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Approaches to Teaching *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Introduction

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was one of the most popular children's books in the last 50 years. The following essay is about certain options of how this book can be used in a teaching context. In the beginning I will focus on some theoretical background knowledge and why this book was challenged, and I give a quick summary of the plot. I will then follow with one possible lesson plan for a 45 minute class and give some more ideas how the material can be used for teaching.

Background Information

The book was written by the British author Roald Dahl in 1964. Surprisingly, it was first published in the United States in the same year and in 1967 in the United Kingdom. There are two film adaptations from 1971 and 2005. The author's inspiration for writing this book was his own childhood experience with two competing chocolate factories in his neighborhood. Originally, the book should contain more chapters and additional characters, but in the end it was shortened to the current version¹. Roald Dahl was one of the most popular authors for children's and young adult's literature during the 1960s and 70s. Characteristic features of his works are unexpected endings and a very unsentimental, dark humor. Also, the use of allegoric writing and character design is typical for the literary context in which the book was written. The sequel of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was written in 1972 and is called *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, which continues the plot directly.

The book was criticized, first, because it contained racist topics. The Oompa-Loompas were originally depicted as black Pygmies from Africa, which could be seen as a

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_and_the_Chocolate_Factory

harmless depiction of slavery. The author removed the first illustrations for the Oompa-Loompas and stated that he did not mean to depict them in a racial way or discriminate somebody. Another argument against the book was the lack of character features for the main character Charlie. Opponents argued that the figure does not have any negative features, but also lacks of positive ones. The book was also said to be too violent and to depict a sadistic moral system. Furthermore, the punishment for the children is ought to be too sadistic². I personally think, that these accusations are not justified. It is the author's right to create the characters at his leisure and the punishments of the children, for my understanding, are not sadistic at all. Nevertheless, the book can be taught in school and therefore I will go on with a short summary of the story plot.

The story is about Willy Wonka and his mysterious chocolate factory, which was never seen from the inside by anybody. One day he raffles five golden tickets in his chocolate bars for a tour through his factory. The first four tickets are soon found by the following children: Augustus Gloop, a fat boy, whose only hobby is eating; Veruca Salt, an insufferable brat; Violet Beauregard, a girl, who is chewing gum all the time; and Mike Teavee, a boy who is addicted to television and plastic guns. All these children stand for bad character flaws and some scholars also suggest that they stand for the seven deadly sins, especially if one considers, that there were originally more chapters and children planned for the book. The story begins with the descriptions of the poor circumstances of Charlie Bucket and his search for the fifth golden ticket, which he eventually finds one day before the tour is ought to happen. The second part of the book describes the tour through Willy Wonka's factory. Throughout this tour the four 'bad' children are ejected on different ways (sucked up by a pipe, thrown away with the trash ...). Charlie Bucket on the other hand, who is grateful and respectful, is not punished for his behavior and in

² <http://www.roalddahlfans.com/articles/char.php>

the end even inherits the factory. All in all, the whole idea of the five golden ticket was to find a worthy successor for the factory. At the end, Charlie, his grandpa and Willy Wonka fly with a glass elevator to Charlie's old house to pick up the rest of his family. The book ends in an open way and continues with the next book *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*.

Ideas for Teaching

Possible Lesson Plan

- Requirements:

The following lesson is planned to be taught at Middle School (children between ages 10-11). I personally think, that this book is not profound enough to be taught on a college level, at least not in depth. Yes, there are certain topics, which can be discussed more in depth, but overall I think it is a children's book as the author meant it to be. I assume that the class contains around 30 pupils and the book is already read at this point. The lesson is therefore a conclusive lesson and the overall topic I chose is a character analysis.

- Topic Introduction

For introducing the topic of the lesson, I would use a game. The children are split up into 6 groups with 5 children each. The teacher should bring 6 chocolate bars with him/her into class, one of them with a golden ticket inside. The group with the golden ticket can choose the character they would like to analyze. The remaining characters are distributed to the other students. The characters to analyze are the five children and Willy Wonka. I use this approach as a topic introduction because it creates motivation, especially with young children.

Besides, teamwork skills and the ability to compromise are improved because the children of the winning group have to agree on one character.

- Working Stage

The task is “characterize your character with quotes from the book and present your results on a poster”. This task should be projected with a beamer or a computer (or written down on the blackboard) to make the task clear. Children in lower grade tend to confuse the given task, so it is always useful to give the task in written form. The group work improves not only social skills and teamwork, but also self-confidence, discrete thinking and problem-solving thinking. Posters are a good medium because the information can be clearly arranged and they are suitable for further lessons. Moreover, children at this age are highly motivated for arts and crafts. It combines physical and psychological activities. The task of character analysis encourages the pupils to work with the text. Reading skills and citation abilities are improved. The book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is very appropriate for this type of activity because the characters are standing for specific attitudes and the analysis of those different character types is not too difficult. If there is some time left in this stage, an additional task could be to find more adjectives (on their own) to describe the figures. This would be a more creative task and promotes the children’s own speaking and language skills.

- Conclusive Stage

In the conclusive stage, the children should choose one speaker of the group to present their results. This step again fosters teamwork (choice of a speaker) and presentation skills. After the presentation follows a class discussion about the following questions: “Why is it Charlie who inherits the factory? Which social

norms and values are implied in the characters?" The children will find out about the superior attitudes the book characters stand for and will add these attitudes to the posters. Depending on the maturity level of the class, the topic of the seven deadly sins can be addressed at this point. If time permits, the discussion can be continued with the examination of morality and social behavior ("What do we learn out of the story? What is the moral of this story?").

- Homework

As a homework I chose a more open and creative task. The children should continue the story in their own words: "*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has an open ending. Continue the story in your own words (1/2 – 1 page)! What happens after Charlie inherits the factory? How does it look like today?" This task is probably also a lot of fun for the children.

- Other possible topics for class:

The book contains, of course, more possible topics for class than the one I chose for this lesson. One could also talk about the topic of moral with the examination of the Oompa-Loompa's songs. Sticking to the topic of the songs, another idea is the interpretation of metaphors and symbols in the Oompa-Loompa songs. Concerning the fact, that there are two film adaptations for this book, another possible way to teach this in class is to watch the movies and compare them to the book. Another prominent topic is poverty and how it is described and created in the book. Or one could simply continue the discussion about norms and values in society. Finally, the justification of censorship and banning can be discussed and analyzed, in this book especially, in the frame of racism.

"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." *Wikipedia*. 22 Jan 2015. Web. 27 Jan 2015.

Dahl, Roald. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: Puffin Books. 2007.

Pierce, Cassandra. "Charlie and the Political-Correctness Factory." Web. 6 Nov 2014.