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# Diversity in Adaptations for Young People: Dahl's *The Witches*

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ENG 384:Diversity of Literature for Young Readers

## Adaptations and Retellings

All stories, texts, and works of art exist in a web of conversations; they reflect many differing, complex, and overlapping ideological constructs - including how race, gender, and sexuality are perceived in society. However, adaptations and retellings have an additional layer to consider, as they also exist as reflections of their source, or hypotexts. These works often present a complex ideological relationship between their hypotexts and the cultural sensibilities of the time in which they are produced. Thus, adaptations at once preserve and subvert the themes and ideology present in their source texts.

It is also important to note that adaptations do not simply reproduce original works, but rather can be regarded as their own independent creative works. Therefore, the expectation of a work to show “fidelity” or capture the essence of its hypotext is misplaced. Instead, adaptations can be regarded as a process of translation to other mediums, times, and audiences.

## Adaptation in Children's Media

- Walt Disney's animated classics inspired by stories from The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson
- Theater for Young Audiences: In the 2018-19, 75% of Theater for Young Audience plays were adaptations (*Racism and the Need for Diversity in the Canon of Stories for Children*). Some popular examples of adaptations for young audiences include: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Matilda*, and *Peter Rabbit*.
- Picture books based on oral storytelling traditions, such as nursery rhymes and folk tales

## Diversity and Adaptation

Most children's literature features characters of a particular race, sexuality, religion, and/or socioeconomic background; statistically this means white, Christian, heterosexual, and middle class. When authors, filmmakers, or other artists adapt or reimagine texts, they often take the opportunity to diversify children's culture, which reflects an evolving understanding of whose voices and stories matter in our society.

However, not all “diverse” adaptations are equally productive. As Rudine Sims Bishop discusses extensively in her work, much of children's literature with characters from traditionally marginalized backgrounds can be divided into three categories:

- Social conscience books, which focus on conflicts that arise from the character's differences,
- Melting-pot books, which contextualize atypical characters in an otherwise normal story, devoting them of cultural markers, and
- Culturally conscience books, which present stories that do not center about the character's marginalizing quality, yet still reflect a cultural concord of sensibilities or complicates societal perceptions of a “diverse” population.

Adaptations are just as likely to fall into the traps Sims Bishop noticed.

It is also important to note that these categories are not the only way of determining how progressive an adaptation is, and that a work might simultaneously challenge one set of cultural misconceptions and invoke stereotypical or problematic images of another population.

## Roald Dahl's *The Witches*

One example of a children's book that has been adapted multiple times and across different cultural contexts is Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983). Dahl's original work follows the story of a young orphaned boy who is adopted by his grandmother. On a vacation, the boy encounters witches and is turned into a mouse, then he and his grandmother must act quickly to prevent the witches from eliminating all the children of England. *The Witches* was made into a movie in 1990, but there have also been two adaptations released this year: a Warner Bros. film and *The Witches: A Graphic Novel*. Each of these adaptations translates Dahl's work to a new medium and showcases dynamics of socioeconomic status, gender, and race in different ways.

## Discussion

The 1990 film could be considered a fairly straightforward interpretation of its source text. Although there are some minor changes in details, the gender and race of the characters stay consistent. Moreover, the few changes made, such as creating a happy ending, serve to make the film more conservative than the book; therefore, this first adaptation exemplifies a “safe” adaptation in children's media.

At a glance, the cover of the 2020 graphic novel seems to suggest that this version may include a more diverse set of characters, as it includes a dark-skinned boy and young girl. However, the author and illustrator, Penelope Bagieu, never explicitly codes the boy's race, and the illustrations suggest that his grandmother is white. Thus, the main character could be considered ethnically ambiguous at best, and this book certainly does not function as more than a melting-pot book with respect to race. Yet, this version does replace the boy's male friend and fellow child-turned-mouse with a girl who helps with their plan to stop the witches. Therefore, this book does offer female representation.

Unlike the other examples, the 2020 film does significantly change the racial makeup of the characters. The film is set in Alabama in the late 1960s and predominantly features African American actors as its top-billed cast. This rendition of Dahl's work still does not center on racial conflict and adds to the body of stories accessible to non-white children by presenting a fun and silly film without being overtly focused upon the racial diversity of its cast. However, Zemeckis does not ignore the role of race in the film, but rather hints at the mid-century cultural barriers—vacationing at an expensive resort—present for non-white Americans. When Grandma decides to visit the hotel, she claims they'll be safe because “only rich white folks” go there, and witches, as a surrogate for other evils of the world, tend prey on easier targets. Therefore, *The Witches* (2020), serves as an example of a productive and somewhat sophisticated diverse adaptation marketed to children.

Yet, this adaptation is not entirely unproblematic, as it has received backlash for an insensitive portrayal of limb differences. In the film, Zemeckis visually implies that witches' “claws” look like hands with missing fingers. This representation contributes to problematic stereotypes that characterizes people with physical differences, especially those with Ectrodactyly, or split hand syndrome, as villains and contributes to the social stigma of disability (Dasrath and Wong). Thus, the 2020 film adaptation of Dahl's *The Witches* demonstrates how adaptations can at once convey both productive and reductive ideologies.



The Witches. Advertisement. Wikipedia.org. 2020. Web. 13 Nov 2020.

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*The Witches*. Directed by Nicolas Roeg, Warner Brothers, 1990.

*The Witches*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, Warner Brothers, 2020.