

The Chocolate Paradise: Spiritual Quest Motif in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Haritha Vijayakumar, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Pondicherry University

Abstract

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964), arguably the most popular children's fiction ever written, is considered a purely fantastical moral tale that has fascinated the imagination of children and adults alike since its initial publication. This paper attempts to closely read the narrative to highlight the more serious and spiritual themes it might be inspired from or modelled on. Through a detailed analysis of the characters, plot, and structure of the text, the paper demonstrates how the journey was undertaken by the protagonist Charlie in the novel is a spiritual quest comparable to the ones in literary classics like Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320) and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592).

Keywords: spiritual quest, fantasy, virtue, vice, sin.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964) by Roald Dahl, a bizarre story of a young boy Charlie Bucket and an eccentric chocolatier Mr. Willy Wonka is often considered among the best young-adult fiction ever written. As whimsical and absurd as the story might seem, it conveys essential life lessons to children. Dahl is known for making his children's stories dark, unsentimental and macabre; even the most unbelievable of his stories are inspired by real-life events and aim to prepare children for the unfair world they will soon face. As accredited by many critics, Dahl did not see kids as invalid, guileless beings. He saw them as 'adults' because he believed in their agency and capabilities. He introduced unconventional themes in his children's stories, which the critics frowned upon but were immensely loved by children. Tim

Burton, the director of the 2005 film adaptation of the book, says: "I responded to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* because it respected the fact that children can be adults." (Burton 223). It should also be remembered that his works held anti-Semitic views, and the text in question has amassed unfavorable criticism for the author's racist portrayal of characters. Children's writer and literary historian John Rowe Townsend describes *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as a "fantasy of an almost nauseating kind" and called out the "astonishing insensitivity" (Townsend 255) regarding the author's original portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas as African black pygmies. However, this was revised in later editions. The present study adopts a different direction and seeks to analyze the spiritual and philosophical patterns and motifs hidden behind the novel's nonsensical themes and settings.

Often considered the most famous story for children, surpassing even the *Harry Potter* series, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is the tale of an underdog boy Charlie Bucket who would love nothing more than a chance to visit the magnificent chocolate factory of Mr. Willy Wonka. By some miracle, Charlie, who has enough money to buy only one chocolate a year, finds one of the five coveted golden passes that let the buyer visit Wonka's factory. Charlie and his grandpa Joe visit the factory with four other lucky winners and their parents. The other four children fall victims to their vices and are evicted from the visit in bizarre and painful ways. At the same time, Charlie emerges

unscathed, becomes Wonka's favorite, and the heir to the paradise-like factory. The story of Charlie's journey from a poor but righteous boy to a permanent resident and partner of the Chocolate factory is reminiscent of the soul's spiritual journey. This theme was a life-long engagement for literary giants like Dante, Milton, and Christopher Marlowe. This paper looks at how the journey motif in the story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can be compared to the soul's spiritual journey in works like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

On the surface, Dahl's text is a simple and direct moral tale where each child character is introduced with a description that tells the reader precisely what one should think of them. Charlie is described simply as the hero, while the other kids are given lengthier introductions regarding their moral turpitude. A few chapters into the novel, the reader discovers why Charlie is the 'hero.' He comes from a long-suffering but virtuous and good-natured family of the Buckets. Charlie and his parents cheerfully care for both sets of grandparents, who are nearly invalid due to old age, while earning a living from Mr. Bucket's wages, the family's sole breadwinner. The other children and their families are presented as lacking moral character and sinful in their greed and capitalist degeneracy. Though winning the golden ticket would seem a matter of pure luck, the chances are more significant for these kids, who, unlike Charlie, can afford to buy large quantities of Willy Wonka's chocolates.

Augustus Gloop wins the first golden ticket, and his town throws a parade to celebrate. Augustus is a greedy child whose hunger can never be satisfied. He eats morbid quantities of chocolate daily, encouraged by his parents, who consider it extra vitamins. It is only natural that

he finds one of the golden tickets. The second winner Veruca Salt is an insufferable brat whose greed is insatiable. Her father employs his factory of peanut shellers to unwrap chocolate bars so that Veruca can procure one of the coveted golden tickets. Mike Teavee, the third winner, is addicted to watching TV and never tears his eyes away from the screen; he spends his days sprawled in front of the machine. His parents also do not discourage him and, like the other two families, can afford to buy the obstinate boy whatever he demands. Violet Beauregarde, the fourth winner, is a girl who always wants to break records, is boastful, and revels in fame. She is highly competitive and wins one of the golden tickets simply by switching her attention from championship gum chewing to searching for golden tickets in candy bars- interests her parents can encourage and afford. Charlie seems to be the only kid who got the ticket through sheer luck or divine intervention. The circumstances that lead Charlie to the last golden ticket are so lucky that it is deemed 'The Miracle.' The boy can afford only one chocolate bar a year on his birthday; however, just the day before the factory visit, when there is only one golden ticket to be found, he stumbles on enough money on the street to buy two more chocolates. The moral uprightness of Charlie and his family, as opposed to the degeneration of the other kids and their families, is highlighted throughout the novel. However, it is most evident in how Charlie procures the ticket as if it is a reward for his goodness.

Rather than presenting the spoilt children as aberrations, the narrative presents them as norms in a depraved world lost in mindless preoccupations. The adults act fiercer than the kids when the news about the golden tickets comes out; they are driven to a crazed state and indulge in acts of gluttony and larceny. In the

novel, a famous gangster robs a bank to mass purchase chocolate bars, and a scientist invents a machine to detect the golden ticket without unwrapping the candy bar. A Russian woman attempts to make a counterfeit ticket, and at the same time, a psychiatrist badgers his patient to reveal the details of a dream regarding where a candy bar with the golden ticket can be found. Charlie's teacher dismisses the class after hearing about the news so everyone can start buying chocolates. At the same time, another lady wants time to think about the ransom demands of her husband's kidnappers, who like her trove of candy bars. These characters and their actions are reminiscent of the sinners in Dante's epic poem and the sensuality of Dr. Faustus. The children become mere symbols of the depraved world consumed by greed.

Though the children's follies are apparent and the fates they suffer inside the factory are a direct warning to children who indulge in such defects, their journey has a deeper meaning. The tour of the otherworldly factory becomes a spiritual journey, like the one undertaken by Dante's soul that tests their virtues and vices. Mr. Willy Wonka is the God of the text's universe who puts the children through different levels of examination in his factory's fantastical but treacherous rooms. Charlie purges vices at various legs of the journey emerges sanctified, and gains ownership of the factory, just like Dante's soul cleanses its sins on the spiritual journey towards heaven and finally acquires the Promised Land. The other children become allegories of the cardinal sins and are punished for their vices. Dante's soul travels up the Inferno and the Purgatory before ascending to heaven. The factory seems heavenly to the kids with a running stream of chocolate, fudge trees, candy grass, and other marvelous creations of Wonka. However, it is also perilous like the Purgatory

and Inferno with their dangerous machines and mysterious rooms. It is the birthplace of Wonka's fantastical creations and his abode, just like heaven is believed to be the abode of God from where he creates and directs all forms of life. The various temptations and trials the children undergo at different stages of the journey can be seen as different stages or levels of purgation. Each child except Charlie falls into temptation and thus cannot travel further in the journey. It is only Charlie and his Grandpa Joe who emerge unscathed. The parents of the other children share their follies and are hugely responsible for it and hence are held back along with them.

The first one to fall into temptation is Augustus Gloop, whose folly/sin is gluttony. We see him consuming large amounts of food, and his thoughts and words constantly revolve around it. At the factory, despite having thousands of candies to choose from, he decides to go for the one thing that is off-limits to him, the chocolate river. He falls into it and gets sucked by the giant pipe that carries liquid chocolate- the consequence of gluttony.

Violet Beaurograde, the second winner, has won many interesting but nonsensical awards, like chewing a piece of gum for the longest time. She is immensely proud of her achievements and likes to remind people of her accomplishments constantly. Her vainglory is rewarded with a rather harsh punishment at the factory. Despite Wonka's warnings, she proceeds to consume the three course-meal-gum, a work in progress, as she wants to be the first person to have tried it. The phrase "swell with pride" is taken to a new level as she starts swelling up like a blueberry and soon turns into a giant blue ball, showing the consequence of Pride.

The most unlikeable of the characters is Veruca Salt, a thoroughly spoiled child who gets anything she wants by stomping her feet and yelling at her father and is still not satisfied. She does not just want things; she wants them when she asks for them. Her greed knows no bounds, and nothing can stay in the way of getting what she wants; she often demands things that are not hers to have. At the factory, she requires to have one of the squirrels employed to crack open nuts in the 'Nut Room'. When Mr. Wonka makes clear that it cannot be done, she proceeds to grab one, the squirrels take her down and throws her in the garbage shaft- the aftermath of greed.

Mike Teavee is the representative of the cardinal sin sloth; something Dahl worried about was taking over the kids of his generation who were glued to the TV screen and missed the real joys of childhood. Mike has not eaten a single meal his entire life without watching TV. When he is introduced to the TV chocolate at the factory, he thinks of how easy it will be to get transported over TV and be a part of his favorite shows. He pays no heed to Mr. Wonka's warnings not to go near the machines and shrinks to ten times his original size. Mr. Wonka recommends that the gum-hurting machine stretch him, but he is overstretched. Ironically, some stretching has been long overdue for Mike. Mike also represents anger/wrath. He is very short-tempered and lashes out whenever someone interrupts his TV-watching.

Wrath, in another sense, is represented through Mr. Willy Wonka. His anger is comparable to the wrath of God. Every time the children do something disrespectful or offensive to Wonka, they are punished. His rage is passive-aggressive, does not manifest on the surface, and works in mysterious ways. Reading the book gives one a sinister feeling that though the

children's fates seem like accidents, they might have been choreographed to appear so by Mr. Wonka. He acts like God handing out punishments and rewards where it is due. It should also be noted that all the children except Charlie sin unbelief. They do not believe Mr. Wonka when he tells them about his fantastical creations and continuously question the credibility of his claims. Charlie and Grandpa Joe, on the other hand, are convinced of Mr. Wonka's abilities and believe in his impossible-seeming creations without question.

The OompaLoompas are identical gypsies who work in the factory; they appear as Mr. Wonka's allies, carrying out his wishes and dispensing children who have wronged. They act as Mr. Wonka's Greek chorus; their seemingly merry songs are pretty sinister and foretell how the punishment each child and their parents get is justified and a consequence of their sinful nature. While Mr. Wonka is elusive and speaks in euphemisms, his agents, the OompaLoompas, proceed to call out the wrong-doers and even celebrate their punishments. An excerpt from their song after the Salts go down the garbage chute is as follows:

A girl can't spoil herself, you know.
Who spoiled her, then? Ah, who indeed?
Who pandered to her every need?
Who turned her into such a brat?
Who are the culprits? Who did that?
Alas! You needn't look so far.
To find out who these sinners are,
They are (and this is very sad)
Her loving parents, MUM and DAD.
And this is why we're glad they fell
Into the rubbish chute as well.' (Dahl
103)

The OompaLoompas can be compared to the demons that come to drag away sinned souls

in *Dr. Faustus* and *Divine Comedy*. Both Dante and Dr. Faustus undertake a spiritual journey from which only one emerges victoriously. Dante's soul is purged, and he returns to earth to lead a more spiritual life; however, Dr. Faustus's soul is doomed forever due to his unpardonable sins. Charlie, on the other hand, is untouched by the perils and vices of wealth. Coming from a humble background, he appreciates what little he has, does not yearn for what is not deserved, nor envies the other children for what they have. These qualities help him complete the journey unharmed and gain a permanent abode in the factory vis-à-vis heaven. His victory can symbolize redemption, the ultimate goal of a spiritual journey.

Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can be considered a moral tale, fantasy fiction, a critique of capitalism, or a political statement. However, it is also a spiritual tale that pits virtue against vices and upholds the former as the ultimate path to redemption. In conclusion, the text is a hard pill coated in sugar and chocolate, which the adults swallow with

caution while the children gobble it up in utter delight.

References

- Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by H. F. Cary, Wordsworth Editions, 2009.
- Burton, Tim. *Burton on Burton*. Faber & Faber, 2008.
- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Directed by Tim Burton, performances by Johnny Depp and Freddie Highmore, Warner Bros., 2005.
- Dahl, Roald. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Puffin, 2010.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. Dover Publications, 1995.
- Stratynner, Leslie and James R. Keller, editors. *Fantasy Fiction into Film: Essays*. McFarland & Co Inc, 2007.
- Townsend, John. Rowe. *Written for Children: An Outline of English-language Children's Literature*. Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1974.