



The Witches (1983), by Roald Dahl Argument-Based Small Group Discussions

Debatable Issues

The debatable issues that we will be using for this unit on *The Witches* are:

Debatable Issue #1

The boy who narrates the novel is shown to be better off and to have a better life as a mouse than as a boy.

Debatable Issue #2

According to the world of the novel, are people basically good, with a smaller number of bad exceptions, or are people basically villainous and full of vices, with the smaller number of good people the superhero-like exceptions?

Method and Procedure

1. For this project, students should be divided into groups of three.
2. Groups should be given 5 minutes to discuss each of the following passages from the novel. For each passage through their discussion they should try to respond to these four questions:
 - A) Which debatable issue does the passage connect with most closely?
 - B) Which position on that debatable issue does the passage support?
 - C) What reason does the passage suggest for why that position on the debatable issue is truer than the opposing position on the same debatable issue?
 - D) Through an analysis or close reading of the passage, explain why it supports that reason?

3. Each student should write out responses to each of the questions on their own form. If there are disagreements during the discussion – which is perfectly fine, and often reflects the kind of independent thinking we are encouraging – students should write out the responses they believe in, noting that group members had a different view. At the end of class, these forms should be collected and formatively assessed.
4. After the small group discussion period has ended – and the discussions can be timed fairly closely – the teacher should lead a share-out, asking groups to report back on the responses they feel reflect their best collective thinking, or that featured their strongest internal disagreements. The teacher should ask groups to respond to other groups’ answers, culling out differences, asking how groups would counter or refute an opposing response, and calling on students to evaluate clashing responses. All of this is to build in critical thinking that comes when students engage with each other’s ideas. The key is not to get to a right answer on these passages, but to practice and sharpen students’ interpretive argumentation.

Selected Passages

1. “Real witches dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ordinary jobs. That is why they are so hard to catch. A real witch hates children with a red-hot sizzling hatred that is more sizzling and red-hot than any hatred you could possibly imagine” (7).

A)

B)

C)

D)

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2. “You don’t seem to understand that witches are not actually women at all. They *look* like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals. They are demons in human shape. That is why they have claws and bald heads and queer noses and peculiar eyes, all of which they have to conceal as best they can from the rest of the world” (30).

A)

B)

C)

D)

3. “It is hardly surprising that after that I became a very witch-conscious little boy. If I happened to be alone on the road and saw a woman approaching who was wearing gloves, I would quickly skip across to the other side. And as the weather remained pretty cold during the whole of that month, nearly *everybody* was wearing gloves” (46).

A)

B)

C)

D)

4. “My blinding ambition, you see, my dream of dreams, was to become one day the owner of a Whote Mouse Circus. I would have a small stage with red curtains in front of it, and when the curtains were drawn apart, the audience would see my world-famous performing mice walking on tight-ropes, swinging from trapezes, turning somersaults in the air, bouncing on trampolines and all the rest of it. I would have white mice riding on white rats, and the rats would gallop furiously round and round the stage. I was beginning to picture myself travelling first-class all over the globe with y Famous White Mouse Circus and performing before all the crowned heads of Europe” (60).

A)

B)

C)

D)

5. “I simply cannot tell you how awful they were, and somehow the whole sight was made more grotesque because underneath those frightful scabby bald heads, the bodies were dressed in fashionable and rather pretty clothes. It was monstrous. It was unnatural” (70).

A)

B)

C)

D)

6. “Where are those chocolate bars you promised me? I’m here to collect! Dish them out!”
“He is not only smelly, he is also grrreedy,” said the Grand High Witch. . . .
“Bruno Jenkins . . . was one of those boys who is always eating something whenever you meet him
Bruno never stopped boasting about how his father made more money than my father and that they owned three cars” (99).

A)

B)

C)

D)

7. “I remember thinking: *I am not myself any longer! I have gone clear out of my own skin!*” (116).

A)

B)

C)

D)

8. “I was a swift and silent mover. And quite amazingly, the pain had all gone now. I was feeling quite remarkably well. *It is not a bad thing after all*, I thought to myself, *to be tiny as well as speedy when there is a bunch of dangerous females after your blood?*” (117).

A)

B)

C)

D)

9. “I found myself thinking, *What’s so wonderful about being a little boy anyway? Why is that necessarily any better than being a mouse? I know that mice get hunted and they sometimes get poisoned or caught in traps. But little boys sometimes get killed, too. Little boys can be run over by motor-cars or they can die of some awful illness. Little boys have to go to school. Mice don’t. Mice don’t have to pass exams. Mice don’t have to worry about money. . . . When mice grow up, they don’t ever have to go to war and fight against other mice. Mice, I felt pretty certain, all like each other. People don’t*” (118-119).

A)

B)

C)

D)

10. “Stick close to the wall all the way and follow me. Do not talk and do not anyone see you. Don’t forget that just about anyone who catches sight of you will try to kill you”(123).

A)

B)

C)

D)

11. “‘Oh, my darling,’ [Grandmamma] murmured and now the tears were really streaming down her cheeks. ‘Oh, my poor sweet darling. What *have* they done to you?’
“‘I know what they’ve done, Grandmamma, and I know what I am, but the funny thing is that I don’t honestly feel especially bad about it. I don’t even feel angry. In fact, I feel rather good. I know I’m not a boy any longer and I never will be again, but I’ll be quite all right as long as there’s always you to look after me.’
I was not just trying to console her. I was being absolutely honest about the way I felt” (126-127).

A)

B)

C)

D)

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12. “‘She’s a murderer,’ my grandmother said. ‘She’s the most evil woman in the entire world!’
“‘Did you see her mask?’ I asked.
“‘It’s amazing,’ my grandmother said. ‘It looks just like a real face. Even though I knew it was a mask, I still couldn’t tell’” (146).

A)

B)

C)

D)

13. “I can well understand your anger, Mr. Jenkins. Any other English father would be just as cross as you are. But over in Norway where I come from, we are quite used to these sort of happenings. We have learnt to accept them as part of everyday life” (180).

A)

B)

C)

D)

14. “How long does a mouse live?”
“If you really want to know, I’m afraid a mouse doesn’t live for a very long time. . . . An *ordinary* mouse only lives for about three years,’ she said. ‘But you are not an ordinary mouse. You are a mouse-person [and] . . . a mouse-person will almost certainly live for three times as long as an ordinary mouse . . . about nine years. . . My darling, are you sure you don’t mind being a mouse for the rest of your life?’
“I don’t mind at all,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you’”(195-197).

A)

B)

C)

D)