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*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* Position Statement

Prior to this course, I had read Roald Dahl's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* once in elementary school and seen the 1971 film version several times. I was intrigued upon previewing the tasks for this week, as I had not before noticed or considered any stereotypes or satire in the work. As I reread the book with this angle in mind, I was surprised to find several problematic areas. While *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* does include stereotypes of women, the old, and the poor, the most egregious wrong is Dahl's portrayal of non-Western cultures.

Dahl uses exaggerated qualities that cross the line into stereotypes. The Bucket family is not just poor; they are destitute. Charlie's grandparents are not just old; they are decrepit (that is, until Grandpa Joe gets wind of the Golden Ticket contest). To me, these stereotypes seem to be relatively harmless lampoons. They seem exaggerated to the point where children can recognize what Dahl is doing, and the characters have positive traits that offset the exaggerations: the Buckets are poor but kind, and the grandparents are old but generous. The female characters in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are slightly more problematic for me. Aside from the Buckets, the other female characters are selfish, nagging, and often overweight, which perpetuates negative stereotypes.

I was most disappointed in the ways Dahl represented people from other cultures, namely India and Africa. I also remembered that these elements from the book were not present in the

1971 film, perhaps because the filmmakers also saw them as an issue. In the book, Grandpa Joe tells Charlie about Prince Pondicherry, an Indian prince who asked Mr. Wonka to build him a chocolate palace. Wonka obliges, but the prince is dismayed when the palace melts on the first hot day. This is the only Indian character in the book, so I find it unfortunate that he is portrayed as being so foolish. Even more difficult for me are the Oompa-Loompas who are “pygmies...imported direct from Africa” and whose “skin is almost black” (Dahl 73, 72). Wonka convinced them to come with him from Africa by offering them to “live in my factory” and promised they could have “*all* the cacao beans you want!” (75). Now, the Oompa-Loompas live and work in the chocolate factory, never leaving. Not only that, but Wonka uses them as his guinea pigs, which often results in harm. When Violet turns into a blueberry after chewing a piece of Wonka’s gum, Wonka says, “It *always* happens like that...I’ve tried it twenty times in the Testing Room on twenty Oompa-Loompas, and every one of them finished up as a blueberry. It’s most annoying” (105). Wonka seems to view the Oompa-Loompas as little more than convenient, entertaining labor he can easily exploit. All of the other characters besides Prince Pondicherry and the Oompa-Loompas are presumably white Europeans, so the book does not send a positive message about cultural diversity.

Racism and ethnocentrism already abound in our society, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* adds to these problems. A young reader is unlikely to think critically about the way the non-Western characters are portrayed, and therefore teachers must think carefully before reading this book with their students. Just because students may not explicitly notice the stereotypes does not mean that they do not implicitly pick up on them. The subtle messages we send through media can have significant repercussions, especially on impressionable young children. *Charlie*

*and the Chocolate Factory* may have many positive qualities, but it sends dangerous messages, both stated and unstated, about marginalized populations that only worsen the problems our culture already has. If we want to improve our society and the way we treat each other, we may want to look to other books than *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for our young people to read.