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Don't Trust the Candy Man:
A Reading of Willy Wonka's Enjoyable Villainy in
***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and Its Film**
Adaptations

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), along with its two film adaptations, is still considerably popular among young readers and viewers. Adults, nonetheless, may feel particularly suspicious about Willy Wonka, the owner of the Chocolate Factory. This character has been studied using different approaches, including psychoanalysis and postcolonialism, yet there is very little research addressing his possible villainy. Although Loveday (2018) has certainly talked about Wonka as an "ambivalent villain," his research is centred exclusively around his use of sarcasm.

Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the villainy in Dahl's novel and its two film adaptations from the standpoint of Literary Studies and Cultural Studies. I argue that, though Willy Wonka does not really function as the villain, he presents certain qualities that are typically villainous; these, however, are concealed by his enjoyable performance.

The first part of my analysis deals mainly with the characterisation of Wonka in the novel. Although he is villainous, for instance, in his treatment of the Oompa-Loompas, this goes unnoticed because his humour makes him enjoyable. The second part focuses on the film representations of Wonka and on how Gene Wilder and Johnny Depp play the character in each adaptation. Regarding the 1971 version, I contend that Wilder highlights mostly the sarcastic side of the character, as evidenced by his mockery of his guests. The 2005 film, nevertheless, is more difficult to assess. At first, Wonka seems less villainous because of his backstory and his "weird" appearance. However, I defend that this changes once we know that Depp has been accused of domestic abuse: in retrospect, his Wonka might now be the most villainous of the three versions. Finally, I mention three upcoming adaptations of Dahl's novel, which might open up new opportunities for further research on villainy.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, Willy Wonka, enjoyable villainy, sarcasm, 'weird' villainy, Gene Wilder, Johnny Depp

INTRODUCTION

Each year, new books for children are written and published. While some go unnoticed and are finally forgotten, others remain popular with readers, and a few become classics within the canon of children's literature. Last March, the Penguin website posted a list of the 100 "best-ever children's books," including titles by Edith Nesbit and C.S. Lewis, among other writers.¹ However, there was one author that appeared more often than any other: Roald Dahl (1916-1990). Eight novels by him were listed in the ranking, among which there were *Matilda* (1988) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), often considered his best-loved works.² In my personal case, while I discovered *Matilda* as a child, I have read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* more recently and, hence, more critically. In fact, I found one of its characters particularly suspicious: Willy Wonka, who will be the focus of the present dissertation. However, before exploring what makes him disquieting, I will provide an overview of Dahl's life.

Roald Dahl was born in 1916 in Wales, though his parents were Norwegian. He lost his father and a sister when he was three, and was educated at Repton, an English boarding school where physical punishment was the norm. After graduating, he worked for Shell in Kenya and Tanganyika, and during World War II he served as a pilot and was severely wounded in a crash. Interestingly, he did not start writing books for children, but short stories for adults notable for their shocking endings and macabre sense of humour. In the 1950s his adult stories started selling less, though, and he tried writing for children, which is how he is often remembered. Although Dahl published his

¹ See the list here: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2019/best-childrens-books-stories.html>.

² They are, respectively, the 1st and 3rd best books by Dahl, according to this ranking: <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/1/12008402/roald-dahl-books-best-ranked>.

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first book for children, *James and the Giant Peach*, in 1961, *Charlie*, published three years later, was his first commercial success. At first, “publishers felt that *Charlie* was somewhat tasteless” (Cheetham 2), yet it sold rather well, and its two film adaptations have helped maintain its status as a classic. Another reason for Dahl’s success might be his collaboration with the artist Quentin Blake, who has illustrated most of his books.

It is worth noting that Dahl has sometimes been surrounded by controversy, since his books present elements that are now deemed unacceptable. *James and the Giant Peach*, for instance, “has been lambasted for its racism..., profanity..., references to drugs and drink ... and sexual innuendo” (H. Anderson). Moreover, his anti-Semitic comments are also notorious, as when he stated that “there is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity” (in Carnevale). Understandably, his work has often been read suspiciously, and *Charlie* is no exception to this.

As for the novel itself, it follows the experiences of Charlie Bucket, a “small boy” (Dahl 2)³ who lives in poverty with his loving family. The story is set in a big town of indeterminate nationality where there is an immense chocolate factory, which is the “the largest and most famous in the whole world” (7). The owner of this factory is Willy Wonka, a mysterious “candy making genius” (19) who works in seclusion. One day it is announced that the factory is to be reopened for five children: whoever finds one of the five Golden Tickets hidden in Wonka’s products will be allowed entrance. By sheer luck, Charlie manages to find one of them. However, when the ticket-holders and their parents arrive, Wonka’s tour of the factory is revealed to be less exciting than expected. Though they are initially fascinated by Wonka’s workers, the Oompa-Loompas, the children are gradually eliminated from the tour. Their greedy desires lure

³ Henceforth, I will cite Dahl’s novel simply by referring to the page numbers.

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them into a series of traps until, finally, only Charlie is left. Then we discover that the tour was actually a test and that, as a prize, Charlie will inherit the Chocolate Factory.

This study will centre on Willy Wonka and his connection to villainy. Some critics, in fact, have already expressed concerns about this character's cruel humour. For instance, Cameron noted in 1972 that the novel's "humor ... is based on punishment with overtones of sadism," and complained that Wonka "is the perfect type of TV showman with his gags and screechings" (Cameron), a shocking combination in a character children are meant to admire. Still, though *Charlie* has been extensively researched, Wonka has rarely been approached as a villain. There are studies from the standpoint of food symbolism (cf. Corinth (2008)) and psychoanalysis (cf. Rudd (2020)), but villainy is hardly ever linked either to Dahl's novel or its adaptations. Only Loveday has referred to Wonka's "imputed villainy" (91), though his research is based on a linguistic reading of the chocolatier's sarcasm. My aim, therefore, is to determine the extent to which we can call Wonka a villain. I will contend that, though he does not function as such, Wonka presents certain typically villainous traits, which appear in the novel and in both film adaptations. However, I will add that we do not perceive this villainy because of his enjoyable performance.

The dissertation will be structured in two parts. First, I will start with an overview of some of the qualities that villains present. Then, I will argue that Dahl's Wonka adjusts to these qualities, though he does not fulfil the role of the villain. The second part will turn to Gene Wilder's and Johnny Depp's interpretations of the character in the adaptations. As I will defend, the 1971 Wonka seems to emphasise the sarcastic side of the original. In the 2005 movie, however, Wonka's backstory makes him appear more vulnerable, though his behaviour has a "weird" quality too.

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Furthermore, I will suggest that Depp's personal life retrospectively heightens our perception of the character's villainy. I will then finish by commenting on the recent announcement of three new adaptations of Dahl's text, which could be a fruitful chance for further research.

PART 1

1.1. The Makings of a Villain: A Theoretical Approach to Villainy

Since the aim of this study is to explore Willy Wonka as a villain, a discussion on what is commonly understood by villainy might be a good starting point. Despite our familiarity with villains in television and literature, a delimitation of the concept is not as straightforward as we might assume at first. Rather than formulating a clear-cut definition of villainy, I intend to determine some of its most frequent characteristics.

In looking at villains, it seems almost necessary to refer to heroes, whom they often oppose. For both categories, there are clear examples that most consumers of fiction would agree upon, like Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in the first *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983). However, other cases seem to defy an easy classification: in *The Godfather* series (1972-1990), for instance, it would be difficult to definitely decide if Michael Corleone is a hero or a villain.

The latter example might be confusing because we assume that Michael, as the protagonist, should be a heroic character, which probably is not the case. Indeed, protagonists and antagonists are often easier to spot than heroes and villains. Most stories centre on a protagonist, and there is frequently an antagonist that opposes them, yet the “hero-villain” dichotomy is more complex than this. This is why I believe villains should not be understood in terms of opposition to heroes, but according to their behaviour.

Though I do not intend to be exhaustive, I will list some of the traits usually found in villains. In *Heroes and Villains*, Alsford argues that villainy “has to do not with our passions or instincts nor even with the dark thoughts we all have from time to

time. True villainy has to do with the desire to *dominate*, to *subsume* the other within the individual self and that without compunction" (120, my italics). The villain, in other words, needs to be in a position of power over other people's lives. In fact, a sadistic villain may even rejoice at his victims' suffering. Works of fiction present numerous cases of this "desire to dominate," such as Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1674), associated with pride, and Voldemort in *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), who lusts for power and immortality at any cost.

Villainy is frequently associated with the idea of evil, too. This notion, however, can legitimise any kind of wrongdoing as it implies villains are simply driven by an energy beyond their control. Going back to *Star Wars*, the dark side of the Force could correspond to this evil energy, since it seems to lead Emperor Palpatine's desire to accumulate power. Nevertheless, in the present dissertation the notion of evil would be quite useless, for reducing Wonka's villainy to a superior force would put an end to the discussion.

"Sense of entitlement," on the other hand, seems a more adequate concept because it does not deny individual responsibility. Psychologists explain that "people high in entitlement believe that they should get what they want because of who they are" (Zitek), which means they feel they have rights over other people by default. As Martín puts it, villainy "does not spring from evil or any general fault in human nature but from an unbounded sense of entitlement to patriarchal power" (2).

The main characteristics of villains, then, would be a desire to rule over other people's lives and a sense that they are entitled to do so by birth-right. Therefore, in the next section I will apply these ideas to determine to what extent Willy Wonka acts as a villain in the novel.

1.2. 'Enjoyable' Villainy: A Reading of Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)

After this overview on the notion of villainy, we can move on to the first work that concerns us: Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Admittedly, having seen examples like Milton's Satan and Lord Voldemort, Willy Wonka might appear an unlikely candidate for an analysis on villainy. Still, I believe that he presents some of the characteristics commonly attributed to villains.

Although Charlie is certainly the novel's protagonist, Wonka is also a central character. We see this, for instance, in how the 1971 adaptation could afford to omit Charlie from its title, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Still, in the *dramatis personae* that introduces the five children, "CHARLIE BUCKET" appears as "the hero" (n.p.), so that we understand that we are expected to side with him. As soon as the factory tour begins, though, Charlie's protagonism is considerably reduced: if he speaks, it is only to make occasional comments, and his actions are almost non-existent. Henceforth, Wonka becomes the book's main attraction, and it is only at the end that Charlie regains his protagonism: when he is revealed to be the winner of the factory, we recognise him as the hero again.

Analysing Wonka as a villain could initially sound unfeasible, but this may be because we expect him to oppose the hero, which does not happen. In fact, the chocolatier acts as Charlie's benefactor by turning him into his heir. In Chapter 18, in an uncharacteristic gesture of kindness, he even gives him a mug of chocolate. However, we should not be concerned with Wonka's position in relation to Charlie, but with his description and with his abuse of his guests.

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Although he does not really appear until Chapter 14, Wonka is already mentioned in the first chapter. Our main source of information is Grandpa Joe, who acts as his sponsor, as it were, by telling Charlie fascinating stories about Wonka. For instance, he describes him as “the most *extraordinary* chocolate maker the world has ever seen!” (9, original italics). When the golden-ticket contest is announced, a “mad candy-buying spree” (23) shakes the world, showing the extent of his fame. The wiki TV Tropes has an entry that adjusts to the chocolatier: it defines him as the “Villain with Good Publicity,” who “commands a great deal of respect from the average citizen, but behind the scenes, conducts all manners of nastiness” (TVTropes). Likewise, Wonka is widely respected, though his factory does hide some “nastiness.”

Wonka’s physique is rather extravagant: he is a “little man” (57) who wears a “plum-colored” coat, “bottle green” (57) trousers and a top hat. His face is “alight with fun and laughter” (57) and he introduces himself by doing a “skipping dance” (58). Thus, his whimsical behaviour confirms the stereotype of the eccentric genius whose next move can never be predicted. In addition, Wonka’s courtesies to his guests are so exaggerated that he sounds insincere, which might remind us of melodrama actors. To play villains, these actors had “codified modes of histrionic ‘*overacting*’ that further accentuated the quality of *excess*” (Singer 39, my italics). Throughout the text, Wonka’s insistence that he is “delighted! Charmed! Overjoyed” (58) suggests he may be simply performing a role.

Wonka’s villainy is still more evident in his treatment of his employees, the Oompa-Loompas. In spite of his insistence that “they’re real people” (68), he does not treat them accordingly. It should be stressed that they are “no larger than medium-sized dolls” (68), and that Wonka himself transported them from Loompaland, their native

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country. Apparently, they were eager to work and live in the Chocolate Factory in exchange for cocoa. They are also a source of entertainment, as they sing tunes about the children's moral flaws after each punishment.

Apart from their musical numbers, though, the Oompa-Loompas do not have a voice of their own.⁴ Their subordination to Wonka, as Rudd argues, "certainly has a class dimension, but it also smacks of a colonial relationship" (379). This is more obvious if we remember that the first editions of the book described the Oompa-Loompas as African Pygmies. In 1973, "the illustrations and the text were changed to remove the racial background" (Cheetham 6), though this did not eliminate the implicit colonialism of the text. Figure 1 compares a first-edition drawing of the Pygmy Oompa-Loompas with a later revised illustration.



Figure 1. Oompa-Loompas by Faith Jaques (left) and Quentin Blake (right)

Moreover, Wonka's choice of words regarding his workers also reveals his villainy: he explains he "imported" (68) and "smuggled them over in large packing cases" (71), like a commodity. Alsford argues that the villain "uses the world and the people in it from a distance, as pure resource," and that companies are "cast in the role of the villain as they become increasingly disengaged from ordinary human lives"

⁴ The only exception is the 2005 film adaptation, in which the narrator, at the end, is revealed to be an Oompa-Loompa.

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(120). As I see it, Wonka adjusts to this because he sees the Oompa-Loompas simply as a means to the production of chocolate.

Similar examples might be the payment of their wages in cocoa beans, which in effect means they cannot survive outside the factory, and their fondness for “Butterscotch and soda” and “Buttergin and tonic” (108). Although it is unclear whether these are drinks or sweets, both confections seem to be alcoholic, since at one point the Oompa-Loompas are heard “drunk as lords” (108). As Cheetham has noted, this might recall “the use of alcohol as a controlling factor with bonded or exploited labour” (13). Furthermore, their use as guinea pigs should also be questioned. At one point, the factory owner tells his guests he has tested his new chewing-gum on “twenty Oompa-Loompas, and every one of them finished up as a blueberry” (98). Wonka’s villainy is thus evidenced by his sense of entitlement towards his employees.

The visiting children, too, are victims of the chocolatier, as they suffer both his punishments and his mockery. If we assume these punishments were premeditated, Wonka’s enjoyment would make him quite a sadist. In relation to his sarcasm, Loveday has defined Wonka as “an ambivalently malevolent character who profoundly lacks empathy” (99). Indeed, he seems incapable of empathising either with the Oompa-Loompas or with his guests.

This sadism is exemplified in Chapter 24, when Veruca Salt is thrown into the garbage conduct as a punishment for her greed. Wonka is then asked where the conduct leads to, and the answer is almost unbelievable: “‘Why, to the furnace, *of course*,’ Mr. Wonka said *calmly*” (113, my italics). While this may be funny, his lack of empathy is undoubtedly cruel given that he is talking about a child’s possible incineration. At another point, Wonka presents “the most *amazing* … gum in the world” (94, original

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italics), and Violet Beauregarde immediately takes it. Then, as a punishment for her addiction to chewing-gum, she is transformed into a huge blueberry. Admittedly, the chocolatier tells her that “the gum isn’t ready yet” (96), but she is already chewing by the time he warns her. What is most striking, though, is that Wonka, like all the other children, knows Violet is an obsessive gum-chewer. This suggests that his publicity of the gum had been part of a premeditated trap, and not a coincidence.

As for the remaining children, Wonka’s response to their suffering is equally sadistic. When Augustus Gloop is suctioned by a pipe, the confectioner appears to enjoy teasing the parents by suggesting their son is “liable to get poured out into the fudge boiler” (78). After this, he explains he was only joking, and starts “giggling madly” (78). Similarly, while Mike Teavee is being sent by Chocolate Television, Wonka also makes rather inappropriate comments. He cannot help pointing out that he hopes that “no part of him gets left behind” (132), which seems to happen with this new device. His remark, however, sounds more like a joke in poor taste than a true concern, as it only serves to worry the parents.

When it comes to Wonka’s attitudes towards Charlie, I think they also reveal his villainous sense of entitlement. It is true that the novel ends happily for Charlie, but the gift of the factory results from Wonka’s need to perpetuate his empire. We see this when he states that “a grown-up won’t listen to me … so I have to have a child” (151). In fact, he appears to feel entitled to turn anyone into his heir and, therefore, chooses Charlie, who seems manipulable enough to preserve his business as it is. Likewise, when Wonka destroys the Buckets’ house because they are “never going to need it again, anyway” (154), we see another case of his sense of entitlement.

In this section, I have discussed how Wonka's behaviour appears to characterise him as a villain. Also, I have referred to the overacted and histrionic politeness in his reception, and to his use of the Oompa-Loompas as forced labour and guinea pigs. Finally, I have looked at his sarcastic responses to the visitors' suffering, and at the sense of entitlement in his choosing Charlie as an heir.

Judging from all this, Wonka seems to conform to the idea of villainy understood as the urge to dominate others and as sense of entitlement. However, it is my opinion that, though he acts like a villain at some points, Wonka does not fulfil this role in the text. This could be due to his apparent kindness towards Charlie, but especially because his villainy is more enjoyable than we would like to admit. I would agree that Wonka's "farcical absurdity and linguistic flair help us to digest and even relish [his] nightmarish malignance" (Loveday 98).

All in all, we can conclude that Wonka manages to hide his villainy through his humorous though sadistic show. In the sections that follow, I will consider the two film adaptations of Dahl's novel, in order to see how Wonka's cruel behaviour translates into the screen.

PART 2

2.1. Histrionics and Sarcasm: Gene Wilder's Development of Wonka's Villainy

The film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, released in 1971, was directed by Mel Stuart and written by Roald Dahl himself, the only Briton involved with the project. However, though the novelist is usually credited with the screenplay, it was largely modified by David Seltzer, which led Dahl to disown the final result. In the

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Internet Movie Database we see this adaptation listed under “family,” “fantasy” and “musical,” and curiously enough, adults often regard it as a cult film.⁵

It might be interesting to start by considering a possible explanation for Gene Wilder's casting to play Wonka. While British actor Spike Milligan had been Dahl's suggestion, the final choice was Wilder, a still-unknown American actor. This, nonetheless, might not be casual, as in Hollywood, British actors are often cast to portray villains. In the *Star Wars* saga, for instance, Emperor Palpatine has been played by Scottish actor Ian McDiarmid. The studios, perhaps being aware of the potential villainy in Wonka, might have wanted to avoid the connotations of a British accent.

Regarding Wonka's extravagant clothing, the film is rather faithful to the novel, as seen in Figure 2. In this case, though, there is no introductory “skipping dance” (58), for Wilder had a different idea: in his first appearance, he would feign a limp, stumble, and then finish with a somersault, revealing he was only pretending. As the actor said, this implies that then “no one will know if I'm lying or telling the truth” (in Usher).



Figure 2. Set photograph of Gene Wilder and the ten Oompa-Loompa actors

⁵ For more details on the film see <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067992/>.

Regarding Wilder's acting, I believe his performance highlights Wonka's histrionics and sarcasm. This is, perhaps, what has made Wilder's interpretation so memorable, though it has also lent the character a disquieting air. As one critic put it, "if you're a kid, Wonka seems magical, but watching it now, he has a frightening combination of warmth, psychosis, and sadism" (J. Anderson). We notice this, for instance, in his uncomfortably well-mannered reception of his guests, during which he repeats expressions like "my dear lady" so often that, rather than courteous, he sounds insincere.

Wonka also likes to exhibit his literary knowledge of the classics, as evidenced by his frequent quotations of lines from Shakespeare.⁶ Such references, as Cartmell puts it, present Wonka as "a man living in a magical kingdom (akin to Hollywood) who is, also, a lover of literature" (177). In my view, the parallel between the factory and Hollywood is quite apt, since both places are alluring to many people, though they also conceal corrupt practices.

This Wonka, nevertheless, is fairly unstable too, as his fits of rage indicate. When Grandpa Joe requests the promised supply of chocolate, Wonka explodes: "you stole Fizzy Lifting Drinks . . . you get nothing! You lose!." Then Charlie proves his honesty by returning one of Wonka's inventions, and we find out that his tantrum was simply a test. Suddenly, he exclaims: "You won! You did it!." This sudden change of mood, though, confirms his skill at performing and, thus, makes him seem more duplicitous.

⁶ For instance, "where is fancy bred, in the heart or in the head?" is from *The Merchant of Venice*. For other quotations, see the "trivia" section of <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067992/>.

Another villainous trait that Wilder emphasises is his sarcastic teasing of children, which I find even more outrageous than in the original. In Chapter 17 Augustus Gloop gets stuck in a pipe, which of course upsets his parents. When they ask for help, the chocolatier exclaims “help, police, murder,” yet his tone is so overacted that we barely believe him. Meanwhile, he starts nibbling at a chocolate bar and adds that “the suspense is terrible, I hope it'll last.”⁷ Later on, after Violet's transformation into a huge blueberry, Wonka mockingly complains that “it happens every time! They all become blueberries.”

As for the depiction of the Oompa-Loompas, already a contentious issue in the novel, this is problematic too in the film. In order to represent Dahl's “tiny men” (68), the producers used actors with dwarfism, similarly to the Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Above, Figure 2 presents them in costume, with their hair dyed green and their faces painted orange, thus eliminating any racial connection with the novel's pygmies. Although this casting choice might have been common practice in the 1970s, our ideas on correctness have since changed. Essentially, the problem is that using people with dwarfism to play workers results in their being typecast for similar roles. Moreover, the Oompa-Loompas are actually quasi-slaves who entertain moviegoers with their tunes, and using people with dwarfism to represent this sort of character might be unacceptable nowadays.

Regarding Wonka's treatment of his employees, it is virtually the same as in the novel. Wonka's narrative of discovery, for instance, still has colonialist overtones. In his story, after finding the “small and helpless” Oompa-Loompas, he automatically feels entitled to take them away from their land and, what is more, to paint himself as their

⁷ Incidentally, this line is extracted from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

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saviour. It is worth noting that, while in the novel Wonka clicks his fingers to call his workers, in the film they are summoned using a flute, which are both condescending practices.

As I see it, Wilder's performance magnifies the sarcastic side of Dahl's Wonka. Some of the mentioned examples of his love for performing are his feigned limp, his mock courtesy and his unexpected fits of rage. Also, I have retrospectively dealt with the Oompa-Loompas' representation using actors with dwarfism and, finally, I have shown that Wonka's sadism is particularly pronounced in this film. Still, as in Dahl's novel, I do not think Wilder's character fulfils the role of the villain. Indeed, he may behave like a villain, but this does not mean we perceive him as such.

Before concluding the section, I would like to discuss the internet meme "Condescending Wonka." As seen in Figure 3, the meme consists in Wilder's teasing expression, and it is commonly used to make sarcastic remarks or to ridicule someone.⁸ The widespread popularity of this image on the Web, I believe, illustrates how Wilder's Wonka is frequently perceived: we may be aware of his aggressivity but, to a certain extent, we also respond to his humour.

⁸ The meme is also known as "Sarcastic Wonka" and "Creepy Wonka." More information on its history at: <https://mashable.com/2016/08/29/gene-wilder-meme/?europe=true>.

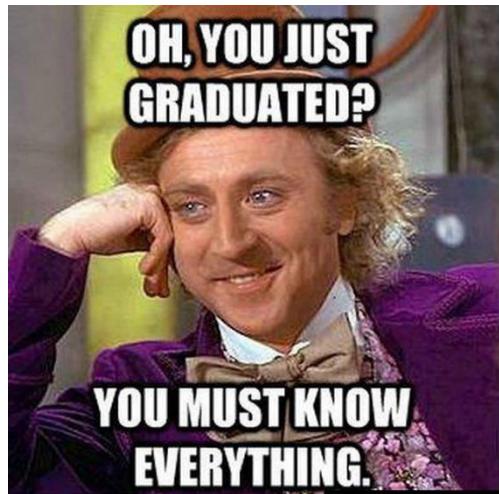


Figure 3. Example of the meme “Condescending Wonka”

2.2. Complicating the Villain: The Implications of Johnny Depp's Performance as Willy Wonka

2.2.1. Wonka's Backstory: 'Weird' Villainy in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, faithfully named after the novel, was released in 2005 by Warner Bros.⁹ Unlike the 1971 adaptation, which had been disowned by Dahl, this film had the full support of the writer's estate. Tim Burton and John August, the director and the screenwriter respectively, were outspoken critics of Mel Stuart's version, and were determined to stay as true as possible to Dahl's work.

In contrast to its predecessor, this film counted with a fairly high budget. It involved recognisable names like Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter and Tim Burton, who was already known for unconventional films like *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). In fact, Depp had starred in the latter, though he is more widely associated with Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003-2017). In the 1990s, he was often

⁹ For more information on the film refer to <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367594/>

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regarded as “not just a different kind of celebrity, but a different kind of masculinity: desirable but gentle, manly but girlish” (Freeman). However, he has recently fallen out of favour due to accusations of domestic violence, which I will discuss later on.

To begin with, the screenplay presents certain novelties that are worth considering. For instance, there is a narrator that frames the story, and Charlie's role is quite more active, as he is offered the chance to affect the original ending. Moreover, Willy Wonka is given a backstory that explains his genius for candy making. We learn about his childhood thanks to a series of flashbacks and the narrator's explanations. Thus, Wonka becomes a sort of second protagonist because, as Salido-López argues, “la película emplea una focalización interna que fluye de Charlie a Willy, los protagonistas de las dos tramas, en lugar del foco único de la novela” (68). In essence, the flashbacks reveal Wonka's troubled childhood. Being the son of a dentist, he had to wear monstrous braces and was not allowed any candy, which developed into an obsession with sweets. Wonka's genius, therefore, seems to result from the confrontation with his father.¹⁰

Charlie's agency is the result of a major change in the story: he will only receive the Chocolate Factory on condition that he abandons his family. Wonka is rather clear about it, stating that “you can't run a chocolate factory with a family hanging over you like an old, dead goose.” When Charlie declines the offer, the chocolatier does not understand why, and finds it “unexpected and weird.” As already mentioned, Wonka's absolute certainty that Charlie will accept his conditions exemplifies his sense of entitlement. In this case, however, he must accept that he does not have the right to

¹⁰ Interestingly, the father is played by the British actor Christopher Lee, who is known for his incarnations of villains like Dracula.

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control other people's lives. After this, Wonka decides to go back to his father and, after their reconciliation, he seems to understand the importance of having a family. Finally, the chocolatier and the Buckets move together into the factory, and the narrator concludes that while "Charlie Bucket won a chocolate factory," "Wonka got something even better: a family." The moral of the movie, then, is not only that greedy children are punished, but that a loving family is essential in life. In fact, "éste segundo mensaje es el que prevalece sobre el conjunto, con lo cual queda modificada la esencia del texto" (Salido-López 69).

In my view, these changes not only modify the film, but also diminish Wonka's villainous characterisation. This happens because his backstory allows us to understand his motivations and, thus, to empathise with him. We find examples of this in his stuttering attempts to say "dad" and "papa" and, later, in his uneasiness when Charlie rejects the factory. In fact, I believe we could read this Wonka as a case of "weird" villainy. After seeing Wilder's charismatic performance, what stands out in Depp is his "weirdness." This may be seen especially in his welcome of the visitors: instead of receiving them personally, he prepares a musical number with wax dolls. However, they suddenly catch fire and begin to melt, which offers quite an eerie sight. When Wonka appears, though, he is at a loss for words, and has to read his speech from a printed card, saying "welcome to the factory, I shake you warmly by the hand." His artificiality is further confirmed by his failed attempts at smiling, which Figure 4 exemplifies. In addition, Wonka tends to make misplaced comments that make little sense. For instance, when Mike Teavee wonders who could want a beard, Wonka answers: "you know, all those hip, jazzy, super-cool, neat, keen and groovy cats. It's in the fridge, daddy-o. Are you hep to the jive?" These examples, therefore, suggest that Wonka's

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“weird” behaviour actually comes from his social awkwardness. In his seclusion, perhaps, he has forgotten how to interact within society without looking artificial.



Figure 4. Film frame of Wonka trying to smile

However, not all reviewers agree that this softened villainy is a change for the better. In fact, some have complained that revealing Wonka's past “cheapened the character,” as “he was no longer a figure of intrigue” (Heritage). Other critics also coincide that Depp's interpretation is unexciting, because “he's lost all the subtle humor and understatement that made Roald Dahl's original story … so charming” (Hornaday). It might be true that, due to his “weirdness,” this Wonka is less enjoyable, yet I believe his toned-down villainy offers quite a positive representation.

Nevertheless, despite Depp's softened edge, we still see some instances of Wonka's villainy. To begin with, the punishment of children and his joking comments remain the same. After Veruca has swelled up into an enormous blueberry, for instance, her mother is evidently horrified. Still, Wonka simply explains that “it goes a little funny when it gets to the dessert,” and adds that “it's just weird,” giving a little laugh. As for the Oompa-Loompas, they still appear as guinea pigs, and an actor with

dwarfism was cast again for their representation. All in all, although the backstory brings him closer to us, Depp's Wonka still seems villainous.

Moreover, there is another peculiarity to Depp's performance. After the release of the movie, numerous film critics were convinced that Depp must have modelled his character on Michael Jackson.¹¹ This connection may appear shocking, but Wonka and the singer actually share a few aspects, such as “the reclusive lifestyle, the fetishes of wardrobe and accessories, the elaborate playground built by an adult for the child inside” (Ebert), as well as Jackson's affected manner. Unfortunately, the film premiered a month after the singer's trial on charges of child abuse, and so the parallel became almost unescapable.¹²

2.2.2. Depp's Court Case: A Retrospective Analysis of Willy Wonka

Having analysed some aspects of how this Wonka functions in the narrative, I will consider the effects of Johnny Depp's personal life on the character's villainy. A retrospective reading of this sort is appropriate, in my view, because the private affairs of Hollywood actors are sometimes so publicised that they modify how we judge their past roles. Thus, the fact that an actor of Depp's fame has been accused of domestic violence cannot be dismissed. In short, in 2016 Amber Heard, then Depp's wife, accused the actor of mistreating her and asked for a restraining order. Since then,

¹¹ For more information see <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/is-willy-wonka-wacko-jacko>.

¹² More specifically, the trial ended in 14 June, and the singer was acquitted of all charges, while the film was released in July 10. More details on the verdict at <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/michael-jackson-child-sexual-abuse-allegations-timeline-785746/>.

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different legal battles have ensued, during which the general public has been exposed to the damaging nature of their relationship and to Depp's problems with drugs.¹³

Due to the media coverage the case has received, it seems difficult to see Depp's character with the same eyes as before, as our ideas on the actor may have got mixed up with Wonka's eccentricity. In dealing with a businessman who lives in isolation and uses his employees as guinea pigs, the thought of domestic abuse sounds quite sinister. Perhaps, for those who ignore Depp's personal life, Wonka will remain the same – this, in fact, is especially the case for children spectators. Adult viewers, however, are likely to connect their knowledge of Depp's violence to his past roles.

In sum, this shows that our judgement of the film itself is not enough to decide on the villainy of Depp's Wonka. Within the movie, we have seen that the chocolatier's backstory makes him seem more relatable, while his awkward behaviour stresses his "weird" personality. In my view, nonetheless, an explanation of Wonka's past cannot make up for our awareness of the actor's personal conduct. Though Wilder's interpretation could certainly be cruel, after this, the last version of Wonka may have become even more villainous than his predecessors.

¹³ The most publicised of the trials took place on November 2020 in London. The newspaper *The Sun* had described Depp as a "wife beater," and he sued the news company for defamation. In the trial, Depp and Heard had to discuss private matters of their relationship, and the jury finally decided that he could be called a "wife beater." For more details, refer to <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-54506759> and <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/nov/03/the-fall-of-johnny-depp-how-the-worlds-most-beautiful-movie-star-turned-very-ugly>.

CONCLUSIONS

All in all, this dissertation has studied the figure of Willy Wonka in Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and its two film adaptations. In particular, it has considered the possibility that he may be a villain. My thesis has been that, ultimately, Wonka does not function as the villain in any of the three versions, though he presents certain qualities that we typically associate with villainy.

In the first part of the dissertation, I have started by presenting some of the characteristics that make villains recognisable, such as their lust for power and the feeling they are entitled to direct other people's lives. Then, I have moved on to Dahl's Wonka and discussed some of the aspects that seem to characterise him as a villain. For instance, I have mentioned his feigned courtesy and his use of the Oompa-Loompas as forced labour. However, it has been argued that, though he is certainly villainous, Wonka uses his enjoyable performance to disguise this villainy.

In the second part I have focused on how Wonka is recreated by the actors Gene Wilder and Johnny Depp in the screen adaptations. I believe Wilder highlights the sarcasm of Dahl's Wonka, as exemplified by his histrionic fits of anger. Nevertheless, he survives the imputation of villainy precisely because, to a certain degree, his mockery is also enjoyable. Depp, on the other hand, tones down Wonka's villainy, as the inclusion of his backstory makes him more relatable, and his social clumsiness stresses his "weirdness." The final section, however, has considered how Depp's personal life retrospectively affects the character. I have argued that, after being accused of physical abuse, his version of Wonka appears more villainous and sinister than the previous ones.

Before concluding, I would like to make some suggestions for further research, especially because new adaptations of Dahl's text are under way. Last year, Netflix announced that it will produce two series related to the novel, both directed by the New Zealander Taika Waititi.¹⁴ Quite interestingly, one of them will be dedicated exclusively to the Oompa-Loompas, which raises the thorny question of their representation. Since the series will be animated, nonetheless, the producers will probably avoid having to cast actors that adjust to the Oompa-Loompa's height. Still, it is likely that the colonialism of the original will still be present.

Warner Bros., in addition, has announced *Wonka*, a prequel film that is to be released in 2023.¹⁵ It will focus on the chocolatier's life before becoming the factory owner we know. The character will be played by the 25-year-old Timothée Chalamet, known for starring in *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *Little Women* (2019), among other films. In consequence, Wonka's representation might prove an opportunity for further research on how villainy is perceived by moviegoers. In fact, these three adaptations are likely to provide an opening to continue with our exploration of Willy Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas. As Charlie puts it, "you just wait and see" (155).

¹⁴ For more details refer to <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/taika-waititi-charlie-and-the-chocolate-factory-willy-wonka-1202215544/>.

¹⁵ Further information in <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/may/24/timothee-chalamet-willy-wonka-origin-movie>.

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