James and the Giant Peach

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROALD DAHL

Dahl was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1916 to Norwegian immigrant parents. When Dahl was still very young, his sister and father died within weeks of each other. Rather than return to Norway to live near family, Dahl's mother remained in Wales so that her children could be educated in English schools. However, Dahl's school days were unpleasant for him—he hated the hazing rituals and prevalence of corporal punishment. Following school, Dahl worked for Shell Oil until World War II, during which he served as a fighter pilot. In 1940, Dahl was seriously injured in a crash landing that temporarily robbed him of his sight. He flew again and served briefly as a flight instructor after his recovery, but he then became a diplomat in Washington, D.C. During his time in the U.S., Dahl published his first story, anecdotes about his time as a pilot. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Dahl published a number of short stories for adults as well as *The Gremlins*, his first book for children. *James and the Giant Peach*, however, catapulted him to fame and became the first of his many successful children's novels. Dahl was married twice, first to actress Patricia Neal and then to Felicity Dahl. He had five children with Neal. In his lifetime, Dahl was a fierce advocate for immunization—his daughter died of measles in 1962—and posthumously, Felicity Dahl created Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity to support sick children. His novels have sold millions of copies and remain immensely popular. Dahl is often considered one of the most influential British authors of the late 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

James and the Giant Peach is a children's novel that focuses on the experience of its seven-year-old protagonist and pays little attention to the world of adults, but it's nevertheless possible to see the influence of the Cold War on the novel. Following World War II, the United States doubled down on its policy of "containment," or making sure that the communist U.S.S.R. didn't spread communism elsewhere in the world. In the 1950s, this resulted in an arms race as the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. created and tested atomic weapons. In 1950s and 1960s, when Dahl was writing, fear of nuclear devastation loomed large. This fear even infiltrated pop culture—for instance, the original *Twilight Zone* television series, which ran from 1959 to 1964, often portrayed nuclear war and the catastrophic effects thereof in its episodes. In *James and the Giant Peach*, this fear is reflected in the way that English and American adults alike see the peach in the air and believe it must be a bomb sent by a foreign country. It's likely, too, that this intense, emotionally charged political atmosphere is actually what encouraged Dahl to lean into fun and frivolity in his novels. Dahl's focus on nonsense and children's experiences and inner lives is perhaps a reaction against the tense, serious Cold War climate in which he was writing.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like *James and the Giant Peach*, many of Roald Dahl's other children's novels feature magic and nonsense, adult characters who are evil and cruel, and bright children as protagonists. Though *James and the Giant Peach* is immensely popular, Dahl is perhaps better known for his later children's novels like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda*. While writing his children's books, Dahl drew inspiration from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Published about a century before *James and the Giant Peach*, the Alice novels popularized the genre of nonsense literature—and, importantly, they were some of the first to present stories for children that weren't simple morality tales. He also grew up listening to his mother, a Norwegian immigrant, tell him Norwegian folk and fairy tales, which influenced a number of his novels. In turn, Dahl has influenced a number of writers, actors, and directors—indeed, it's possible to see *James and the Giant Peach*'s Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker as possible influences on J. K. Rowling in the creation of her characters Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia. Though Dahl is best known for his children's literature, he also wrote a number of short stories for adults that share some of the same odd, macabre elements.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** James and the Giant Peach
- **When Written:** 1960–1961
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Children's Novel; Fantasy
- **Setting:** England, New York City, and the sky above the Atlantic Ocean
- **Climax:** The peach falls from the sky and gets skewered by the Empire State Building in New York City.
- **Antagonist:** Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's In a Name? Roald Dahl was named for Roald

Amundsen, a Norwegian polar explorer. Amundsen was the first to lead a successful expedition to the South Pole in 1911.

Advice for Writers. A 2007 television special on Dahl, *Roald Dahl's Revolting Rule Book*, offered eight rules that Dahl followed when writing his children's books. They state, for instance, that chocolate is necessary and food is fun, while also acknowledging that adults can be scary and bad things can happen in life.

PLOT SUMMARY

James Henry Trotter is a happy four-year-old boy—that is, until his parents take a trip to London, where an escaped rhinoceros eats them. In the aftermath of this tragedy, the newly orphaned James is forced to move in with his evil aunts, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge. They're cruel, selfish people. They put James to work and never let him play with anyone. He's not allowed to leave their desolate garden at the top of a hill, so James becomes increasingly sad and lonely.

The novel picks up again three years later, and James is sadder and lonelier than ever. When he asks his aunts if they can take a trip to the seaside—where he lived with his parents—they threaten to punish him. Distraught, James runs to a secluded corner of the garden, where an old man in a green suit emerges from the laurel bushes. The old man offers James a bag full of magic green crystals and tells James that ingesting the crystals will make wonderful things happen. But before James can consume the crystals, he trips over the roots of his aunts' barren peach tree, and the crystals, as though they're alive, burrow into the ground.

Almost immediately, the peach tree produces its very first **peach**, and Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge dance around the tree with glee. But to their surprise, the peach keeps growing and only stops when it's as big as a house. The women decide that this is a great money-making opportunity, so the next day, they charge admission to their garden so people can see the gigantic peach. James, meanwhile, spends the day locked in his room. After dark, his aunts send him outside to clean up after the crowds. But when James approaches the peach, he notices a hole in it and crawls inside.

Inside the peach's pit, James enters a sitting room filled with garden bugs who are about his size. There's an Old-Green-Grasshopper, a Centipede, a Spider, a Ladybug, an Earthworm, and a Silkworm. They greet James warmly and assure him they don't want to eat him. James spends the night in the peach in a hammock woven by Miss Spider.

In the morning, the massive peach comes loose from the tree and tumbles down the hill, killing Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge in the process. When the peach rolls all the way to the sea and plunges into the water, the bugs all panic—they're sure they'll sink and there's no food. James points out that the peach is floating and the peach itself can feed them for weeks. All seems well until 100 sharks arrive and begin to bite into the soft peach. James's friends are convinced they'll die, but James hatches a plan to lasso enough seagulls to lift the peach out of the water. He'll use silk string spun by Miss Spider and the Silkworm, and the Earthworm will act as bait. His plan works, and after lassoing 502 seagulls with the silk thread, the peach is airborne. Everyone on the peach is thrilled, especially when Miss Spider checks the bottom of the peach and finds little damage to it. But on the water below, a ship's Captain notices the peach in the sky and believes it's a bomb. His sailors think he's been drinking too much.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper plays music with his leg and his wing. James has never heard such music and is shocked to hear that the Old-Green-Grasshopper's body is a sort of violin. As James and the bugs chat, James learns all sorts of things he'd never thought could be true. For instance, grasshoppers' ears are on their bellies, and it's not actually true that a ladybug's spots correlate to her age. The Earthworm tells James about how earthworms swallow soil to help farmers, while Miss Spider laments that nobody likes spiders despite spiders' good deeds. The Centipede, a self-professed "pest," continues the concert by dancing and singing rude songs about Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. As he dances, he falls off the edge of the peach, but James rescues him.

When night falls, the Old-Green-Grasshopper suggests that they stay on top of the peach to keep watch. Because the peach is a silent mode of travel (unlike a noisy airplane), the travelers see beings no one has never seen before: Cloud-Men, who make the weather. Though James and most of the bugs are afraid of the Cloud-Men, the Centipede isn't. He insults the Cloud-Men and regrets it immediately—the Cloud-Men throw hailstones as big as cannonballs at the peach. The terrified seagulls carry the peach to safety, but not long after, James and his friends notice the Cloud-Men painting a rainbow up ahead. As the Cloud-Men lower the massive rainbow down by ropes, the peach crashes through it and gets caught up in the Cloud-Men's ropes. Though James and the bugs manage to untangle their peach and fly away from danger, one Cloud-Man tosses a pot of paint onto the Centipede. As the paint dries, the Centipede becomes rigid. Suddenly, the Cloud-Men send a deluge of water down on the peach. It's frightening, but it washes the paint off of the Centipede.

When the sun rises, they see that they're above a big city—New York City. They're thrilled and begin cutting seagulls loose so they can descend slowly. Down below, however, people are panicking, since they believe the round thing in the sky must be a bomb. When an airplane whooshes by just above the peach, it suddenly severs all the seagulls' strings, sending the peach hurtling toward the city below. James, the bugs, and every New Yorker prepares for the end—but the peach gets skewered on

the sharp point atop the Empire State Building. First Responders initially believe the peach must be an alien spaceship, especially when they catch sight of the Centipede and Miss Spider. But James explains what happened to the baffled officials and assures them they don't need to be afraid. The mayor calls for a parade to celebrate James, the bugs, and the giant peach. During the parade, James gives a little girl permission to eat some of the peach. Within minutes, hundreds of children flood the street to get a bite of the peach. When they're done, only the pit is left.

All of the bugs find jobs in New York City, where they become rich and successful. James, meanwhile, takes up residence in the peach pit, which the city installs in Central Park. Children visit him every day to play and listen to his story. After a while, James decides to write his story down. That story is the book the reader just finished.

CHARACTERS

James Henry Trotter – James Trotter is the novel's seven-year-old protagonist. At four years old, James lost his parents in a tragic accident and was forced to move in with his evil aunts—the novel's antagonists, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. Unlike his cruel and selfish aunts, James is sweet, kind, and curious. He grows increasingly lonely over the three years that he lives with his aunts, as they won't let him play with other children or explore the woods surrounding their desolate garden. However, James never loses hope that his future will bring better things—so when an old man shows up in the garden one night and offers James a bag of magic crystals, James accepts the bag despite his fear. James is also extremely mature for his age. This becomes increasingly clear when the single **peach** begins growing on the otherwise barren tree (due to the crystals' magic). While James's aunts are whipped up in a frenzy and see the increasingly gigantic peach as something to profit off of, James thinks the peach is the most beautiful thing he's ever seen and calmly approaches it with awe and respect. James's childlike curiosity and desire to explore nature leads him to crawl through a hole he finds in the peach and discover a group of child-size garden bugs living inside. As James gets to know the bugs, he learns that it's wrong to make assumptions about others based on their looks or one's own preconceived notions. For instance, Miss Spider frightens James at first, but she turns out to be incredibly sweet and teaches him that it's cruel and even dangerous to judge others based on appearances. When the peach loosens from the tree and plunges into the sea, the adventure really begins, and James has numerous opportunities to solve problems and get his friends out of sticky situations. His solutions, no matter how outlandish, all work, which speaks to his creativity, optimism, and maturity. In New York, where the peach eventually ends up, James is heralded as a hero. He takes up residence in the peach's pit, which officials set up in New York City. After coming of age over the course of his journey, James pays his lessons forward by writing *James and the Giant Peach* so that other children can learn the same lessons he did.

The Centipede – When James encounters the Centipede in the middle of the giant **peach**, he's initially terrified—but the Centipede endears himself to James quickly with his sense of humor. Centipedes are common garden pests (insects that attack crops) but the novel's Centipede is a proud "pest" in the other sense of the word, as he takes it upon himself to tease and annoy everyone, especially the Earthworm. He also delights in misleading people by insisting that he has 100 legs, though the Earthworm points out several times that centipedes only have 42 legs. On these legs the Centipede wears boots, which he does a poor job of tying and which take hours to take on and off. The Centipede's pressing need to take off, put on, or polish his boots—often at inopportune moments—is one of the ways that Dahl infuses the novel with nonsensicality. In addition to adding levity and humor to every situation by teasing the Earthworm, the Centipede is also a skilled performer. He can come up with songs and poems on the spot and is happy to perform them. The subject matter of his recitations is often humorous but a bit rude, as when he makes fun of Aunt Sponge's and Aunt Spiker's weight. His rudeness eventually gets the group into trouble: the Centipede isn't afraid of the Cloud-Men like he should be, so he heckles them and causes them to attack the peach. Once he settles in New York City, the Centipede becomes the vice president of a shoe and boot company.

Miss Spider – Miss Spider is one of the giant bugs that James finds living inside the giant **peach**. She's about the size of a child and is frightening for James at first—she's the first to announce that she's hungry, thereby making James think that she wants to eat him. In reality, Miss Spider is kind, helpful, and generous. She readily accepts James as the captain of the peach, and she also tells James stories that teach him why it's important to not make assumptions about people. Since she's a spider, most people are afraid of her and automatically don't like her—even though she does nothing but good for the world by catching pesky flies and mosquitos in her web. While the assumptions people make about her are unfair and upsetting, even worse, she suggests, is the ease with which people act violently based on these prejudices. She tells James stories about her father, whom Aunt Sponge washed down the bathtub drain, and her grandmother, who got stuck in the fresh paint of Aunt Spiker's ceiling and was eventually murdered with a mop. While all the giant bugs on the peach help James learn to be empathetic and approach others with openness and curiosity instead of prejudice, Miss Spider's stories are perhaps the most meaningful in James's personal development. Once in New York City, Miss Spider and the Silkworm learn to spin nylon and make a living creating ropes for tightrope walkers.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper – The Old-Green-Grasshopper is the oldest and most distinguished of the bugs that James discovers living inside the giant **peach**. He's quiet much of the time and leaves most of the talking to the Centipede and the Earthworm. However, he does speak up to defend his honor—when the Centipede notes that the Old-Green-Grasshopper was a "pest" in his youth, the Old-Green-Grasshopper insists he's never been a pest. Instead, the Old-Green-Grasshopper thinks of himself as a musician. As a short-horned grasshopper, the Old-Green-Grasshopper can use his wing and hind leg to create music much like that of a violin, which James finds very impressive. From the Old-Green-Grasshopper, James also learns that it's rude to make assumptions about other people's bodies. For James, it's a shock to learn that grasshoppers' ears are on either side of their abdomen, rather than on either side of their head—but the Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Centipede make the case that it's just as silly to have ears on one's head as it is to have them on one's belly. When he's not imparting lessons like these to James, though, the Old-Green-Grasshopper is prone to panicking loudly and dramatically during difficult situations, which makes him a foil for James's maturity and penchant for creative problem-solving. In New York City, the Old-Green-Grasshopper joins the New York City Symphony Orchestra.

The Earthworm – The Earthworm is one of the creatures James finds waiting for him inside the giant **peach**. Unlike the other bugs in the group, the Earthworm is blind. This—along with the fact that the Earthworm is purposefully gloomy and dramatic—makes the Earthworm the center of most of the Centipede's jokes and teasing. Even more so than his companions, the Earthworm is prone to dramatic declarations that the whole party is doomed to die. It takes a lot of convincing on James's part to make the Earthworm see that it's possible, for instance, to eat the peach so that it doesn't sink in the ocean. According to the Ladybug, the Earthworm likes being dramatic and pessimistic, but the Earthworm also seems genuinely upset by the Centipede's constant needling—and in light of the Centipede's teasing, the Earthworm's hysterics don't seem so out of line. Despite his gloomy personality, he is very proud to be an earthworm. He explains that earthworms swallow soil to help farmers' crops grow well and takes pride in being so useful. Once in New York City, though, the Earthworm abandons swallowing soil and instead, takes a job selling women's face creams in television commercials—a prime example of Dahl's flare for the nonsensical.

The Ladybug – The Ladybug is one of the bugs that James finds living inside the giant **peach**. She's one of the kindest and gentlest bugs in the group and takes special care of James—she offers to protect him and explains things to him when others won't. A nine-spotted ladybug, the Ladybug insists that she and others in her family are the most refined and polite of all the ladybugs; ladybugs with fewer spots, she claims, are "saucy" or "ill-mannered." The Ladybug is one of the first to realize that James has the ability to get their group out of dangerous situations, so she's often the one to suggest they ask James for help when things get scary. After she establishes herself in New York City, the Ladybug marries the head of the fire department. This is because she's lived her life in fear that her house is on fire and her children are all gone—a reference to a classic nursery rhyme.

Aunt Spiker – James's Aunt Spiker is one of the novel's antagonists, along with her sister, Aunt Sponge. True to her sharp-sounding name, she's tall, thin, bony, and wears spectacles that clip onto her nose. She believes she's quite beautiful (but according to the narrator, she isn't) and spends much of her time with her sister about which of them is the prettiest. Like Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker is selfish and cruel. When she and her sister take in orphaned James, they refuse to call him by name and force him to perform difficult manual labor despite him only being four years old. Over the years, they beat him whenever they feel like it and deny him any delights of childhood, such as exploring the woods or making friends. Of the two aunts, Aunt Spiker is the schemer. When the giant **peach** grows in their garden, her first thought is to come up with a way to profit off of the enormous fruit. Her plan is successful, at least for a time—she and Aunt Sponge can barely manage the crowd on the day they charge admission to tourists to see the peach. However, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge both die when the peach's stem breaks; when the peach rolls down the hill, it flattens both aunts.

Aunt Sponge – One of the novel's antagonists, Aunt Sponge is Aunt Spiker's sister and James's aunt. Unlike the skinny Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge is extremely overweight and is described as having a face "just like an overboiled cabbage." (Just as Aunt Spiker's name seems fitting for such a skinny, bony person, Aunt Sponge's name is reflective of her plumpness and sponge-like body.) However, like her sister, Aunt Sponge also thinks that she's very beautiful—though the narrator insists that this is untrue. Aunt Sponge is also unbelievably selfish and cruel, particularly to James. Along with her sister, Aunt Sponge forces James to perform difficult manual labor, beats him, and disrespects him constantly. Both sisters are extremely self-interested, so when the giant **peach** grows in her yard, Aunt Sponge is thrilled to be able to eat it. (In contrast, James is enamored of the peach for its beauty, not because what it can do for him.) She goes along with greedy Aunt Spiker's plan to charge admission for people to see the peach. And though this initially proves successful, both Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker come to a sorry end when the peach detaches from its stem and rolls down the hill, flattening and killing both aunts in the process.

The Cloud-Men – The Cloud-Men are mysterious beings who live on top of the clouds. They generally hide from people traveling by air, but because the **peach** moves so silently, unlike

noisy airplanes, James and his friends are able to sneak up on the Cloud-Men and even interact with them. The Cloud-Men make all the weather that occur down on Earth; James notices factories that produce cyclones and watches Cloud-Men form hailstones and paint a rainbow. They're a frightening sight, as they stand twice as tall as a normal man, with wispy bodies and tiny black eyes. When the Centipede characteristically insults the Cloud-Men, the Cloud-Men prove themselves mean and dangerous. They hurl hailstones at the peach, attempt to board the peach, and even douse it with a deluge of water.

The Old Man – The old man appears mysteriously in Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's garden one day with a bag of tiny green crystals. He wears an emerald green suit and has an odd, scratchy beard. Somehow, the old man knows that James is unhappy and gives James the crystals, which he claims will magically improve James's life if ingested. He disappears just as mysteriously as he arrived after announcing that the crystals are made from crocodile's tongues. James finds him frightening, though he takes the old man at his word and plans on eating the crystals.

The Silkworm – The Silkworm escapes James's notice for the first part of the journey; he doesn't fully realize she's a sentient being until the Silkworm wakes up to spin thread so James can lasso seagulls. She's sleepy and shy, and so she spends much of her time looking like a great white lump on the floor of the room inside the **peach**. In New York City, the Silkworm joins Miss Spider in spinning nylon to make ropes for tightrope walkers.

The Glow-worm – It takes James a while to notice the Glow-worm, as she functions like a ceiling light. She is, according to the Centipede, a female firefly without wings. The Glow-Worm provides light inside the **peach** and since she's shy like the Silkworm, she generally keeps to herself. After landing in New York City, the Glow-worm replaces the light bulb in the Statue of Liberty's light, thereby saving the city a massive electricity bill every year.

The Captain – The Captain of the Queen Mary—an ocean liner that, in the 1950s and 1960s, made regular trips between England and New York City—catches sight of the **peach** flying high in the air and believes at first that it's a bomb. But when he gets out his telescope and announces he can see bugs and a boy on top of a giant peach, his associates believe he's been drinking again.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CHILDREN VS. ADULTS

Four-year-old James has a miserable start to life: after a rhinoceros eats his parents, his evil aunts, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, take him in. But instead of treating James with kindness and compassion, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker force James to perform backbreaking manual labor, deny him playtime and the companionship of other children, and even refuse to call him by name. Things only begin to look up when, three years after James moves in with his aunts, the barren peach tree in the garden magically grows a **peach** as large as a house—and when James ventures into a tunnel in the side of the peach, he comes face to face with human-size garden bugs living inside. But as James and his new bug friends embark on a fantastical journey across the Atlantic from England to New York City, James's new bug friends—who are all adults—still underestimate him, though without the cruelty his aunts expressed. Through James's relationships with his aunts and with the adult bugs, it's possible to read *James and the Giant Peach* as an exploration of the different ways that adults and children relate to each other. The novel proposes that children are often more mature and deserve more credit than adults are generally willing to give them.

Dahl presents a world in which children's fears of being underestimated, controlled, and at the mercy of adults around them come to life in horrifying detail. And through James, Dahl implies that, no matter what a child's situation, it's normal to feel powerless at times. For the three years James lives with Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, he is entirely without agency. From the moment his parents die, James has no say in where he goes or what happens to him—as a child, his opinion matters little, if at all. And throughout his years with his aunts, he's also powerless to push back when they treat him poorly. Instead, James has no choice but to do his chores and sleep on the floorboards of his empty bedroom. The one time he does push back and requests a trip to the seaside, his aunts threaten to beat him and dangle him in their well. While James's experiences with his aunts may represent an absurd extreme, the novel nevertheless offers a protagonist and framing that many children will identify with on some level: that of the downtrodden, underestimated child who, if he were only allowed a bit of freedom, could amaze adults and children alike with what he can do.

Just because adults in the novel are more powerful than children, however, doesn't mean that the adults are competent. Indeed, James—a seven-year-old child—is the most competent, observant, and self-possessed character in the novel. This becomes increasingly clear as James ventures into the magical giant peach and meets the oversize garden bugs within. The bugs—Miss Spider, the Centipede, the Ladybug, the Earthworm, the Silkworm, the Glow-worm, and the Old-Green-Grasshopper—are portrayed as adults, but they can't manage in scary or difficult situations. Instead, without fail, they panic. But

when they discover that James is adept at navigating these frightening situations, they come to treat him as their leader and allow him to develop increasingly creative, outlandish solutions to their problems—all of which work. When allowed a degree of power over their lives, the novel shows, children can rise to the occasion and even come up with inventive solutions that the adults around them would never think of. For instance, when sharks attack the peach as it floats in the ocean, the bugs are sure that they're going to die. And the Earthworm believes that even if the sharks don't kill them, their lack of food aboard the peach will result in starvation, and *then* they'll die. But James points out that the peach itself is enough food to last them for weeks, something that seems obvious to him but that the bugs miss completely. In addition, when faced with the shark attack, James comes up the idea to lift the peach out of the ocean by lassoing seagulls with string. His idea is complex and outlandish—it requires miles and miles of string spun on demand by Miss Spider and the Silkworm, and it requires the Earthworm to act as bait on top of the peach while James lassos individual seagulls that swoop down in search of a snack. But ultimately, James's idea works—502 lassoed seagulls later, the peach is airborne.

As James and his friends continue to run into dangerous or frightening bumps over the course of their journey, the bugs eventually recognize that as an imaginative child, James is the best one to save them—the Ladybug insists at one point that they need only to ask James how to solve their problems. This implies that children, with their unique and imaginative way of seeing the world, are perhaps better able to make sense of things and can even change the world for the better, if only adults would get out of their way or support children in their ideas. With this, the novel warns adults to not underestimate the power of young people. They will, one day, lead the world—whether it's as a child, like James, or once those young people become adults themselves.

ASSUMPTIONS VS. CURIOSITY

Everyone in *James and the Giant Peach* makes assumptions about others—something that the novel suggests is part of being human. However, this doesn't make it a good thing, as preconceived ideas (especially about other people) can prevent a person from forming new relationships or learning new information. The novel shows that while making assumptions is normal, it's far better to approach new people or situations with open-minded curiosity and a desire to understand.

A lack of curiosity, the novel shows, can have disastrous consequences—and in a worst-case scenario, can even lead to abuse. James's Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, who take James in after he's orphaned, are extremely uninterested in him. They don't give any thought to who James is or what he might like—instead, they put him to work performing backbreaking labor that would be strenuous for an adult, without any breaks or time to play. Through Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, then, *James and the Giant Peach* links a lack of curiosity about others to selfishness. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge put James to work, disregarding who he is or what he wants in order to support their own self-centered lifestyle. Their lack of curiosity, in this sense, the crosses the line into cruelty and neglect.

But even though the novel portrays Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge as the epitome of incurious, uncaring evil, this doesn't mean that making assumptions isn't a normal human impulse—or that it's not possible to learn to do better. Indeed, James makes assumptions just like his aunts when, after crawling through a hole in the **peach** and winding up in a sitting room hidden within the peach's pit, he comes face-to-face with a group of child-size garden bugs. He's understandably terrified, especially of Miss Spider. It's telling that even James, the novel's protagonist, has such a quick reaction to coming across something new. This suggests that making assumptions (such as that a human-size spider will be unfriendly or dangerous) is something that everyone does—no matter how good or kind they might be otherwise. But as James gets to know his new companions, he gradually learns about how unhelpful it is to cling to his assumptions about bugs. For instance, he learns from the Old-Green-Grasshopper that grasshoppers don't have ears on the sides of their head, like James assumed everyone did. Rather, their ears are on their abdomens—and it's both silly and rude, the Old-Green-Grasshopper suggests, to assume anything about another person's body.

Most importantly, the novel insists that children and adults alike can learn to engage with new people and information with curiosity and openness, rather than with fear and prejudice. When James lassos 502 seagulls that lift the peach high in the sky, almost all adults who see it are terrified of it—they think it's a bomb that will destroy the world. This reflects the adults' willingness to assume that other nations are out to destroy the U.S. or the U.K.—it seemingly doesn't occur to them to so much as wonder what *else* the sphere floating through the sky might be. Once the peach gets skewered on the top of New York City's Empire State Building, the various first responders who arrive to check out the supposed "bomb" are shocked to the point of fainting when they discover a huge peach, an assortment of human-size bugs, and a little boy. Once James manages to calm down the hysterical first responders and assure them that he and his friends mean no harm, James and his friends are heralded as heroes and are fully accepted into New York City's fold. For that matter, the descriptions of what each bug does in New York suggests that their various skills and perspectives make the city—and, by extension, the world—a richer, better place. Miss Spider and the Silkworm, for instance, learn to spin nylon and create ropes for tightrope walkers, while the Old-Green-Grasshopper's violin adds depth

to the New York City Symphony Orchestra. With this, *James and the Giant Peach* acknowledges that it's normal to make assumptions about unfamiliar people, animals, or situations upon first glance. But it's far better if people endeavor to meet new situations or people with curiosity and compassion, as diversity and difference make the world a better and more interesting place.

NATURE AND GROWING UP

When four-year-old James's parents die, his life turns upside down. Within days, James is forced to leave his parents' house by the seaside and move in with his cruel Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, who live inland, high on a hill. At his aunts' house, James is confined to their backyard, though he longs to explore the woods surrounding the property—and, eventually, to return to the sea. Through James's desire to move beyond the confines of the garden and later, as he embarks on his transatlantic journey in a giant magical **peach**, the novel positions the natural world as a place of wonder and delight. The story equates nature as the realm of children, while manmade structures and cities represent the world of adults. In this sense, as James and his friends journey through the natural world to New York City, James symbolically comes of age and enters the world of adulthood.

Throughout the story, James's longing to observe and enjoy the natural world is linked to his youth. In James's estimation, the natural world is a playground that contains endless opportunities. It's not only somewhere where he can play with other children away from the watchful eyes of adults—it's also compelling, beautiful, and exciting in its own right. James's Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, on the other hand, see the natural world as something to dominate and profit from. This reflects their existence in a stuffy, manmade adult world. It's unthinkable to them to enjoy all that nature has to offer simply for the joy of doing so, which is why they threaten to punish James when he asks for a trip to the seaside. James and his aunts, in this sense, exist in entirely different worlds with different rules. This difference is best expressed in the different reactions to finding the giant peach growing on the otherwise barren peach tree. Up until the magic peach grows on Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's tree, their tree has never produced a single peach—a reflection of the aunts' disinterest in nature. And when the peach does grow, their first thought is to selfishly keep it for their own consumption. Their second idea—which they follow through on—is to charge admission for others to come see it. In this sense, James's aunts corrupt the innocence and fun of the natural world to support their boring adult lifestyles, a vision of adulthood that James sees as stifling. James, meanwhile, sees the peach as something to explore and appreciate in its own right. The peach's economic value doesn't matter to him, as he's a young child who just wants to enjoy it for its own merit. Instead, his curiosity toward the peach represents his hope for a better future in which he can explore and grow up on his own terms, unhindered by his aunts' selfishness.

James and the Giant Peach also shows how, if children are allowed to engage with nature on their own terms, nature gives them the opportunity to enjoy independence, solve problems, and encounter new ideas. These things, the novel suggests, aren't possible to achieve in the built world of adults. Over the course of James's transatlantic journey aboard the peach, the oversize bugs he meets in the peach treat him as their leader. This means that James has more responsibility than most seven-year-olds ever get, and he uses this opportunity to develop his confidence and hone his problem-solving skills. After the journey, when the peach lands in New York City, James is a fundamentally different person—his experiences on the peach prepared him to step into a more adult role. Having been allowed to grow up on his own terms on the peach, James is prepared to help the firefighters and police officers who rescue them from the top of the Empire State Building understand that the bugs aren't anything to be afraid of—in other words, he takes on the more adult role of a cultural interpreter. However, this doesn't mean that James is fully grown up. Indeed, he takes up residence in Central Park in the home made from the giant peach's pit, a far more natural setting than, say, an apartment in New York. James is mature enough to exist in a big, bustling city—but he's not yet adult enough to live in a world of concrete and steel. Most importantly, James demonstrates his maturity by writing down his story—*James and the Giant Peach* itself—to share his fantastical journey with other children. This represents James stepping into a more adult role by introducing other children to the wonders of nature.

In a broader sense, the novel also makes the case that if someone is willing to embrace a more childlike way of seeing the world, nature has something to teach *everyone*. For instance, James and his bug friends (who are all adults) are able to see Cloud-Men making hailstones, rain, and rainbows as they silently float through the sky on the peach, something they wouldn't be able to see had they been on an airplane (which the novel links to adulthood and the manmade world). Taking things slower and more quietly, this suggests, creates opportunities to see things a person wouldn't be able to see if they rely on manmade things—like airplanes, which frighten the Cloud-Men with their noise—to navigate the world. And conversely, the novel suggests that relying on the built world of adults exclusively can have disastrous consequences, as when the peach runs over Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge because they tried to monetize nature instead of just enjoy it. With this, *James and the Giant Peach* makes it clear that growing up doesn't have to mean giving up on the natural world altogether, and nor should it. Rather, life is richer and more fun if people make an effort to appreciate and learn from the natural world,

long after they grow up.

FUN, NONSENSE, AND ABSURDITY

James and the Giant Peach is a fundamentally silly book—it's absurd, nonsensical, and brimming with poems and songs that beg to be recited out loud. By plunging readers into a world that offers few or no explanations as to how or why it works, Dahl encourages readers of the novel to go with the flow and simply enjoy the story and the experience of reading it. Through this, Dahl suggests that it's not worth it to try to ascribe logic or sense to the story—or indeed, to life itself. Life, the book implies, is fundamentally nonsensical and should be enjoyed for what it is.

The novel portrays adults as people who are fundamentally absurd. This is especially true when it comes to James's Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, who take him in upon his parents' death. The women's bodies are described as being almost too strange to be human: Aunt Sponge is "like a great white soggy overboiled cabbage," while Aunt Spiker is "only bones and skin." But even the strange old man who appears in the garden one day looks odd to James. James is only seven years old, so it's possible that adult bodies on the whole just look strange to him. His perspective as a child means that things that may be normal for adults (such as having a body type that deviates from the norm or, in the case of the old man, having facial hair with an odd texture) is so outside of James's experience as to seem absurd. But more broadly, Dahl suggests that James has the right idea. As a child, James doesn't try to explain away or understand strange things, as an adult might. Instead, he accepts them as fact and moves on.

Beyond portraying adults as absurd, the novel also suggests that life itself is absurd and silly—and that this is exactly what makes life worth living. James's happiest moments over the course of the novel take place as increasingly absurd things happen. He meets his new best friends—child-size garden bugs—in a sitting room hidden within the giant **peach**'s pit. And James only discovered them in there because, unlike his aunts who wanted only to profit off of the absurdly large peach in their garden, James wanted to explore it just for fun. In James's case, embracing the absurdity of the giant peach saves him from his aunts. The peach not only flattens Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge when its stem breaks and the peach rolls down the hill; it ultimately carries James all the way to the United States, where he's able to start a new life surrounded by people who care about him. James's life is nonsensical—but that absurdity, silliness, and willingness to explore saves him from abuse and neglect.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that it's less important *why* any of the events in *James and the Giant Peach* take place—what matters is that those events makes James's life richer and happier, regardless of how or why they happen. Broadly speaking, the novel as a whole can be taken the same way. While the book is undeniably a rich tale that contains valuable lessons, one of its most important takeaways is that reading and stories should be fun and engaging. Within the world of *James and the Giant Peach*, absurdity and nonsense may have a dark side—James's parents are eaten by a rhinoceros, after all—but that absurdity nevertheless works in service of humor and the reader's enjoyment. It's enough, the novel suggests, to take its story at face value, enjoy the experience of reading it, and make one's own life richer in the process.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PEACH

The titular giant peach symbolizes how the natural world helps children grow and come of age. Before the magical peach begins to grow, James is miserable. His aunts are exceedingly cruel to him and don't allow him to explore nature or make friends—two things the novel suggests are critical to a child's development—so James leads a lonely, boring existence.

So when James finds that the peach has grown as big as a house—and is filled with friendly bugs—it becomes the living embodiment of James's desire to exist in nature and to make friends. The peach also offers James a world far away from the oppressive Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker; when the heavy peach loosens from the tree and rolls down the hill, it fatally flattens the evil aunts, consequently giving James the freedom and agency to play, experiment, and learn on his own.

The peach is also where James begins to sharpen his critical thinking skills and creative problem-solving abilities, which are also critical to the coming-of-age process. Living inside a giant peach presents a set of unique challenges—for instance, when the peach plunges into the ocean, sharks attempt to eat the fruit's soft flesh, thereby threatening its passengers' safety. As James comes up with increasingly outlandish ways to save the peach from destruction, he gains confidence and skills that propel him toward adulthood. By the time James lands in New York City, he has symbolically come of age. He signals his maturity by writing down the story of his journey across the Atlantic—his hope is that his story about the peach will consequently help other children as they come of age, too.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Puffin edition of *James and the Giant Peach* published in 2013.

Chapter 1 Quotes

They were selfish and lazy and cruel, and right from the beginning they started beating poor James for almost no reason at all. They never called him by his real name, but always referred to him as "you disgusting little beast" or "you filthy nuisance" or "you miserable creature," and they certainly never gave him any toys to play with or any picture books to look at. His room was as bare as a prison cell.

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter, Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge begin abusing four-year-old James immediately after he moves in with them. As adults, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge have unchecked power and the ability to behave cruelly like this—while as a child, James doesn't have much power to stand up for himself or push back against his aunts. Adults, the novel suggests, live in a world designed to support their needs and desires. And their world isn't always one that is kind to the children who rely on adults for care and shelter. Children should, per the narrator, have toys and picture books to play with—and it falls to adults to provide those things.

But more than simply showing how cruel and nonsensical the adult world can be, *James and the Giant Peach* also makes the case that Aunt Sponge's and Aunt Spiker's stems from the fact that they're selfish and incurious. It never occurs to them to wonder what James might like, or to even treat him like a real person; instead, they only care about what he can do for them, such as manual labor. In particular, refusing to call James by name is one way that Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge dehumanize him.

And as time went on, he became sadder and sadder, and more and more lonely, and he used to spend hours every day standing at the bottom of the garden, gazing wistfully at the lovely but forbidden world of woods and fields and ocean that was spread out below him like a magic carpet.

Related Characters: Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Over the three years that James lives with his Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, he becomes increasingly upset and lonely. This happens for many reasons (e.g., they beat him and force him to do manual labor), but one of the main reasons is that Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's garden is desolate—and they refuse to allow James to leave the garden to play in the wilderness surrounding their property. With this, the novel situates nature as the realm of children, while the manmade world is the realm of adults. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, unlike their young nephew, have little interest in the natural world. To them, it's frivolous and useless. (Indeed, they only care about the natural world when the realize that they can profit off of the giant peach.) But to James, the natural world is one in which he can play, learn, and grow, unencumbered by adults' watchful eyes, cruelty, or narrowmindedness. This is why the landscape outside the garden looks like a "magic carpet"—to James, it seems magical and far better than anything he'll find inside his aunts' garden. He knows that he should be spending his childhood out there, where he'll have opportunities to stretch his legs and his mind that aren't available in the controlled, boring world of adults.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"Oh, Auntie Sponge!" James cried out. "And Auntie Spiker! Couldn't we all—*please*—just for once—go down to the seaside on the bus? It isn't very far—and I feel so hot and awful and lonely..."

"Why, you lazy good-for-nothing brute!" Aunt Spiker shouted.

"Beat him!" cried Aunt Sponge.

"I certainly will!" [...] "I shall beat you later on in the day when I don't feel so hot," she said.

Related Characters: Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, James Henry Trotter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

One particularly hot day, when Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge task James with chopping wood, James begs for a trip to the seaside to play and cool down. It's worth noting that though James "cries out" when he makes this request, his request is nevertheless polite and reasonable. It's a hot day; it makes perfect sense that anyone—especially a

child—would crave a relaxing day by the water. James, in other words, isn't asking for anything out of the ordinary, and he's not asking for it in a rude or odd way.

Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, though, are unwilling or unable to see James as a person in his own right and not just their personal servant. His request also challenges their power over him—something they can't allow him to do if they want to continue to force him to perform manual labor. James's labor means that Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker can live restful and idyllic adult lives and have all their responsibilities taken care of by James—a situation that makes them look decidedly childish and makes James look far more mature than his aunts. With this, the novel begins to suggest that children are often more mature than adults give them credit for. Adults, on the other hand, can be silly, nonsensical, and incompetent. Indeed, the bugs that James is about to meet echo this idea; though they aren't cruel like James's aunts, they also prove to be immature and childish, while James is the levelheaded and competent one in the group.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"It's ripe!" she cried. "It's just perfect! Now see here, Spiker. Why don't we go and get us a shovel right away and dig out a great big hunk of it for you and me to eat?"

"No," Aunt Spiker said. "Not yet."

"Whyever not?"

"Because I say so."

"But I can't wait to eat some!" Aunt Sponge cried out. She was watering at the mouth now and thin trickle of spit was running down one side of her chin.

"My dear Sponge," Aunt Spiker said slowly, winking at her sister and smiling a sly, thin-lipped smile. "There's a pile of money to be made out of this if only we can handle it right. You wait and see."

Related Characters: Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge (speaker), James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis

After finding the giant peach in their garden, Aunt Sponge demands that she and Aunt Spiker eat it right away—but Aunt Spiker comes up with an idea to make money off of the peach. Here, Aunt Sponge in particular looks very childish. She single-mindedly fixates on the instant gratification of eating the peach to the point that she drools, and she cries and whines like a child might when they're denied a treat. This continues the novel's project of making adults look silly, childish, and incompetent.

Aunt Spiker, on the other hand, presents a more sinister image of adulthood. Even though she's just as greedy as her sister, this greed plays out in a different way—she wants to get rich off of the peach. In hatching the plan to charge admission to tourists, Aunt Spiker essentially corrupts the innocence and the beauty of the natural world (the magnificent peach) to support her adult lifestyle. As far as she's concerned, the natural world is worthless unless it presents her with opportunities for economic gain.

Though James doesn't speak throughout this conversation, his reaction—that of awe—provides a useful foil for Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's reaction to the peach. While the aunts plan to exploit the peach, James wants to admire it and appreciate it for what it is. And indeed, his conduct throughout the novel is respectful toward the peach and, by extension, the natural world. This respect is something that's far beyond his aunts' grasp, suggesting again that children are often more mature than adults give them credit for.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"*There* he goes again!" the Earthworm cried, speaking for the first time. "He simply cannot stop telling lies about his legs! He doesn't have anything *like* a hundred of them! He's only got forty-two! The trouble is that most people don't bother to count them. They just take his word."

Related Characters: The Earthworm (speaker), James Henry Trotter, The Centipede

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

When the Centipede asks James to help him take off his 100 boots, the Earthworm accuses the Centipede of lying about how many legs he has. Indeed, the Earthworm is correct—centipedes can have upwards of 300 legs, but it's impossible for centipedes to have exactly 100 legs.

The Earthworm is an undeniably funny character—he's

dramatic, he wants to be right, and he takes issue in particular with the Centipede's love of joking with people. As an earthworm he also doesn't have any legs himself, so it's even funnier that he's the one calling the Centipede out on his lies. By calling the Centipede out, though, the Earthworm calls others out on their willingness to make assumptions. Since "centi" means 100, it's understandable why people assume that centipedes have 100 legs. But taking this at face value without counting or otherwise researching how many legs centipedes have is, according to the Earthworm, an assumption that people make unfairly.

Thus, the novel proposes that reading has many purposes. Reading a book like *James and the Giant Peach* can arm readers with fun facts about centipedes, spiders, and earthworms—but it can also simply introduce young people to the idea that reading should be fun. Books don't need to be stuffy to be worthwhile; they can be silly and entertaining while still providing important lessons in other areas.

❝ James decided that he rather liked the Centipede. He was obviously a rascal, but what a change it was to hear somebody laughing once in a while. He had never heard Aunt Sponge or Aunt Spiker laughing aloud in all the time he had been with them.

Related Characters: Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, The Centipede, James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Through listening to the Centipede poke fun at the other bugs inside the peach, James decides he likes the Centipede. James's reasoning—he likes the Centipede just because he laughs—drives home just how unhappy he was living with his aunts. His aunts live in a world where fun simply doesn't matter, if it exists at all. They care only about themselves and about doing whatever it takes to support their boring, stuffy adult lifestyles. For a child like James, living with his aunts is torturous. As a child, James wants to play, explore, have fun, and learn about the world—all things he can't do if he's never allowed to express himself by laughing (or if he never sees anything to laugh about). Fun, the novel suggests, is an important ingredient in a child's life as they grow up and come of age. Fun and play not only give kids outlets for their energy; laughter and companionship help children practice their critical thinking skills, learn to relate to others, and ultimately help them grow up into competent adults.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ Already, he was beginning to like his new friends very much. They were not nearly as terrible as they looked. In fact, they weren't really terrible at all. They seemed extremely kind and helpful in spite of all the shouting and arguing that went on between them.

Related Characters: Miss Spider, The Ladybug, The Old-Green-Grasshopper, The Earthworm, The Centipede, James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

As James snuggles into the hammock that Miss Spider has just spun for him, he decides that his new bug friends are wonderful, not frightening. At first, James was afraid—when confronted with a group of beings who seemed to defy all rules about how things should be, James panicked. He assumed that the bugs, and Miss Spider in particular, would want to eat him. But now as James gets to know his friends, he gradually comes to see how unhelpful it is to make assumptions about people based on the way they look. Indeed, it's Miss Spider—the most terrifying-looking one of the bunch—who thoughtfully made James's bed, a luxury that James never even had when he lived with his aunts. As James makes these connections, he becomes less judgmental and is better able to approach new situations and people (or bugs) with curiosity and a desire to understand.

This is why, later in the novel, James takes his friends' arguing as opportunities to learn more about them. He breaks up fights between the Centipede and the Earthworm to ask about the Earthworm's role in the ecosystem, for instance—something he perhaps wouldn't have thought to do a few hours ago, when it was still unthinkable to him that bugs could be so big and so kind. Friends, he knows now, can come in all shapes in sizes and they can come from anywhere.

Chapter 15 Quotes

They panicked. They both got in each other's way. They began pushing and jostling, and each of them was thinking only about saving herself. Aunt Sponge, the fat one, tripped over a box that she'd brought along to keep the money in, and fell flat on her face. Aunt Spiker immediately tripped over Aunt Sponge and came down on top of her. They both lay on the ground, fighting and clawing and yelling and struggling frantically to get up again, but before they could do this, the mighty peach was upon them.

Related Characters: Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Aunt Sponge's and Aunt Spiker's selfishness leads directly to their deaths. While it might be normal and expected for a person to panic when confronted with a house-sized peach rolling at them, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge react in ways that reflect self-centeredness and greed. First, Aunt Sponge trips over her moneybox. The moneybox itself represents the aunts' desire to profit off of the peach and the natural world. In charging admission so people can see the peach, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge corrupt the innocence and beauty of the natural world and try to make it serve their adult lives. Then, it's telling that Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge fight each other rather than work together to escape the peach. Even though the aunts usually act together when they punish or abuse James, when their lives are at risk, they're incapable of being anything but selfish. And selfishness, the novel shows, isn't just an undesirable personality trait—it can be dangerous. The giant peach may only pose a danger in the absurd, fictional world of the novel, but this passage nevertheless makes the point that selfishness in any situation can bring about unintended and undesirable consequences. People must be open and willing to work together to solve problems, not see others as the enemy in the face of danger.

Chapter 17 Quotes

"But my dear friends!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper, trying to be cheerful, "we are *there*!"

"Where?" they asked. "Where? Where is *there*?"

"I don't know, the Old-Green-Grasshopper said. "But I'll bet it's somewhere good."

Related Characters: The Old-Green-Grasshopper (speaker), Miss Spider, The Centipede, The Ladybug, The Earthworm, James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Before James and his bug friends climb on top of the peach and realize they're in the ocean, the Old-Green-Grasshopper tries to cheer everyone up about where they might be. His optimism drives home one of the novel's main ideas: that it's essential to approach new people or situations with openness, curiosity, and a healthy dose of optimism. Approaching something with preconceived notions about what one is going to encounter makes it much harder for a person to accept what comes, be it good or bad. And indeed, the cynical Earthworm (who's certain they're going to die, no matter what situation they're in) has a hard time maintaining a sense of optimism throughout the journey. Because he consistently jumps to the worst possible conclusion he can think of, it's harder for him to notice when things are good or hopeful. For instance, no matter where the peach is now, it's still far away from Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, something that will no doubt make James happy. With this, the novel encourages readers to approach new situations with optimism and openness. It's impossible to always know for sure what new situations will hold, but it's still possible to find something good everywhere.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"None of us three girls can swim a single stroke."

"But you won't *have* to swim," said James calmly. "We are floating beautifully. And sooner or later a ship is bound to come along and pick us up."

They all stared at him in amazement.

"Are you quite sure that we are not sinking?" the Ladybug asked.

"Of course I'm sure," answered James.

Related Characters: The Ladybug, James Henry Trotter, Miss Spider (speaker), The Earthworm, The Centipede, The Old-Green-Grasshopper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

The bugs panic upon discovering that the peach landed in the ocean, but James calmly assures the bugs that they'll be fine. The bugs, who are all portrayed as adults, drive home the novel's assertion that adults aren't as capable or adaptable as they might like to think they are. Indeed, rather than taking a moment to take stock of the situation, the bugs panic immediately and think up all the ways that they'll perish as a result of their situation.

But, James shows, if the bugs were willing to look around for just a moment, they'd see that none of their fears are founded. For one thing, the bugs won't have to worry about not knowing how to swim, since the peach floats and therefore acts as a boat or a raft. And even if James did have bad experiences with his aunts, his note that a boat will pick them up at some point suggests he knows that plenty of adults in the world are more than willing to help when asked. Once again, James looks far more mature than any of the bugs. And with this, the novel shows that children are often more observant and more capable than adults give them credit for. Their status as children may make them uniquely able to see a situation for what it is without making assumptions about it—which is what the bugs do, and which is what causes them to panic.

"You must be crazy! You can't eat the ship! It's the only thing that is keeping us up!"

"We shall starve to death if we don't!" said the Centipede.

"And we shall drown if we do!" cried the Earthworm.

[...]

"You can eat all you want," James answered. It would take us weeks and weeks to make any sort of a dent in this enormous peach. Surely you can see that?"

"Good heavens, he's right again!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper, clapping his hands.

Related Characters: The Old-Green-Grasshopper, The Centipede, James Henry Trotter, The Earthworm (speaker), The Ladybug, Miss Spider

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

When the conversation turns to what the travelers on the peach are going to eat, James points out that it's a nonissue: they can eat the peach and survive for weeks. Once again, James appears mature beyond his years—and he seems more mature and levelheaded than any of the adult bugs on the peach. Instead of looking around calmly and taking stock of the situation, the bugs worry about all of the ways that things could go wrong and they could die. It's telling that even the Centipede—who's usually one of the more lighthearted bugs in the bunch—is just as upset and pessimistic about what's going on as the others. Making these assumptions may be part of what it's like to be an adult for these bugs.

James, on the other hand, doesn't try to rationalize or make sense of the world in the same way that the bugs do. And rather than seeing the world as something that's out to get him, he looks for all the ways that the natural world can help him. Through this, James recognizes that the peach itself is both a good food source and a good ship. Because he's thought carefully and logically about the situation, he understands that the peach can be both. This represents James's openness, and drives home how closed-minded some of the bugs—and adults more generally—can be in frightening moments.

"For dinner on my birthday I shall tell you what I choose:
Hot noodles made from poodles on a slice of garden hose—
And a rather smelly jelly
Made of armadillo's toes.
(The jelly is delicious, but you have to hold your nose.)"

Related Characters: The Centipede (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After James convinces his hungry friends to eat some of the peach (and that doing so won't make their peach raft immediately sink), the Centipede sings everyone a song about how wonderful the peach tastes. It is, in his opinion,

better than anything he's ever tasted, including poodle noodles or armadillo toe jelly. The Centipede's song is silly and absurd, reflecting the overall tone and content of *James and the Giant Peach*—and, indeed, many of Dahl's children's novels, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The BFG*. While the Centipede's song drives home that the peach—and, by extension, the natural world the peach represents—is amazing, its multiple stanzas about silly and disgusting foodstuffs seem designed to make the young reader laugh. Reading, Dahl suggests through the Centipede's song, should be fun. And in line with this, a story or a poem doesn't have to make sense, be logical, or be overtly moralistic to be worthwhile.

Chapter 19 Quotes

"Is there *nothing* we can do?" asked the Ladybug, appealing to James. "Surely *you* can think of a way out of this."

Suddenly they were all looking at James.

"Think!" begged Miss Spider. "*Think*, James, *think*!"

"Come on," said the Centipede. "Come on, James. There *must* be *something* we can do."

Their eyes waited upon him, tense, anxious, pathetically hopeful.

Related Characters: The Centipede, Miss Spider, The Ladybug (speaker), James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

As sharks attack the bottom of the peach, causing it to sink, the bugs panic—but they quickly turn to James and beg him to come up with a solution for their problem. In this moment, James's bug friends realize and accept that James, as a child, has unique insight into the world that allows him to more effectively and creatively solve problems. And being naturally optimistic and open, James doesn't spend too much time thinking about all the ways his plans might fail. Instead, he remains open to the possibility that his plans will work—and indeed, all of them do.

It's especially telling that the narrator describes the bugs as "pathetically hopeful." By portraying the adult bugs this way, Dahl suggests that adults are actually just as lost—if not more so—in the world than children are. Though adults may have more power and responsibility because of their age, this doesn't mean that they actually have the skills or the outlook to solve problems as they come. Rather, Dahl suggests, adults should turn to children and their unique perspectives whenever possible.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"Why, it's absolutely brilliant!" cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper when James had explained his plan.

"The boy's a genius!" the Centipede announced. "Now I can keep my boots on after all."

"Oh, I shall be pecked to death!" wailed the poor Earthworm.

"Of course you won't."

"I will, I know I will! And I won't even be able to see them coming at me because I have no eyes!"

James went over and put an arm gently around the Earthworm's shoulders. "I won't let them *touch* you," he said. "I promise I won't."

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter, The Earthworm, The Centipede, The Old-Green-Grasshopper (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

After James explains his plan to lasso seagulls and lift the peach out of the water, everyone but the Earthworm—who will act as the bait for the seagulls—is thrilled. In this moment, James once again takes on a more adult role than one might expect for a boy of seven. In addition to coming up with a plan that will save everyone, James also takes it upon himself to comfort the hysterical Earthworm. James gently and kindly asks the Earthworm to trust him and not make assumptions about what will happen. If the Earthworm can do this, James suggests, they'll all succeed and will survive the shark attack.

In particular, what James asks the Earthworm to do flips the age dynamic between them and places the Earthworm in a vulnerable—or childlike—state, while James will assume a more adult, protective role. The fact that the Earthworm is so upset about having to do this speaks to the idea that it's normal for people to not want to be without power and agency—and so it's especially cruel when adults, who have a great deal of power over children, do just that. Though the novel never suggests that James comes up with the plan he

does just to feel powerful, young readers may get a kick out of a young boy like James wielding such power over a stuffy adult character like the Earthworm. In James's world, if not in the reader's world, children are capable of much more than adults realize.

"Action stations!" James shouted. "Jump to it! There's not a moment to lose!" He was the captain now, and everyone knew it. They would do whatever he told them.

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter (speaker), The Silkworm, The Ladybug, Miss Spider, The Earthworm, The Centipede, The Old-Green-Grasshopper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Here, James sends everyone to their places so they can carry out his plan to lasso seagulls and lift the peach out of the water, saving them from the sharks below. In this moment, the dynamic between James and the bugs shift. While James treated the bugs like they were adults when he first met them, James is now the honorary adult in the room, while the bugs act like panicked children who need James's calm guidance.

By setting up this shift, the novel elevates children's unique way of seeing the world above the more narrowminded way that adults perceive things. Children, the novel suggests, have a more open, creative, and optimistic way of seeing the world, which gives them insight into how best to solve all manner of problems. This doesn't mean that the solutions children come up with will seem normal or likely to work by others—indeed, James's plan is absurd and ridiculous, but it nevertheless works. And because the bugs go along with James's plan and allow him to test out his problem solving skills, they're all saved from the sharks.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"That's it!!" cried the Captain. "It's a secret weapon! Holy cats! Send a message to the Queen at once! The country must be warned! And give me my telescope."

Related Characters: The Captain (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

When the Captain of the ship the *Queen Mary* sees the peach floating far above in the sky, he initially thinks it's a weapon or a bomb. This reflects his suspicious nature and his willingness to make assumptions about everything he sees, an impulse the novel ties to adulthood. And there's little or no evidence within the world of the novel to suggest that the Captain should see things this way—it's just how he's learned to see the world as an adult. (The reference to a bomb is, however, reflective of the tense Cold War climate in which Dahl was writing.)

However, the novel also goes to great lengths to make it clear that the Captain's way of engaging with new things isn't positive or helpful. Indeed, it's absurd—as evidenced by an adult using an exclamation as silly as "Holy cats!" when he sees the peach. It's especially absurd given that the Captain hasn't even properly seen the peach yet, since he doesn't have his telescope in hand. This makes it abundantly clear that the Captain is making assumptions based on his own fears and insecurities, not making sensible, thought-out decisions that could help him understand the world. Readers should take the Captain as a cautionary tale. It's no fun—and indeed, it's anxiety inducing—to assume that things are inevitably dangerous or frightening without first confirming what exactly one is looking at. Because the Captain makes these assumptions instead of being curious about new things, he needlessly works himself up in a frenzy.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"My dear young fellow," the Old-Green-Grasshopper said gently, "there are a whole lot of things in this world of ours that you haven't started wondering about yet. Where, for example, do you think that I keep my ears?"

"Your ears? Why, in your head, of course."

Everyone burst out laughing.

Related Characters: The Old-Green-Grasshopper (speaker), James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

During a conversation with the Old-Green-Grasshopper about how the grasshopper makes music, James begins to learn how silly it is to make assumptions about other people—especially when it comes to what their bodies should look like or do. First, the Old-Green-Grasshopper frames his question in such a way as to excuse James for not knowing. It's normal, he suggests, to not wonder about lots of things until provoked. He recognizes that in James's understanding of the world, people and animals always have ears on their heads, and that's just the way things are. However, the Old-Green-Grasshopper tries to teach James that while he may have good reason to assume this about most people, that doesn't mean he should. Through this, the novel suggests that it's a learning process as people let go of their assumptions and preconceived notions about other people. But it's nevertheless necessary to let go of these assumptions and engage others with curiosity and compassion if one wants to be a good friend and citizen.

"You're joking," James said. "Nobody could possibly have his ears on his legs."

"Why not?"

"Because...because it's ridiculous, that's why."

"You know what I think is ridiculous?" the Centipede said, grinning away as usual. "I don't mean to be rude, but *I* think it is ridiculous to have ears on the sides of one's head. It certainly *looks* ridiculous. You ought to take a peek in the mirror some day and see for yourself."

Related Characters: The Centipede, The Old-Green-Grasshopper, James Henry Trotter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

When the Old-Green-Grasshopper finally explains that his ears on his legs, and that crickets' and katydids' ears are on their legs, too, James is shocked. The Centipede, however, tries to impress upon James that if one takes a step back from their preconceived notions and narrowminded way of seeing things, they might find that what's normal to them (e.g., having ears on the side of one's head) is actually just as absurd as anything else (e.g., having ears on one's legs). To the Centipede, it's silly to have ears on one's head for all the world to see. But for James, who has grown up around humans who all have ears on their heads like he does, it's unthinkable that a person's ears could be anywhere else. The novel suggests that it's an important exercise to consider one's own idea of what's normal and think about how it might seem completely foreign to someone else. The ability to do this, the novel suggests, is part of growing up and learning to be a more openminded, compassionate, and kind person. As James develops his compassion and his curiosity about other people, he moves closer to adulthood and independence.

Chapter 25 Quotes

"But what's the point?"

"What do you mean, what's the point?"

"Why do you do it?"

"We do it for the farmers. It makes the soil nice and light and crumbly so that things will grow well in it. If you really want to know, the farmers couldn't do without us. We are essential. We are vital. So it is only natural that the farmer should love us."

Related Characters: The Earthworm, James Henry Trotter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After the Earthworm explains that he and other earthworms constantly eat soil, James is stunned and wants to know why. This is another instance in which James has to confront that other people do things differently than he does. To James, a human, it seems pointless, weird, and probably gross to eat soil. If James ever put dirt in his mouth as a small child, he probably learned immediately that it didn't taste good and spit it out. But for the Earthworm, soil (and the nutrients and organisms within that soil) is akin to food and water. It's something the worms need to survive—and as an added bonus, the earthworms are doing farmers and gardeners a favor by eating the soil and processing it in their bodies, which makes the soil more fertile for growing crops. By making this relationship between worms and farmers clear for James, the Earthworm encourages James to approach new things with an open mind. What may seem disgusting or pointless to one person may normal to another—and have a whole host of benefits—and so it deserves respect.

"But what about you, Miss Spider?" asked James. "Aren't you also much loved in the world?"

"Alas, no," Miss Spider answered, sighing long and loud. "I am not loved at all. And yet I do nothing but good. All day long I catch flies and mosquitos in my webs. I am a decent person."

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter (speaker), Miss Spider

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing about how humans love earthworms and ladybugs, James asks Miss Spider if people love her, too. Unfortunately for Miss Spider, few people love her or appreciate everything she does for them. Indeed, it's not uncommon for people to be afraid of spiders and kill them . Miss Spider goes on to detail several occurrences in which people have killed her family members for no other reason than that they're spiders. By making it clear that the people who kill spiders are making unfair assumptions about who spiders are and what they do, Miss Spider shows James how awful it can be to make assumptions about someone without knowing the whole story. She seems to suggest that if people knew or focused on the fact that spiders do away with all sorts of unpleasant and dangerous pests like mosquitos and flies, they'd be more accepting of spiders in their homes and gardens. Instead, spiders are defined by the way they terrify people, and "decent" ones, like Miss Spider, have to pay the price.

While Miss Spider makes the case for spiders specifically, it's possible to apply her lessons more broadly. It's unhelpful and even outright harmful, she suggests, to judge anyone by how they look—no matter how scary or unfamiliar a person might look. Instead, it's far more respectful to approach new people with open-mindedness and curiosity about who they are and what they do. If people can be more accepting of others, the novel suggests, the world would be a better, kinder place.

Chapter 27 Quotes

There was not a sound anywhere. Traveling upon the peach was not in the least like traveling in an airplane. The airplane comes clattering and roaring through the sky, and whatever might be lurking secretly up there in the great cloud-mountains goes running for cover at its approach. That is why people who travel in airplanes never see anything.

But the peach...ah, yes...the peach was a soft, stealthy traveler, making no noise as it floated along. And several times during that long silent night ride high up over the middle of the ocean in the moonlight, James and his friends saw things that no one had ever seen before.

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98-99

Explanation and Analysis

Once the giant peach is airborne, the narrator explains how traveling by peach differs significantly from traveling by airplane. Peaches, unlike airplanes, are silent. In this passage, the novel equates airplanes with the manmade world of adults. In contrast, the peach, as a symbol of the natural world, represents the imaginative world of children. Through this, the novel makes the case that if a person goes through life too caught up in their noisy adult world, they sacrifice a lot for the sake of convenience. On the other hand, if a person is willing to take James's example and embrace everything the natural world has to offer, they can see "things that no one [has] ever seen before."

By setting up this dichotomy, the novel proposes that if people are willing to embrace the natural world and the innocent curiosity of childhood, there's no telling what a person might observe or learn. On the peach, James is learning how to be a kind, competent, and independent as he helps his friends and goes on to battle the Cloud-Men over the course of their journey. Adults who simply travel in an airplane will never have these experiences, and so will never be able to learn the lessons that James is absorbing. And while flying on a giant peach may be a fictional mode of travel unique to this novel, James's relationship to the natural world nevertheless makes the case that if a person looks to nature for lessons and help, the natural world can and will provide.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ "Those are skyscrapers! So this must be America! And that, my friends, means that we have crossed the Atlantic Ocean overnight!"

"You don't mean it!" they cried.

"It's not possible!"

"It's incredible! It's unbelievable!"

"Oh, I've always dreamed of going to America!" cried the Centipede. "I had a friend once who—"

"Be quiet!" said the Earthworm. Who cares about your friend? The thing we've got to think about now is *how on earth are we going to get down to earth?*"

"Ask James," said the Ladybug.

Related Characters: The Ladybug, The Earthworm, The Centipede, James Henry Trotter (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

At daybreak, when James and his friends realize that the peach has carried them all the way to New York City, the bugs argue about whether to focus on the fact that they've arrived or how to get down. It's telling that after most of the bugs spent the entire trip panicking at every little thing, everyone except for the Earthworm greets the discovery that they're in the United States with excitement and curiosity. This suggests that through their time with James on the peach, most of the bugs have reworked the way they respond to new situations. Now, they approach new things with curiosity, excitement, and optimism, which allows them to have a more pleasant life on the whole.

The Earthworm, on the other hand, still makes assumptions—and given his gloomy character, he always jumps to the worst conclusion or worst-case scenario. This reflects the fact that he isn't as open to change or learning new things as his companions. For him, life has to make perfect sense and everything must be mapped out down to the second. There's still no room for spontaneity or unpredictable occurrences.

Finally, the Ladybug's comment that the Earthworm should just "Ask James" how to get down shows how fully the dynamic has shifted between James and the bugs. While at first James felt like a small, powerless child in a group of mature, adult bugs, this is no longer the case. As a child, James has a unique way of seeing the world that allows him to come up with creative solutions to problems—and thus far, he has successfully led the group and saved them from both the sharks and the Cloud-Men. The Ladybug knows this, and she trusts that Jams will be able to get them down to earth safely. In this sense, the bugs read very much as children, while James inhabits the role of the all-knowing, competent adult—a suggestion from the novel that children are far more competent than adults usually give them credit for.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ Far below them, in the City of New York, something like pandemonium was breaking out. A great round ball as big as a house had been sighted hovering high up in the sky over the very center of Manhattan, and the cry had gone up that it was an enormous bomb sent over by another country to blow the whole city to smithereens.

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Unbeknownst to James and his bug friends on top of the peach, everyone in New York City thinks that the peach is a bomb that will destroy the city. This outlook reflects the fictional New Yorkers' set understanding about how the world works. Because they don't approach new situations with curiosity and open-mindedness, they jump to conclusions—and cynical ones, at that. So in their minds, there's nothing a "round ball as big as a house" could be *but* a bomb. In this sense, it's possible to see that the New Yorkers don't just treat new objects with suspicion—they treat other countries and other people with suspicion, too. This is especially important given when Dahl was writing James and the Giant Peach, as the Cold War with the U.S.S.R. was, at this time, turning into a nuclear arms race. The threat of nuclear devastation loomed large in people's minds, so it's understandable that Dahl's fictional New Yorkers are afraid of a devastating bomb. However, Dahl also suggests that feeling this fear and anxiety all the time isn't necessarily helpful. If people greet new things with curiosity instead of suspicion, life can be richer and more fun for everyone.

Chapter 37 Quotes

"Don't be frightened of us, please!" James called out. "We are so glad to be here!"

"What about those others beside you?" shouted the Chief of Police. "Are any of them dangerous?"

"Of course they're not dangerous!" James answered. "They're the nicest creatures in the world! Allow me to introduce them to you one by one and then I'm sure you will believe me."

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter (speaker), The Ladybug, Miss Spider, The Glow-worm, The Silkworm, The Earthworm, The Centipede, The Old-Green-Grasshopper

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

When the peach is skewered on the top of the Empire State Building, the first responders who go up to inspect it are terrified of the peach and of the bugs—that is, until James appears to allay everyone's fears. The first responders, as adults, treat the peach and the bugs with suspicion. The novel suggests that the adults have forgotten how to approach new things with curiosity and openness. This is especially true since the novel's setting is now New York City—a dense, urban environment that represents the manmade adult world even more than Aunt Sponge's and Aunt Spiker's yard did. In other words, these first responders are so caught up in their familiar world of the city that they don't know how to engage with anything that doesn't fit neatly into their worldview.

As a child who is naturally more creative and openminded, James is better equipped to tackle new things and learn from them. This is why he was able to befriend the bugs in the first place. But now that he finds himself in New York City, James is in the position to bridge the gap between the adult first responders and the natural world, the realm of children. The song he sings introduces the first responders to the bugs—and it serves its purpose. The first responders aren't afraid anymore after James makes it clear that the bugs are all kind people. With this, the novel also shows that if even adults are willing to listen, observe, and ask questions, they can learn to see the world more like a child does. Through doing so, they can make their lives richer and react to new things in healthier ways.

Chapter 39 Quotes

And because so many of them were always begging him to tell and tell again the story of his adventures on the peach, he thought it would be nice if one day he sat down and wrote a book.

So he did.

And *that* is what you have just finished reading.

Related Characters: James Henry Trotter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 144-146

Explanation and Analysis

Following his transatlantic journey on the giant peach, James takes up residence in Central Park, where he can play daily with hundreds of children. And after constantly being asked to tell the story of his journey, James transcribes the story so others can read it.

By writing his story down, James symbolically comes of age more fully than he had before. He demonstrates his maturity by recognizing that it's his responsibility to help other kids learn the same lessons he did. In doing so, James is taking care of younger children far better than his aunts ever took care of him and equipping them for their own coming-of-age journeys.

This also cements the novel itself as an important book for young readers. *James and the Giant Peach* has withstood the test of time and remains wildly popular among young readers. James himself may be fictional, but he and his friends have been teaching kids and adults about curiosity, the wonders of the natural world, and the delights of nonsense and absurdity for decades. Revealing that James himself is the "author" of the book also shows kids who identify with James that they, too, can share their stories and help others by doing so.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

James Henry Trotter lives a happy, idyllic life. He and his parents live by the sea, where James spends his days playing with other children. But one day when James is four years old, his parents go to London and a rhinoceros eats them. While this experience is unpleasant for James's parents, it's even worse for James. The world is big and unfriendly to a small boy. People sell James's parents' home and James moves in with his aunts, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge. James's aunts are awful, selfish, and cruel. They beat James for no reason, call him names, and give him nothing and no one to play with.

One of the things that makes James's early childhood so idyllic is that he lives in close proximity to the ocean—that is, to the natural world. His parents also allow him to spend lots of time in nature with kids his own age, which gives James the opportunity to learn how to play and interact with others. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, however, don't see the benefit of this. By depriving James of any friends or stimulation, they condemn him to a sad, boring life.

Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker live in a house at the top of a hill. From the house, James can see for miles—and on clear days, he can see his parents' home and the sea. His aunts forbid him to leave, however. They believe he's going to get in trouble if they allow him to leave their garden, and they threaten to lock him in the cellar for a week if he sneaks out. The yard of their home is big, but desolate. There are some laurels and an old **peach** tree that never produces any fruit. No children ever visit. James becomes increasingly sad and lonely. He spends hours standing at the fence, looking out into the nearby woods and fields.

Throughout the novel, Dahl equates the natural world with the realm of children—so the aunts' desolate garden places them in opposition to anything having to do with children. In a sense, then, living with his aunts means that James has to grow up and adapt to a boring life in the adult world well before he's ready to do so.

CHAPTER 2

James has now been living with Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker for three years. One morning, several peculiar things happen. It's a hot day, so Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge sit in deck chairs, sipping lemonade and supervising James's chores. James is chopping wood and he's not allowed to stop and rest. Aunt Sponge is very fat, while Aunt Spiker is tall, bony, and spits when she talks. The "two ghastly hags" watch James, scream at him to chop faster, and talk about how beautiful they are. Aunt Sponge picks up her hand mirror and recites a poem about how good she smells and how dainty her toes are. Aunt Spiker ruins it by pointing out that Aunt Sponge's tummy is fat. Aunt Spiker insists she's more beautiful, but Aunt Sponge retorts with another stanza about how much Hollywood would love her curves.

The descriptions of Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker's bodies are intended to be humorous—but it might also be beyond James's comprehension that people's bodies can change dramatically when they become adults. He's still a child in a prepubescent body; developmentally, he's not there yet. However, it's still telling that both aunts are self-centered and cruel. The absurd descriptions of their bodies—and their absurd, silly poems—may also illustrate the novel's assertion that being so self-centered and mean is absurd, in and of itself.

As Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge exchange insults, James chops wood frantically. His ax is too heavy for him, and he's sweaty and sad. He wonders what other children are doing right now and cries as he thinks of them riding bikes and playing in the ocean. When the tears get to be too much, James stops chopping. Aunt Sponge shrieks at James to get back to work, but James begs for a trip to the seaside. His aunts, however, decide to beat him later, when it's not so hot. They send James away. James runs to the laurel bushes and sobs.

Saddling James with this chore shows that Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge have no idea how to deal with children in a kind, compassionate way. Because they're so selfish and caught up in their own adult worlds, it's unthinkable that they'd ever do something like allow him to go to the beach—or even allow him to spend a few moments not working. For James, this is difficult because he's still a child. He's not ready to grow up and join his aunts' world.

CHAPTER 3

At this point, a "rather peculiar thing" happens to James. An old man in a green suit comes out of the bushes. The man is bald, with a bristly beard and moustache. He stops, stares at James, and then calls James to him—he has something wonderful to share with him. James is terrified, but the old man approaches and offers James a bag filled with tiny green crystals. They're luminous and make a quiet rustling noise. Softly, the old man says that the crystals contain more power and magic than anything else. When James asks what the crystals are, the man gets closer and closer. When his nose touches James's forehead, the old man leaps back and shouts about crocodile tongues, lizards' eyeballs, and the juice of a porcupine. He shoves the bag at James.

James's terror when he sees the old man suggests that it's not just his aunts' exaggerated bodies that are frightening to a young child—in a way, it's all adult bodies. It's telling, though, that the old man is the one to give James these magic crystals. Adults may be strange and even scary, the novel seems to imply, but that doesn't mean they can't still offer children amazing opportunities. And for that matter, the fact that the crystals are made of crocodiles' tongues suggests that the world of adults can be just as wild and absurd as the imaginative world of a child.

CHAPTER 4

James takes the bag and stares at the old man. He listens as the old man tells him to put the crystals in water, add 10 of his own hairs, and drink the mixture when it bubbles. At this point, the old man says, steam will pour from James's mouth and marvelous things will start to happen. James will never be miserable again. The old man tells James to keep the crystals away from his aunts and to take care to not spill them—they'll give their magic to whatever they touch. At this, the old man disappears into the bushes.

Even though the old man is trying to help James, it's significant that he essentially cautions James to be selfish with the crystals. This tracks with the novel's insistence that many adults have selfish tendencies, even if they might not be as strong as Aunt Sponge's or Aunt Spiker's. The absurdity of this situation, though, suggests that what's ahead will be just as nonsensical.

CHAPTER 5

James races back to the house. He decides that if he can get into the kitchen undetected, he'll drink his potion in there. But as James passes the peach tree to get around Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, he slips. When James hits the ground, the bag bursts open and the tiny green crystals scatter. Though James tries to pick them up, they burrow into the ground faster than he can snatch them, and they disappear in moments. James feels like crying, especially since he knows there's nothing in the dirt for the crystals to work on. There's just the roots of the peach tree and, no doubt, an assortment of bugs. James wonders what the crystals will do if they meet bugs or the peach tree's roots.

It's telling that James thinks there's "nothing" in the ground to work on—after all, he mentions that there are bugs and tree roots there. In other words, James assumes that the bugs in the ground aren't anything worth mentioning. The sentient nature of the crystals, meanwhile, adds to the sense that life is absurd and not something people can control. James can't control the crystals; he can only adapt to whatever comes next.

Suddenly, James hears a shriek. He looks up to see Aunt Spiker standing over him. As she orders James to finish chopping the wood, Aunt Sponge waddles over. She suggests they put James in the well overnight to cure him of his laziness. Aunt Spiker thinks this is a brilliant idea, but she wants James to finish chopping wood first. James sadly picks his ax back up, still upset that he dropped the bag. Now, there's no hope of ever finding happiness. As James begins to chop, he hears a shout behind him.

Aunt Spiker's and Aunt Sponge's selfishness shines through here: they want to punish James, but they want to make sure they squeeze a little more work out of him first.

CHAPTER 6

Aunt Spiker shrieks at Aunt Sponge to come look—the peach tree has a **peach** on it. It's up on the highest branch. Aunt Sponge is dismissive since the tree never produces fruit, but when she looks, she sees that Aunt Spiker is right. James puts down his ax and turns to stare at his aunts and the tree. He knows something odd is going to happen; he can feel it in the air. James creeps closer to the tree, where his aunts stand and stare at the peach. It looks ripe, so Aunt Sponge summons James to climb the tree and pick the peach. She warns him not to eat any of it himself. Just as James reaches the trunk, though, Aunt Spiker shouts that the peach is growing. The peach grows to twice its original size and keeps going.

Clearly, the magic crystals are having an effect on the peach tree. It's significant that Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker don't bother to ask why their barren tree suddenly has a peach on it, which speaks to their incurious natures. There's also no indication that they plan to share the peach with James, even though they're going to make him pick it for them.

CHAPTER 7

Aunt Spiker, Aunt Sponge, and James stand and watch the **peach**. James is more excited than he's been in a while. Within 30 seconds, the peach is the size of a melon. In another 20 seconds, it doubles in size. Aunt Spiker shouts for James to get away from the tree when the peach reaches the size of a pumpkin—it might fall and crush him. The branch begins to bend as the peach grows as big and heavy as Aunt Sponge. Soon after, the peach is as big as a car and it touches the ground. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge leap around excitedly, clapping their hands and saying silly things. James just watches the peach, spellbound. It's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen—but when he voices this, his aunts tell him to shut up.

In comparing James's reaction his aunts', it's clear that James's reaction is more mature. While James simply watches and remarks on the beauty of what he sees, his aunts completely lose all control as if they were children. With this, Dahl seems to suggest that adults may have more power than children, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're always more mature than children. The giant peach, meanwhile, represents the wonders of the natural world—which are available to anyone, if they care to look.

The **peach** continues to grow. When it's as tall as the tree and about the size of a small house, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker decide it's done growing. Slowly, the women circle the peach and inspect it. Aunt Sponge puts out a finger to touch the peach and declares that it's perfectly ripe. She suggests they get a shovel and dig out a hunk to eat, but Aunt Spiker has a better idea—they can make money off of the peach.

Rather than simply appreciate the giant peach for the magnificent thing that it is, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker corrupt the innocence and the beauty of nature. By deciding that they're going to make a profit off of the peach, they try to force the peach into the stuffy, controlling world of adults.

CHAPTER 8

News of the **peach** spreads quickly across the countryside. The next day, hordes of people arrive to look at it. Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker hire carpenters to build a fence around the peach. Then, they sell tickets to people who want to see it. By noon, the garden is filled with people. Helicopters and news crews arrive and agree to pay double to take their cameras closer. While all this is going on, James sits locked in his bedroom. He stares out the bars of his window at the fun below. He'd begged his aunts to let him help sell tickets, but they didn't want him to mess anything up.

Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker's desire to make money off the peach reflects their existence in a stuffy adult world where things are only valuable as long as they can generate a profit. The peach, in their eyes, isn't interesting in its own right—it's only so compelling to them because it's going to make them rich. To this end, they deny James any time outside, even though he could probably help them. Their expected wealth is more important to them than anything else.

At the end of the day, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge let James out of his room and send him outside to clean up the mess that the crowds left. They refuse to give him food first, even though he hasn't eaten all day—they're too busy counting their money to feed him. Once James is outside, they lock the door so he can't get back in.

Again, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker are so caught up in the adult world of money and fame that they have no time to spare for James. Like the peach, James has worth in their eyes only as long as he can make their lives easier.

CHAPTER 9

James is hungry and upset. The moon is big, high, and casts strange shadows on the garden. It's also creepily quiet. James is scared, as anyone would be in such a situation. He looks ahead and sees the **peach**, which seems even bigger than it was yesterday. The moonlight makes the peach look like a huge, silver ball. Once again, James feels "shivers of excitement" on his back. He knows something else is going to happen. James looks around, wondering what might happen, and realizes that the whole garden seems "alive with magic." As though in a trance, James approaches the peach, climbs the fence, and touches it. It's soft and fuzzy. Then, James notices a hole in the peach's side.

By noting that anyone would feel afraid in this situation, Dahl draws young readers in and helps them identify with James. With this, Dahl encourages readers to pay attention to the natural world and notice how magical it can be, just like James does. It's fun and exciting, per the novel, to be outside with no plan or goal other than to have fun exploring. When people engage with the natural world like this, surprising things show up—such as the hole that James finds in the side of the peach.

CHAPTER 10

The hole in the **peach** is about the size of a fox's hole. James crouches down and crawls inside it. He realizes it's a damp, murky tunnel. It smells like fresh peach. James takes bites out of the walls of the tunnel as he crawls deeper into the fruit. Finally, he hits his head on the pit of the peach. James runs his hands over the pit, which is bumpy and feels like wood. Then, he notices a door carved into the pit. It opens when James pushes it. He crawls through the door and hears voices saying that they've been waiting for him. James looks with horror at the speakers, but he can't leave the peach—the door is gone.

For James, the peach is interesting because it's unknown—his only goal is to figure out what's inside. (Though it also provides him sustenance when his aunts won't feed him, suggesting that nature can also be a source of nourishment for children.) James's horror at whomever he finds inside the peach suggests he's making snap judgments about them out of fear.

CHAPTER 11

James looks around the room, terrified. The creatures look like insects, but insects are usually small—and these creatures are as big as a large dog. There's an Old-Green-Grasshopper sitting on a stool, a giant Spider sitting next to him, and a Ladybug on her own chair. On a sofa sits a Centipede and an Earthworm, while a thick white something—maybe a Silkworm—sleeps on the floor. Each creature is at least James's size and looks terrifying. Suddenly, the Spider announces that she's hungry. The Old-Green-Grasshopper, the Ladybug, and the Centipede second this sentiment and stare right at James.

It's relatively common for people to wary of bugs, especially bugs like spiders and centipedes. Thus, James's fear seems reasonable—especially when the Spider reveals that she's hungry and looks pointedly at James, suggesting that she is going to eat him. *While James is frightened of the bugs, he also doesn't try to make sense of how or why they're so big. At this point, it's more important to try to survive this ordeal than it is to ask questions.*

After a moment, the Spider asks James if he's hungry. James says nothing and the Centipede remarks that James looks ready to faint. The Ladybug says that James must think they want to eat *him*. All the bugs laugh and then, the Ladybug kindly says that James is one of them now. They've been waiting for him all day and they're happy to see him. The Centipede tells James to cheer up and to help him get his boots off of his many feet.

The Ladybug and the Spider in particular make James feel like he shouldn't have judged them. Rather than being frightening beasts who are far too large, these bugs are warm and polite—and they want to be friends with James. The Centipede's boots add another level of absurdity to the situation, suggesting that in this world, anything can happen.

CHAPTER 12

James is afraid to offend the bugs, so he sets to work untangling the Centipede's shoelaces. He murmurs quietly that the Centipede has lots of boots, so the Centipede announces he has 100 legs, 100 feet, and 100 boots. At this, the Earthworm cries that the Centipede is a liar—centipedes only have 42 legs, but most people take the Centipede at his word and don't bother to count. The Earthworm says there's nothing amazing about having so many legs, either. Conspiratorially, the Centipede whispers to James that the Earthworm is blind and therefore, isn't aware of how dashing the Centipede looks. The Earthworm says it's better to have no legs but still be able to walk. At this, the Centipede and the Earthworm argue about whether the Earthworm walks, glides, or slithers.

This passage begins to suggest that the bugs are adult figures, not children like James. This is why James decides he needs to help the Centipede with his boots when the Centipede asks, as the Centipede and his friends could be quite powerful. However, there are also indicators that these bugs, though adults, are sillier than any adults James has met in his life. The Centipede seems to take pleasure in riling up the Earthworm, while the Earthworm's contrarian nature seems designed to make people laugh.

The argument ends when the Earthworm points out that he's useful and beloved by gardeners, while the Centipede is a pest. The Centipede is proud to be a pest, so this doesn't bother him. He notes that he's the only pest present, aside from the Old-Green-Grasshopper—but the Old-Green-Grasshopper is too old to be much of a pest anymore. Scornfully, the Old-Green-Grasshopper says that he's a musician, not a pest. The Centipede turns to James and asks if James has ever seen "such a marvelous colossal Centipede." James hasn't, and he asks how the Centipede got to be so big.

The Earthworm essentially proposes that for a person to be worthwhile, they need to do something good for the world. This is why he fixates on being a useful garden bug and calls the Centipede a pest, meaning an insect that feeds on crops or gardens. However, the Centipede makes the case that it's enough to bring joy and light to people through comedy—with this, he positions himself as a different sort of pest, one who teases and jokes.

The Centipede explains that he was under the peach tree when a tiny green crystal wriggled past him. The Ladybug and Miss Spider shout that the same thing happened to them, while the Earthworm says he swallowed three crystals. Annoyed, the Centipede admonishes his companions for interrupting his story. The Old-Green-Grasshopper says it's too late for stories anyway, since it's about bedtime. James has only undone 20 of the Centipede's boots, so the Centipede announces that there are 80 to go. At this, the Earthworm shrieks that the Centipede is lying—the Centipede only has another 22 boots. When the Ladybug warns the Centipede to not pull the Earthworm's leg, the Centipede dissolves in laughter. James decides he likes the Centipede. The Centipede is a "rascal," but it's nice to hear laughter. The Old-Green-Grasshopper asks Miss Spider to make some beds.

Even if some of these adults are sillier than James's aunts, that doesn't mean they don't still have a schedule and rules. This is why the Old-Green-Grasshopper sets about sending everyone to bed. However, it does probably defy James's expectations to find bugs so concerned about getting to bed on time. As James learns these things, he begins to see that it's fruitless to make assumptions about people. This is especially true as he comes to like the Centipede. The Centipede may have been frightening at first, but he's not scary anymore—he's delightful and shows James that there's far more to life than Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge wanted him to think.

CHAPTER 13

Within moments, Miss Spider creates the first bed with her thread. It hangs from the ceiling like a hammock, but it's silky and luxurious. The Old-Green-Grasshopper crawls in. Next, Miss Spider makes beds for the Ladybug, the Centipede, and the Earthworm. Then, she turns to James and asks how soft he'd like his bed. James says he likes a very soft bed and then returns to the Centipede's boots. The laces are tied in complicated knots and the whole process of untying them takes about two hours. By the time James is done, the Centipede is fast asleep. James pokes the Centipede in the stomach and sends him to bed. When James crawls into his own hammock, it's soft and comfortable.

Miss Spider continues to defy James' expectations as she turns to making beds for all her friends—while James previously thought she was scary and assumed she wanted to eat him, here she shows that she's thoughtful, gentle, and even maternal as she essentially tucks everyone into bed. When the Centipede falls asleep while James is taking his boots off, it suggests that no matter how adult the Centipede may seem, he might not be as competent as James assumed. And, like a child, he falls asleep before making it to bed—while James has to assume an adult role to get him out of his boots.

The Centipede says, "Lights out," but nothing happens. He says it again, louder. James is confused. He looks around and sees the Old-Green-Grasshopper, the Ladybug, Miss Spider, and the Earthworm snoring. James asks if the Centipede is talking to *him*, but the Centipede snaps that the Glow-worm fell asleep with her light on. James looks up and sees a three-foot-long fly without wings, standing upside-down on the ceiling. Its tail end lights up the room. James comments that it doesn't look like a worm and the Centipede says he's right: Glow-worms *aren't* worms, they're just wingless, female fireflies. He hurls a boot at the Glow-worm, who tells the Centipede to be polite. She greets James and turns off her light. James listens to the others breathe and wonders what will happen in the morning. He likes his new friends—none of them are frightening. They seem kind and helpful.

Even though James describes his new friends as kind and helpful, that becomes questionable in light of the Centipede's violent behavior toward the Glow-worm. The Glow-worm's polite scolding of the Centipede makes the Centipede look even more immature and less like a competent, kind adult. And the Centipede confirms for James that not everything looks like James thinks it should. The Glow-worm defies all expectations and, through this, encourages James to keep an open mind when he encounters new things.

CHAPTER 14

James wakes up when one of his new friends shouts, "We're off!" Everyone else is already awake and moving around. The floor heaves, and James asks what's happening. The Ladybug kindly explains that they're about to leave this desolate hill—and consequently leave Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge behind. She notes that the peach tree is on a hill, and the only thing stopping the **peach** from rolling down it is its stem, which is starting to break. The Ladybug raises her voice and yells that the Centipede is up on top nibbling at the stem. She offers to take James under her wing to protect him once they start rolling, but James declines. The Centipede emerges from a hole in the ceiling and says they're off. The Earthworm mutters that they must be headed for trouble, but the Ladybug says they'll see great things.

By talking to James like this and explaining what's going on, the Ladybug takes on a maternal role with him. In this sense, she becomes the mother that James hasn't had for the last three years—and she shows him how an adult should treat a child a how they should act in frightening, unknown situations. The idea that James and his new friends will be able to leave Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker thanks to the hill—and the giant peach—suggests that the natural world has a lot to offer James.

The Centipede says they could see anything on their journey. He sings that they could see the man-eating Pink-Spotted Scrunch, dragons, or unicorns. It's possible they'll see a hen who lays beautiful eggs that, when boiled, blow people's heads off. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter what they encounter—the important thing is that they get away from Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge. As soon as the Centipede is done singing, the **peach** begins to roll.

The Centipede's song speaks to the unpredictability of life. It's impossible to know and predict everything—but it's precisely this sense of possibility that makes life so exciting. Everything he lists is absurd and silly, which supports the novel's larger point that life itself is absurd and unpredictable.

CHAPTER 15

Out in the garden, Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge have just set up for another day of selling tickets to sightseers. Aunt Sponge remarks that James never came back last night. She hopes he fell and broke his neck, while Aunt Spiker says she'll punish James when he returns. Suddenly, they hear an awful noise and turn around. The **peach** is rolling right for them. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge scream, panic, and start to run, but they push each other and selfishly only try to save themselves. Aunt Sponge trips over her moneybox and falls, and Aunt Spiker trips over her sister. The peach rolls over them with a sickening crunch, leaving Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker flat and dead on the lawn.

Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's selfishness brings about their deaths—even more confirmation that adults tend to act selfishly, and that this impulse is dangerous and even fatal. Because they have no concept of working together toward a common goal, it's unthinkable that Aunt Spiker, for instance, might help her sister up. It's also telling that Aunt Sponge trips over her moneybox: the moneybox symbolizes how she and Spiker tried to corrupt nature and profit off of it—and her death suggests that this was a bad idea.

CHAPTER 16

The **peach** crashes out of the garden and bounds down the hill, picking up speed as it goes. People walking up the hill to see the peach scream and run to get out of the way. At the bottom of the hill, the peach knocks over a telephone pole and flattens two cars. It crashes through fences, scattering livestock. In the village, it crashes right through a chocolate factory and leaves two peach-shaped holes in the brick—which chocolate promptly begins to pour out of, flooding the entire village. Children gulp up the chocolate gleefully. At the edge of town, the peach leap off the cliffs and into the ocean, where it bobs on the surface.

It's significant that adults are afraid of the peach—while the children around the chocolate factory delight in the peach's destruction and the absurdity of the whole situation. Children, the novel suggests, are better able to take life as it comes and look for the bright spots. The mention of a chocolate factory perhaps shows Dahl beginning to conceptualize Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, *which he published three years after* James and the Giant Peach.

CHAPTER 17

It's chaos inside the **peach**. James is tangled up with all his friends and all their furniture. The journey down the hill was, according to the narrator, the worst in history. The rolling was fun at first, but after the peach flattened Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, it rolled out of control. To make the journey even worse, the Glow-worm's light stopped working. Now, though, everything is quiet. The Centipede shouts for light, but the Glow-worm struggles to light her tail. Finally, her light comes on. The Ladybug moans that the journey was terrible, but the Old-Green-Grasshopper says that they're here. He doesn't know where "here" is, but it must be somewhere good.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper demonstrates the power of optimism. Wherever they are, it's better than where they were—there's no Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge to abuse James anymore, for one thing. Further, if one treats life like an adventure, anything can be fun and exciting. This doesn't mean that it's always easy, as evidenced by this journey being the worst ever.

The Earthworm mutters that they must be in a coalmine, but the Old-Green-Grasshopper hopes they've made it to a country with music. James, meanwhile, hopes they're near the seashore so he can play with other children. The Ladybug interrupts and asks if anyone else feels the **peach** bobbing up and down. The Old-Green-Grasshopper thinks she's just dizzy, but he suggests they go up to the top of the peach and look around. The Centipede shrieks that he can't go out in bare feet, so the Ladybug asks everyone to help with the Centipede's boots. Miss Spider weaves a ladder so they can reach the ceiling. After a half-hour, they're ready. One after the other, they climb the ladder through a soggy, peachy tunnel.

What James wants is to live somewhere where he can truly be a kid. He wants to be in nature, and he wants to be able to play with other kids like him. He is, in this sense, just as optimistic as the Old-Green-Grasshopper. The Earthworm, on the other hand, seems increasingly stuffy and pessimistic as he insists they're in a coalmine.

CHAPTER 18

On top of the **peach**, all the bugs and James look around and blink nervously. They're in the middle of the sea and can barely see the shore. None of them understand how they got here, and the Old-Green-Grasshopper declares this a "rather awkward situation." The Earthworm, meanwhile, insists they're going to die. The bugs panic—the Centipede can't swim with his boots on, while Miss Spider, the Ladybug, and the Glow-worm can't swim at all. Calmly, James says that nobody *has* to swim: the peach is floating, and eventually, a boat can rescue them. The bugs stare at James, amazed, and ask if he's sure they're not sinking. With James's prodding, they look over the edge at the water. He's right.

When the bugs panic, it drives home how incompetent they are as adults. It's beyond them to look around, take stock of the situation, and ascertain that things aren't so bad. As James points out, the peach is floating, so the threat of drowning isn't a pressing issue. When James is the one to point this out to his friends, it reiterates that children are often more mature and knowledgeable than adults think they are. As James steps into a more adult role, he also takes on more responsibility and starts to come of age.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper says they must keep calm and believe everything will turn out fine. The Earthworm says this is nonsense, since nothing is *ever* fine in the end. The Ladybug whispers in James's ear that the Earthworm makes everything into a disaster. He likes to be gloomy, though she can't blame him—being an Earthworm would make lots of people gloomy. The Earthworm continues his tirade and insists they're going to starve or die of thirst. The Centipede agrees, but James says the Earthworm is blind. The Earthworm takes offense to this, but James carefully says that the **peach** is big enough to feed them for weeks. The Old-Green-Grasshopper announces that they're saved, but the Earthworm insists they'll drown if they eat their peach ship.

The Earthworm eludes to the idea that everyone dies eventually—which is true, but that's no reason to immediately believe that death is imminent. The Ladybug, however, helps James understand that it's just in the Earthworm's nature to see everything as a catastrophe. By telling James this, she helps James empathize with the Earthworm and how difficult and anxiety-inducing this situation might be for him. In addition, James continues to take on a more adult role as he reminds his friends that they're not in immediate trouble.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper agrees with the Earthworm and with the Centipede, who insists that they'll either drown or starve. When Miss Spider asks if she can just eat a tiny bit of the **peach**, James notes that it would take weeks to eat enough of the peach to sink them. This fact is obvious to him. The Old-Green-Grasshopper agrees that James is right and suggests they eat out of the hole they crawled through, as to not eat holes all over the peach. The Earthworm, however, still looks concerned. When the Centipede asks what's wrong, the Earthworm says the problem is that there *isn't* a problem. Everyone laughs and digs into the delicious peach. They sit and eat happily.

The fact that all of this is obvious to James shows that he sees the world differently than his bug companions do. To him, the peach and the ocean around them seem to represent opportunity, not danger. As an optimistic child who's just happy to be out in nature and free from the oppressive adults in his life, it's unsurprising that James feels this way. The natural world offers him the tools he needs to practice being independent. The bugs, meanwhile, provide foils for James's maturity and make him look even more grown-up by comparison.

The Ladybug remarks that the **peach** is better than aphids, which is all she's ever eaten. Miss Spider concurs; this is better than a fresh-caught fly. But the Centipede sings that he's tasted all the finest foods in the world—like jellied gnats and minced doodlebugs—and the peach is better than any of them. He concludes his song by saying he'd give up every other food for a tiny bite of the giant peach.

The Centipede's song makes it clear that James and the Giant Peach *is meant to be silly and nonsensical. Throughout the novel, moments like these make the broader point that literature doesn't have to be stuffy, boring, and moralistic; like the Centipede's silly song, it can be lighthearted and fun.*

CHAPTER 19

As the group finishes their meal, the Centipede points to a "funny thin black thing" in the water. Miss Spider and the Ladybug notice that there are several. The Earthworm cries that they must be sharks come to eat the **peach**. Though the Centipede insists that's silly, he doesn't sound confident—and everyone believes the Earthworm is right. They look over the edge at the creatures and the Centipede says he believes they'll be safe if they stay on top of the peach. But at that moment, one of the sharks stares up at the group on top. When the group yells at the shark, the shark opens its massive mouth and lunges at the peach. All the other sharks follow suit. On top of the peach, the bugs panic. The Ladybug asks James to save them.

The sharks make it clear that nature isn't always benevolent. Sometimes, it can be dangerous and predatory. But the natural world still offers James the opportunity to flex his critical thinking skills when the Ladybug begs him to come up with a plan to save them. In this moment, James starts to look more and more like the levelheaded adult in the group, while the "adult" bugs look increasingly childlike and immature.

CHAPTER 20

Slowly, James says he has an idea, but he's not sure it'll work. The bugs beg James to tell them his idea, but James says it's no good—they don't have any string. The Old-Green-Grasshopper they can have as much string as James wants if they wake up the sleeping Silkworm downstairs. Miss Spider says she can also make string. She assures James the string will be thick and strong. With this detail taken care of, James says he's going to lift the **peach** out of the water. The Earthworm says James is mad, but James says they can do it by tying string around seagulls' necks and attaching the other end of the string to the peach's stem.

James's plan is ridiculous and outlandish—like much of the novel itself—which reflects his childlike, imaginative way of looking at the world. The other bugs understand that James has a unique way of seeing the world because of his youth and can fix all sorts of problems in inventive ways.

The bugs insist that this is ridiculous, while the Old-Green-Grasshopper says it'll take thousands of gulls to get the peach out of the air. James notes that there are plenty of seagulls around. He doesn't know how many they'll need, but if they get enough, eventually they'll fly—they just need to be quick so that the sharks don't sink them first. The Earthworm maintains that James is crazy, since it'll be hard to lasso a seagull. But James explains that they'll use the fattest, juiciest earthworm in the world as bait—and that earthworm just happens to be on the **peach**. At this, the Earthworm becomes hysterical. The Centipede and Miss Spider say they'll respect the Earthworm as a martyr for the rest of their lives as the Old-Green-Grasshopper asks James for his plan.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper is trying to look at the situation logically and find all the reasons it won't work. James, on the other hand, is far more optimistic, so he's open to the possibility that it can actually work. Unlike the bugs, James doesn't think too hard about how things should work or why they work at all—he just knows, in this situation, that with enough gulls the peach will fly. In this sense, nature still allows James the opportunity to try new things and test out his ability to solve problems.

CHAPTER 21

Once James details his plan, the Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Centipede affirm that it's brilliant. The Earthworm, however, is distraught. James puts an arm around the Earthworm's shoulders and promises that he won't let the seagulls touch him. But James insists they need to get going, since there are about 100 sharks attacking the **peach** now. To everyone on top of the peach, it looks like the peach is sinking. James tells everyone to take their places. Everyone knows he's the captain. He orders everyone but the Earthworm to climb back into the peach and sends the Centipede to wake up the Silkworm.

Especially when James comforts the Earthworm, he steps even further into an adult role. This is reinforced when, moments later, the bugs accept James as their captain. Their acceptance of James's plan suggests that more adults should listen to children's ideas—they may be outlandish, but there might be some grain of truth or usefulness within.

CHAPTER 22

It's silent on top of the **peach**. The Earthworm lies in the sun in full view of the seagulls. His tail dangles into the tunnel so that the Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Ladybug can quickly pull him in to safety, while James waits in the tunnel with a loop of string to lasso the gulls. Inside the peach's chamber, the Glow-worm lights the room so the Silkworm and Miss Spider can spin their thread.

The sheer number of moving parts in James's plan adds to the novel's sense of silliness and absurdity. However, the complexity of the plan also emphasizes James's inventiveness and leadership, as everyone has a role to play. It's also significant that all parts of this plan involve nature; it's bugs, silk from a silkworm and spider, and seagulls that are putting this plan into action, which again speaks to the idea that the natural world is brimming with opportunities.

In the tunnel, James tells the Earthworm that a gull is coming. When he gives the word, the Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Ladybug pull the Earthworm inside, and James loops the string around the gull's neck. James lets about 50 yards of string out and then ties the gull to the **peach**'s stem. Then, the group repeats the process over and over again. The sharks frantically attack the peach as James lassos the 500th seagull. At the 501st seagull, the peach begins to hover slightly over the water. With the 502nd seagull, the peach lifts into the sky like a balloon.

Here, it's unimportant to consider how long it would take to lasso 502 seagulls—it would take hours. Rather, the novel wants readers to focus on how James was able to carry out his highly inventive plan quickly and successfully. James's success and leadership suggests that children can do amazing things when given the opportunity to do so.

CHAPTER 23

Everyone runs to the top of the **peach**. The view is so magnificent that Miss Spider pulls the Centipede into a dance. Even the shy Glow-worm and the quiet Silkworm watch everyone else celebrate on top of the peach. When the excitement dies down, James admits he's worried about what the sharks might have done to the peach. Miss Spider offers to lower herself over the edge with string to check and leaps off before anyone can object. She returns with a puzzled look on her face—the peach is almost untouched. No one believes her, especially when the Centipede points out that they were sinking.

Because Miss Spider isn't able to or doesn't offer to take anyone else with her to confirm her story, they don't believe her. In their minds, there's no way they could've escaped the sea without suffering major damage from the sharks—but in this case, it's better for them to just accept that they don't know what happened or how they made it out unscathed.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper suggests that they weren't actually sinking. Maybe they were just so frightened that they *thought* they were. The narrator says that the Old-Green-Grasshopper is correct. Sharks, the narrator explains, don't have the type of mouth that allows them to get a bite out of a huge curved surface, like the side of a giant **peach**. The Ladybug, however, announces that the peach must have healed itself with magic.

The narrator doesn't fault James and his friends for assuming that the sharks were damaging the peach—but the narrator does imply that fear can make people jump to conclusions all too easily. When the Ladybug suggests that the peach is magical, it also speaks to how the novel encourages readers to suspend their disbelief and appreciate the nonsensical without straining to make everything make sense.

James shouts that there's a ship below and everyone runs to look—none of the bugs have seen a ship before. None of the **peach**'s passengers know that the ship is the *Queen Mary*, on her way to America. The Captain of the *Queen Mary* stands on the bridge, staring up at the peach. Neither he nor his officers know what it is, but they don't like it. One officer wonders if it's following them and another suggests it's dangerous. The Captain insists it's a secret weapon and accepts his telescope from his first officer. With its help, the Captain can see birds and people, including a small boy, on the thing. He can make out a huge grasshopper, a big spider, and an enormous centipede. The officers believe the Captain has been drinking again and call the ship's doctor. Meanwhile, the peach disappears into a cloud.

It's telling that the Captain fears the peach is a bomb or a weapon at first. He's not curious and openminded about it—he jumps to conclusions before he even knows what he's looking at. Like many adults, he's no longer especially curious about the world around him. And when he shares what he sees through the telescope, the other officers immediately assume that he's drunk. Furthermore, that the Captain fears that the peach is a bomb gestures to the tense Cold War climate in which Dahl was writing.

CHAPTER 24

The Earthworm wonders where they'll end up, but no one else cares. They just know the seagulls will hit land at some point. As the **peach** climbs higher, the Ladybug asks the Old-Green-Grasshopper if he'd play for them. The Old-Green-Grasshopper agrees. James has never heard music so beautiful, even though he's heard grasshoppers chirp before. The Old-Green-Grasshopper sounds like he's playing a violin with his wing and his back leg. When the first part of the concert is done, everyone applauds.

For everyone except the Earthworm, this is all one grand adventure through the natural world. With this, the novel implies that James will have more opportunities to learn about himself and the world as he engages with nature. Learning about the Old-Green-Grasshopper's music is one instance in which James expresses openness and curiosity when confronted with something new.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper asks James if he liked the music. James loved it and says, "It was as though [the Old-Green-Grasshopper] had a real violin in [his] hands." At this, the Old-Green-Grasshopper says that his body *is* a violin. When James asks if all grasshoppers play violins, the Old-Green-Grasshopper explains that short-horned grasshoppers, like him, play violins. Long-horned grasshoppers play by rubbing their wings together—it's an inferior noise and sounds like a banjo, not a violin. James marvels that he has never thought about how a grasshopper makes noise. Gently, the Old-Green-Grasshopper says there's a lot James hasn't thought about yet, such as where grasshoppers keep their ears.

During this conversation, the Old-Green-Grasshopper assumes the role of an all-knowing adult mentor to James. The fact that the Old-Green-Grasshopper assumes this role after acting only moments ago like a panicky child implies that there are childish elements alongside adult elements in everyone. When James notes that he's never thought about these things before, the novel reminds readers to always be open to learning and to realize that they don't know everything.

Everyone laughs when James insists that grasshoppers must have ears on their heads. Instead, the Old-Green-Grasshopper says, grasshoppers have ears on either side of their tummies—while crickets and katydids have ears on their legs. James thinks this is a joke and insists that having ears on one's legs is ridiculous. The Centipede says it's actually ridiculous to have ears on the side of one's head. He suggests James look in the mirror sometime. At this, the Earthworm tells the Centipede to apologize and stop being rude.

Even though James is generally the most mature and levelheaded one in the group, he still makes assumptions about other people. Everyone, the novel suggests, is susceptible to this. Given that the conversation is about ears, the novel also suggests that it's especially rude and absurd to make assumptions about people's bodies. And for that matter, if one takes a step back from their narrow way of looking at things, they'll realize that just about anything can look absurd—even normal human ears.

CHAPTER 25

Not wanting the Centipede and the Earthworm to argue again, James asks the Earthworm if he makes music. The Earthworm says he doesn't, but he does other amazing things. He tells James that next time he stands in a field or garden, James should remember that every bit of soil has recently passed through an earthworm. James is disbelieving, but the Earthworm says proudly that he and other earthworms swallow soil "like mad." When James asks why they'd do this, the Earthworm says they help farmers. Swallowing soil makes the soil better for plants, so the farmers love earthworms. He suggests that farmers love earthworms even more than they love ladybugs.

Turning to the Earthworm to avoid a fight speaks to James's growing maturity. Further, he's acting on the Old-Green-Grasshopper's advice to always be ready to learn something new by asking the Earthworm what he does. Even though James can't fathom why anyone would swallow soil, he still remains open to the Earthworm's explanations. Through this, James becomes more accepting of difference and learns the value of approaching new habits with curiosity instead of suspicion.

James turns to the Ladybug and asks if the farmers love her as well. Shyly, the Ladybug says that she's heard farmers love ladybugs so much that they buy live ladybugs to release. Ladybugs eat the pesky insects that destroy farmers' crops, and they do it all for free. James says this is wonderful, but he has one question: can a person tell how old a ladybug is by counting spots? The Ladybug explains that that's just a myth; in reality, the number of spots on a ladybug tells which family she belongs to. She's a Nine-Spotted Ladybug, which is a great family branch. Two-Spotted Ladybugs are ill-mannered, while Five-Spotted Ladybugs are a bit nicer, but "saucy." However, the Ladybug says, everyone loves ladybugs, no matter how many spots they have.

Now, James is getting the hang of approaching others with curiosity and a desire to understand. And even more importantly, he starts to question whether things he thought were true are actually *true. This is why he asks if it's possible to tell how old a ladybug is by her spots. Even though the Ladybug insists it's inappropriate and incorrect to make the assumption that one can gauge a ladybug's age, there nevertheless are assumptions one can make about a ladybug due to her spots. But no matter what a ladybug's personality is, she's still a beloved member of her community.*

The Centipede notes proudly that he's a pest; *nobody* loves him. James asks Miss Spider whether people love her. She sighs as she says that nobody loves her, even though she spends her days catching flies and mosquitoes in her web. Spiders, she says, are treated unfairly. Just last week, Aunt Sponge flushed Miss Spider's father down the bathtub drain. Miss Spider begins to cry. James looks around and asks if it's true that it's unlucky to kill a spider. The Centipede says it's very unlucky—Aunt Sponge died after flushing Miss Spider's father. Miss Spider agrees that feeling the bump of Aunt Sponge was very satisfying and asks the Centipede for a song.

It's not uncommon for people to be afraid of spiders, which Miss Spider shows is a big problem. By having Miss Spider—a giant talking spider—tell this story, Dahl encourages readers to recognize that being afraid of spiders (or people) isn't an excuse to hurt, kill, or think poorly of them. For that matter, it's possible that when someone acts on their prejudice, they'll one day suffer for it. This is, according to the Centipede, why Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker died—they were horrible people who got their comeuppance.

The Centipede sings a song about how fat Aunt Sponge was. He sings that she decided to make herself "sleek as a cat," but the **peach** made her thinner than any diet would have. Miss Spider loves the song and asks for one about Aunt Spiker. With a grin, the Centipede sings that Aunt Spiker was thin enough to use her as a fire poker. He sings that Aunt Spiker wanted to gain weight, so she vowed to eat marshmallows and chocolate—but the peach "ironed her out on the lawn" instead. Everyone claps. The Centipede sings his favorite song, but James interrupts and shouts for the Centipede to look out.

Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge's bodies are so far outside the norm that to James, they seem absurd. While the preoccupation with making fun of the aunts' bodies might be grating for modern readers, within the world of the novel, their absurd body shapes make them more humorous and less villainous.

CHAPTER 26

Having danced wildly during his songs, the Centipede now teeters and falls off the edge of the **peach**. James yells for the Silkworm to start spinning and ties string around his waist. He tells his friends to pull him up if he tugs on the string three times. Then, James dives over the edge. The Ladybug cries that both James and the Centipede are lost. The others join her in crying, while the Old-Green-Grasshopper plays a funeral march on his violin. Suddenly, they feel three tugs on the string. Everyone hauls on the string and finally, James and the Centipede are back on the peach. The Centipede cries that his boots are ruined after his swim in the Atlantic. The Old-Green-Grasshopper shushes the Centipede. Night is falling, and he suggests they stay on top of the peach to keep watch.

Once again, James's bug friends make quick assumptions rather than trusting that James's plan could work. This is why they promptly mourn his death—in their mind, no one survives such a leap. Meanwhile, the Centipede's silly annoyance with his wet boots after an extremely serious near-death experience again underscores that the novel is likewise a silly and nonsensical one.

CHAPTER 27

James and his friends look around at the clouds, which tower over them like mountains. The moon rises and illuminates the swaying **peach**. It's completely silent. Airplanes, the narrator says, make so much noise that they scare anything hiding in the "cloud-mountains." A peach, however, is a "soft, stealthy traveler," so James and his friends see things that no one has ever seen before. As they drift past one cloud, they see wispy creatures twice the height of normal men. The Ladybug is afraid, but James shushes her—these must be Cloud-Men. Everyone is afraid the Cloud-Men will see them. The Centipede tells the Earthworm that the Cloud-Men would love to eat an earthworm like salami.

Dahl links airplanes to the manmade world of adults. They're noisy and they make it so people using them can't see their world for what it really is. Because James is a child and embraces the natural world, he is open to seeing all of the spectacular, unbelievable things that nature has to offer. The Cloud-Men support the Old-Green-Grasshopper's earlier point that there are lots of things people don't know about—but if they're willing to accept that the world is full of mysteries, those mysteries will begin to reveal themselves.

As the group on the **peach** watches, the Cloud-Men grab handfuls of cloud, roll them into marbles, and then toss the marbles in a pile. The Cloud-Men don't notice the peach behind them. After a while, one Cloud-Man tells his fellows to get their shovels. Then, the Cloud-Men shovel the marbles over the edge of the cloud, chanting about sending hail and snow down to Earth below. When James notes that they just witnessed the creation of hailstones, the Centipede deems that ridiculous—it's summer. The Centipede refuses to listen to James's explanations or requests that he quiet down. Laughing loudly, the Centipede loudly calls the Cloud-Men idiots.

The Cloud-Men are Dahl's imaginative version of a figure like the Greek god Zeus, who throws thunderbolts down to earth to make lightning storms. In essence, the novel encourages readers to wonder what's actually more absurd and unbelievable: the idea that there are Cloud-Men in the sky making weather, or the idea that the clouds make hail all by themselves. Of course, clouds do make hail, but Dahl encourages readers to see that life itself is absurd.

The Cloud-Men jump. When they notice the **peach**, they drop their shovels and stare, dumbfounded. Everyone on the peach, save for the Centipede, sits still and terrified. The Centipede insists he's not afraid and dances while making rude gestures at the Cloud-Men. Angered, the Cloud-Men begin to hurl hailstones at the peach. James yells for his friends to lie flat. But the Cloud-Men throw the hailstones hard enough to make holes in the peach. One hits the Centipede right in the nose. The Cloud-Men make bigger and bigger hailstones. When they throw some as big as cannonballs, James tells his friends to run down the tunnel into the peach. The Ladybug asks for someone to inspect her shell, but the Glow-worm's bulb is cracked. Eventually, James realizes that they can't hear hailstones anymore. He peeks outside and the coast is clear.

Even if the natural world has a lot to teach James and his friends, that doesn't mean it's wholly benevolent. Indeed, the natural world is full of danger—the Cloud-Men could do serious damage to the peach and its passengers with their huge hailstones. It's telling, though, that the Cloud-Men only launch their attack after the Centipede insults them. It's better, per the novel, to approach the natural world with respect, reverence, and a desire to understand. The Centipede, on the other hand, assumes the Cloud-Men are inferior and is punished for making that assumption.

CHAPTER 28

James and his friends climb back on top of the **peach**. They don't see any Cloud-Men, but they do notice that the peach is leaking. The Earthworm panics, but the Ladybug distracts him. She points to a spot ahead, where they can see an arch. Both ends of the arch rest on clouds. The bugs wonder if it's a bridge or a giant upside-down horseshoe. When the Centipede catches sight of Cloud-Men on the structure, he goes pale. There are millions of Cloud-Men. James begs his panicking friends to keep quiet—sneaking past the Cloud-Men is their only hope.

While James and his friends may be right to assume that the Cloud-Men are dangerous, that doesn't mean they should panic and invite whatever inclement weather the Cloud-Men have in store for them next. Rather, James suggests, they need to look at things calmly and logically, especially as they try to figure out what this arch is. And realistically, these Cloud-Men might not be interested in harming the travelers—especially if the Centipede doesn't insult them.

Silently, James and his friends watch the Cloud-Men scramble over the arch. The Centipede runs down the **peach**'s tunnel, but the others on top of the peach observe that the Cloud-Men are painting the arch. They realize the arch is a rainbow and shout for the Centipede to come back up to see. The Centipede pokes his head back up just in time to see the Cloud-Men push the rainbow off of the clouds. It now hangs by ropes, but the Centipede notes that they have a problem: the peach is headed right for the arch and the ropes. Miss Spider, the Earthworm, and the Ladybug all panic. James shouts for everyone to hold on as the peach crashes through the rainbow, splintering it.

Even though this episode still ends in disaster, it's telling that James and his friends are able to put aside their fear and assumptions when they realize that they're looking at the creation of a rainbow. This suggests that it's possible at any point to find something beautiful and awe-inspiring to notice and appreciate, even if it's only for a fleeting moment. It's also telling that James is the one to encourage his friends to hold on—he's still the captain of the peach and the most capable person on it.

The ropes that held the rainbow get tangled up in the silk securing the seagulls. An angry Cloud-Man begins to climb down the string. The Centipede yells for the Cloud-Man to eat the Earthworm first, but James shouts for the Centipede to bite through the string. The Centipede does as he's told, and a seagull flies away from the flock. The Cloud-Man dangles beneath the fleeing gull, cursing. Seeing their fellow carried away like this makes the other Cloud-Men let go of their ropes, which sends the rainbow pieces tumbling and frees the **peach**. However, rather than let the peach go, the Cloud-Men run after it, throwing things like dead rats and saucepans at it. One Cloud-Man tips a gallon of purple paint right onto the Centipede. The Centipede shrieks with anger, but becomes frightened when the paint starts to dry.

Again, the bugs' panic is telling—the Centipede shouting for the Cloud-Men to eat the Earthworm first reads a lot like Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker pushing each other and getting in each other's way as the peach bore down on them. Fortunately, James is able to come to the rescue again and help his friends see that selfishness like the Centipede expressed isn't helpful. Instead, people should look for solutions—or turn to children, with their less inhibited ways of seeing the world, for solutions. The Centipede does get his comeuppance when he becomes covered in paint.

CHAPTER 29

Finally, the seagulls pull the **peach** out of the Cloud-Men's reach. Everyone gathers around the Centipede. As the paint dries, he has to sit rigidly upright. All his legs stick straight out and he can't speak—the paint is already dry on his lips. The Old-Green-Grasshopper is aghast that the paint dried so fast, but James notes that "rainbow-paint" dries quickly. Miss Spider says she hates paint. The last time Aunt Spiker painted her kitchen, Miss Spider's grandmother got stuck in the wet paint. Nobody could rescue her, but Miss Spider and her friends brought food for the grandmother for six months. But then, last April, Aunt Sponge noticed the spider on her ceiling and murdered it with a mop. Suddenly, James hears someone shouting.

In this passage, it's worth noticing the absurdity of both the quick-drying rainbow-paint and of Miss Spider's grandmother's death. The death in particular is tragic and macabre, but the thought of feeding an imprisoned spider for months is nevertheless humorous.

CHAPTER 30

Everyone listens, but the voice is too far away to make out properly. Miss Spider cries that it's a Cloud-Man come to get them, while the Earthworm says, "It came from above!" Everyone looks up at a huge, dark cloud. Faintly, they hear someone shout to turn on the faucets. Within seconds, the cloud bursts open. What comes out isn't raindrops, though; it's like the whole ocean falls out of the sky. James and his friends grab onto whatever they can so the water doesn't wash them away. The deluge makes James think this is the end, but suddenly, it stops. The Old-Green-Grasshopper and the Earthworm gasp at how wet they are, but the Centipede shouts with excitement—the water washed the paint off. He dances and sings a song about how happy he is to be a pest again.

Once again, the Cloud-Men prove that the natural world can be dangerous if people don't treat it with respect and reverence. This is clearly revenge for either doing away with their fellow Cloud-Man or for insulting them earlier. However, the deluge nevertheless frees the Centipede from his stiff paint. With this, the novel suggests that the natural world may teach lessons that are frightening, but learning those lessons is nevertheless a good thing. Hopefully, the Centipede will be able to move on, knowing he shouldn't insult people.

CHAPTER 31

The Ladybug observes that the **peach** seems to be going very fast. James thinks the seagulls don't like the Cloud-Men either and want to get away quickly. At a few more points that night, James and his friends notice the Cloud-Men. They pass a snow machine and the drums that make thunder. Past the machines that make cyclones and tornadoes, James notices the city of the Cloud-Men. The wives of the Cloud-Men crouch over stoves, frying snowballs while children play. Just before dawn, the travelers hear a whoosh above and see something large and bat-like. The creature cries and flies away. Miss Spider moans that she wants morning to come soon. James points to the horizon, where the sky is just starting to lighten.

By this point, the travelers are growing tired of their journey. But even though their curiosity is waning, this doesn't mean there aren't still things to learn—such as that thunder comes from drums, or that tornadoes come from machines. But the fact that even James seems ready to have this night be over points to the fact that over the course of his journey, he's begun to come of age in significant ways. He's closer to being ready to leave behind the natural world of childhood for a more adult world, where he can put what he's learned to use.

CHAPTER 32

When the sun rises, everyone stands and stretches. Then, the Centipede notices that there's land below them. Everyone celebrates and peers down at the vast city below them, which is spotted with tall buildings. The Old-Green-Grasshopper doesn't think this is England and James agrees—this must be America. The **peach** crossed the Atlantic overnight. The Centipede is thrilled at this turn of events, but the Earthworm cuts him off. He insists they need to figure out how to get down to land. The Ladybug suggests they ask James. James thinks if they cut down a few seagulls at a time, they'll slowly descend and reach the ground.

Unlike his companions, the Earthworm hasn't learned the importance of not making assumptions or jumping to conclusions. It's still in his nature to panic and assume that things won't go well—even though James has proven himself more than capable of rescuing the peach and his friends from danger. The Ladybug, on the other hand, now sees James as a competent young man, ready for the next chapter of his life.

CHAPTER 33

Down below in New York City, pandemonium breaks out. When someone sights a massive ball high over Manhattan, they believe it's a bomb sent to destroy the city. Air-raid sirens tell people to take cover in subways and in cellars. The mayor of the city calls up the president, who abandons his breakfast cereal to get the military involved. Before long, the entire United States knows that the biggest bomb ever is about to explode over New York City.

The fact that the New Yorkers panic and believe the big ball—the peach—is a bomb again speaks to how people (and especially adults) are quick to make assumptions. The people's widespread fear also gestures to the Cold War climate in which Dahl was writing.

CHAPTER 34

James tells the Centipede to cut through a string. This doesn't do anything, but James points out that the **peach** lost a lot of juice due to the Cloud-Men's hailstones. After a few more gulls fly away, the peach begins to descend. It descends slowly, giving its passengers time to discuss what will happen once they land. The Ladybug wonders if they'll be in the newspapers, while the Centipede asks for help polishing his boots. Just then, a huge airplane flies right above them. As it passes, it slices all of the strings and lets all of the seagulls loose. The peach plummets. The Earthworm begs for James to save them, but James can't. He tells his friends to shut their eyes.

Once again, James comes up with a plan that seems guaranteed to be successful by letting the seagulls go gradually. The Earthworm doesn't even have anything to say about it. However, it's a major leap for the Earthworm when, once the peach does fall, he asks James to save them. On some level, the Earthworm knows that James is more capable than the Earthworm gives him credit for. It just takes a truly life or death situation for the Earthworm to be able to voice that.

CHAPTER 35

The **peach** falls faster and faster. The narrator is certain that the peach will "smash into a million pieces" when it hits the ground. Everyone who isn't yet hiding underground looks up and watches the peach—which they think is a bomb—fall. Several women scream, while men say goodbye to each other. The city waits for the end.

According to the narrator, everyone—including those on the peach—believes they're going to die, which is another reference to the tense wartime climate in which Dahl was writing. But given that the novel makes it clear that people shouldn't jump to conclusions, it seems unlikely that anyone is actually going to die here.

CHAPTER 36

James tells all of his friends on the **peach** goodbye. The peach is headed for all the tallest buildings, so James watches the skyscrapers get too close too fast. The tallest skyscraper has a huge needle sticking up into the sky. The peach hits the needle directly and finally stops, skewered on the top of the Empire State Building.

Indeed, the peach and everyone on it is saved—and this time, by a skyscraper, which symbolizes the adult world. This consequently represents James's growing readiness to be a part of this new adult world. He has the skills he needs, thanks to the lessons he learned on board the peach, to integrate and succeed.

CHAPTER 37

After a few minutes, people below realize that whatever fell wasn't a bomb. They pour out of their hiding places to stare at the Empire State Building. Some think the thing on it is a flying saucer containing aliens. Firemen and police officers, with guns at the ready, take the elevators up the building and gather on the observation deck right below the spike. From this vantage point, they can't see anyone on the **peach**. The Chief of Police shouts for the travelers to show themselves, so the Centipede sticks his head over the edge and grins. Policemen and firefighters believe the creature is a Wampus, a Snozzwanger, or a Prock. The Centipede seems to be enjoying himself. When the Chief of Police asks where he came from, the Centipede says they traveled thousands of miles.

In the first responders' reactions to the peach and the Centipede, the novel drives home how absurd it is to make assumptions about new things and new people. It never occurs to the first responders, for instance, to ask the Centipede who or what he is—instead, they make themselves look silly by suggesting he's a Snozzwanger (one of Dahl's many made-up creatures). The belief that the peach is an alien spaceship reads as similarly absurd and wildly off base. However, the Centipede encourages readers to notice just how silly all of this is by grinning and enjoying the confusion.

The Old-Green-Grasshopper sticks his head over the edge too. Six men faint when they see him, while others shout that he's an Oinck or a Cockatrice. Neither the Centipede nor the Old-Green-Grasshopper know why the first responders are so upset. When Miss Spider joins them at the edge, the head of the fire department blanches. Miss Spider asks for help down, but the first responders are afraid the bugs have "space guns." They agree to put up a ladder as all seven bugs on board the **peach** arrive at the edge to look over. The panic stops suddenly when James appears next to his friends.

Now, the Old-Green-Grasshopper and Miss Spider join the Centipede in making the first responders look even sillier. To the bugs, their existence is normal—so it's unclear why the first responders are so shocked. And it's especially telling that the first responders still have a hard time after Miss Spider asks politely for help. They assume she's evil, even when she shows she clearly isn't, which points back to her earlier lamentation that people always assume the worst of spiders.

James waves happily at the first responders, laughs, and asks that they not be frightened. He says that his friends aren't dangerous and, breaking into song, he introduces the Centipede, the Earthworm, the Old-Green-Grasshopper, the Glow-worm, Miss Spider, the Ladybug, and the Silkworm. As he introduces each bug, James shares something good that they do. He mentions that the Earthworm helps farmers, while Miss Spider has never met or frightened Miss Muffet. James also insists it's bad to kill spiders. When James is done, the first responders agree that it's time to get the newcomers down from the **peach** immediately.

Now that James is more of an adult himself, he's better able to connect with the adult first responders and introduce them to his new friends. Through his song, James shows the first responders how wrong they were to make assumptions about the bugs—the bugs are, according to James's song, all upstanding, helpful beings. James's success in convincing everyone that they mean no harm suggests that anyone can learn to be more open, no matter how old they are.

CHAPTER 38

Within five minutes, James and his friends are down off the **peach**. James tells his story to shocked first responders, who treat James and the bugs like heroes. The Mayor welcomes the newcomers to New York while big cranes get the peach off of the Empire State Building. Then, the Mayor announces that it's time for a parade. James and the bugs sit in a big open limousine, while the peach follows behind on a big truck. Nobody cares about the hole from the Empire State Building's spike, which causes peach juice to drip into the street. The Mayor and other important New Yorkers follow the peach.

Calling for a parade is the Mayor's way of celebrating absurdity and new things. More importantly, the parade will also introduce thousands of other people to something new: the idea of a giant peach and giant bugs. The parade, in this sense, spreads the idea that people should greet new things with curiosity and openness to an entire city. Parading the peach itself also holds up the natural world as a positive thing worth admiring.

The crowds cheer and yell for James and his friends. Suddenly, a little girl runs out and asks to have a taste of the **peach**. James gives her permission and hundreds of other children join her. The trail of children gets to be a mile long. James hasn't seen this many children in years—it's the best thing he's ever seen. By the end of the parade, the peach is gone. Only the pit remains.

Even though James is now in the adult world of the city, this doesn't mean that he'll never be around children again. Even though he's come of age symbolically, he is still a seven-year-old child. When he agrees to share his peach with the other children, he introduces them to the wonders of the natural world.

CHAPTER 39

This ends James's journey, but he and his friends all become rich and successful in the United States. The Centipede becomes the vice president of a boot company, while the Earthworm works for a company that makes women's face creams. He acts in commercials for the creams. The Silkworm and Miss Spider learn to spin nylon thread and make ropes for tightrope walkers, while the Glow-worm replaces the light bulb inside the Statue of Liberty's torch. She saves the city from paying a huge electricity bill. The Old-Green-Grasshopper, meanwhile, joins the New York Symphony Orchestra with his violin. And the Ladybug, who spent her life fearing that a fire would destroy her home and family, marries the head of the fire department.

It's telling that all of James's bug friends find jobs and lives in New York City. And indeed, the novel implies that each of James's friends finds a job that plays to their strengths and allows them to find success. With this, the novel insists that if people celebrate diversity and welcome newcomers with open arms, the world becomes a richer place. Each of James's friends brings a new spin to their respective jobs, making the job of a spinner or a violinist in the orchestra even more fun and interesting than it was before.

The city sets the **peach** pit up in Central Park. In addition to being a famous monument, the pit becomes James's home. Every day, James welcomes visitors into his home. Sometimes they can find the Old-Green-Grasshopper or the Ladybug there as well. And every week, children visit the peach pit and become James's best friends. He's now the happiest boy in the world. Because all his new friends beg him to tell his story all the time, James eventually writes it all down in a book. That book is the one the reader just finished.

When James decides to live in the peach pit in Central Park, it reminds readers that he's not a full adult yet. He may be more mature, but he's not mature enough to live in an apartment building in the very adult city. Choosing to write down his story to share with other children, however, represents another significant leap in James's maturity. He recognizes the importance of the lessons that he learned and he wants to be able to easily share them with others.

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