

# Matilda

by Roald Dahl

## Classroom Favorites

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### SYNOPSIS

**The Reader of Books** The narrator complains about deluded parents who think their average children are brilliant. Such parents and children deserve to get brutally frank reports about their child's shortcomings, he believes. However, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood are quite the opposite: they do not care about their daughter Matilda—who is a genius. By the age of 18 months, Matilda had perfect speech; by the time she was three, she had taught herself to read. Her beastly father, a dishonest used car salesman, irritably tells Matilda to watch television like normal people. Left alone in the house, the young child toddles down to the library. Mrs. Phelps, the librarian, is astonished when Matilda reads all the children's books. Over the next six months, Matilda reads an astonishing number of classic novels by famous British and American writers. When she learns that she can borrow books from the library, Matilda visits the library weekly to replenish her stock of books. By reading, Matilda travels all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.

**Mr. Wormwood, the Great Car Dealer** Matilda's father sells junk cars that appear to work well but fall apart shortly thereafter. Mr. Wormwood explains his deceptions to Matilda's brother Michael while criticizing Matilda for being too stupid to understand. The family eats their TV dinners in front of the television. Matilda hates her dishonest, narrow parents and wishes they knew that there is more to life than cheating and escapism.

**The Hat and the Superglue** To even the score against her mean parents, Matilda lines her father's hat with Superglue. Mrs. Wormwood has to cut Mr. Wormwood's hat off, removing chunks of his hair in the process.

**The Ghost** Furious at seeing his daughter always reading, Mr. Wormwood rips her latest library book to shreds. To retaliate, Matilda borrows her friend Fred's talking parrot and hides it up the chimney. That night, the parrot says "Hullo, Hullo, Hullo!", Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood are convinced that a robber is in the house. Mr. Wormwood cowardly flees from the house. Matilda feels partly avenged for her father's cruelty.

**Arithmetic** Mr. Wormwood asks his son to calculate his profits from cheating customers. When Matilda does the sums quickly and accurately in her head, her father accuses her of cheating. The issue comes to a temporary halt when the family eats their TV dinners in silence.

**The Platinum-Blond Man** Mr. Wormwood is vain about his black hair and every morning rubs Violets Hair Tonic on it. Matilda pours some of her mother's peroxide into his tonic. His hair turns dirty silver and partly falls out. Mrs. Wormwood assumes that her husband used the wrong bottle and tells Matilda that men just aren't very smart.

**Miss Honey** Matilda's parents enroll her in Crunchem Hall Primary School, run by Miss Trunchbull, a tyrannical monster. Matilda's teacher is just the opposite: the sweet, young, and gentle Miss Honey. Matilda dazzles Miss Honey with her mastery of reading and math. Miss Honey is even more amazed when Matilda composes a flattering limerick on

the spot. In brief, Miss Honey recognizes that Matilda is a prodigy.

**The Trunchbull** Miss Trunchbull is vicious, more like a blood-thirsty follower of the hounds than the headmistress of a school for children. She admires Mr. Wormwood as a pillar of society and believes all the lies he has told about Matilda. Miss Honey tells Miss Trunchbull that Matilda is brilliant, but the headmistress refuses to believe it. She also refuses Miss Honey's request to move Matilda to the top class.

**The Parents** Miss Honey designs an individual curriculum for Matilda. She visits the Wormwoods to discuss their daughter's brilliance but they refuse to listen: Mrs. Wormwood is too busy watching television and Mr. Wormwood ignores her. "Looks are more important than books," Mrs. Wormwood tells Miss Honey in all seriousness, even though Mrs. Wormwood is a fat, frowzy blonde. Realizing that her efforts are futile, Miss Honey leaves.

**Throwing the Hammer** Because of her warm personality, Matilda is popular with the other kids — despite her brilliance. Hortensia, an older girl, tells Matilda and her friend Lavender about Miss Trunchbull's vast cruelty. The little girls very much admire Hortensia's skill in torturing Miss Trunchbull. Just then, Miss Trunchbull spots little Amanda and her pigtailed. Since she cannot abide pigtailed, Miss Trunchbull grabs the child by her hair and throws her — much as she threw the hammer in the British Olympics. Amazingly, Amanda is only a little dazed by this ordeal.

**Bruce Bogtrotter and the Cake** Miss Trunchbull gathers the school to watch the humiliation of Bruce Bogtrotter, who had the nerve to eat a piece of her chocolate cake. Miss Trunchbull forces Bruce to eat an entire huge chocolate cake. To the students' amazement and delight, he eats it all. She smashes the plate on his head.

**Lavender** Lavender puts a newt in Miss Trunchbull's water jug.

**The Weekly Test** Miss Trunchbull humiliates Nigel Hicks, the doctor's son, by asking him to spell "write." When he asks whether she means "write" or "right," Miss Trunchbull makes him stand in the corner on one leg. When Rupert cannot do a multiplication problem correctly, she holds him aloft by his hair. Eric Ink gets suspended by his ears when he cannot spell "what." Matilda reveals that she has read Dickens, and Miss Trunchbull yells that Mr. Wormwood is a crook who sold her a bad car.

**The First Miracle** When Miss Trunchbull pours her water from the jug, the newt falls out. Revolted, Miss Trunchbull blames Matilda, who hotly denies the crime. Furious with rage, Matilda uses her brain power to overturn Miss Trunchbull's glass—without touching it. Miss Trunchbull swears that Matilda overturned the glass, but the children stand behind their classmate.

**The Second Miracle** After class, Matilda tells Miss Honey how she tipped the glass using only brain power. Matilda does it again to prove that she is telling the truth.

**Miss Honey's Cottage** Miss Honey takes Matilda to her tiny home, a cottage without running water, heat, light, or furniture. Matilda is amazed at Miss Honey's poverty.

**Miss Honey's Story** Miss Honey reveals that she is very poor. Orphaned as a child, she was left in her aunt's care. Her aunt made Miss

Honey into a slave and denied her all but the most basic necessities. Finally, Miss Honey broke away, but not until she had signed virtually all her salary away to her abusive aunt—none other than Miss Trunchbull!

**The Names** Matilda asks Miss Honey her father's first name (Magnus), Miss Trunchbull's first name (Agatha) and what they called Miss Honey (Jenny). Matilda thanks Miss Honey for the meager tea and leaves.

**The Practice** Matilda practices her powers, which she perfects in six days. Now she is ready to put her plan into action.

**The Third Miracle** Miss Trunchbull comes to Miss Honey's class for her weekly observation and once again humiliates the children. This time, however, Matilda strikes back writing a message on the board by using her magic powers to move the chalk. The message claims to be from Miss Honey's father, ordering Miss Trunchbull to give his daughter back her home, return her money, and leave the village. Miss Trunchbull faints.

**A New Home** Miss Trunchbull heeds the message and vanishes, but not before returning Miss Honey's home and money. Mr. Trilby is appointed headmaster. Matilda returns home to find her parents and brother fleeing to Spain because the law has finally caught up with them. They give their permission for Matilda to live with Miss Honey and the two live happily ever after.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Best known as a children's writer, Roald (pronounced "Roo-aal") Dahl was also noted for his short stories for adults and his autobiographies. Dahl's children's books are marked by sharp turns into fantasy and their harsh treatment of adults who make trouble for children. His adult fiction is also marked by sharp, unexpected plot turns.

Dahl was born in 1916 in South Wales. An active, mischievous child, he was often in trouble. Though Dahl's father died when Roald was only four, his mother was able to afford a fine education for her children. At school, Roald encountered many tyrannical and cruel adults. Speaking of his days in English schools, Dahl later said: "Those were days of horrors, of fierce discipline, of not talking in the dormitories, no running in the corridors, no untidiness of any sort, no this or that or the other, just rules, rules and still more rules that had to be obeyed. And the fear of the dreaded cane hung over us like the fear of death all the time."

Dahl was a mediocre student and showed little sign of his future skill as a writer. His teacher in 1931, for example, declared him "a persistent muddler. Vocabulary negligible, sentences malconstructed. He reminds me of a camel." Nevertheless, Dahl's mother suggested he attend college after high school. Instead, Dahl took a job with the Shell Oil Company, and later shipped off to Tanganyika (now Tanzania), where he enjoyed "the roasting heat and the crocodiles and the snakes and the log safaris up-country, selling Shell oil to the men who ran the diamond mines and the sisal plantations... Above all, I learned how to look after myself in a way that no young person can ever do by staying in civilization."

In 1939, Dahl's adventures took a dangerous turn when he joined the Royal Air Force in Nairobi, Kenya, as a fighter pilot. While strafing a convoy of trucks near Alexandria, Egypt, his plane was hit and crashed. Dahl crawled from the wreckage as the gas tanks exploded. It took six months for Dahl to recover from his skull fracture and broken nose. Dahl returned to his squadron in Greece and shot down four enemy planes, but frequent blackouts as a result of his earlier injuries eventually rendered him unable to fly.

Dahl was transferred to Washington, D.C., to serve as an assistant air attaché. One day C. S. Forester interviewed Dahl over lunch for an article he was writing, but didn't take notes. Dahl's notes turned out to be a story, which Forester sent to the magazine under Dahl's name. The magazine paid Dahl \$1,000 for the story. His career was launched. "Becoming a writer was pure fluke," he later said.

Dahl published many stories during the next decades, but by 1960 turned mainly to children's fiction. His career boomed. Both *Charlie*

*and the Chocolate Factory* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* sold over one million hardcover copies in America alone. Looking back on his years as a writer in *Boy*, Dahl contended that "the life of a writer is absolute hell compared with the life of a businessman. ... Two hours of writing fiction leaves this particular writer absolutely drained. For those two hours he has been miles away, he has been somewhere else, in a different place with totally different people, and the effort of swimming back into normal surroundings is very great. ... A person is a fool to become a writer. His only compensation is absolute freedom. He has no master except his own soul, and that, I am sure, is why he does it."

#### CRITIC'S CORNER

Often compared to the works of Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry, and Saki, Dahl's stories employ surprise endings and shrewd characters who are rarely what they seem to be. Of Dahl's work, critic Michael Wood has commented: "His stories are not only unfailingly clever, they are, many of them, about cleverness." Gerald Haigh, writing in *Times Literary Supplement*, said that Dahl had the ability to "home unerringly in on the very nub of childish delight, with brazen and glorious disregard for what is likely to furrow the adult brow."

However, many critics have objected to Dahl's rough treatment of adults. Eleanor Cameron, for example, in *Children's Literature in Education*, found that "Dahl caters to the streak of sadism in children which they don't even realize is there because they are not fully self-aware and are not experienced enough to understand what sadism is."

Dahl explained in the *New York Times Book Review* that the children who wrote to him "invariably pick out the most gruesome events as the favorite parts of the books. . . . They don't relate it to life. They enjoy the fantasy. And my nastiness is never gratuitous. It's retribution. Beastly people must be punished."

In *Trust Your Children: Voices Against Censorship in Children's Literature*, Dahl contended that adults may be disturbed by his books "because they are not quite as aware as I am that children are different from adults. Children are much more vulgar than grownups. They have a coarser sense of humor. They are basically more cruel." Dahl often commented that the key to his success with children was that he conspired with them against adults. Vicki Weissman, in her review of *Matilda* in the *New York Times Book Review*, agreed that Dahl's books are aimed to please children rather than adults in a number of ways. She thought that "the truths of death and torture are as distant as when the magician saws the lady in half," and delighted that "anarchic and patently impossible plots romp along with no regard at all for the even faintly likely."

#### WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

##### For Adults

*Sometime Never: A Fable for Supermen* (1948)  
*My Uncle Oswald* (1980)  
*Going Solo* (1986)

##### For Children

*Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life* (1988)  
*The BFG* (1982)  
*Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984)  
*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)  
*Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator: The Further Adventures of Charlie Bucket and Willy Wonka, Chocolate-Maker Extraordinary* (1972)  
*The Complete Adventures of Charlie and Mr. Willy Wonka* (1978)  
*The Dahl Diary* (1992)  
*Danny: The Champion of the World* (1975)  
*Dirty Beasts* (1983)  
*The Enormous Crocodile* (1978)  
*Esio Trot* (1990)  
*Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970)  
*George's Marvelous Medicine* (1981)  
*The Giraffe and The Pelly and Me* (1985)  
*The Gremlins* (1943)  
*James and the Giant Peach: A Children's Story* (1961)

*The Magic Finger* (1966)  
*Matilda* (1988)  
*The Minpins* (1991)  
*More Tales of the Unexpected* (1980)  
*My Year* (1994)  
*Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying* (1946)  
*Rhyme Stew* (1989)  
*Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes* (1982)  
*Roald Dahl's Revolting Recipes* (1994)  
*Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected* (1979)  
*Selected Stories of Roald Dahl* (1968)  
*Someone Like You* (1959)  
*Taste and Other Tales* (1979)  
*Twenty-nine Kisses from Roald Dahl* (1969)  
*Two Fables* (1986)  
*The Twits* (1980)  
*The Umbrella Man and Other Stories* (1998)  
*The Vicar of Nibbleswicke* (1992)  
*The Witches* (1983)  
*The Wonderful World of Henry Sugar and Six More* (1977)

#### FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

##### Books

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*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 79. Detroit: Gale, 1993.  
Dahl, Lucy, *James and the Giant Peach: The Book and Movie Scrapbook*, Disney Press, 1996.  
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Dahl, Roald, *Going Solo*, Farrar, Straus, 1986.  
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Farrell, Barry, *Pat and Roald*, Random House, 1969.  
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Shavick, Andrea, *Roald Dahl: The Champion Storyteller*, Oxford University Press, 1998.  
Treglown, Jeremy, *Roald Dahl: A Biography*, Farrar, Straus, 1994.  
*Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, 3rd edition, St. James Press, 1989, pp. 255-256.  
Warren, Alan with Dale Salwak and Daryl F. Mallett, *Roald Dahl: From the Gremlins to the Chocolate Factory*, 2nd ed., Borgo Press, 1994.  
West, Mark I., interview with Roald Dahl in *Trust Your Children: Voices against Censorship in Children's Literature*, Neal-Schuman, 1988, pp. 71-76.

##### Periodicals

*Books and Bookmen*, January 1969; May 1970.  
*Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1986.  
*Chicago Tribune Book World*, Aug. 10, 1980; May 17, 1981.  
*Entertainment Weekly*, Jan. 24, 1994, p. 57.  
*Horn Book*, October 1972; December 1972; February 1973; April 1973; June 1973; January/February, 1989, p. 68; January/February, 1992, p. 64.  
*New Republic*, Oct. 19, 1974, p. 23; April 19, 1980.  
*New York*, Dec. 12, 1988.  
*New Yorker*, Dec. 12, 1988, p. 157; Nov. 25, 1991, p. 146.  
*New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1953; April 29, 1980.  
*New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 7, 1960; Nov. 12, 1961; Oct. 25, 1964; Nov. 8, 1970; Sept. 17, 1972; Oct. 27, 1974; Oct. 26, 1975; Dec. 25, 1977, pp. 6, 15; Sept. 30, 1979; April 20, 1980; March 29, 1981; Jan. 9, 1983; Jan. 20, 1985; Oct. 12, 1986; Jan. 15, 1989, p. 31; Oct. 27, 1991, p. 27; May 1, 1994, p. 28.

#### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze parenting skills
2. To evaluate how cruelty affects children
3. To recognize the theme of revenge

4. To analyze how some adults abuse their power
5. To understand the author's use of fantasy
6. To explore child prodigies
7. To find elements from traditional fairy tales
8. To appreciate the novel's use of humor
9. To describe the novel's mood or atmosphere
10. To predict what the future holds for Matilda and Miss Honey

#### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the magic of reading
2. To analyze Matilda's brilliance
3. To probe the relationship between Matilda and her parents
4. To understand Miss Honey's devotion to her students
5. To see how different people deal with cruelty
6. To trace how the author exaggerates Miss Trunchbull's character to create humor
7. To understand the story's irony
8. To compare and contrast Miss Honey and the Wormwoods
9. To appreciate the novel's clever plot
10. To identify the novel's structure, especially its climax

#### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Roald Dahl's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**Fantasy** is a kind of writing that describes events that could not take place in real life. Fantasy has unrealistic characters, settings, and events. *Matilda* contains many elements from traditional fantasy stories, such as the wicked witch (Miss Trunchbull), magic (Matilda's powers to move objects), the beautiful downtrodden princess (Miss Honey), and fantastic events (children flying through the air and surviving with nary a scratch).

**Humor** is the parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. Dahl uses each of these methods of creating humor. On page 86, for example, he creates humor with irony when Miss Trunchbull says: "Nasty dirty things, little girls are. Glad I never was one." He creates humor through exaggeration as Miss Trunchbull holds children up by their ears, forces them to eat unbelievably large chocolate cakes, and tosses them about as though they were Olympic hammers.

**Irony** occurs when something happens that is different from what was expected. It is ironic that frowzy Mrs. Wormwood said to the beautiful Miss Honey, "Now look at *me*. Then look at *you*. You chose books. I chose looks." To reinforce the irony, the author then remarks: "Miss Honey stared at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room." Authors use irony for many different purposes, but in *Matilda*, Roald Dahl uses irony to increase the humor.

#### CROSS CURRICULAR SOURCES

For more information about *Matilda* and Roald Dahl's novels, consult the following sources.

##### Books

Beverly Cleary, *Beezus and Ramona*; *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*; *Ramona the Pest*; *Ramona's World*  
Ian Fleming, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*  
Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories and Plain Tales from the Hills*  
E. L. Konigsberg, *The View From Saturday*  
Richard Peck, *Long Way From Chicago* and *The Year Down Yonder*  
J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Louis Sachar, *Holes*

George Selden, *The Cricket in Times Square*

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

##### Videos/Films

*James and the Giant Peach* (1996)

*Matilda* (1996)

*Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971)

*The Witches* (1990)

## THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- alienation
- dishonesty
- education
- friendship
- genius
- humor
- the joy of reading
- revenge
- psychopaths
- suspense

### Motifs

- dealing with uncaring and even abusive families
- looking at life through a child's eyes
- the importance of reading
- the powerful effect of good teachers
- abusive educational systems
- how children can outsmart adults
- humor and pathos
- superhuman abilities and unexplained psychic phenomenon
- the qualities of an effective teacher
- the impulse to achieve revenge

## MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. (The Reader of Books, p. 21) (*Matilda teaches herself to read and in so doing, opens up the entire world to her eager gaze. Here, Dahl directly states the power of books to transform a narrow life into a rich and full one. Matilda's parents do not understand her, nor do they care to do so. Their world is stifling, narrowly defined by television and popular culture. By reading, Matilda comes to realize that there is so much more to life than soap operas, TV dinners, bingo, and cheating people out of their money in dishonest business dealings.*)
2. With frightening suddenness he now began ripping the pages out of the book in handfuls and throwing them in the waste-paper basket. (The Ghost, p. 41) (*In a frenzy, Mr. Wormwood shreds Matilda's library book. As he does so, Mr. Wormwood screams that he is fed up with her reading. Matilda realizes that her father is jealous of his daughter enjoying reading books while he is denied this pleasure by the narrowness of his interests and shallowness of his character. It is this violation more than any other that shows the reader the hopelessness of Matilda ever fitting with her family.*)
3. "Yes, I liked Wormwood. A real pillar of our society. He told me the daughter was a bad lot though. He said to watch her." (The Trunchbull, p. 85) (*Not only is Miss Trunchbull a sadist, but she is also a woefully bad judge of character. She believes that Wormwood, the stereotypical crooked used-car dealer, is an upstanding man. As with most of the names in the novel, his very name telegraphs his character trait: the man is a worm that eats away at wood. Miss Trunchbull believes that Matilda, really a kind and sensitive girl, is a troublemaker. By the end of the book, Trunchbull realizes that Wormwood is a crook, but she never understands Matilda's loyal and loving nature.*)
4. "I'm not in favor of blue-stocking girls. A girl should think about making herself attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books." (The Parents, p. 97)

("Blue-stocking girls" are wealthy, educated young women devoted to good causes. Mrs. Wormwood firmly believes that education, self-reliance, and good works are useless; rather, women should concentrate on surface qualities such as appearance in order to snare a husband. Miss Honey now understands what narrow-minded values Matilda faces at home. She sees how hopeless it is to get Matilda's parents to understand or appreciate their child.)

5. Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky. (Throwing the Hammer, p. 115) (*This section reveals the novel's reliance on the conventions of the fairy tale. Miss Trunchbull grabs Amanda by her pigtails and heaves her like an Olympic hammer into the sky. Under normal circumstances, such a throw would severely maim if not kill the child, but in this novel, Amanda lands, sits up, and is none the worse for the experience. As in a cartoon, the rules of everyday reality are suspended to create humor and help the author entertain his readers.*)
6. Matilda said, "Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog." (Bruce Bogtrotter and the Cake, p. 117) (*Matilda advises her friend Lavender to make sure that everything she does is unbelievable. This comment summarizes Dahl's literary technique in the novel. The events are so outrageous that no one would believe them; hence, they create their own unique world view and stand as a totally convincing view of life as seen through the eyes of a child.*)
7. "Who did it!" she roared. (The First Miracle, p. 166) (*Matilda has made Miss Trunchbull's glass tip over without even touching it. Obviously, no one possesses such a miraculous power. Since Dahl has created such a magical world in Matilda, her first miracle – the tipping of the glass – is believable and sets the stage for the climax to come.*)
8. Margarine, Matilda thought. She must really be poor. (Miss Honey's Cottage, p. 189) (*To Dahl's generation of fellow British citizens, raised on the deprivations of World War II, margarine symbolized abject poverty. Miss Honey is poor, woefully, unbelievably, fairy-tale poor. Again, Dahl exaggerates the scene to create a fantasy-like world.*)
9. Give my Jenny her wages. Give my Jenny the house. Then get out of here... (The Third Miracle, p. 223) (*Matilda uses her magic powers to trick Miss Trunchbull into giving Miss Honey back her wages and her house, and then disappearing forever. It is a most satisfying climax to the novel as the underdogs – Matilda and Miss Honey – triumph over the bully – Miss Trunchbull.*)
10. "Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after." (A New Home, p. 239) (*Matilda returns home to discover that her parents are leaving for Spain, one step ahead of the law. She asks her parents if she can live with Miss Honey, and they eagerly agree. They don't even bother to look back as they drive away. Matilda is delighted to be living with someone who shares her values and loves her – Miss Honey.*)

## COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where does the story take place? (*The story takes place in England during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*)
2. How is Matilda different from the rest of her family? (*Matilda is intelligent, quiet, and classy, while her parents are stupid, vulgar, and crude. She loves to read, while they never read, far*

preferring to watch television. She is open to new ideas while they are completely closed to anything that is not part of the crass popular culture.)

3. In what ways does Miss Honey help Matilda?  
(Miss Honey tries to get Matilda into the appropriate class in school. When Miss Trunchbull refuses to recognize the child's genius, Miss Honey designs a challenging individualized curriculum. Miss Honey also visits Matilda's parents in a vain attempt to get them to recognize their child's genius. Finally, she takes Matilda into her home and raises her with love and kindness.)
4. Why is Miss Honey so poor?  
(Miss Trunchbull, Miss Honey's aunt, has cheated her out of her inheritance. Miss Trunchbull has not only stolen her money and home, but has also robbed Miss Honey of much of her self-confidence.)
5. Why do Matilda's parents decide to go to Spain?  
(One or more of the people whom Mr. Wormwood has cheated has tipped the police off about his traffic in selling used cars as new. He is fleeing Spain to avoid imprisonment.)

#### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. How do the characters' names reveal their personalities?  
(Miss Honey is sweet and kind, while Miss Trunchbull is like a truncheon (a blunt weapon) and a bull (fierce and out of control). The Wormwoods are like parasites destroying the fabric of society (wood), while Matilda's friend Lavender is like a pretty flower.)
7. What elements in the story are not realistic?  
(Possibilities include Miss Trunchbull's outrageous acts of cruelty and Matilda's wild supernatural powers.)
8. Why do you think children might enjoy this book?  
(Children are apt to enjoy the humor, wildly exaggerated acts of revenge, and Matilda's amazing powers to move objects using only her mind. Most of all, young readers will likely enjoy seeing how the underdog (the children) triumphs over the bullies (the adults, Miss Trunchbull and the Wormwoods.)

#### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. What is the author's tone in this novel?  
(Dahl's tone is light, arch, and humorous. Especially in the early chapters, he is also wry and lightly sarcastic.)
10. Are the jokes that Matilda plays on her father humorous or cruel? Explain your answer.  
(Answers will vary, depending on each reader's individual taste in humor. In the main, the jokes do border on cruelty, since they involve great discomfort as well as inconvenience.)

#### Questions 11-13 (Creative Level)

11. Working with a small group of classmates, discuss some ways that you might have coped with Matilda's situation had you been in her place.
12. Argue that Matilda should or should not have gone to live with Miss Honey at the end of the novel.

#### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

##### Art and Music

1. Design a poster for a movie version of *Matilda*.
2. Create a storyboard for a cartoon version of this novel. Include at least two scenes for each chapter.
3. Draw several new illustrations for the novel. Be sure that your drawings capture the novel's wild humor.
4. The author comments that Mozart was only five years old when he started composing for the piano. Report on Mozart's life to explain "what happened to him," as the author comments.

##### Drama

1. Read one of the books Matilda especially liked, such as *The Secret Garden*. Writing as Matilda, give a speech explaining why you enjoyed the book so much.
2. Explain the policies of your school and public libraries. Describe how you get a library card, how long you can keep a book, and

how many books you can take out at one time.

3. Working with a group of classmates, teach the class a lesson about multiplication or spelling, using the techniques that Miss Honey taught her students.
4. Role-play a scene between Matilda and her parents, in which she explains how she feels about them.
5. Imagine that you are Matilda. Design another trick you could play on your father to get revenge for his cruelty to you. Working with some friends, act out the trick for the class.
6. Write a limerick about one of the characters in this novel. Follow the form as shown in the two model limericks.

##### History and Geography

1. Locate England on the map and explain its climate, history, and topography.
2. Find out more about the British school system. On a chart, compare and contrast it to the American educational system.
3. Miss Trunchbull was an Olympic star. Select one outstanding Olympic athlete and report on his or her career.
4. The author refers to the Duke of Wellington and the Battle of Waterloo. Find out more about this important historical event. Then explain how the reference does or does not fit as it is used in the chapter entitled "Lavender."

##### Language Arts

1. Writing as the new school principal, draft an evaluation of Miss Honey's teaching ability.
2. Create a new title for the novel. Explain how it fits the story's plot, mood, and theme.
3. Dahl uses many different British words and expressions in this novel, such as "telly" for "television" and "flaming" for "silly." Write a glossary of British words used in *Matilda* and their American equivalents.
4. Reread the first chapter. Then write a report that your teacher might draft about you and your accomplishments and abilities. Try to match Dahl's funny tone as you assess your character and progress in class.
5. List at least five more books that you would recommend that Matilda read on her own. Next to each book, write a sentence or two explaining why it deserves to be on her reading list.
6. Design an individual curriculum for Matilda, as Miss Honey does, to make the most of her unique talents and abilities.

##### Mathematics

1. Do the arithmetic to figure out how much money Mr. Wormwood earned by cheating his customers.
2. Create a book of mental math hints to help people calculate sums in their head.
3. Find a recipe for chocolate cake that the cook might have prepared for Bruce Bogtrotter. Calculate how much of each ingredient you would need to feed everyone in your class one generous slice of cake.

##### Science and Health

1. Mrs. Wormwood fixes only TV dinners for her family. Prepare a more healthy menu for the family, including a week's worth of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. Be ready to explain the importance of eating a variety of different foods.
2. Matilda glues her father's hat to his head using Superglue. Explain how this glue works and whether or not this trick is really possible. Could it have happened as described in the novel? Why or why not?
3. Do parrots really "talk"? Find out more about these remarkable birds. Share your findings with the class.
4. Matilda is classified as a "genius." What is a genius? Make a chart showing how IQ results are ranked, from the lowest measurable score to the highest. Then decide where you think Matilda fits on the chart and why.

## TEACHER'S NOTES

5. Will hair dye make your hair fall out, as Mr. Wormwood believes? Find the answer to this question and share your results with your classmates.
6. Are newts really harmless, as the author claims? Report on newts. Include scale drawings of newts in your report.

### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Role-play a scene in which Miss Trunchbull humiliates another student in Miss Honey's class.
2. Write an advertisement for Miss Trunchbull's school.
3. Stage a news conference in which the police explain what happened to Miss Trunchbull and the Wormwoods at the end of the novel.
4. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main themes.
5. Recast this novel as a fairy tale. Assemble your story as a children's picture book and read it to some younger children.
6. Read another book by Roald Dahl. Compare and contrast it to *Matilda*.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Explain why it is so important to read well and to enjoy reading.
2. Retell the events in this novel from Matilda's point of view.
3. Write another chapter in the novel in which you explain what life is like for Matilda ten years in the future.
4. Write a critical review of the novel for publication in the school newspaper.

### VOCABULARY TEST

Complete the following chart by writing a synonym and an antonym for each of these vocabulary words from *Matilda*. After you have completed the chart, see how many more synonyms and antonyms you can find. Add them to the chart as well.

Vocabulary Word	Synonym	Antonym
1. obstinate	_____	_____
2. formidable	_____	_____
3. subtle	_____	_____
4. amiably	_____	_____
5. twaddle	_____	_____
6. nimble	_____	_____
7. doting	_____	_____
8. ghastly	_____	_____
9. fragile	_____	_____
10. solemn	_____	_____
11. chaos	_____	_____
12. adore	_____	_____
13. foe	_____	_____
14. bemused	_____	_____
15. enthralled	_____	_____
16. incapable	_____	_____
17. indelible	_____	_____
18. prodigy	_____	_____
19. bewilderment	_____	_____
20. vile	_____	_____

## COMPREHENSION TEST A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blanks provided.

- |     |  |                     |
|-----|--|---------------------|
| ___ | 1. a talking parrot  | A. Matilda          |
| ___ | 2. astounds Miss Trunchbull by eating an entire chocolate cake       | B. Miss Honey       |
| ___ | 3. plays bingo and watches TV all day                                | C. Miss Trunchbull  |
| ___ | 4. cheated out of her home and money by her aunt                     | D. Mr. Wormwood     |
| ___ | 5. a helpful librarian   | E. Mrs. Wormwood    |
| ___ | 6. threw the hammer for the British Olympic team                     | F. Lavender         |
| ___ | 7. tries to frighten Matilda with tales of Miss Trunchbull's cruelty | G. Mrs. Phelps      |
| ___ | 8. puts a newt in Miss Trunchbull's water                            | H. Chopper          |
| ___ | 9. a child genius  | I. Hortensia        |
| ___ | 10. a dishonest used-car salesman                                    | J. Bruce Bogtrotter |

### Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- \_\_\_ 1. Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood do not care about their daughter Matilda.
- \_\_\_ 2. By the age of 18 months, Matilda had perfect speech; by the time she was three, she had taught herself to read.
- \_\_\_ 3. Matilda loves her parents even though they are dishonest and narrow-minded.
- \_\_\_ 4. Mr. Wormwood is vain about his black hair and every morning rubs Violets Hair Tonic on it.
- \_\_\_ 5. Miss Honey does not understand that Matilda is a prodigy.
- \_\_\_ 6. Mrs. Wormwood believes that books are more important than looks.
- \_\_\_ 7. When Miss Trunchbull comes into Miss Honey's class, she humiliates Nigel Hicks (the doctor's son) by asking him to spell "write."
- \_\_\_ 8. Eric Ink gets held up by his nose when he cannot spell "school."
- \_\_\_ 9. Miss Honey takes Matilda to her home, a tiny cottage without running water, heat, light, or furniture.
- \_\_\_ 10. Matilda writes a message on the board by using her magic powers to move the chalk.



**Part III: Motivation (20 points)**

Complete each of the following statements

1. Matilda likes to read because
2. Matilda lines her father's hat with Superglue because
3. Mr. Wormwood rips Matilda's library book to shreds because
4. Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood think there is a robber in the house because
5. Matilda pours some of her mother's peroxide into her father's hair tonic to
6. Miss Trunchbull grabs Amanda by her hair and throws her because
7. Miss Trunchbull tries to humiliate Bruce Bogtrotter because
8. Matilda uses her brain power to overturn Miss Trunchbull's glass because
9. Miss Honey is very poor because
10. Miss Trunchbull disappears because

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe how Matilda is different from other children.
2. Compare and contrast Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull.
3. Explain why the children don't tell their parents about Miss Trunchbull's cruelty.
4. Describe two of the tricks Matilda plays on her parents.

## COMPREHENSION TEST B

### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Underline a word or phrase in the parenthesis to complete each of the following statements.

1. Matilda Wormwood is a (genius, brat).
2. Left alone in the house, little Matilda toddles to the (food store, library).
3. Matilda's father sells (used clothing, junk cars)
4. Matilda lines her father's hat with (feathers, Superglue).
5. To get back at her father, Matilda borrows her friend Fred's (talking parrot, newt).
6. Matilda pours some of her mother's (peroxide, perfume) into her father's hair oil.
7. Miss Trunchbull (threw the hammer, played soccer) in the British Olympics.
8. Matilda tipped a glass using only (her finger, brain power).
9. The first name of Miss Honey's father is (Michael, Magnus).
10. At the end of the novel, Matilda goes to live with (Miss Honey, Miss Trunchbull).

### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Match the following descriptions with names of characters from the lettered list. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| ___ 1. A little girl with long pigtails                                | A. Matilda         |
| ___ 2. Miss Trunchbull's niece   | B. Miss Honey      |
| ___ 3. A frowzy, plump platinum blonde                                 | C. Miss Trunchbull |
| ___ 4. Steals a slice of Miss Trunchbull's chocolate cake              | D. Mr. Wormwood    |
| ___ 5. A brilliant child prodigy misunderstood by her parents          | E. Mrs. Wormwood   |
| ___ 6. Matilda's closest friend in school                              | F. Lavender        |
| ___ 7. Tries to terrorize the children about Miss Trunchbull           | G. Amanda Thrupp   |
| ___ 8. Takes his family to Spain to avoid being arrested for fraud     | H. Chopper         |
| ___ 9. The cruel headmistress of the local elementary school           | I. Hortensia       |
| ___ 10. A talking parrot that Matilda borrows to humiliate her parents | J. Bruce Bogtro    |

**Part III: Identification (20 points)**

Explain why each is important in the story.

1. used cars
2. the talking parrot
3. chocolate cake
4. Miss Honey
5. books

**Part IV: Essay (30 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe how Matilda gets revenge on her parents for their cruelty.
2. Trace the novel's plot. Include the rising action, climax, and denouement
3. Is Miss Honey a good teacher? Why or why not?
4. Select two names from the novel and explain how they reveal each character's personality.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

#### Vocabulary Word

1. obstinate
2. formidable
3. subtle
4. amiably
5. twaddle
6. nimble
7. dotting
8. ghastly
9. fragile
10. solemn
11. chaos
12. adore
13. foe
14. bemused
15. enthralled
16. incapable
17. indelible
18. prodigy
19. bewildered
20. vile

#### Synonym

1. stubborn
2. imposing
3. hidden
4. kindly
5. nonsense
6. graceful, agile
7. loving
8. terrible
9. weak
10. grave
11. confusion
12. love
13. enemy
14. amused
15. captivated
16. not capable
17. permanent
18. genius
19. confusion
20. evil

#### Antonym

1. flexible
2. weak
3. obvious
4. cruelly
5. sense
6. clumsy
7. indifferent
8. wonderful
9. strong
10. frivolous
11. tranquility
12. hate
13. friend
14. concentrating
15. indifferent
16. capable
17. transitory
18. moron
19. assurance
20. good

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Sentence Completion (20 points)

1. genius
2. library
3. junk cars
4. Superglue
5. talking parrot
6. peroxide
7. threw the hammer
8. brain power
9. Magnus
10. Miss Honey

#### Part II: Matching (30 points)

1. G
2. B
3. E
4. J
5. A
6. F
7. I
8. D
9. C
10. H

#### Part III: Identification (20 points)

1. Mr. Wormwood sells defective used cars. They stand for his dishonesty.
2. The talking parrot is at the heart of a trick that Matilda plays on her parents. The trick reveals that Mr. Wormwood is a coward, out only for himself.
3. Chocolate cake is the means by which Bruce Bogtrotter stands up to Miss Trunchbull and becomes a hero to the other children.
4. Miss Honey is the only kind adult in the novel.
5. Books are Matilda's salvation, her escape from her parents' cruelty and her window into the world outside her narrow family.

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

1. H
2. J
3. E
4. B
5. G
6. C
7. I
8. F
9. A
10. D

#### Part II: True/False (20 points)

1. T
2. T
3. F
4. T
5. F
6. F
7. T
8. F
9. T
10. T

#### Part III: Motivation (20 points)

1. reading allows her to "travel" all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.
2. he called her stupid and made fun of her
3. he is furious at seeing his daughter always reading,
4. they hear "Hullo, Hullo, Hullo!" but do not see anyone speaking
5. humiliate him for humiliating her
6. she cannot abide pigtailed and Amanda has long pigtailed
7. he had the nerve to eat a piece of her chocolate cake.
8. Miss Trunchbull falsely accused Matilda of putting a newt in her glass of water.
9. her aunt Miss Trunchbull stole all her property and money
10. she is terrified of the message that Matilda wrote on the chalkboard

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

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