

## THE GRAND HIGH WITCH'S CHARACTERIZATION IN ROALD DAHL'S THE WITCHES

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### ABSTRACT

*Roald Dahl's children's literature usually depicts children as the protagonists and the grown-ups as the antagonists. This study aims to describe The Grand High Witch's character as the main antagonist in Roald Dahl's The Witches (1983). This study employs interactive qualitative analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), with simultaneous processes of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verifying, where the conclusion is continuously triangulated with the data condensation, data display, and the data collection. The research revealed that The Grand High Witch was portrayed as having a scary face, with deep hatred towards children, influenced the Grand High Witch's cruel and cunning natures. These traits support the Grand High Witch's position as the novel's main antagonist. Thus, these characters could provide insight to children that people in society come with various traits.*

**Keywords:** antagonist, characterization, children's literature, Roald Dahl

### INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl is well-known as a talented and creative English author (Tanusy, 2020). Through his works such as *Matilda* (1988), *The BFG* (1982), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and *The Witches* (1983), Roald Dahl's stories have pleased children around the world with his compelling stories (Hissan, 2012). Dahl is recognized as an author who writes humorous and fantasy stories despite his writing style containing violence and grotesqueness (Hissan, 2012). Dahl's writing style is also colored with sexism, racism, dark humor, paradox, and ambiguity, which drew many critics (Jaber, 2016; Maynard, 2019; Yeni & Ariska, 2018). Many studies have examined Roald Dahl's books from various perspectives and approaches, such as character educational values (Giovani et al., 2014; Hissan, 2012; Suwastini, Dewi, et al., 2022; Yeni & Ariska, 2018), feminists (Anggraeni, 2016; Garini & Winarti, 2021; Jaber, 2016; Stauri, 2020; Tanusy, 2018; Tso, 2012), linguistics (Dewi, 2022; Pradani, 2016; Tanto, 2020), Psychoanalysis (Bilalia, 2018; Hadju, 2018; Pangestu, 2019), teaching media (Huan, 2020b, 2020a; Putri & Retnaningdyah, 2018).

One of Roald Dahl's novels that contains violence perpetrated by adults is *The Witches*. Roald Dahl's *The Witches* depicts the cruelty and inhumanity of witches towards children (Curtis, 2014). *The Witches* is about an orphan boy who lived with his Norwegian grandmother. The Boy and his grandmother's adventure in eliminating the

witches from all over the world began when The Boy and his grandmother had a short vacation at a seafront hotel. The Boy accidentally met The Grand High Witch and a group of England's witches who turned him into a mouse. However, at the end of the story, The Boy and the grandmother succeeded in eliminating all the witches in England by turning them into mice, and soon, they traveled the world to save children from the witches.

Some studies have been published relating to Dahl's *The Witches*. (Yeni & Ariska, 2018) analyzed the children's struggle against the bullies in Roald Dahl's novels. Tanto (2020) analyzed similes, metaphors, and personification in Dahl's *The BFG*, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, and *The Witches*. Dewi (2022) took the speech acts theory from Searle to identify speech acts in *The Witches* and revealed that the novel contains five types of speech acts: representative, directive, expressive, and commissive. Þórðardóttir (2019) analyzed the feminist influence in *Matilda*, *The BFG*, and *The Witches* and revealed that women could be both villains and heroines. Suwastini et al. (2022) analyzed the good characters of The Boy's from the novel *The Witches* and found that he was cheerful, curious, brave, and intelligent. Stauri (2020) compared the depictions of the witches in the novel to the film and revealed that the witches in the novel are depicted in a more scary way than in the film.

These previous studies have analyzed Roald Dahl's *The Witches* from a linguistic field (Dewi, 2022; Tanto, 2020; Yeni & Ariska, 2018) or a feminist point of view (Murphy, 2019). Studies about the characterization of the characters in the novel and its film adaptation have been conducted by Stauri (2020) and Suwastini et al. (2022). However, these studies have yet focused on the novel's antagonist using an objective point of view, where The Grand High Witch's characterizations are analyzed only about her position as the antagonist of the narrative. Thus, the present study analyze the character of The Grand High Witch as the main antagonist in Roald Dahl's *The Witches*.

While prior analysis has focused on linguistic and feminist view points, the present study explored how the characterizations of the Grand High Witch established her as the main antagonist in *The Witches*. Characterization refers to how a character is presented through action, appearance, dialogue, and mindset. In Roald Dahl's book, the female characters are usually depicted as evil, ugly, and cunning, which can strike fear into the reader (Jaber, 2016). Throughout the novel, The Grand High Witch is portrayed as a terrifying and cruel figure, and it is interesting to scrutinize The Grand High Witch's negative characters. Thus, this study analyzes the characterizations of The Grand High Witch as scary, cruel, and cunning in Roald Dahl's *The Witches*.

## METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed interactive qualitative data from Miles et al. (2014) to identify The Grand High Witch's characterization as the main antagonist character in Dahl's *The Witches*. According to Miles et al. (2014), interactive qualitative data has three simultaneous processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Figure 1 shows an interactive qualitative data cycle of (Miles et al., 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the simultaneous process of analysis in Miles et al. (2014) when implemented to analyze the Grand Witch's characterization. The main instrument was the researcher who conducted simultaneous analysis during data collection, data display, data condensation, and conclusion drawing.

### Source of Data

Roald Dahl's *The Witches* was taken as the subject of the study. The novel was published in 1983 and illustrated by Quentin Blake (Dahl, 1983).

### Unit Analysis

Following the segmentation technique from Bordwell et al. (2017), the study divided the novel into plot segmentation, consisting of sequences of major events in the narrative. A sequence consists of a major event in the plot development, while a subsequent consists of an incident within the major event of the individual sequence (Dewi et al., 2022; Saraswati et al., 2021; Suwastini, Setyadewi, et al., 2022). The data was selected from these subsequences, serving as the units of analysis, allowing a discussion of a certain character of the Grand High Witch to be focused on her actions, speech, thoughts, and reactions towards her behaviours solely on a certain subsequence of incident, without being trapped in a retelling of other events and incidents in the narrative.

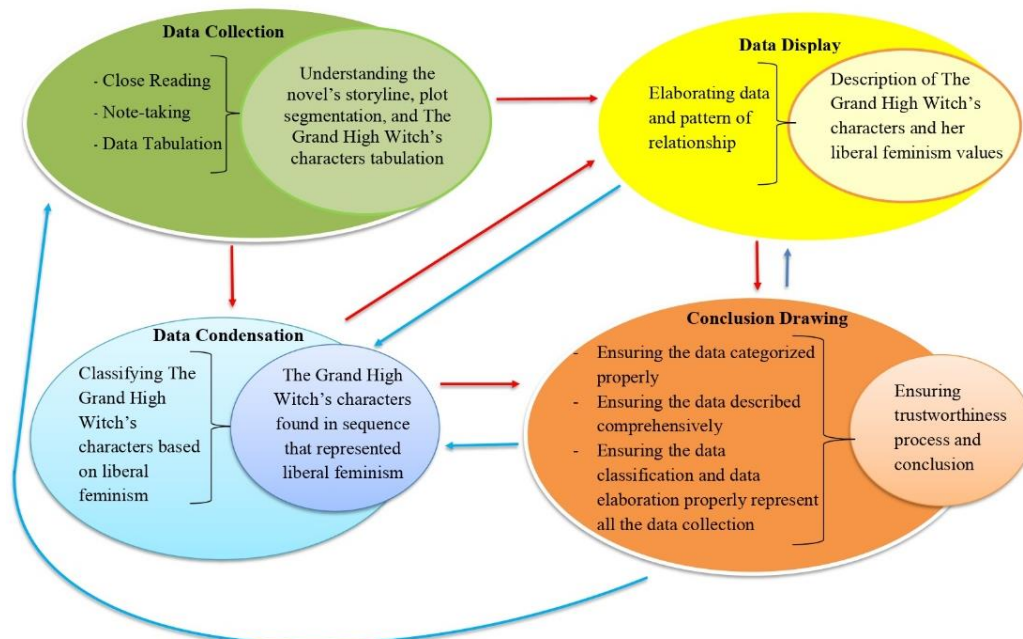


Figure 1. Interactive Data Analysis by Miles et al. (2014)

### Procedures of Data Collection

The initial step was data collection which involved repeated reading to get a general understanding towards the novel plot. Notes were taken to record points related to the Grand Witch's characterizations, such as the traits depicted, the method of character revelations, and its effect on character development. The subsequences that include the Grand High Witch's characters are recorded into table of data tabulation.

### Procedures of Data Analysis

The researcher conducted simultaneous data analysis along the process of data collection, data display, and data condensation by consistently checking the characterization of the Grand High Witch as recorded in the table of data tabulation. The data collected were categorized into major traits of the Grand High Witch, while at the

same time, they were elaborated to provide comprehensive explanation of how the traits are depicted on the selected subsequences through her actions, speech, thoughts, the response of other characters toward the antagonist, and from the description of other characters or the narrator (Fitria, 2021; Gill, 1995; Nahdiyati, 2009). These two process were conducted interactively to synchronize the data categorizations and the data display, leading to conclusion drawing stage. The conclusion was further repeatedly compared with the data display, the data condensation, and the data conclusion to ensure that the data are saturated and the elaborations had led to a trustworthy conclusion.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, the Grand High Witch's Grand High Witch's scary trait is depicted in ten subsequences, her cruel character is depicted in eleven subsequences, and her cunning feature is depicted in seven subsequences.

### The Grand High Witch as a Scary Witch

Scary is the ability to generate fear because of something unusual (Rizal, 2017). In line with this statement, The Grand High Witch was revealed as a scary witch because she was feared by many people, including members of her organization. The descriptions of her scary characters appear in 10 subsequences but are most strongly depicted in subsequences 6c, 10a, and 10e.

Subsequence 6c introduced The Grand High Witch as a scary witch, as described in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 1: *"She is the ruler of them all."  
"She is all-powerful. She is without mercy. All other witches are petrified of her. They see her only once a year at their Annual Meeting. She goes there to whip up excitement and enthusiasm, and to give orders. The Grand High Witch travels from country to country attending these Annual Meet-ings."*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983: 33)

The above excerpt is taken from the conversation between Grandmother and The Boy. According to Grandmother, The Grand High Witch was powerful and without mercy. Her power made her become the ruler of the witches around the world. The grandmother stated that The Grand High Witch was the one who *"gave orders"* during the Annual Meeting on what other witches should do because she was the ruler. Grandmother also mentioned that The Grand High Witch was *"without mercy."* The Grand High Witch's mercilessness made her become feared by all witches. In her words, Grandmother said that The Grand High Witch's presence could *"whip up excitement and enthusiasm"* to emphasize that her presence could cause fear and frigidity. Thus, Grandmother's and The Boy's dialogue indirectly presents The Grand High Witch's scary character. Julietta (2020) found such characterization from Maleficent in *the Maleficent* film, which had a negative aura so that her presence could generate a frightening atmosphere.

Subsequence 10a, The Boy was accidentally in the same room with The Grand High Witch. Through the hidden place, The Boy saw the true face of The Grand High Witch. It was described as,



Excerpt 2: *“That face of hers was the most frightful and frightening thing I have ever seen. Just looking at it gave me the shakes all over. It was so crumpled and wizened, so shrunk and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. It was a fearsome and ghastly sight. There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there.”*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 58)

The Boy, directly through his own description, states that The Grand High Witch's face is "*frightful and frightening*." The Boy described The Grand High Witch's face as "*crumpled and wizened, so shrunk and shrivelled*" as if it was "*pickled in vinegar*" to emphasize that her face was so saggy and wrinkled and showed that The Grand High Witch was an old witch. The sentence, "*the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there*" highlights The Grand High Witch's rotten face because maggots were usually found in decaying objects. The Grand High Witch's unusual appearance was similar to that of The White Witch in C.S. Lewis's *Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in a study conducted by Tso (2012) and Maleficent's appearance in *Sleeping Beauty* in a study conducted by Murtiningrum et al. (2023). In both studies, The White Witch and Maleficent were described as having unusual appearances, which showed that they were not normal women and did not meet the standard norms of beauty.

The Grand High Witch's scary trait was again highlighted in sequence 10e. It was described as,

Excerpt 3: *"The audience stirred uneasily and sat up straighter in their chairs. "Miserrable witches!" she yelled. "Useless lazy vitches! Feeble frribbling vitches! You are a heap of idle good-for-nothing vurms!" A shudder went through the audience.*

*"Nobody answered her question."*

*"We will do better," murmured the audience.*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 63)

This sequence began with The Grand High Witch's high-pitched scream, which showed her anger towards all the witches of England. Through The Boy's narration, The Witches' body response toward The Grand High Witch's scream was "*stirred uneasily*." The Witches' behavior indicated their uneasiness toward The Grand High Witch. Uneasiness experienced by characters can indicate fear (Rizal, 2017). The witches' bodies began to "*shudder*" when they realized that The Grand High Witch was getting angry. The sentence "*Nobody answered her question*" emphasized The Witches' fear of The Grand High Witch. They feared that The Grand High Witch would be even angrier if they spoke. The witches answered The Grand High Witch's order by saying, "*We will do better*," with a low tone, implying that they had no courage to speak generally because they felt scared of The Grand High Witch. It is similar to findings from Julietta (2020) that show The Moors' creatures did not dare to speak in a high tone to Maleficent because they were afraid of her.

Grandmother described The Grand High Witch as a scary witch because she was a heartless leader. The Boy's description and body reaction after seeing The Grand High Witch's awful face during the meeting highlighted her scary traits. The Boy was not scared during The Meeting because of The Grand High Witch's presence. The members of her organization were also afraid of her.

### **The Grand High Witch as a Cruel Witch**

In Dahl's *The Witches*, The Grand High Witch shows her cruel character by committing violence to children and animals. Violence means an act of emotional or physical torture against someone by involving physical force (Kadizade & Karaz, 2021). Extreme violence can cause people to lose their lives (Navarro, 2013). The Grand High Witch's cruel character is presented in subsequences 10b, 11e, and 13b.

Subsequence 10b, The Grand High Witch showed her cruel character by severely punishing a witch who did not have the same goal as her. It was described in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 4: *"Forgive me, O Your Grandness!" cried the miserable culprit. "I didn't mean it!" But The Grand High Witch continued with her terrible recital. "A vitch who dares to say I'm wrrrong Vill not be vith us very long!"*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 66)

The excerpt above shows The Grand High Witch's actions when a witch argued over her order. Through her behavior, the Grand High Witch indirectly showed her cruel nature by punishing members of her organization who argued her order. Although that witch had begged for an apology by saying, *"Forgive me, O Your Grandness!"* The Grand High Witch remained in her stance. Her character is also related to Severus Snape in *Harry Potter*, who was portrayed as cruel because he often punishes his students and gives the worst punishment (Yasamahadewi et al., 2021). The Grand High Witch did not care about others' feelings or lives, not even members of her organization. The Grand High stated, *"A vitch who dares to say I'm wrrrong Vill not be vith us very long!"* which implies that the one who argued with her will be executed. It is similar to Voldemort in *Half-Blood Prince*, who killed Amelia Bones because she disturbed and insulted him (Fitri, 2018).

The Grand High Witch's cruel character was also shown when she saw The Boy's mice, William and Mary. The Grand High Witch explained the mouse maker formula when Wiliam and Mary suddenly appeared around her feet. The Witches became noisy and no longer focused on The Grand High Witch's explanation. Knowing these mice were ordinary mice, The Grand High Witch became angry because these mice had disturbed the meeting. As an expression of her anger, The Grand High Witch tortured these mice, as seen in this excerpt from subsequence 11e.

Excerpt 5: *"You can imagine that none of this was making me feel very comfortable. William and Mary were still running around on the platform, and I saw The Grand High Witch aim a swift running kick at William. She caught him right on the point of her toe and sent him flying. She did the same to Mary. Her aim was extraordinary. She would have made a great football player."*

*Both mice crashed against the wall, and for a few moments, they lay stunned.*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 82)

The excerpt above describes The Grand High Witch's action toward William and Mary. The Boy's narration, "*The Grand High Witch aim a swift running kick at William,*" indicates The Grand High Witch's action in hurting these mice. This argument is supported by the following sentence, which explains that the Grand High Witch managed to catch both mice, and the Grand High Witch kicked them until they "*crashed against the wall.*" This action proves that The Grand High Witch committed acts of animal cruelty. Animal cruelty is any action that can hurt animals, such as neglecting them, treating them as toys, and hurting their physic by kicking or hitting them (Juliadilla & Noveni, 2021; Mota-Rojas et al., 2022). The Grand High Witch's action is similar to a study conducted by (Charvátová, 2016), which found that Roald Dahl inserted animal cruelty in his work *The Magic Finger* by presenting Gregs, a family who loved to kill and hunt animals.

The Grand High Witch made a formula that could transform people into mice because she wanted to put an end to all children. In subsequence 12a, The Grand High Witch used Bruno Jenkins as her first experiment. It was described as,

Excerpt 6: *“Bruno was getting smaller by the second. I could see him shrinking...”*  
*“Now his clothes seemed to be disappearing and brown fur was growing all over his body...”*  
*“Suddenly he had a tail...”*  
*“And then he had whiskers...”*  
*“Now he had four feet...”*  
*“It was all happening so quickly...”*  
*“It was a matter of seconds only...”*  
*“And all at once he wasn't there any more...”*  
*“A small brown mouse was running around on the table top...”*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 57)

The excerpt above describes Bruno Jenkin's transformation into a mouse. The Grand High Witch's potion made Bruno Jenkins into "*A small brown mouse.*" The Grand High Witch's action toward Bruno Jenkins was considered cruelty because she transformed Bruno Jenkins into an animal. There was no apparent reason why she hated children. It is similar to Voldemort, who was considered cruel because he did not need a reason to kill and hurt people (Fitri, 2018). Furthermore, The Grand High Witch's behavior can be categorized as child abuse because she had the intention to kill Bruno Jenkins and transform him into a mouse, making him unable to get his rights as a child. Child abuse is any form of physical, psychological, sexual, or neglectful treatment that can cause injury and negatively impact the child's health, standard of living, growth, development, or self-confidence (GDewi et al., 2022).

Child abuse committed by The Grand High Witch is also highlighted in subsequence 13b. In this subsequence, The Grand High Witch gave the Boy five hundred dosages of poison, which directly changed him into a mouse. It was describe

Excerpt 7: *“Oh, the pain and the fire!”*

.....

*“Now for the mouse-trrrrap!”*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 102)

The Grand High Witch forced The Boy to open his mouth using violence. The Boy felt extreme pain in his mouth when the poison was poured into his mouth. He described his pain directly by saying, *“Oh, the pain and the fire!”*. The Grand High Witch's behavior of causing The Boy to suffer in pain indirectly showed her cruel nature. The Grand High Witch gave five thousand doses of the potion, which made The Boy instantly turn into a mouse (Suwastini, Dewi, et al., 2022). Seeing that The Boy had become a mouse, The Grand High Witch expressed her excitement by clapping, chanting, and cheering (Tso, 2012). It showed The Grand High Witch's cruelty because she found enjoyment in harming a kid. The Grand High Witch also asked for *“the mouse-trrrrap!”*. Enjoyment, The Grand High Witch, found while harming children, is similar to The Landlady in Dahl's *The Landlady*, who found pleasure in killing young men for no reason and then keeping them as ornaments (Jaber, 2016).

The Grand High Witch's cruel nature led her to commit violence to children, animals, and even her organization members. Toward her action, The Grand High Witch indirectly shows her cruel nature by killing a disobedient witch, torturing The Boy's mice, and transforming children into mice. The Grand High Witch used violence in her actions. Seeing children in pain and suffering was her pleasure.

### **The Grand High Witch as a Cunning Witch**

Cunning means the ability to trick others to gain benefit (Wen, 2009). Dahl's female character is described as vicious and cunning in carrying out her mission, and sometimes her actions are unforeseen and cause shock (Jaber, 2016). The Grand High Witch was described as a cunning witch because she had a brilliant plan to execute all the children. The Grand High Witch's cunning character can be identified in subsequences 10a, 11b, and 11c.

The Grand High Witch camouflaged her appearance to hide her witch identity. Subsequence 10a includes a trick that The Grand High Witch used to camouflage her appearance, as shown below.

Excerpt 7: *“She didn't look to me like a witch at all, but she couldn't possibly not be one, otherwise what on earth was she doing up there on the platform?”*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 57)

The subsequence 10a showed The Grand High Witch's success in covering her actual appearance. The Witches attractively disguised themselves to be seen as ordinary women (Þórðardóttir, 2019). The Grand High Witch's cunningness is indirectly revealed through her appearance. The Boy's statement, *“She didn't look to me like a witch at all,”* indicates that The Boy would not notice that the woman was a witch because her appearance was similar to women in general. The Grand High Witch used her cunningness to camouflage so the people around would treat her better and she could carry out his cunning plans surreptitiously. Similar to Wulandari (2014), who found Ravenna in *Snow White and The Huntsman 2012* portrayed as a cunning



stepmother because she disguised herself as William, Snow White's childhood friend, and gave a poisoned apple to Snow White, which caused her to fall into a deep sleep.

The novel's storyline showed that The Grand High Witch had a cunning plan to execute children. Subsequence 11b describes The Grand High Witch's cunningness when running a sweet shop. It was described.

Excerpt 8: *"You will prepare yourselves for this Great Gala Opening by filling every choc and every sweet in your shop with my very latest and greatest magic formula! This is known as FORMULA 86 DELAYED ACTION MOUSEMAKER!"*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 73)

Through her speech, the Grand High Witch indirectly revealed her cunning plan to distribute her poison to all children by saying, "*filling every choc and every sweet in your shop with my very latest and grrreatest magic formula.*" Running a sweet shop made distributing the poison easier for The Grand High Witch because the children would come to her shop for sweets and chocolates. They would not notice that sweets and chocs were poisonous because the reaction of the poison happened the next day after. The Grand High Witch's ideas in transforming the children when they are at school could avoid her being accused as the witch is similar to the identification of The Boy, who could think in detail to avoid danger (Suwastini, Dewi, et al., 2022). Moreover, Anggraeni (2016) also found such characterization from Mr. Wormwood, Matilda's father, who took advantage by cheating his customer. He poured sawdust into the car's engine to make it sound good (Anggraeni, 2016).

In subsequence 11c, The Grand High Witch's cunningness gave her a way of not getting caught due to her cunning actions. It was described as,

Excerpt 9: *"Teachers is all rrrushing and rrrunning out and getting mouse-trrraps and baiting them vith cheese and putting them down all over school! "*

(Roald Dahl, *The Witches*, 1983, 75)

The Grand High Witch, through her speech, said the teacher would set "*mouse-trrraps and baiting them,*" which means that in achieving her mission, The Grand High Witch would involve adults. Her speech indirectly showed her cunning nature because she did not need to set mouse traps around England to catch the children. Adults were the ones who would catch and kill the mouse without noticing that the mouse was children (Þórðardóttir, 2019). The Grand High Witch's cunning thought brought her an advantage because she did not need to bother to catch the mice. It is similar to the identification of The Boy, who thinks creatively to gain benefit (Suwastini, Dewi, et al., 2022). Moreover, The Grand High Witch's cunning traits are similar to Mary Malone's traits, as identified by Garini & Winarti (2021), when she used her intelligence and cunning to avoid being accused of murder.

Thus, subsequences 10a, 11b, and 11c showed The Grand High Witch as a cunning witch in achieving her desire. It can be seen through The Grand High Witch's actions camouflage her appearance to look like an ordinary woman. Her cunning trait was also highlighted through her speech when she decided to open a sweet shop to distribute the delayed formula.

## CONCLUSION

Roald Dahl's *The Witches* is a children's novel about a boy who became a mouse after encountering a witch. This study aims to analyze the most prominent characters of The Grand High Witch as antagonist characters. This study concludes that The Grand High Witch's scary, cruel, and cunning traits made her a feared and respected personae in the narrative. These characterizations support her position as the main antagonist in the story, as all the other withces as antagonists in the story closely followed her leadership out of respect and fear. These traits also threaten the protagonists' lives, providing conflicts for the plot development. While these traits are mostly presented indirectly through speech, actions, and reactions of other characters toward The Grand High witch, direct techniques of character revelations are also used in the narrative, where the other characters in the narrative directly mention her traits. This study has objectively described the novel's main antagonist as scary, cruel, and cunning, befitting her position as an antagonist. With these traits, she provided conflicts for the plot development and built the suspense toward the climax by complicating the survival of the Boy as the narrative's main protagonist.

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