into pheasants and then get shot. If that weren't enough, they get eaten for dinner, too. So, it seems like Roald Dahl isn't using violence for the shock factor – instead, he's almost trying to make it seem normal. Is this okay in a book written for children? What do you think?

***Quotation 3:***

"Yes," my grandmother answered at last. "She's gone. I'm here, my darling. I'll look after you. You can come down now." (4.86)

Grandmamma is tough as nails and pretty stubborn. Once in a while, though, her caring, compassionate side shines through.

***Quotation 4:***

"[T]heir favourite ruse is to mix up a powder that will turn a child into some creature or other that all grown-ups hate." (4.17)

Not only do witches have a huge amount of hate inside them, they can inspire hate in others. They know what makes adults cringe, and they feed off that to carry out their evil plans.

***Quotation 5:***

"No," she said. "I doubt that. One child is as good as any other to those creatures." (4.93)

To the witches, all children are the same. Even just by looking at the difference between our narrator and Bruno Jenkins, though, we know that's not actually the case.