

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SOME OF  
ROALD DAHL'S BOOKS FOR CHILDREN,  
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO A  
'SUBVERSIVE' ELEMENT IN HIS  
WRITING, SOME RESPONSES TO HIS  
WORK AND ITS PLACE IN THE  
EDUCATION OF THE CHILD.

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NOTE

Longer titles such as Charlie And The Chocolate Factory, George's Marvellous Medicine and Danny The Champion Of The World, are sometimes shortened to Charlie, George and Danny, respectively, in order that unnecessary repetition and awkwardness of expression may be avoided.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is always interesting to take a critical look at the works of an extremely popular author. Even more so when a particular writer has been the subject of criticism from a fair number of librarians, teachers and parents in the English-speaking world, and probably further afield wherever the writer's books have been available in translation.

One would seem to be referring to none other than Enid Blyton. The history of her worldwide fame and the criticism she has attracted is well known. However the author in question is Roald Dahl, who has already established himself as one of the most popular living authors for children, if not the most popular in the world today. It is not my intention either to establish on a statistical basis the extent of Dahl's popularity as a children's author, or to document the origin, nature or extent of the criticism levelled against him.

To my knowledge no child has gone on record as being in any degree unfavourably disposed towards his work. An informal reading survey was conducted among junior and senior primary schoolchildren in some thirty schools in the Cape Province (mostly English medium), which formed part of an assignment for Graaff-Reinet College students, in July 1983. This survey revealed that Roald Dahl was even more widely read than Enid Blyton - in the class groups involved. Exciting action, humour and lively language and characterisation were the reasons most commonly given for Dahl's popularity.

Reasons for negative adult reactions, ranging from reservation to hostility concern mostly the ethical content of Dahl's stories, the absence of depth in the characterisation and a tendency to overdo certain effects, particularly in language use. Various articles on a few of Dahl's stories, but mostly on Charlie And The Chocolate Factory, have appeared from time to time in the journals such as Children's Literature in Education, The Horn Book Magazine and The School Librarian. The general tendency has been fairly critical, and this probably not only reflects but also influences current thinking on the subject, especially in the United Kingdom.

Mrs R. Bennett, who is responsible for approving titles for reading lists in Cape Department Schools, offered me an overriding reason for her reluctance to include Dahl for several years: that none of his stories, with the exception of The Enormous Crocodile, is told from the point of view of the child. This is serious criticism indeed. But this does not throw any light on the reasons for Dahl's popularity with children.

It is clear that Dahl, like Blyton, has a huge juvenile following worldwide, but has some critics in the adult and educational establishment. One might ask whether his work is criticised for similar reasons as apply in the case of Enid Blyton; whether he is popular among children for similar reasons; whether most adults adopt a disapproving stance towards his work and whether there is consensus at least among school librarians.

To answer questions such as these on the basis of exhaustive research lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. I have chosen to elicit views on Dahl's work from various adults, including a few librarians, not as a means of validating any hypothesis, but more as a source of reference for my own critical review of Dahl's books for children.

Similarly responses of children, either in groups or as individuals, serve merely to reflect a tendency among a relatively small sample of readers. What is said regarding the merits of an author whose work has attracted controversy, must rest largely upon value judgements; and these cannot be formulated on the basis of quantitative findings alone.

The emphasis of this study will be more on an assessment of Roald Dahl's work itself - from a literary and educational standpoint - than upon responses of children and adults to his books. But some attention is invited to the question of whether there is good reason for the apparent discrepancy between juvenile and some adult responses. It is my own contention that Dahl's writing for children has a claim to making a positive contribution towards the social, emotional and linguistic growth of children, at least in the English-speaking world. Great popularity with children need not necessarily be taken as a signal that an author's work offers little more than superficial entertainment of passing value for the indiscriminating reader.

It could be of some interest to make a brief comparison between Dahl and Blyton, as both have captured a world market in children's literature, and both have

been treated with hostility in some adult circles.

In the earlier part of her career, the forties and early fifties, Blyton filled a large gap, as very few writers for children appeared in that period. Her works, which were produced with great frequency, flooded bookshops and, as Sheila Ray points out, placed libraries under great pressure to supply the enormous demand, or else lose clients. Towards the end of this earlier period, librarians became increasingly critical of Blyton's works as being poor in literary quality, and considerable controversy arose concerning the duty of library services to set standards by providing and encouraging quality literature on the one hand, and needing to cater for what children wanted to read, in the interests of encouraging reading, on the other. After the Second World War Blyton came increasingly under fire for what were regarded as outdated social attitudes. Her books projected a 'cosy' middle class family image, which was reassuring enough during the time of the fascist regimes in Europe, but unacceptable to the egalitarian movement after the war.

In contrast to this, Roald Dahl has emerged as probably the most popular living author for children during a sustained 'golden' era of children's literature. His earlier books for children, James And The Giant Peach (1961) and Charlie And The Chocolate Factory (1964), appeared at about the beginning of a 'boom' worldwide which has risen to dizzy heights in the seventies and eighties. Charlie, particularly, has been the centre of much controversy for years for its allegedly undesirable social attitudes and flat or stereotyped characterisation. Dahl appeared to have been flying in the face of egalitarian attitudes in his portrayal of the oompa-loompas, a work force of pint-sized indigenous 'slaves' earning their keep in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. But there is little evidence of cosy middle class prejudice or outworn colonial attitudes in his work as a whole.

A significant point of difference, furthermore, is that Roald Dahl has published a dozen or so children's books in just over two decades, whereas Blyton produced literally hundreds in roughly three. In no sense has the juvenile reading public been bombarded with Dahl as it has been with Blyton, yet Dahl has shared top spot with Blyton in many a survey of reading preferences. Sheila Ray, for example, quotes a survey conducted by John Richmond (amongst boys only) in two London comprehensive schools, in which "Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton maintain an impressive supremacy in both first year classes. Between them they have as many readers from the two lists as all the other authors put together."

(Ray, S. 1982 p. 207).



The availability of little other writing for children and the sheer quantity produced by Enid Blyton may account for a part of her success. These possibilities may certainly be eliminated in the case of Dahl. Nevertheless Blyton's popularity has continued right up to the present day - despite her output having ceased altogether more than fifteen years ago.

Some librarians and educationists have, in varying degrees, been opposed to the work of both writers on the ground of their having, in their different ways, undermining effects on the literary and social progress thought to be desirable for children. Perhaps the word 'undermining' is a little strong in Enid Blyton's case, as nothing that she wrote could have been construed as positively harmful to the child or against the prevailing social norms. The worst that she could generally be held to blame for is encouraging petty and stereotyped social attitudes which reflected the unquestionable superiority of the rather upper middle class outlook on life. Put another way, she did nothing to take children further along the road of social or, for that matter, linguistic development. In a sense the trite and banal in themes and style can be undermining as far as the best interests of education are concerned.

Dahl's work presents more of an enigma, however. He, like Blyton, knows how to appeal to children in his writing, and thus cannot be ignored even by his critics. The one characteristic easiest to single out as being 'undermining' in his books is the stance he adopts towards the social Establishment. His books can be a celebration of enterprise and the spirit of fun, and at the same time be underlaid with a cynicism which is not exactly negative, but certainly provocative. His heroes sometimes find themselves on the wrong side of the law, yet embody a spirit of fair play. There is a fairly insistent notion that the world is not what it is made out to be, and children are not spared a view of the darker or 'real' side of people or institutions. Even so his books are colourful and lively, filled with imaginative inventiveness and variety, as I shall attempt to show in Chapter Two.

One can occasionally be left wondering whether Roald Dahl always has children's tastes and interests in mind, whether he is not perhaps using a story or part of a story as a vehicle for 'hitting back' at society for wrongs of which he may well have felt a victim as a child. His experiences at Repton Public School under the heavy hand of the headmaster Geoffrey Fisher, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury, may provide a clue in this direction.

To generalise, the 'ethos' of the Dahl books differs markedly from that of the

Blyton collection. The Famous Five are adept at showing up adults as being, at best, ineffectual, but this is as far as any subversion of the adult establishment goes in the world of Enid Blyton. Dahl's ridiculing of certain adults is not to show how children are superior in upholding the Establishment, but a comment on the Establishment itself. This difference in 'ethos' is the real difference between these two authors. Action, excitement and wish fulfilment they both have, but whereas Blyton's themes tend to be trite and repetitive, reinforcing stereotyped social (essentially elitist) attitudes, with a style of language to match, themes in Roald Dahl's books carry a challenge, something original - with a style suitable for expressing this.

It is generally accepted that children's books are capable of serving developmental needs. It is therefore reasonable to assume that little harm can result if the compulsion to read Blyton is merely a passing phase. It seems undeniable that Blyton has been serving some or other needs, possibly security and wish fulfilment, experienced by children at a certain stage. Ray (1982 p.117) says, "... most readers, child or adult, prefer their fiction reading to provide a window on a more affluent way of life, not a mirror reflection of their own, perhaps rather dull, life." The need for wish fulfilment is not necessarily something that disappears with childhood; but adults, when reading 'escapist' literature, prefer books written specifically for adults, and would not consider re-reading an Enid Blyton mystery. With Dahl, however, there is a difference. Adults can enjoy reading his children's books - although clearly not for 'escapism' of the kind mentioned above. Adult enjoyment could occur because the stories are inventive, lively, humorous and often provocative, and almost always with characters capable of arousing interest. Blyton's stories can be read on one level only; Dahl's on more than one, even in the case of titles specifically intended for the youngest reader. C.S. Lewis (1969) felt that a good children's book should be capable of engaging the interest of an adult also.

Characterisation is a further area in which comparisons between the authors concerned may be of interest. A degree of similarity is apparent in the 'caricature' type of portrayal of characters who exhibit extremes of attitude or behaviour, such as Blyton's Mr Twiddle (absent-mindedness) and Dahl's Victor Hazell (vindictive arrogance). Other of his creations are larger-than-life, such as Willy Wonka. Young children recognise and respond to extreme types more easily than to less clear-cut figures. There are no redeeming features in the characters of the three farmers in Fantastic Mr Fox, and vices

of character such as gluttony or miserliness are thus thrown into-sharp focus. Nor is there any thing to mollify the sinister and tyrannical evil of the grandmother in George's Marvellous Medicine.

While Blytonesque creations such as Messrs Twiddle and Meddle are really personifications of absurdity designed to make the reader laugh, Dahl's larger-than-life characters have a particular role to play in his works of fantasy. In the traditional fairy tale, good and evil are polarised and confront each other squarely in the form of clearly distinguishable good and bad characters. There is a similar pattern in works such as George's Marvellous Medicine, James And The Giant Peach and Fantastic Mr Fox, in which the nasty characters need to be seen as nasty. But that is not to say that the protagonists in such stories are mere cardboard cut-outs. There is more to identify with in them than children could possibly be aware of. Here I should exclude Charlie Bucket, whose very passivity seems intended as a virtue in itself, in a story which bears more than a passing resemblance to the cautionary tale. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that young Charlie serves essentially as a foil to those who are greedy and undisciplined.

Barring the Charlie Bucket stories though, there is an important difference between Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton in the way they portray their central characters. Blyton's fantasy tales have not attracted much criticism; it is in her mystery-type stories that a lack of focus and depth in her children heroes and heroines have drawn really unfavourable comment. Whereas each Dahl story has an easily identifiable child protagonist, who in most cases becomes an acceptable 'rounded' character in his own right, there are none in the Blyton adventures and mysteries. Not only is very little attention given to the inner lives of her characters, but as there are always at least four children (and one animal) involved in each plot, there is no scope for such attention. There is also, not surprisingly, little to distinguish between the characters as individuals either, in any but a superficial sense. But then Blyton is not concerned with creating convincing people in her brand of fiction where action and suspense are the key to everything. Nor do her readers appear to be looking for anything more than this.

Excitement and action appear to be ends in themselves in Blyton's work, whereas they would be also partly a means to an end in Dahl. The reader may identify quite easily with the Famous Five for what they do rather than for what they are. Identifying with a Danny or a Sophie involves much more. Whatever the

suspense or action might be, in most of the Dahl stories there is an exploration of state of mind and motivation which brings the reader very much closer to the heroes or heroines as people.

Roald Dahl's purpose, if one may presume upon such a thing, would be to involve and entertain his reader with exciting and interesting plots and characters. Although many of his characters are created to serve a satirical purpose also, it would be inaccurate to say that none of them exists in its own right. Adult readers sometimes have reservations about Dahl's hyperbolic techniques in his creation of the 'nasties'. The author's relish in such creations is unmistakable. Shocking or sensational some might seem to be, but it is improbable that children find them anything but enormously funny.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHAT IS A GOOD CHILDREN'S BOOK? (FICTION)

This question should be approached in relation to what is meant by worthwhile fiction. Firstly, it is something that enables the reader imaginatively to enter a specially created world and to enact the role of spectator-participant of events occurring in that world. The reader's journey through time, place and event can lead, through closeness to the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the central character(s), to a broader awareness of the human condition. This awareness is brought about by an appeal to both thought and feeling. Fiction, as an art form, has the ability to awaken and sustain wisdom through emotional response. This would not be possible if the whole action in a work of this genre were unauthentic - if the elements of human motivation, circumstance, feeling, thought, relationships and interaction did not ring true or cohere as a whole.

What sets apart a work of fiction as being written for children as against that intended for adult readers? It is not always possible or even useful to divide books into neat categories. Watership Down and Lord of the Flies, for example, defy ready classification. Nevertheless there are certain distinctions which have an important bearing upon children's responses to books. Myles McDowell (1973) enumerates some important differences, such as that children's books are generally shorter, mostly have children as the central characters, have clear plots, active rather than passive treatment, with greater weight given to dialogue and incident than to description and introspection. Furthermore they contain language accessible to children, optimistic rather than pessimistic themes, and a level of complexity which favours clear-cut issues rather than moral ambiguities. McDowell adds that the writer for children need not oversimplify experience:

"I think this comes close to the heart of the difference between a children's and an adult novel: a good children's book makes complex experience available to its readers; a good adult book draws attention to the inescapable complexity of experience."

(McDowell M. 1973 p. 52).

A child's thinking rests upon a more optimistic view of life; physical laws of cause and effect and chance occurrences are in the mind of a child, subordinate to a benign and omnipotent moral force which ensures that justice will be done in the end. "Good will triumph ... because it must." (McDowell M. 1973 p.54).

It is not possible to provide a handy 'recipe' for a good children's book, as no individual title could be expected to contain all of the 'ingredients'. Nevertheless reviewers of children's books have little difficulty in assessing them in terms of 'quality' or 'non-quality'.

Broadly speaking 'non-quality' fiction is lacking in artistic and educational value. This could be because of implausible plots, thin characterisation, unoriginal style and other factors. One must accept, however, that there must be differences of opinion on the value or quality of a particular title.

Houghton-Hawksley quotes Roald Dahl's view that worthwhile children's books must match up to two tests: "children must love them, and succeeding generations of children must love them; they must be excellent both in content and style." (Houghton-Hawksley H. 1983 p. 8). This view encompasses the two major areas of children's enjoyment as well as the intrinsic value of the work itself. While an adult may estimate a particular title to be high in value, it may prove unpopular with children, and vice versa. Dahl's first 'test' quoted above, however, suggests an enduring popularity which transcends the interests or fashions of a particular generation of readers. (One notes that Blyton's work has 'passed' this test.) His second 'test' does not specify what is meant by "excellent"; one can expect adult opinion to be divided from time to time on the value of particular works.

The general criteria used for the evaluation of fiction in the Cape Education Library Service have been summarised by Mrs R. Bennett (Book Selector) along these lines:

- "Every fiction book should:
- (i) be good literature;
  - (ii) be out of a child's world, i.e. it should have a child's perspective;
  - (iii) be sound morally;
- AND (iv) be enjoyable to a child."

(Houghton-Hawksley H. 1983 p. 292).

Enlarging upon what she means by "good literature", Mrs Bennett proceeds as follows:

- "(i) \*
- \* it should show some sort of creative imagination and originality.
  - \* it should have a theme or plot which builds to a climax and a satisfactory and credible ending.
  - \* it should either be true-to-life, i.e. true to its setting, or a complete fantasy. Both types should be consistent.
  - \* it should be convincing and realistic and in perspective.
  - \* it should be gripping/exciting/sad/funny etc. but not sensational.
  - \* the characters should be real and believable.
  - \* in general, personification of animals, plants, buses, etc., should be avoided unless, as for example with Beatrix Potter, the characterization is outstanding.
  - \* nothing in the text should offend any particular group or individual in the community.
  - \* abridged versions should be as near the original as possible.
  - \* fairy or folk tales should, in translation, be as close to the original as possible, not the reteller's own version.
  - \* it should not be "talked down" or patronizing."

(Houghton-Hawksley H. 1983 p. 292).

There is no direct reference here to style. It might be correct to assume that should a book be found wanting in respect of content or theme, a good style would not be able to compensate for such deficiencies. On the other hand it is unlikely that a work of fiction written in a style which, as Sheila Ray puts it, "avoids clichés, which incorporates original metaphors and similes, which uses challenging language structures and rhythms and in which there is a vivid immediacy of language", would be anything but sound in content.

(Ray S. 1982 p. 128).

The points made in (i) above, in particular those relating to plot, realism and characterisation, tie in with further observations made by Sheila Ray:

"In children's fiction, a plot is essential and this must be unfolded in a way which attracts and holds a reader's interest. Ideally, the sequence of events should arise from the nature of the characters, not be imposed upon them from the outside. In a novel for children, the central characters are usually children or child-substitutes but adults who are important to the story must appear as convincing and rounded characters. The quality of the characterization plays an important part in the overall quality of the work."

(Ray S. 1982 p. 128).

She goes on to say:

"The good children's story should create a credible environment and a sense of reality. If the author is skilful enough, the reader will inhabit this created world during the reading of the story and if the skill is great enough, something of that world will always remain with the reader."

(Ray S. 1982 p. 128).

The second major point Mrs Bennett makes, in (ii) above, " ... be out of the child's world ..." she enlarges upon by observing:

" \* it should have some relation to the child's level of experience, thoughts or emotions.

\* it should stimulate his imagination, or extend his knowledge and widen his horizons mentally and emotionally or develop his experience."

(Houghton-Hawksley H. 1983 p. 292).

On this aspect Sheila Ray says the following:

"Themes and concepts must be appropriate to the child reader. Solutions which are offered to problems should be feasible and constructive. The novel should meet the child's need for achievement, security and acceptance, but should also open his mind to the possibility of change. The reader should be given the opportunity to make evaluative judgements and be given worthy ideals for conduct and achievement. The reading of a story should be an enriching and rewarding experience as well as an enjoyable one, increasing the reader's understanding of the world, widening his sympathies and stimulating his imagination."

(Ray S. 1982 p. 128).

Nina Bawden writes that "the important difference between writing for adults and writing for children is not style or subject matter, though those come into it, but the point of view you're looking from". (Bawden N. 1974 p. 4).

Norma Schlager (1978) points out that if readers of a particular age cannot relate to a character in a story because of a discrepancy in maturity between them,



the book will be unacceptable, no matter how well written. She maintains that substantial research has indicated that unless childhood needs at identifiable developmental stages are recognised, children of roughly corresponding ages will not read them. This suggests a view that reading for children in the primary school stage serves emotional more than cognitive needs. The power that the fairy tale once exerted over the pre-school child is lost during the so-called latency stage, (approximately 7 - 12 years) but is recaptured in a more advanced form in stories dealing with childhood fantasies, daydreams, hero-worship, self-assertion and aggression.

The writer has a double responsibility towards children. First of all he must write in accordance with the level of response associated with the abilities, needs and interests of children at various ages and stages. Secondly he must tell the truth at all times, but in a manner fitting his juvenile readers. Nina Bawden expresses this dual obligation most aptly:

"Writing for children, you should never pretend things are other than they are, but you can, and should, leave out things that are beyond their comprehension. Answering their questions, their doubts and fears, is one thing. Clobbering them over the head with the facts of life, quite another ... a good book for children, like a good book for adults, should hold an honest mirror up to life; reflect the emotional landscape they move in, tell them what they want to know. And what they want to know, what they want to understand, is their own situation."

(Bawden N. 1974 p. 10).

Notwithstanding this, children pass through a stage in which they seem to have a need of escapism, an area on which David Shavreen throws some useful light:

"It is because stories offer to the child new horizons, the possibility of a different order from the familiar one, that they have so strong an appeal. Where life only too often is a dull and boring routine of living that fails to rouse in children those heroic qualities that they so much admire, they turn to stories as all generations have before them for a substitute; and seek exciting adventures in a land of make-believe."

(Shavreen D. 1977 p. 22).

Most children seem, at some pre-critical stage, to absorb everything they read indiscriminately without any regard for quality.

Once children have begun to develop some critical sense, (those who do), one might reasonably expect them to prefer books which are more true to life. Shavreen highlights the responsibility devolving upon the teacher as mediator in children's reading choices:

"... for he must act as the bridge which leads the child to those books that have a high measure of truth and reality; that give him access to such facts and values operating in life as are within his comprehension. Bad books, books that is, that spring from immature minds, that gloss over difficulty and danger, that ignore frailty and fear, that pretend that children are goody-goodies or that fame is easy, or that are otherwise written to please rather than to communicate experience, tend like bad money to drive out the good."

(Shavreen D. 1977 p. 25).

As mentioned earlier, a child's thinking is governed by a more optimistic view of life where physical laws of cause and effect are subordinate to a benign goodness favouring justice. Such a view is "safe and reassuring". (McDowell M. 1973 p.54). But an important distinction between good and lesser children's literature can be shown by the degree to which events in a novel reflect the interrelationship of various contributory factors leading to a 'happy' or 'satisfactory' ending, or reflect a facile disregard for realistic cause and effect.

Inseparable from this consideration of what helps constitute quality writing is the way in which human (or animal) characters are portrayed. If something of the complexity of experience is to be conveyed, no matter how accessible it is made to the child, the central character of the novel should not be flat or one-dimensional. Otherwise he will have no life of his own, and the reader will not be able to associate himself consciously or emotionally with the character in the novel in any way other than superficially. It is natural that a child will be able to recognise and comprehend some of the complexities of a child character more readily than he will grasp some of the complexities of an adult.

Good writing can do much to refine away some of that egocentricity so characteristic of childhood, and which does not always disappear timeously or smoothly in later childhood or early adolescence. Nicholas Tucker mentions that despite the simplistic lines along which children make judgements of other people, "...in their own lives children also have experience of confused feelings, when we don't always say what we really want to say, or do what is obviously best for us." (Tucker N. 1974 p. 40). He goes on to say that it is reassuring for the child to learn that some of his own feelings which seem grotesque and unique to himself, are shared by others. This will be more readily revealed by fiction than by real-life children, who tend to keep many feelings to themselves, thinking that they are the only ones who experience them. Children in reality are in many cases unable to articulate their thoughts to a degree where they become meaningful, or to express them in words.

Empathy is one of the means of engaging the child closely with the events of a story, through the establishment of an intimate bond of sympathetic awareness of what the protagonist is experiencing. The scope for this occurrence depends upon the scope allowed in the portrayal of character. In good children's writing, recognition and understanding which occur in moments of empathy can sometimes be taken further, when previously unencountered areas of complexity can be built in along with what is already known. The older the reader, the more conscious he will be of this. By way of conclusion, reference will be made to Esther Hautzig's The Endless Steppe, which, though meant for a higher age group, provides an outstanding example of how the reader's sensibilities can be educated through empathy.

A reading of this story, based on true events, can not only extend a child's knowledge of what Polish deportees might encounter in the wastes of Siberia, but can also take the reader further along the road to understanding the depth and resilience of the human spirit in the extremes of adversity. The response of the protagonist and heroine Esther Rudomin to the severities of life in Siberia becomes the reader's response. Realisation that the Russian oppressors of herself and her family are still human beings, becomes the reader's realisation. Her sufferings and hardships, her enterprise and her determination to rise above misfortune and to assert herself as an individual become an indelible lesson. The growing ambivalence of her feelings for the barren environment in which she and her family endure five years of hardship, to the point where she feels reluctant to leave later on, points to a complex bond between people and nature, as well as between individuals and the community, where what is good and worthwhile cannot be measured quantitatively. Suffering attains a positive stature in this book, because in the courage and pride, the determination and dignity shown by the characters, suffering becomes meaningful. It is the way to insight and self-knowledge for the reader, who has the opportunity of seeing that situations are not merely either good or bad, and that people are neither completely evil nor good.

All this is made accessible to the young reader because the protagonist is herself a growing individual, from whose point of view the events are told. Though she remains essentially the same person she grows older, and her judgements and tastes evolve commensurately. She grows as a character in the course of the novel, and her mental, spiritual and emotional growth are considerable by the end. The reader may share in this process, which produces a very special quality of awareness.

The above title represents a high point in children's fiction, especially for the older child, and it will not be implied that Roald Dahl's work needs to measure up to it in most respects. One of the more important reasons for this is that his readers include the very young. Nevertheless certain terms of reference have been provided according to which the quality of Dahl's writing will be discussed. If any of these need to be highlighted, they would be centred upon the accurate portrayal of the child's world; in particular, authenticity of feeling and perspective.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DISCUSSION OF SELECTED TEXTS

#### 2.1 George's Marvellous Medicine and The Witches

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) holds that the greatest value of the traditional fairy tale is the opportunity it affords children to resolve conflicts within themselves. If various tensions caused, inter alia, by sibling rivalry, aggression, fear of adults who appear overwhelmingly powerful, and anxieties about not being loved by parents are not allayed in a form both acceptable and comprehensible to young children, normal development of the personality can be retarded. Without a feeling of security, no child will be able to move confidently towards attaining an individual identity.

Because a pre-puberty child is unable to reason out the nature and complexity of his inner conflicts and insecurities, unable to find rational solutions to the consequent tensions, or to make sense of rational explanations of such, he unconsciously seeks reassurance by projecting himself, and his problems, imaginatively into situations depicted in fairy tales and fiction. The problems and challenges of the heroes in the stories he reads or has read to him become his own.

Two activities are at work when a child engages imaginatively with narrative: projection, whereby problems embedded in the child's subconscious are transferred into the situations presented in the story concerned, and empathy, whereby the reader imagines himself to be in the shoes, so to speak, of the central character or characters (in fairy tales, normally one) and achieves a measure of identification with the character portrayed. Projection allows the young reader to distance himself from his problems in seeing (some of) them depicted, in narrative form, in a story in which he knows he has no part as such. Yet such a story has the power of speaking to him of needs

he is scarcely aware of, and of objectifying them in acceptable form, and of offering acceptable solutions.

Certainly the very young child (4 to 6 years of age) is incapable of insight into his own psychological needs, yet responds readily to tales such as "Goldilocks", "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "The Three Little Pigs". Together with the reassurance subconsciously experienced by the child when encountering the typical fairy tale, there occurs a measure of identification with the embattled but eventually successful hero, who embodies all the positive qualities which the child learns to admire.

On a more conscious level, there is the growth of the child's moral sense too. The archetypal fairy tale presents an unambiguous picture of good and evil. The latter may be temporarily in the ascendancy, but good will always emerge victorious in the end. The young child is incapable of more complex moral judgements and would be confused if evil appeared to triumph over virtue, or if a particular character was neither good nor evil, in which case difficulties with identification could occur.

In the light of this, it might be reasonable to consider George's Marvellous Medicine as having some of the characteristics of a fairy tale. The young protagonist George, who feels vulnerable in the absence of his parents, is undoubtedly terrified by his grandmother. The latter is presented as being consummately grotesque - distorted in personality, sinister and predatory. Indeed an uglier or more frightening picture of lurking evil scarcely seems probable in children's fiction. Yet the possibility exists that such a picture is largely the product of George's imagination, and that the reader merely sees what George imagines he is seeing. Furthermore, George's feelings of hatred - "oh how he hated Grandma!" (p. 18) - might merely express his fear of being overwhelmed by something or someone having power over him and whom he finds incomprehensible and overbearing.

No juvenile reader's response to the text could be expected to provide a reliable clue as to the above possibilities. The external action of the story is the element making the most direct impact upon the mind of the young reader, but the adult may speculate as to a further level of meaning. George's action against Grandma may quite probably be seen by the child as being an enterprising and brave little boy's crusade against something which seeks to pervert and destroy. An adult may well judge the narrative

to be significant in psychological terms: the working out of latent aggression within a young child. Put more elaborately, young George could be projecting his own potential for aggression onto the person of Grandma in an extraordinarily inventive way, and in putting paid to the threat posed by her, mastering anti-social tendencies within himself - something of which he would not be consciously aware. If this interpretation is justifiable, one may then also regard the eventual disappearance of Grandma as being the measure of success with which George has overcome the anti-social within himself and mastered his own irrational fears. One may compare this situation with the one in which Max finds himself in Sendak's Where The Wild Things Are, where aggression arising from egocentricity and fear, and which society will not allow to come to the surface, is externalised in the form of an exotic dream.

Fantasy is a significant element in George's Marvellous Medicine, as it presents certain actions which no child would interpret literally. But the young reader, in empathising with George, may himself undergo something of a cathartic experience, an activity which Bettelheim sees as significant when children encounter fairy tales. A number of adults have told me that they have reservations about George being suitable for children, because the events of the story reflect an abnormal picture of human behaviour, or because they are capable of arousing fear in young readers. On the other hand this fantasy may contain a strong measure of psychological truth. Bettelheim suggests the possibility of regarding the traditional fairy tale as being a mirror of inner childhood experience, rather than of reality. Perhaps his observation is equally relevant to the book in question. The children in various Cape schools who completed the reading survey mentioned in the Introduction, also responded to an extract (Appendix B) from George's Marvellous Medicine, in which the young protagonist began evolving a strategy to queer Grandma's pitch. In answer to Question A (iv) of the accompanying questionnaire (Appendix C) which asked whether it was thought that George would really have tried to be horrible to his Grandma, the majority of respondents felt that George would not have done any real harm to her, but was merely expressing what he imagined he would like to have done to such an unpleasant relative. One child wrote that George "wanted to frighten her to give her a shock". Most respondents also felt that in a similar situation they would not like to have done what George was contemplating doing. A standard five girl commented, "I don't think so. If the result was nasty I would have felt terrible." Yet many were of the

opinion that it was wrong of George to plot against his aged relative.

Question A (vi) of the questionnaire asked whether the reader would like to have George as a friend, and why. Responses revealed both admiration and caution, and roughly equal numbers replied in the affirmative and the negative. Positive votes were accompanied by a variety of reasons, such as, "because he is naughty like me", "he is brave", "he is plucky and sturdy", ... he has a remarkable sense of humour", ... he's full of plans which sound exciting" and "he's mischievous and exciting". Those who did not favour George as a friend felt that "he might play a trick on me" or "persuade me to do something like that" and "would get us into a lot of trouble". One said that "he was a naughty and ugly boy to have as a friend", while another even declared, "I would detest him".

One may infer that even though large numbers of respondents admired George, few could see themselves sharing his determination to do something unpleasant to Grandma. Conversely most of those who rejected the idea of having George as a friend, did not expect him to do Grandma any serious harm. In other words, there is little consistency in the respondents' answers as far as these two issues are concerned. This suggests that few respondents were prepared to take the situation seriously; that the events of this fantasy would find no ready transfer to real life. Yet one Rhodes University student reported during a class discussion of this book, that a young relative had been frightened when George was read to him. Such a reaction runs counter to the way in which children have been observed by myself, colleagues and friends, to respond to the book in either private or class group readings. Hence one should not give too much credit to the book's potential for actually disturbing children. This can be substantiated by the responses of the children quoted above, despite the fact that they were exposed to only an extract from the story.

Opinions on whether George's Marvellous Medicine provides a healthy outlet for subconscious strivings and conflicts in children, are bound to differ. The vital point to consider is whether this work reflects the point of view of the child, and is a fairly accurate expression in imaginative form of some area of the child's inner life. I believe that the book succeeds in this. Much of the language of George expresses the intensity of George's feelings and the vividness of his imagination. For example:



"George sat himself down at the table in the kitchen. He was shaking a little. Oh, how he hated Grandma! He really hated that horrid witchy woman. And all of a sudden he had a tremendous urge to do something about her. Something whopping. Something absolutely terrific. A real shocker. A sort of explosion. He wanted to blow away the witchy smell that hung about her in the next room. He may have been only eight years old but he was a brave little boy. He was ready to take this old woman on. 'I'm not going to be frightened by her,' he said softly to himself. But he was frightened." (p. 18).

While George may be interpreted according to the way in which a young child might view the world, and words uttered by the protagonist such as "hate" taken from whence they come, I am not at all sure that the same claim can be made for a later book, The Witches, (Jonathan Cape, 1983). The opening section has an adult persona, presumably the author as far as the child is aware, imparting a vital secret to his young readers - at the same time taking them into his confidence and yet seeming almost to threaten. He knows something they don't know, and they had better listen, or something very horrible could happen to them. The book certainly does not commence from the point of view of any child protagonist.

Dahl makes it clear in the opening section that:

"In fairy-tales, witches always wear silly black hats and black cloaks, and they ride on broomsticks. But this is not a fairy-tale. This is about REAL WITCHES ... The most important thing ... is ... REAL WITCHES dress in ordinary clothes ... and they work in ORDINARY JOBS ... A REAL WITCH hates children ... spends all her time plotting to get rid of the children in her particular territory." (p. 7).

Any child of five or six might be inclined to take this in earnest. After all the author is addressing him directly. This leads rather naturally, in a sense, to the use of the first person narrator for the story itself. Whereas the introduction could have left the young reader startled and somewhat vulnerable, the opening chapter allows attention to be focused on the central character. The first person point of view and the fact of the protagonist being eight years of age prepares the way for the establishment of empathy in the reader. The purpose of the introduction ("A Note About Witches") is very much open to question. It does not fit in with the fictional basis of the narrative. It provides for no imaginative involvement with the events of a story. What is said in "A note About Witches" could have been said far more subtly in the course of the narrative itself. Indeed much

of it is repeated by the protagonist's grandmother in the opening stages, and said far more sympathetically too.

This element of repetition encourages one to suspect that the introduction is little more than a ploy which Dahl cannot resist, to fascinate his reader into horrified attention. Once "A Note About Witches" (for which the artistic integrity of the book suffers) is passed, the 'listener' becomes the protagonist in Chapter One, while the holder of secrets about witches is his grandmother, who becomes a colourful character in her own right. The human motivation in this chapter, the atmosphere and tone are authentic and well presented.

The author is no longer speaking directly to the reader. The presence and manner of the grandmother are reassuring to both reader and protagonist. This however is diminished after the latter's first direct encounter with what he presumes to be a witch, at which Grandmother begins to tremble and her face goes "ashy grey". (p.46). Soon after, our young hero has to fend for himself when he finds that he is trapped behind a screen in a large room at a seaside hotel, where a large gathering of witches is taking place.

The narrator (whose name we do not know) has been secretly training his pet mice when the room fills with delegates to what (in a grimly humorous way) is understood to be a conference of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. But this is a mere cover, for a great get-together of the secret society of witches in England, to be addressed by the Grand High Witch of the Whole World. The narrator has, to his horror, noticed one symptom after another which identifies every woman in the room as a witch, and the manner in which the Grand High Witch, who first appears as a beautiful young woman, reveals her identity is both terrifying and repulsive. Her face was

"so crumpled and wizened, so shrunken and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. It was a fearsome and ghastly sight. There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there." (p. 66).

The protagonist's feelings are vividly conveyed: "I was transfixed. I was

numbed. I was magnetised by the sheer horror of this woman's features." (p. 66).

Dahl's description of the impact that the sight of this witch makes on the boy is realistic in psychological terms, in that he first registers what he perceives; this is followed by his emotional reaction and finally an intellectual response:

" I knew immediately, of course, that this was none other than The Grand High Witch herself. I knew also why she had worn a mask. She could never have moved around in public, let alone book in at an hotel, with her real face." (p. 67).

From this point the author displays his skill in developing tension while at the same time making the assembly of witches the object of satire. A guttural Germanic-Norwegian delivery complements the formidable aspect of the Chief Witch: "Vitches of Inkland!" she begins, going on to object to the lack of success English witchdom has had in getting rid of its natural victims "rrrotten rreepulsive little children". (p. 72).

There is almost something comical in the way the Grand High sets about making an example of a witch who steps out of line: a series of incantations beginning

"A stupid vitch who answers back  
Must burn until her bones are black!" (p. 74),

alternating with wretched pleas by the offender for clemency, is followed by "a stream of sparks that looked like tiny white-hot metal-filings" (p. 75) shooting from the Grand High's eyes and which roasted the victim in her chair. Dahl takes his readers' capacity for stomaching the revolting and the macabre to the limit perhaps when telling that a "smell of burning meat filled the room." (p. 75). Immediately after this the rest of the witches, suitably moved by the power of the Grand High, make a chorus of repulsive declamations against children. The phenomenon of mass hysteria before a charismatic and awe-inspiring leader at a rally, which has been known to occur from time to time, is happening here. Yet inseparable from this is a strong element of the comically absurd that cannot fail to appeal to both a juvenile and non-prudish adult sense of humour: "Children are rree-volting ... Dogs' drrroppings is smelling like violets and prrrimroses compared with children!" (p. 77).

The Grand High Witch works up the assembly to a pitch of frenzy when she discloses her plan for disposing of thousands of children by means of a special formula which turns them into mice, and follows this with a vivacious song of triumph in rhyming couplets.

It is perhaps inevitable that the protagonist is caught and duly turned into a mouse; the reader may derive some comfort from the fact that the story is related in the first person - nothing too devastating could happen to the hero if he is there to tell the tale. Ironically once he has become a mouse, the narrator decides that he "rather liked it" and begins thinking "What's so wonderful about being a little boy anyway?" (p. 118). He finds plenty of reasons for thinking the life of a mouse preferable to that of the average boy, and concludes with an observation which recalls moments from The BFG: "When mice grow up, they don't ever have to go to war and fight against other mice. Mice, I felt pretty certain, all like each other. People don't." (p. 119).

This kind of insight, coming from a seven-year-old boy, is not entirely convincing. An earlier realisation that, as a mouse, he will no longer have to go to school, is perfectly natural, if not inevitable. But one is tempted to judge the thoughts quoted above (p. 119), as an intrusion by the author, who wishes to ride this particular hobby-horse perhaps, at this point. Worthy as a comment it undoubtedly is, but it is out of place here, and therefore does not succeed. A similar type of observation about mankind is made in The BFG by the Big Friendly Giant himself and not by a child, and for this reason it is appropriate. Nevertheless, the sheer pace and vivacity of the writing, its power to make a vivid and unforgettable impact, render what should be utterly frightening, partly absurd. The terror of the witches is further lessened by the alacrity with which the protagonist and another boy who shares his fate, adapt to their new existence.

As Dahl, rightly or wrongly, warns at the outset, this is no fairy tale, and the hero, having been turned into an animal, is not restored to his human form by the breaking of a spell. In the traditional fairy tale the metamorphosis sometimes symbolises a sub-human lack of self-restraint where the protagonist has to earn his restoration to human status, and sometimes it is the result of a mischievous or wicked spell cast by a malicious worker of magic, whereupon Dame Fortune or some other benign agent eventually releases the victim. But in The Witches there is no

such release - the transformation of children into mice assumes positive qualities. The story ends in a spirit of optimism: our young hero is about to use his new form as a means of bringing about the downfall of hundreds or thousands of other witches in different lands - a feat he would have struggled to achieve in human shape; a purpose he would not have espoused had he not been transfigured in the first place.

From the point of view of unity it might have been better had the hero found some means of returning to human form. The story lacks finality, especially as the protagonist is about to embark, with his irrepressible cigar-smoking grandmother, on a new series of escapades against witches elsewhere. Nevertheless, the story follows a certain line to a degree of resolution at the end: The young narrator loses his parents in a motor accident, is cared for by his grandmother who tells him all about witches, is himself accosted by one and later trapped by a large assembly of them who turn him into a mouse; he turns the agility this gives him to good account and eventually gains his revenge on the witches by turning them into mice. The reader who is a school beginner still sees morality in absolute terms, and this story should satisfy his need for simple justice, not to speak of escapist fantasy.

Because The Witches ends as it does, it seems reasonable to expect a sequel to it, in which it may be seen just how successfully the hero's objectives are carried out; and whether he finally returns to his proper shape. There is no suggestion at all that he even wishes to return to it. Perhaps the author intends this to hold a lesson for us. Or else he may have grown weary of his story and merely ended it where he did. In any event, I am not convinced that I should particularly look forward to a sequel, or that one would be worth writing, however entertaining it would most probably be.

## 2.2 Danny The Champion Of The World.

This is the only one of Roald Dahl's full-length stories for children which is not a work of fantasy. The title holds promise of its being such, yet this book, with a realistic country setting, takes a searching look at the ethics of the humble countryman and how this conflicts with that of the wealthy land baron.

Danny is altogether a 'quieter' book, lacking of course the fantastical events, as also the lively verse which orchestrates some of the action in other of his works. The narrative is slow in 'taking off', the first three chapters being devoted to the introduction (setting and circumstances), Danny's father and the bedtime stories he told, and the various playthings he used to construct for his son's entertainment. Despite this, I did not find, when reading the story to a group of standard three children (1981) or to a pre-school child (1981), any evidence of restlessness for the story to 'get going' and for the real excitement to begin.

These introductory chapters serve the important purpose of building up the more personal theme of the novel: the relationship between father and son - how a fine understanding and affection develops between the two in the absence of a mother or any other children. Although some adult readers might be tempted to find this relationship somewhat idyllic, it is essential to the functioning of the plot, which is about how Danny and his father together manage to outwit the powerful and very nasty Victor Hazell, owner of a vast acreage of wooded land surrounding the small pocket of ground on which Danny lives and on which his father conducts the business of a filling and service station.

Danny's father William makes a living as a motor mechanic, and clients bring their cars from considerable distances to receive his expert attention. Danny has acquired his father's love of machinery from a very early age, and spends a great deal of his time alongside his father in the garage. A considerable blot on their landscape is Mr Victor Hazell, an arrogant and malicious land baron who once threatened Danny with punishment if he laid his "filthy little hands" on his shiny Rolls-Royce while serving him with petrol. Danny's father, overhearing this, makes it clear that he does not wish to see Hazell there again. The latter attempts to have them run off the land through the local Department of Health and other bodies, but to no avail.

Danny's father does not have a large enough income to afford them a car of their own, and they live in an old wooden caravan close to the garage. Danny goes to a neighbouring school only at the age of seven, by which time he is already able to strip and assemble a motor car engine by himself.

The outlines of the story itself begin to take shape on the night Danny, who is now nine years old, discovers that his father is missing from the caravan. When he returns in the early hours of the morning, he reluctantly tells Danny that he has been poaching pheasants in Hazell's wood several miles distant. Danny is at first shocked by the idea that his father has been stealing someone else's possessions, until his father gives him some perspective on this activity.

"You mean stealing them?' I said, aghast.

'We don't look at it that way,' my father said.

'Poaching is an art. A great poacher is a great artist.'" (p. 30).

He explains to his rather stunned little boy that he had been taken poaching from the age of ten, and caught the poaching fever from his own father. He points out, furthermore, that

"in those days just about every man in our village was out in the woods at night poaching pheasants. And they did it not only because they loved the sport but because they needed food for their families. When I was a boy, times were bad for a lot of people in England. There was very little work to be had anywhere, and some families were literally starving. Yet a few miles away in the rich man's wood, thousands of pheasants were being fed like kings twice a day." (pp. 30 - 31).

His father also explains how Hazell reared hundreds of pheasants each year, overfed them and then handed them over to the mercies of annual shooting parties. Such mass slaughter of half-tame birds was not sport. Poaching without the use of firearms, and with the stealthy keepers never far away, certainly was. Danny himself becomes 'initiated' into the sport when his father divulges some of the best secret methods of catching pheasants. By the time he has finished, Danny is keen to accompany him on one of his excursions, which his-father has only just begun to resume himself, after several years.

The gulf between the likes of Hazell and themselves is emphasised by Danny:

"Mr Victor Hazell was a roaring snob and he tried desperately to get in with what he believed were the right kind of people. He hunted with the hounds and gave shooting parties and wore fancy waistcoats. Every week-day he drove his enormous Rolls-Royce past our filling station on his way to the brewery." (p. 41).

Hazell becomes even more despicable in their eyes than he already is when Danny's father is caught in a man-trap dug in Hazell's wood to catch poachers. He has failed to return at anywhere near a reasonable hour, and Danny, desperate with worry, takes the Baby Austin which he and his father have completed working on that day, and succeeds in reaching the wood. With amazing luck and not a little enterprise, Danny avoids the attentions of the traffic police and finds his father in the darkness. Back at the garage, Doc Spencer, who is attending to William's injury, tells Danny that he too used to poach when he was younger, and has a fund of country lore at his disposal. Spencer is outraged by the use of the pit, and recalls how he once took his revenge on Hazell for maliciously kicking his old dog.

From this time on, a slight change comes over Danny's father, who tells Danny that the pheasant shooting season is about to start. Hazell's shooting party marks this annual event. The landed gentry who attend "don't come because they like Mr Hazell. Secretly they all despise him." (p. 79). They come because it is the most rewarding pheasant shoot in the South of England. As for Hazell, he feels important. "For one day in the year he becomes a big cheese in a little world and even the Duke of So-and-so slaps him on the back and tries to remember his first name when he leaves." (p. 81).

And so the great plan evolves - to poach so many pheasants from the wood on the night before the shooting party that there are practically none left to shoot. It remains no more than his father's dream until Danny hits upon the idea of putting small quantities of sleeping powder into raisins and feeding them to the gathered pheasants prior to roosting. The irony of Hazell's man-trap is that had William not been injured and been prescribed sleeping tablets (which he did not bother to take), his son would not have had the basis for a plan.

The plan succeeds: the painstaking preparations are rewarded with a haul of one hundred and twenty doped pheasants. This unprecedented coup prompts William to dub his son "the champion of the world!" (p. 135). The completion of the plan, which includes the stowage of the birds, involves more



of the village people, the most surprising of whom is the local vicar's wife, who made a practice of delivering everyone's pheasants in a specially adapted perambulator.

The episode has an unforeseen conclusion, however. No one thought of what would happen if and when the effect of the sleeping pills wore off; the effect is spectacular, but the birds eventually take wing in the direction opposite to Hazell's wood, which represents a victory for Danny, his father and the village folk despite the loss of most of the birds. So justice has been done, from the point of view of those opposed to the cruelty, maliciousness and snobbery of Hazell.

I have attempted to give the background to and a synopsis of the story itself in the hope of making it clear what motivates Danny and his father to interfere with someone else's property. An important issue raised in the story is: when is stealing not stealing? Put differently, can poaching, a form of stealing, be justified in any circumstances, even those of this particular narrative? A quick answer would inevitably hold that unlawful appropriation of the goods of another can scarcely be condoned, certainly never defended. Dahl, however, challenges what could be a stereotyped notion of right and wrong. He creates a set of circumstances intelligible to the juvenile reader which places the question of poaching in an altogether different light, one which denies a simplistic or socially conditioned judgement.

Firstly, poaching for Danny's father and others is a sport, with a long agrarian tradition behind it, underpinned by unwritten rules of acceptable conduct. An example of this is the non-use of firearms, which has its practical side too. Poachers approached it as an art, requiring the exercise of considerable skill and judgement, not to mention intuition and common sense. They also accepted the risks: an unarmed man moving into a wood at dusk balanced his shrewdness and concentration against the watchfulness and the shotgun of the ever-present keeper. If caught, poachers accepted the consequences, "poachers' bottom" being one of them.

Danny's father was careful to point out that when he was a child, many people faced virtual starvation, and poaching provided many a family with a welcome meal. The force of this argument is brought home by references to wealthy landowners holding extravagant shoots on the strength of feeding their pheasants "like kings twice a day". (p. 31). Victor Hazell provides a

vivid foil to the austerity and diligence of Danny and his father: wealthy, arrogant and cowardly, maliciously antagonistic towards the humble but independent of spirit, the simple and rustic self-sufficiency which stands up to overbearing social priggishness. Hazell is an example of the plutocrat whose possession of wealth is associated with some abominable human characteristics.

The rural setting has an important function in pointing out another related theme: Danny's father and other down-to-earth village folk work in harmony with nature, seeing it as a testing ground for honing their skills, for pitting their own natural, agrarian cunning and enterprise in equal contest against the odds that nature provides. In contrast to this, Hazell, undoubtedly like many others, has no patience or use for the challenges of nature or laws of the countryside, and breeds large numbers of pheasants in largely artificial circumstances and makes a travesty of the sport on the annual shoot. He is thus subverting a natural law of survival in favour of artificial social considerations, and in such a way that he promotes hypocritical conduct in others.

Despite their official positions in society, the vicar, the constable and Doc Spencer reveal a sympathetic disposition towards nature and a flexibility which reflects the humanity with which they perform their duties. Doc Spencer, while strapping up William's leg, tells Danny how to tickle a trout to sleep underwater; Danny's father informs that the vicar "is very fond of roasted pheasant for his dinner" (p. 40), while Sergeant Enoch<sup>1</sup> Samways "likes a piece of roasted pheasant as much as the next man" (p. 138). The taximan who provides transport for a hundred and twenty drugged pheasants from the wood to the village, reckons that Samways "knows a thing or two about catching 'em as well" (p. 138). When Samways turns up on his bicycle at the scene of the shambles around the filling station when the drug wears off, the face "behind the big black moustache showed no surprise, no anger, no emotion of any kind. It was calm and neutral, as the face of the law should be." (p. 156). Samways, having listened to Hazell's impassioned accusation of Danny's father, may have been aware of the fact that when he began to shoo the dopey pheasants across the road, the Rolls-Royce was standing in the way with its door open. He was certainly aware of being in line for his share of the remaining pheasants when he rode away. The rather superb portrait of rustic constabulary is completed with a fine tinge of irony, warmth and humour:

"Then Sergeant Samways ... pedalled slowly, and there was a certain majesty in the way he held himself, with the head high and the back straight, as though he were riding a fine thoroughbred mare instead of an old black bike." (p. 169).

Dahl provides his readers with a picture of healthy, unified community life, where, as in an organic entity, the various members of a community need one another, and stand by one another. They are, as people, bigger than the offices which they occupy, and bring to their functioning in society a humanity without which there would be no solidarity against what was mean and unjust. One has a glimpse in this book, of village life not yet eroded by the disruptive elements of urbanisation; village life still close to its roots, still meaningfully connected with the natural environment and providing for the material, social and spiritual needs of its human inhabitants.

Dahl conveys implicitly to his readers that the letter of the law can be an abhorrent tyranny when manipulated by those who are insensitive to its spirit of justice and compassion; it was pure spite which goaded Hazell into requesting the authorities to inspect William's premises, which the law entitled them to do. What is ridiculed and defeated in this book is the abuse of power, wealth and social position. The absence of humanity, the unthinking self-centredness of Hazell's guests, whose poor shooting would maim countless birds on the opening day of the legal season, is shown for what it really is as opposed to the spirit and manner in which Danny, his father and the others are involved in the purloining of most of the intended feathered victims. So Danny and his father, through their desire to teach Hazell a lesson and to bring about some redress for the malicious cruelty exhibited by him, perpetrate an illegal action, and in so doing, although unintentionally, save most of the pheasants they capture from death, and certainly from senseless slaughter.

Some adult readers might judge the book to be subversive in respect of institutions such as the law, and of the integrity and responsibility of those who hold public office. But, as I have attempted to show, what Dahl makes very accessible to his readers, whether adults or children, is that far greater harm can be done to people through greed, spite and selfishness even when perpetrated within the ambit of the law, than by technical transgressions against it by people who have kindness in their hearts.

Another controversial theme in Danny concerns formal education. The law in England states that parents must send their children to school when they are five, and of this Danny's father was aware. Is it a comment on institutionalised education that William, who is ambitious for his son to go far in mechanical engineering - what Danny himself clearly wanted - should decide to keep Danny out of school until the age of seven? By this time he would have learnt to take a small engine to pieces and put it together again. By his seventh birthday Danny can do just that. He has had a practical education in the workshop, with the emphasis upon active participation. He comments that "luckily for us, nobody came knocking on the door to ask why I wasn't attending school." (p. 19).

It is worthwhile noting that Danny's father was in the habit of making toys for him to play with. It is beside the point that he was unable to afford to buy them anyway. Danny's play-room had always been the workshop, there being no alternative. He relates: "My toys were the greasy cogs and springs and pistons that lay around all over the place, and these, I can promise you, were far more fun to play with than most of the plastic stuff children are given these days." (p. 17). (An adult-sounding notion, not really typical of a child.)

When he grew older his father made him a tree-house, a kite, a fire-balloon. What is important is that Danny could watch his father making these things, listening to the explanations of why such-and-such needed to be done this way and not that. From early on then, Danny's play was educational. He learnt the principles on which various contrivances worked; he came to understand something of the laws of nature; he was taught that there is a use for everything - that the imagination could devise a way of turning one item usefully into something else; he learnt to be purposeful and constructive, and to appreciate the end-product more because he had insight into the design and construction of it. Furthermore the construction and use of playthings afforded him abundant opportunities for developing motor skills and co-ordination. By the time Danny went to school, he had learnt to take nothing for granted, and had a firm foundation in practical learning.

Furthermore Danny's father told him stories every night, thus feeding his imagination, and encouraging a love for language and narrative and promoting sound habits of listening and concentration. These stories, the product of William's own imagination partly, also gave rise to much discussion between father and son, something of both educational and personal value.

One cannot, therefore, say that Danny's educational needs had been neglected because of the two extra years he spent out of school. When he begins to attend school, his father accompanies him on the two mile walk to the nearest village in which it is situated, and walks back with him in the afternoon. The reader is left in no doubt that Danny's daily walks to school are more educational than what takes place in the classroom. His father is a man of the countryside. Danny has long been aware of this: "I loved the way he moved. He had that long loping stride all countrymen have who are used to covering great distances on foot." (p. 46).

And later:

"I really loved those morning walks to school with my father. We talked practically the whole time. Mostly it was he who talked and I who listened, and just about everything he said was fascinating. He was a true countryman. The fields, the streams, the woods and all the creatures who lived in these places were a part of his life. Although he was a mechanic by trade and a very fine one, I believe he could have become a great naturalist if only he had had a good schooling.

Long ago he had taught me the names of all the trees and the wild flowers and the different grasses that grow in the fields. All the birds, too, I could name, not only by sighting them but by listening to their calls and their songs.

In springtime we could hunt for birds' nests along the way, and when we found one he would lift me up on to his shoulders so I could peer into it and see the eggs. But I was never allowed to touch them." (pp. 90 - 91).

Whenever an animal or insect appeared, Danny's father would have something interesting to tell about it. The school building itself is drab, with an inscription above the front door, and "I often thought how nice it would be if they put something different up there every day, something really interesting." (p. 93). Not unexpectedly he thinks of how well his father would have provided this service. For example: "THE GUPPY HAS FUNNY HABITS. WHEN HE FALLS IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER GUPPY, HE BITES HER ON THE BOTTOM." (p. 93).

Danny's own teacher, unlike some of the others, was "a horrid man" who had "a fiery temper" (p. 95) and always seemed to be on the lookout for trouble. He was called Captain Lancaster. The title had remained from the Second World War, despite at least twenty years in civilian life.

"My father said it was an idiotic thing to do. There were millions of people still alive, he said, who had fought in that war, but most of them wanted to forget the whole beastly thing, especially those crummy military titles. Captain Lancaster was a violent man, and we were all terrified of him." (p. 95).

Not all adult readers will feel comfortable about Dahl's references to "those crummy military titles". (p. 95). This might suggest too sweepingly an indictment of the Establishment. The criticism is, however, directed at the individual. The headmaster Mr Snoddy is depicted with gentle humour and compassion, tinged with irony: "A funny thing about Mr Snoddy was that he always brought a glass of water with him into class, and this he kept sipping right through the lesson. At least everyone thought it was a glass of water." (p. 96). Danny has occasion to visit Snoddy's study and happens to be accompanied by a friend:

"And as we went in, we saw Mr Snoddy standing by his desk refilling his famous glass of water from a bottle labelled Gordon's Gin. He jumped a mile when he saw us. 'You should have knocked,' he said, sliding the bottle behind a pile of books." (p. 96).

Snoddy does not become angry with either of the boys, who then decide to repay his customary kindness to all of the children by keeping "his deep dark secret" to themselves. The only person Danny tells is his father, who, perhaps not surprisingly, is not shocked, but is even sympathetic. He demonstrates to Danny the need for understanding to precede judgement, and does so with a characteristic sparkle of humour.

"I don't blame him one bit. If I was unlucky enough to be married to Mrs Snoddy, I would drink something a bit stronger than gin.'  
 'What would you drink, Dad?'  
 'Poison,' he said. 'She's a frightful woman.' " (p. 97).

The incident of the caning by Captain Lancaster reveals an interesting feature in the relationship between Danny and his father. The gentle man is as usual encouraging Danny to do something himself rather than take over and do it for him, when he notices the severe welt on Danny's hand. Reluctant at first, he then tells the whole story, whereupon his father impulsively leaps up to "beat the daylights" out of Lancaster. (p. 103). Danny is ruled by his head here, pointing out to his father that it will only make matters worse, and that his grandfather surely did not go about doing such things. This makes William see reason. He feels very protective naturally, but is calmed by the maturity with which his son dismisses the incident.

Danny's father exhibits 'irresponsibility' again - role reversal? - when planning the big night in the wood: " 'You will be suffering from a very nasty cold on Friday and I shall be forced to keep you home from school.'  
 'Hooray!' I said." (p. 89).

Nevertheless William's daily conduct and outlook on life show him to be well informed and sensible regarding the world, which, taken with the manner in which he communicates his insights to his son, indicate that he is a gifted teacher. One scarcely need elaborate on the text by commenting on the importance of this as opposed to being merely qualified.

Dahl has chosen to use the first person narrator as the point of view from which to relate the events of the story. The most immediate, and perhaps the most important consequence of this is that it allows the reader to identify more readily with Danny as a character, with his emotional experience, ideals and the situations in which he finds himself. The first person point of view allows the hero to say things about his father such as: "I think that all the love he had felt for my mother when she was alive he now lavished upon me." (p. 8).

It also affords more credibility to statements that he had never had a moment's unhappiness or illness, in the sense that the reader will respond to this with more latitude, coming from the young protagonist himself, than if it proceeded from an omniscient narrator. It may be accepted that such is the boy's affection and admiration for his father, that he is concerned to report only the marvellous things about him - those things which make him "sparky" and outstanding. Everything that is perceived or felt in the course of this story is limited to what narrator Danny knows or is able to tell. There is a certain distance between Danny the narrator and Danny the protagonist in the first few chapters, starting from when he was four months old, with the gap steadily closing as he grows older. At the beginning of the fourth chapter the narrative finds its level when the narrator is nine years old. From then on the distance, such as it exists, between narrator and protagonist remains steady for the duration of the story. Occasionally Danny interrupts his narrative to address the reader more directly, assuming a somewhat 'older' or retrospective stance. For example: "You will learn as you get older, just as I learned that Autumn, that no father is perfect. Grown-ups are complicated creatures, full of quirks and secrets." (p. 26); "I have already told you he did not have a car of his own, so there was no question of his having gone for a drive." (p. 27); and "I must pause here to tell you something about Mr Victor Hazell ... (he) was a roaring snob and he tried desperately to get in with what he believed were the right kind of people." (p. 41).

In each case the enhanced insight, or hindsight is matched by an appropriate maturity of style. The reader may certainly feel that the narrator is talking

down to him at such moments. A maturer reader may sense a break in the unity of the point of view.

Despite this, Danny's narration is essentially from the point of view of a nine-year-old child. How, one might ask, does the author succeed in achieving an effective satire on monied arrogance, social climbing and various forms of injustice? One effective technique is the use of Danny's father, who in the course of the novel not merely provides a living example of what it is to be "sparky", but also a sometimes hard-hitting commentary on the attitudes and conduct of others. Examples of this may be found on pages previously quoted. There is nothing contrived about William's commentary on the behaviour of Hazell or the others, as Danny's admiration of his father is such that he remembers vividly what he says and finds it worth recording. There is a strongly formative teacher-pupil element in the relationship between father and son, curiously combined with the candour of genuine friendship and companionship. It is therefore inevitable that there will be a closeness between the outlook of Danny and that of his father.

The first person narrator technique rules out any possibility of author intrusion. Roald Dahl is, in a literary sense, at his best when he avoids leaning across to slip a confidential or smug word in the ear of his reader. The tone in Danny is well controlled and sustained, and there is little or no tendency towards excesses of feeling or expression frequently encountered in other of Dahl's work. The first person narrative also probably weighs against the possibility of sentimentality in the relationship between Danny and his father. Idyllic their life may be in a sense, but certainly not sentimental! The perfectly artless candour with which Danny speaks of his father's love for him early in the book, and of his love for Danny's mother, shows a fine command of tone and feeling:

" 'Your mother was wonderful at sewing things,' my father said.  
 'She'd have had these raisins done in no time.'  
 I didn't say anything. I never knew quite what to say when he talked about my mother.  
 'Did you know she used to make all my clothes herself, Danny?  
 Everything I wore.'  
 'Even socks and sweaters?' I asked.  
 'Yes,' he said. 'But those were knitted. And so quickly! When she was knitting, the needles flew so fast in her fingers you couldn't see them. They were just a blur. I would sit here in the evening watching her and she used to talk about the children she was going to have. "I shall have three children," she used to say. "A boy for you, a girl for me and one for good measure."' "



There was a short silence after that. Then I said, 'When Mum was here, Dad, did you go out very often at night or was it only now and then?'

'You mean poaching?'

'Yes.'

'Often,' he said. 'At least twice a week.'

'Didn't she mind?'

'Mind? Of course she didn't mind. She came with me.'

'She didn't!'

'She certainly did. She came with me every single time until just before you were born. She had to stop then. She said she couldn't run fast enough.'

I thought about his extraordinary piece of news for a little while.

Then I said, 'Was the only reason she went because she loved you, Dad, and because she wanted to be with you? Or did she go because she loved poaching?'

'Both,' my father said. 'She did it for both the reasons you mentioned.'

I was beginning to realize what an immense sorrow it must have been to him when she died.

'Weren't you afraid she might get shot up?' I asked.

'Yes, Danny I was. But it was marvellous to have her along.'

She was a great sport, your mother.' " (pp. 106 - 107).

One notices a number of things in this passage. Danny's father and he are purposefully engaged in the practical and fiddly operation of splitting and sewing up raisins for the all-important expedition to Hazell's wood. At the same time Danny feels a little uncomfortable. "I didn't say anything ...". His father pays tribute to Danny's mother by mentioning practical skills which she so easily performed. But he also recounts her talk about the children she was going to have: "A boy for you, a girl for me and one for good measure." Danny is sensitive to the poignancy of this moment, a moment particularly poignant for his father - "There was a short silence after that." The discussion which follows about his mother's participation in poaching serves to convey Danny's curiosity, a moment of humour ("... she couldn't run fast enough."), and to bring to life for Danny the love between his father and his mother. His father's understatement, "She did it for both the reasons which you mentioned", and Danny's open-hearted and unself-conscious realisation, "I was beginning to realize what an immense sorrow it must have been to him when she died", speak of a delicacy of feeling that goes beyond the need for euphemism, a tact and a restraint, free of sentimentality which create an exquisite moment in this story.

It appears that extremes of character such as good and bad, are more within the range of the younger child's comprehension than are more complex issues such as moral ambiguities. Such matters are better coped with by adolescents. While Danny does not set out to come to grips with inner conflict or ambiguity in any character as a theme, its readers being mostly younger children, it does not produce mere stereotypes either. True, Victor Hazell represents a certain social

type and betrays no redeeming features whatsoever, but still comes across fairly strongly as an individual character. This is partly so because he is depicted in a number of ways: by his own actions and words, by what Danny's father tells of his background, by what Doc Spencer has to say about him and by Danny's own observation of him and response to him. Furthermore he is the very antithesis of what Danny's father is, and this strengthens Danny's feeling of alienation from Hazell.

Most of the other characters are presented with sympathy and some humour. Doc Spencer, Enoch Samways, Charlie Kinch, Mrs Clipstone and Mr Snoddy as people are paradoxical in terms of the roles they fill in society. The irony of their specific roles in the story is inseparable from the humour with which they are portrayed. The reader finds himself at one with Danny's response to the various characters; an adult reader may sense that his instincts are very sound.

Of Danny, the hero of the story, one may conclude that he is a boy who is deeply appreciative of kindness and is sensitive to the feelings of others, yet can stand up for himself when the need arises. He has a deep sense of honour which he has acquired from his father, for whom his affection and respect are boundless. From his father he has also inherited a sense of fun and adventure, an enterprising nature which does not acknowledge defeat. He deserves the status of hero in things such as the rescuing of his father and masterminding the 'great plan'; also because of his humility and self-restraint.

In depicting his father to his readers, Danny reveals much about himself. His descriptions of his father's activities, his conversation, his skills and outlook on life, the richness which he offers to Danny when they are materially poor, are a tribute to the man himself as well as being a mirror of the boy's inner self. Danny's father, a seemingly endless source of inventiveness and energy, a keen observer of nature with a delicate and respectful touch but a strong sense of justice, pays tribute to his own lad in their moment of triumph. However the book ends with Danny's own tribute to his father, a statement which coyly conceals the real impact of the story: "What I have been trying so hard to tell you all along is simply that my father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had." (p. 173).

### 2.3 Fantastic Mr Fox

Thematically this work has something in common with Danny The Champion Of The World. Again in an agrarian setting, it deals with the attempt by members of the powerful landowning establishment to destroy unwanted characters (foxes) by 'unfair' means. What at first seems an unequal contest in favour of the landowner turns out to be quite the opposite in the end. The threatened makes use of his superior skill and knowledge of nature to outwit the violent oppressor, although suffering physical injury and near-capture. The victory of the besieged hero takes the form of an audacious act of theft from under the very nose of the landowner, and again the reader may have to answer the question: can theft ever be justified by a particular set of circumstances?

Written for the younger reader, Fantastic Mr Fox is very different in concept, being an animal fantasy. The main characters are clearly defined in terms of being either sympathetic or grotesque. In keeping with the young child's simplistic view of good and evil, the three farmers, Boggis, Bunce and Bean, all very rich, are introduced as being "as nasty and mean as any men you could meet." (p. 9). The descriptions which follow demonstrate why this is so. Each is shown to be thoroughly repulsive physically and socially. The author, in presenting these characters as children might see them, makes no attempt to disguise his own feelings towards them. Speaking of Bunce: "His food was doughnuts and goose livers. He mashed the livers into a disgusting paste and then stuffed the paste into the doughnuts. This diet gave him a tummy-ache and a beastly temper." (p. 13).

A little later in the story when the farmers are attempting, without much success, to excavate Mr Fox and his family from their hole, Bean is shown to be somewhat hard of hearing:

" 'What?' said Bean. 'I can't hear you.' Bean never took a bath. He never even washed. As a result, his earholes were clogged with all kinds of muck and wax and bits of chewing gum and dead flies and stuff like that. This made him deaf. 'Speak louder,' he said to Bunce, and Bunce shouted back, 'Got any more stupid ideas?'

Bean rubbed the back of his neck with a dirty finger. He had a boil coming up there and it itched." (pp. 31 - 32).

The portraits of the three farmers indicate the connection between bad eating habits, poor hygiene and malicious temperaments. Boggis's

malnutrition is the result of excess; Bean's of undernourishment and Bunce's of an unbalanced diet. Gluttony, alcohol and a warped appetite had worked wonders for the three men, the extent of whose meanness and violent cruelty are reflected by the gaping hole which they excavate and the "murderous, brutal-looking monsters" - (p. 33) - the tractors with mechanical shovels which they resort to using. The illustrations of the farmers show no redeeming features whatsoever; verging on caricature, they suggest an ugliness of spirit, thereby complementing the text. The illustrations of the mechanical shovels serve not only to emphasise the inequality of the contest between man and beast, but also to highlight the destruction of agricultural land by machinery. The excesses in the natures of Boggis, Bunce and Bean find expression in the indiscriminate pillage of the soil, while the latter conveys the farmers' intentions towards Mr Fox.

In general terms the story depicts mankind as the fearful enemy of the animal world. All burrowing animals are threatened; for the younger reader the story is about how the fox hero devises a brilliant plan not only to ensure the survival of himself and his dependents, but also to outwit the farmers by gaining access to their food stores. The cunning and resourceful fox turns a desperate situation to his own advantage. More broadly the tale is an enactment of another drama as well - the onslaught of modern technological advances on nature and the consequences this holds for the landscape and for those depending on it for survival.

The story also celebrates the victory of natural instinct and intelligence, in the form of animal cunning, and the will to survive against destructive forces. The latter, though represented by humans, are shown to be dehumanised, their senses blunted and their wits not sharp enough to comprehend that the tables have been turned on them.

The young child's concept of justice demands the satisfaction of an indisputable victory of the hero over the villains. The latter could, in this fantasy, hardly be more unsympathetically sketched; but what of the hero? How is he made attractive to the reader? First of all Mr Fox is described as a successful hunter who regularly provides food for his family. He succeeds because he is intelligent; he uses his sharp sense of smell to alert him to danger; he uses the direction of the wind to his advantage; he is too smart for the three farmers. The reader begins to identify more closely with Mr Fox when they decide to get him once and for all. The well

groomed and confident Mr Fox is a shade too complacent before setting out. "What shall it be tonight?" (p. 21) he asks his wife. This time the farmers are waiting for him - downwind. The hero is certainly not shown as being an indestructible superfox as he, failing to detect danger, only just escapes down the hole, minus his tail. Some of Fox's pride goes with his tail. He is however gracious and realistic enough to be grateful that he is still alive. The reader's feeling of empathy for Mr Fox is enhanced and extends to his family when the sound of digging is heard above the foxes' heads.

An important aspect of the portrayal of the foxes is their resemblance to human beings in that they wear clothes, live in a settled abode and lead a 'family' life. Mrs Fox's loyalty to Mr Fox, her concern for him and for her children are what human children normally take for granted in their own lives. The reality of the threat to the fox family is conveyed by both dialogue and action: " 'They'll kill my children!' cried Mrs Fox." (p. 27). " 'How will they kill us, Mummy?' asked one of the small foxes. His round black eyes were huge with fright." (p. 28). "Suddenly there was an especially loud crunch above their heads and the sharp end of a shovel came right through the ceiling." (p. 28).

The tide turns slightly when Mr Fox realises that foxes can dig faster than men; for the time being they are safe. But their respite is shortlived as the mechanical shovels get going. The tension is kept at a high pitch in Chapter 6 as the race between the tractors above and the foxes below progresses. The excitement is enhanced as a kind of madness takes hold of the men:

"The tall skinny Bean and the dwarfish pot-bellied Bunce were driving their machines like maniacs, racing the motors and making the shovels dig at a terrific speed. The fat Boggis was hopping about like a dervish and shouting, 'Faster! Faster!'" (p. 38).

In Chapter 8 the foxes seem trapped as the farmers surround the remains of the hill above the foxhole with over a hundred farmhands for the night. They themselves sit on campstools at the mouth of the excavated tunnel with guns at the ready. This continues the next day, and the foxes begin to starve, but this gives rise to Mr Fox's next idea: to burrow until they are beneath Boggis's chicken shed, push through the floorboards and help themselves. The tension is broken when Mr Fox's plan succeeds.

The rest of the story concerns itself with the completion of Mr Fox's victory over his enemies. In this, he saves other digging animals such as rabbits and badgers who can no longer venture outside because of the intensive human activity there. The conflict is satisfactorily resolved with a splendid feast for all the underground animals who will from now on be provided for by Mr Fox; he has by now acquired the status of animal protector. The story ends on a note of humorous irony as the three farmers continue their vigil, soaked to the skin but expecting the fox to make a run for it at any moment. This of course appeals enormously to a young child's sense of justice.

Although Fantastic Mr Fox is essentially entertainment for the younger reader, an important moral implication is raised when Badger, one of the underground characters, has reservations about stealing food from the farmers. Fox's response is logical enough in the circumstances: "My dear old furry frump ... do you know anyone in the whole world who wouldn't swipe a few chickens if his children were starving to death?" (p. 66). He assures Badger that he is "far too respectable", to which Badger replies, "There's nothing wrong with being respectable." (p. 66).

Fox has the answer to this one, pointing out that Boggis, Bunce and Bean are out to kill them all, whereas all the animals are intending to do is simply to "take a little food here and there to keep us and our families alive." They are not going to stoop to the level of the humans: "We don't want to kill them." (p. 66). Badger is finally won over when Fox proposes that "If they want to be horrible, let them ... We down here are decent peace-loving people." (p. 67).

This he says with a directness which leaves little room for smugness or presumptuousness. Nevertheless a problem is raised here, similar to the one in Danny, one that is important enough not to be casually passed over. What attitude should society adopt towards those who break the law when they are desperate? Do the desperate not have some or other duty to provide for themselves, even if not recognised by the law? Furthermore is it a social disgrace for one to be in such a position? Badger's hesitation to pilfer shows that he is "respectable" despite his hunger. The young reader may sense the challenge: can one allow oneself to sympathise with those who pilfer, even when the latter have little or no option? Or is this sort of sympathy not 'respectable'?

Through their empathy for Mr Fox and his friends, children may be drawn out of their complacency - perhaps without their even realising it - by being placed on the side of those who are forced to break the letter of the law in order to survive. Although the context of this tale is far more 'harmless' (in that it concerns animals) than that of Danny, Dahl could be seen as 'subversive' if children are brought to sympathise with lawbreakers. On the other hand a distinction between the letter and the spirit of the law may be sensed by the somewhat older child, and readily perceived by the adult reader. Like Hazell in Danny, the farming threesome are legally entitled to protect their possessions from poachers and marauders. Hazell breaks no law in literally hoarding hundreds of birds for mass killing in the name of sport, or in capturing or even shooting poachers. And Boggis and his neighbours are perfectly entitled to destroy large areas of ground in order to trap what they regard as vermin, using any means they think fit.

Nevertheless young readers could be brought, by this story, to sense that those who happen to keep to the right side of the law can seem unworthy of the protection it affords, whereas others, on the wrong side of it, can seem far more deserving. To the worried parent or librarian in a quandary as to the legal and moral rights of the case, and the 'desirability' of this book for children, the initial reactions of both Danny and Badger to the question of helping oneself to another's property, are significant: Danny is shocked and incredulous; Badger troubled. What wins the day for the 'spirit' of the law, for young readers at any rate, is the horrid nature of the character in each case whose property is violated - he deserves to be raided, to be taught a lesson. This was the way in which my own children responded to the question of whether Mr Fox was not being a naughty fellow to steal what he did. They responded in a similar manner when I read them Danny, as did every school child or college student from whom I elicited responses either by questionnaire or interview.

The young reader naturally does not 'lift' this issue out of the story itself as something separate. Whether he is capable of transferring any insights gained or sympathies aroused to his own situation and surroundings would depend on individual circumstances, such as whether an influential adult has played any part in his reading and enjoyment of the text. The implications of such an occurrence would be particularly interesting in the case of the average white South African child.

What seems beyond question is the fascination which this story holds for children. There is empathy for Mr Fox and the other animals, admiration for the hero himself, both disgust and mirth at the grotesqueness of the three farmers and delight at the lively description, action and dialogue, all humorous and exciting.

If one were to compare Dahl's approach to the question of transgressions against the law as seen in Danny or Fantastic Mr Fox, with that of Enid Blyton in any of her mystery or Famous Five yarns, one would see, over and over again, the stereotyped Blyton-esque attitudes to right and wrong. The upholders of the law, normally children, are invariably brave, loyal and of unquestionable respectability. There is little evidence of morally challenging situations. The have-nots unquestionably lack all respectability, are idle and depraved, have only themselves to blame for their predicament, and are always to be despised by the haves, who take their position for granted. The moral superiority felt and often flaunted by the Blyton children appears to stem from an assumption of the upper middle class of society being the accepted norm.

In as much as Dahl challenges certain 'sacred cows' of the Establishment, he is being 'subversive'. A cautious adult may interpret Fantastic Mr Fox as a glorification of stealing, flouting of the law, a romanticising of predatory animals and a distortion of adult human characteristics; but this would be to mis-read it completely. This is not the way in which children normally respond to it.

To conclude this discussion of Fantastic Mr Fox, I shall take a brief look at Dahl's use of language. The liveliness of his descriptions has already been referred to. Dahl occasionally addresses the reader in a somewhat consultative manner amidst the description. The following extract is an example of this, and of the liveliness of his language, in which some contrast between animal characters is also shown:

"You must understand this was not the ordinary weak fizzy cider one buys in a store. It was the real stuff, a home-brewed fiery liquor that burned in your throat and boiled in your stomach.

'Ah-h-h-h-h-h!' gasped the Smallest Fox. 'This is some cider!'

'That's quite enough of that,' said Mr Fox, grabbing the jar and putting it to his own lips. He took a tremendous gulp. 'It's miraculous!' he whispered, fighting for breath. 'It's fabulous! It's beautiful!'

'It's my turn,' said Badger, taking the jar and tilting his head well back. The cider gurgled and bubbled down his throat. 'It's ... it's



like melted gold!' he gasped. 'Oh Foxy, it's ... like drinking sunbeams and rainbows!'

'You're poaching!' shrieked Rat. 'Put that down at once! There'll be none left for me!' Rat was perched upon the highest shelf in the cellar, peering out from behind a huge jar. There was a small rubber tube inserted in the neck of the jar, and Rat was using this tube to suck out the cider." (pp. 70 - 72).

One is frequently aware of the author's twinkle-eyed presence emerging from the background. Readers of all ages share his relish in the characters and situations he creates, and it is the underlying sense of fun, at times of hilarious abandon, which takes the sting out of the 'subversiveness' which some people feel is a significant feature of his writing. Dahl doesn't pull his punches when presenting unsympathetic characters - it might be said that he overdoes it, and leaves no room for the reader to form his own judgements - but the vividness and humour of his writing give all of his characters, animal and human, a colour and life of their own. He varies his style. One may compare the vitality of the previously quoted passage with the following descriptions of farmers Bunce and Bean, and again with the delicate touch he uses to show Mr Fox emerging from his hole:

"Bunce was a duck-and-geese farmer. He kept thousands of ducks and geese. He was a kind of pot-bellied dwarf. He was so short his chin would have been under water in the shallow end of any swimming-pool in the world. His food was doughnuts and goose livers. He mashed the livers into a disgusting paste and then stuffed the paste into the doughnuts. This diet gave him a tummy-ache and a beastly temper." (p. 13).

"Bunce, the little pot-bellied dwarf, looked up at Bean and said, 'Have you got any more stupid ideas, then?'

'What?' said Bean. 'I can't hear you.' Bean never took a bath. He never even washed. As a result, his earholes were clogged with all kinds of muck and wax and bits of chewing-gum and dead flies and stuff like that. This made him deaf. 'Speak louder,' he said to Bunce, and Bunce shouted back, 'Got any more stupid ideas?'" (pp. 31 - 32).

"His black nose twitched from side to side, sniffing and sniffing for the scent of danger. He found none, and he was just about to go trotting forward into the wood when he heard or thought he heard a tiny noise, a soft rustling sound, as though someone had moved a foot ever so gently through a patch of dry leaves.

Mr Fox flattened his body against the ground and lay very still, his ears pricked. He waited a long time, but he heard nothing more." (p. 23).

Good writers can vary their styles and effects, as I have attempted to show. They give the reader something to think about, but their particular art lies in delighting the eye and the ear as well, in language which is accessible to the reader for whom it is intended, and which strikes chords of emotional truth, without which the reader cannot grow in awareness.

## 2.4 The BFG

Probably the finest of Dahl's fantasy stories to date, The BFG is about the struggle between a little girl, aided by her friend the Big Friendly Giant (known as BFG), and a troop of enormous man-eating giants who inhabit a desolate uncharted territory.

In this story not all kinds of giants are grotesque and frightening, and Dahl allows the heroine Sophie to discover that human beings are capable of being even more unpleasant than giants.

One night the heroine, who is an orphan, is whisked out of her bed and taken to a strange land by a giant four times the size of a normal person. Frightened out of her wits, she later discovers that he is not a flesh-eater, and that his chief occupation is blowing dream powders into bedrooms of human children at night. The BFG has 'kidnapped' Sophie because she had seen him doing this, but meant her no harm.

The large fellow has an eccentric style of speech abounding in grammatical irregularities and malapropisms, spoonerisms and puns, as well as an intensely expressive range of coined words and phrases. Sophie soon learns that her captor has a kind nature and a personal brand of humour, but has dangerous neighbours in the form of nine flesh-eating monster giants more than twice his size. These visit different countries each night in search of their staple diet: children. In contrast to this, the BFG dispenses pleasant dreams to children, taking each night's supply in a suitcase, and subsists on a wholly repulsive vegetable known as a snozzcumber.

After a narrow escape from a prowling giant, Sophie resolves to do something to prevent the deaths of scores of innocent children every night. She and the BFG devise a plan to have the nine flesh-eaters captured; two key components are the BFG's skill in concocting dreams and securing the co-operation of none other than the Queen of England.

The unlikely friendship between little girl and giant is quaint enough; improbability is taken a little further when both actually meet the Queen. Her Majesty is naturally astounded, but just as naturally maintains her regal dignity and composure throughout the extraordinary events in which she agrees to become involved.

Despite the absurdities of some of the top men in Her Majesty's Defences the giants are captured and permanently incarcerated in an enormous pit. The BFG and Sophie are honoured for their part in this venture.

The BFG is, first and foremost, an entertaining and exciting story of lovable (and unlovable) characters and heroic deeds. Thematically it may be seen as innocence, resourcefulness and great courage overcoming barbaric and frightening evil; of how determination, ingenuity and a sense of justice can outwit the anarchy of brute strength. But this story encompasses far more than how good overcomes evil. While the flesh-eating giants are portrayed as uncompromisingly hideous and frightening, Dahl allows the BFG to open our heroine's eyes to some fairly disturbing truths about human beings. He and Sophie have been discussing the nightly disappearance of children, when he points out that this does not attract as much attention as she may think, as

" '... human beans is disappearing everywhere all the time even without the giants is guzzling them up. Human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it.'

'But they don't eat each other,' Sophie said.

'Giants isn't eating each other either,' the BFG said. 'Nor is giants killing each other. Giants is not very lovely, but they is not killing each other. Nor is crockadowndillies killing other crockadowndillies. Nor is pussy-cats killing pussy-cats.'

'They kill mice,' Sophie said.

'Ah, but they is not killing their own kind,' the BFG said. 'Human beans is the only animals that is killing their own kind.'

'Don't poisonous snakes kill each other?' Sophie asked. She was searching desperately for another creature that behaved as badly as the human.

'Even poisionse snakes is never killing each other,' the BFG said. 'Nor is the most fearsome creatures like tigers and rhinostossterisses. None of them is ever killing their own kind. Has you ever thought about that?'

Sophie kept silent ...

... She was beginning to wonder whether humans were actually any better than giants. 'Even so,' she said, defending her own race, 'I think it's rotten that those foul giants should go off every night to eat humans. Humans have never done them any harm.'

'That is what the little piggy-wig is saying every day,' the BFG answered.

'He is saying, "I has never done any harm to the human bean so why should he be eating me?"'

'Oh dear,' Sophie said.

'The human beans is making rules to suit themselves,' the BFG went on. 'But the rules they is making do not suit the little piggy-wiggies. Am I right or left?'

'Right,' Sophie said.

'Giants is also making rules. Their rules is not suiting human beans. Everybody is making his own rules to suit himself.'

'But you don't like it that those beastly giants are eating humans every night, do you?' Sophie asked.

'I do not,' the BFG answered firmly. 'One right is not making two lefts ...' (pp. 84 - 86).

This particular theme is not obtrusive, arising as it does from the foregoing events and emerging from the growing understanding between Sophie and the BFG. While it is true that this is not a theme that will be of any real concern to children, the moral ambiguity it contains would not pass unnoticed in the case of the slightly older or maturer reader. The cynical or pessimistic element, in as much as it exists here, is more an expression of an adult way of looking at things, but Dahl does not dwell on this aspect for long; the point is made, and well made, and it is well taken by Sophie, but she and her friend then set about the business of plotting the downfall of the giants. Furthermore the manner in which the poor behaviour of human beings is elucidated by the BFG keeps it well within the level that even the youngest reader will be able to comprehend; the special character of this book is exemplified by the passage quoted - the warmth and charm generated by the BFG's manner of speech. Here, as in the rest of the story, there is a delightful contrast between Sophie's directness and tendency to understatement on the one hand, and her big friend's exuberance, on the other. Both are, however, more subdued in the above passage than usual.

A rather important point emerges from all this. It is not by chance that Dahl's story-telling appeals to a fairly broad spectrum of readers. The youngest reader will enjoy the excitement and identify to a large extent with the characters. Older readers may enjoy the action, humour and characterisation together with the challenging attitudes and ideas that emerge - at times the sheer outrageous nature of the things which happen. Adults - both young and old - have expressed enjoyment and interest in Dahl's works for children. The BFG is probably the best example of his works which can be enjoyed on more than one level and which offer more at every reading.

Satire is a further dimension of The BFG. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's top defence personnel do not escape Dahl's humour, which can be very biting when directed against the Establishment. Here too, the older reader will enjoy the comic irony, while the younger will be delighted at the way in which the Army and Air Force set about trying to capture the giants. Undoubtedly the satire on officialdom surrounding the American President's office in Charlie And The Great Glass Elevator is more hilarious and sustained, but in The BFG there is just enough of it not to be too distracting as far as the plot is concerned. The following extract demonstrates different levels of humour:

"The Army general was no more used to being insulted than the Air Marshal. His face began to swell with fury and his cheeks blew out until they looked like two huge ripe tomatoes. 'Your Majesty!' he cried.

'We are dealing with a lunatic! I want nothing more to do with this ridiculous operation!'

The Queen, who was used to the tantrums of her senior officials, ignored him completely." (p. 193).

The relationship between Sophie and the BFG lies at the very heart of the story. In the beginning, the benevolent giant's appearance is frightening and alien, but it does not take very long for the first barriers of misunderstanding to be removed. Before long Sophie realises that she is happier and better off in the company of the giant in his potentially dangerous world than she has been at the orphanage. In her new acquaintance she finds kindness, sympathy and a degree of spontaneity quite foreign to her.

Sophie herself is mature beyond her years, self-assured, articulate and understanding; by contrast her strange companion lacks the graces and refinements which education has given the little girl. Despite his unattractive exterior, the BFG is a creature of deeply felt sentiments, and Sophie comes to learn a great deal about herself, human beings and the nature of friendship from him. In this eccentric and lonely creature Sophie comes to see a beauty and wisdom which are belied by appearances.

A fourteen-year-old respondent, in one of her answers to a questionnaire on The BFG, which dealt with the characters, wrote as follows:

"Not much is said character-wise about Sophie. She seems to be there more as a foil for the BFG than anything else. She is clever and bright, but I think that the author used that to point out that even the brightest people can be taught something by people maybe not as knowledgeably clever as they. I think the author liked Sophie, although she is not as outstanding as the BFG. I think he liked the idea of the friendship between the BFG and Sophie, as they both taught each other things and found a true friend in each other when they had no one else to turn to."

Perhaps this respondent has come close to what the book is really about. For such learning to take place one needs a sympathetic mind, and an openness to new experience which is not based on stereotyped assumptions. A paradox underlying The BFG is that someone such as Sophie comes to understand a few new things about human beings from one who is himself not human. So, perhaps, can the slightly older reader, who can nevertheless enjoy the story as much for what it offers as a story, as can the younger reader.

The character of the BFG himself is a masterly creation suggesting classic pro-

portions. He is lovable, eccentric, vividly expressive in gesture and speech, disarmingly candid and at times coyly artful; he is enthusiastic and purposeful, caring to the point of being affectionate; always dignified and courageous. Courteousness itself, he has a mien of graciousness which complements his little friend's own nobility of nature. So, when meeting the Queen for the first time, "he stopped and made a slow graceful bow." (p. 169).

It is very much a part of the BFG's characterisation that such a moment of courtesy should be accompanied by an amusing unintended error of speech: "Your Majester," he said. "I is your humbug servant." (p. 169).

As the morning wears on, he becomes more relaxed in the company of Her Majesty, and his spontaneous nature gives way to a certain exuberance as he tucks into a breakfast of stupendous dimensions, and, to Sophie's dismay, broaches the subject of "whizzpopping".

It is in relating to Sophie and her extraordinary friend that the Queen is portrayed as a character in her own right. There is not the slightest suggestion of any fun being made of royalty here. In the Queen, Dahl creates a presence one would associate with a popular monarch - an aura of dignity and composure; a restrained but perceptible sense of humour; a feeling for occasion and proportion. Businesslike and sympathetic, exquisitely tactful in the presence of the bizarre, and diplomatic in dealing with the shortcomings of her senior officials, the Queen projects an image of being both human and immensely regal. She provides an effective foil to the BFG, humouring his idiosyncracies, dealing with the unprecedented with the utmost decorum. All these qualities come to the fore when the BFG gives a demonstration of his gastronomical power and skill - "whizzpopping":

"The Queen jumped. 'Whoopee!' shouted the BFG. 'That is better than Bagglepipes, is it not, Majester?' It took the Queen a few seconds to get over the shock. 'I prefer the bagpipes,' she said. But she couldn't stop herself smiling."

(p. 184).

In the light of the foregoing discussion I find it difficult to accommodate the view that Roald Dahl's stories for children are not told from the point of view of the child. Nor can I go along with any possible notion that his juvenile literature is to a significant extent a vehicle for the expression of the author's social prejudices. At the same time one recognises that a strong theme running through most of his children's books is the triumphing of the underdog over the Establishment, or the exposure of some unpleasant reality concealed by appearances.

But I have attempted to show that the experience of a Sophie or a Danny or a Mr Fox is something with which a child can associate himself very closely.

It is worth recalling the words of Nina Bawden:

"Writing for children, you should never pretend things are other than they are, but you can, and should, leave out things that are beyond their comprehension. Answering their questions, their doubts and fears, is one thing. Clobbering them over the head with the facts of life, quite another ... a good book for children, like a good book for adults, should hold an honest mirror up to life; reflect the emotional landscape they move in, tell them what they want to know." (Bawden N. 1974 p. 10).

Dahl does not pretend that things are other than what they are, but what the BFG tells Sophie about the behaviour of human beings does not amount to "clobbering" children over the head with the facts of life. This specific theme casts no shadow over the story as a whole. Children do not relate to pessimistic themes, and respond positively to the main characters of The BFG as they do in other books. They also enjoy descriptions of fairly inept behaviour on the part of Army and Air Force officialdom. Children relate easily to comical descriptions of foolish or unpleasant attitudes and conduct, and enjoy seeing justice done against this. But it would be absurd to imagine that a reading of The BFG would cause the average child to think that all or most Defence officers are as headstrong and impulsive as those in The BFG.

In poking fun at Her Majesty's senior officials in The BFG, Dahl is providing entertainment at the expense of individuals or types. There is a subtle but powerful suggestion in The BFG, just as there is in Danny The Champion Of The World, that the honour and integrity associated with public office need to be upheld by the holder of a particular office. The figure who bears authority needs to be justified in terms of personal qualities equal to the dignity required of that position. Hence, all the Queen's men who are summoned to deal with the crisis brought to her notice, in displaying their inadequacies, contradict the authority connected with their status. It cannot therefore be said that Dahl is ridiculing the office of Air Marshal or Head of the Army as a public institution.

The supreme example of a public office being vindicated by its incumbent in The BFG, is the monarchy. There is more than a mere public image associated with that "famous voice" (p. 160), — a genuine 'presence' referred to earlier. It is because of, and not despite, the amusing and personal touches that the institution of the monarchy emerges with enhanced esteem in The BFG.

A fair response to the overall impact of this book, which underlines its appeal for children, comes from an eleven-year-old child, who wrote that The BFG was his favourite book because

"It was very funny, the names were terribly gruesome. Roald Dahl's use of adjectives was excellent and the BFG's love for human beings was very tender."

## 2.5 Animals and human beings

Human cruelty towards animals is a theme which occurs in several of Roald Dahl's works for children. In Fantastic Mr Fox this occurs within the context of an animal fantasy in which the hero is himself threatened with extermination along with his family. In The Twits (1980), a group of caged monkeys is assisted by some birds in turning the tables on their captors, the wholly repulsive and nasty Mr and Mrs Twit. The Magic Finger (1966) features a heroine-narrator who supplies the chemistry for another turning of the tables by animals upon human beings, while the hero of Danny The Champion Of The World is a sympathetic character opposed to the cruelty and arrogance of a wealthy landowner who would have scores of birds massacred for 'sport'.

Two works, The Magic Finger and The Twits bear some comparison. The former is an exposure, through dramatic and unusual events, of the one-sidedness of hunting as a sport. A family called Gregg, who are exceedingly 'fond of shooting birds, have the 'magic finger' of indignation turned on them by the heroine, and lo and behold, they are transformed into tiny midgets with wings instead of arms, while four wild ducks, their most recent intended victims, undergo a corresponding metamorphosis whereby they become man-sized and grow arms. The Greggs then discover what it means to be at the mercy of much larger, gun-wielding adversaries, and are saved from death only by a solemn undertaking to the ducks not to kill any kind of animal from then on.

The Greggs and others like them are depicted as being unthinking rather than evil. The reader is not invited to condemn them, but rather to see something of himself in these people, perhaps. The narrator is the one with whom the reader identifies most strongly, as it is through her furious eyes that the problem is perceived. Yet she does not feature prominently in the main events of the story; she merely re-tells what she has heard from one of the





children who underwent the experience.

In The Twits, however, the situation is very different. Mr and Mrs Twit are inhuman in their consummate grotesqueness. They are even grotesque towards each other, but are at their meanest when forcing caged monkeys to perform humiliating and uncomfortable tricks and when devising ways of ensnaring unsuspecting birds. At one point even a group of boys seem destined for the Twits' cooking pot. In the end the couple get what they deserve. The book appeals to both children and adults, mostly for its grotesque humour. An eight-year-old girl and a five-year-old boy to whom the story was read, did not believe that people such as Mr and Mrs Twit could really exist, so repulsive were they. This title is one of those most frequently occurring in book reports of students for their English courses at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College. For them the humour, and to a lesser extent the justice meted out to the repulsive pair, are the chief recommendations. Of the two works, The Magic Finger is the more subtle, lacking the eccentric and somewhat 'exaggerated' characterisation of Mr and Mrs Twit, addressing itself entirely to the ethical implications of hunting as a theme - it contains no side issues - and presenting the problem in a highly dramatic way which has impact without any hint of the sensational. More is conveyed in this way, despite the patent improbability of the events themselves, than would be possible if one were merely to moralise about the issue.

Dahl does not depict only adults as capable of being cruel to animals or children. In The Swan, a short story from a volume entitled The Wonderful Story Of Henry Sugar (1983), a collection meant for the somewhat older reader, two teenage louts, Ernie and Raymond, while out shooting birds with Ernie's new .22 rifle, come upon a small inoffensive boy named Peter Watson, who is studying birds through his binoculars. The two decide to torment the boy, who is everything that they are not - academically bright, responsible, pacific and nature-loving. They subject him to abuse and humiliation which are both bizarre and sickening. Peter survives having a train rush over him after being tied between the lines of a railway track. Eventually the boys shoot a nesting swan, cut off both wings, and, because of Peter's outrage at this, tie them to his arms as a mocking gesture of reincarnation.

The violence, the irresponsible and dangerous delinquency and the utter vulnerability of the defenceless against such a form of lawlessness is disturbing. For this reason The Swan is not recommended reading for children below the age of at least eleven. As a realistic portrayal of bullying and the anarchy of

hooliganism, this story is outstanding. Its realism is compromised, to an extent, by the young victim's emerging unscathed from between the railway lines.

Far more unsatisfactory still is the 'lapse' into fantasy at the end of the story. Young Peter, having been struck by a bullet after refusing to jump and 'fly' from the top of a willow tree, suddenly acquires the power of flight. He escapes from his persecutors and flies home. Such a conclusion has no logical connection with the preceding events, which are frighteningly realistic. Perhaps Dahl is saying that in real life there are irresponsible fathers who give their sons rifles for their birthdays and encourage them to shoot any small animal that moves; that the mentality of an Ernie or a Raymond is not imaginary; that the innocent do not simply escape and that the wicked do not necessarily get the punishment they deserve. Nevertheless an adult reader may well be left feeling uncomfortable about the way Dahl concludes his story.

Because it is essentially true-to-life, The Swan is potentially far more frightening than the account of the nine flesh-eating giants in The BFG. The reader, whether adult or child, accepts the latter work as being one of fantasy, terrifying though some of the incidents may be in parts. Furthermore, the reader through the heroine Sophie, is made merely to reflect on the age-old propensity for violence in the human race without having to witness the barbaric actions of hooligans. The BFG merely gives a hint of the dark side of human nature from which children are often sheltered. The Swan goes much further.

When considering the portrayal of human cruelty in fiction, it is worthwhile bearing in mind what Bruno Bettelheim says of this in relation to fairy tales:

"There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures - the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes."

(Bettelheim B. 1976 p. 7).

The duality of human nature may be presented either in terms of stereotypes, in which good and evil are polarised in separate human characters for the benefit of much younger readers, or else within the framework of more complex and realistic characters and events which would not be confusing to older

readers.

Whereas in The Swan, one boy, a gentle lover of nature and animals, is persecuted by his peers, the young hero of The boy Who Talked With Animals, from the same collection, finds himself in conflict with adult society around him. While holidaying with his parents in Jamaica, the boy comes across an excited crowd on the beach, watching a giant turtle being dragged through the sand, upside down. The boy's intense anguish and concern are a foil to the trophy-hungry greed of some of the tourists and to the desire of many others for turtle soup and steaks. The lad loves animals, and in order to forestall a hysterical scene, his father succeeds in buying off the interested parties in return for the release of the turtle. Clearly, those involved in its capture and the negotiations surrounding it, were motivated by how much money and glory they could gain from it.

Humanity in the form of commercially motivated hotel management and fishermen, and sensation-and-glory-seeking holidaymakers, is revealed in a poor light. But not all adults are seen to be insensitive. The boy's father acts out of consideration for his son's feelings; he could no doubt afford to do so in a material sense. Nevertheless the boy disappears, and it is reported soon after that a giant turtle with a boy riding on its back was observed far out to sea. One is left with the feeling that the civilized world is well worth leaving as far as the boy is concerned, especially when he is seen again in the company of the turtle on a remote island, and he wastes no time in disappearing from view.

This story suggests that although Dahl writes with some cynicism about adult human beings, particularly when gathered together in great numbers, he does show that there are, after all, some people of integrity and responsibility. The finest, uncorrupted instincts in humanity come to the fore in young children, but a healthy relationship with a parent or parents is also shown to be important.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESPONSES TO 'THE BFG' AND 'DANNY THE CHAMPION OF THE WORLD'

#### 3.1 Interviews: 'The BFG' and 'Danny The Champion Of The World'

Three students, M, R and W, in their second year at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College, were separately interviewed in October 1984. A number of specific questions was set beforehand to establish the general direction of the interviews. As far as possible the same questions were asked of all three students, but the sequence was determined more by what transpired during each particular interview, as was the amount of time devoted to the discussion arising from such.

In the case of each book, special attention was given to its suitability for children, the degree to which it promoted reader involvement and a re-think of one's attitudes, the success of the characterisation and the extent to which the story was told from the point of view of the child rather than of an adult with perhaps an 'axe to grind'.

##### 3.1.1 The BFG

All three agreed that The BFG was suitable for children. M maintained that adults can also enjoy it: "He writes on an adult level as well." i.e. Dahl's writing in this instance is not confined to the child's level of interest and awareness. On the question of reader involvement, R and W had reservations as adult readers. R found the plot "slightly far-fetched, but fun ... it dragged on a little bit." W found the narrative, in particular the play on words "a bit monotonous at times", but M found that the section on the various dreams could relate to the child's world, saying that she, as a child, "wished that I could get my sister back, that I had suckers on my feet and I could walk up the walls ... it's so true ... you can relate to things like that."

A crucial passage in The BFG occurs when Sophie's strange and lovable friend says, "Giants is not very lovely, but they is not killing each other ..." and proceeds to open Sophie's eyes to some of the realities of human behaviour. R thought that the sentiments were rather negative, while W regarded them as fair; both considered that what was said was of great importance. Asked whether they considered that Dahl was merely using the BFG as a mouthpiece for expressing a personal view, or whether the words came naturally from what had gone before, R responded:

R: It arises quite naturally from what he says.

Q: The story itself. Does it, within its fantasy framework, evolve naturally - the author isn't ... using the story as a means of ... grinding an axe?

R: No. Not at all. Everything flows from it ... naturally.

W's reply was as follows:

W: I believe that it is Roald Dahl speaking, and he is saying what he wants to say through the BFG; however it fits in with the BFG - the Big Friendly Giant. His character is friendly. He is totally opposite to the other giants, and he is very humane in a way; he is expressing his own thoughts, and I can expect the BFG would have thought something like that.

Q: You don't feel that it, or anything else Dahl is saying, affects the convincing nature of the character portrayal?

W: No, I don't think so. It's quite natural.

M's response echoed that of the other two.

Violence in The BFG was discussed as follows:

Q: Violence. Did it not worry you?

M: No. It wasn't gory. Not even when the people fell into the pit near the end. It was handled in a light-hearted way.

Q: Violence in The BFG - the eating of the children ...?

R: It's violent but he doesn't make it sound so gruesome - he does make it sound gruesome, but in a humorous vein ... it softens the blow.

Q: ... Bloodbottler and company eating the children, even though we don't see it directly happening, were you disturbed at all by the notion that it was happening?

W: No - not really, and I don't think a child would be either because if we look at many of the fairy tales and things like that, we see these sort of things happening, and as you say, we don't really see

it directly ... we just hear people telling about it, and I don't think we experience anything that could be unpleasant.

Two points emerge here: humour and indirectness of the narrative. W makes an interesting point about fairy tales. In the latter, the 'atrocities' form a direct part of the stories themselves. It may also be added that several fairy tales feature malevolent human beings or witches as preying upon human innocents, rather than clearly identifiable enemies such as man-eating giants.

If the principal characters of any story fail to convince, then the story fails as a whole. Regarding the success with which the title hero is portrayed, M said, "I do find him convincing because of his feelings ... towards the humans." R thought him very authentic; saying that "with such friendly mannerisms, you just don't think of him in any other way." She described him as thoroughly human and yet not so. W regarded the BFG as "almost human in many ways". The interviewees were also asked how the BFG's style of speaking - "I is" - and so on, affected their feelings towards him. The replies went as follows:

M: You love him more, because he's not up there, and you're not scared of him or anything ... it makes him smaller, and you can relate to him better.

R: It adds humour. You can laugh at the way he speaks because of his lack of education and I think it also adds to the story when the BFG doesn't understand how humans can kill each other ... he can't understand it, and it comes through in his lack of educated speech.

W: I don't mind him speaking like that at all, it's quite amusing sometimes ... but at times I feel it becomes a bit monotonous; maybe it fits in with his simple way; I suppose it does, to a certain extent, because he is unlearned, and yet he has a basic goodness in him, I think, but that is why he is different from the humans - they're clever and have intelligence, yet they don't use it correctly and they kill each other.

Q: If the BFG had spoken in a normal way, and said things like, "Just because I'm a giant, you think I'm a man-eating cannibal ...", how would this, do you think, have affected your feelings towards him?

W: ... Having read the book as it is written with the BFG using the language he does, it does make the book more effective, because we must bear in mind that he is a giant. He doesn't come from the same world as we do in a way. So there must be some basic difference, and I think this makes it effective and the story more interesting and perhaps more believable, especially for the child.

Concerning Sophie as a character:

- Q: ... Also convincing, do you find?
- R: ... Not as convincing as the BFG.
- Q: In what sense do you mean convincing ... not as much of a character or portrayed as fully as he is ... doesn't develop ...?
- R: Well she doesn't develop ... I think the BFG dominates it, and Sophie is just used as an instrument to ... as a foil to him and to create the climax.
- Q: Isn't there any instance of her adapting herself - do you think Sophie learns anything ... does her attitude to life change in any way? ... Does the BFG teach her anything?
- R: Well, he teaches her that there is another world and not everything is frightening; the supernatural in the sense that it is portrayed isn't as frightening as people have made her believe it to be.
- Q: Does she learn something perhaps about her own kind ... about people?
- R: She believed that they are evil in the sense that they kill each other, and I think also at Sophie's age they tend to believe that ... they think things, and they tell them to grownups and grownups don't believe them. Maybe Roald Dahl is trying to portray that as well, as Sophie was trying to convince humans that the giants were killing the people.
- Q: So he's telling the story very much from the child's point of view?
- R: Completely from a child's point of view.
- Q: No doubt about that?
- R: No. He takes the role of the child.
- 
- Q: What about Sophie - is she a convincing character?
- W: Yes. She's very similar to the BFG in many ways, I think. She looks up to him as a father. She agrees with the things he says and thinks, because he stands for ... goodness. She sees the other giants and how they contrast with him. I think she's very convincing. I don't think she says anything a normal child of her age wouldn't say.
- Q: Do you think she develops as a character at all?
- W: I think she learns quite a lot.

R's observation that Dahl uses Sophie as a foil to the BFG, to be dominated by him, may be overstating the case somewhat. What emerges from both R and W however, is that Sophie undergoes a learning experience in the field of personal relationships. R is emphatic that such an experience, in fact the entire story is told from within the world of the child, and as such, by im-

plication provides the young reader with an interesting and valuable learning experience.

A possible source of controversy at any time is the portrayal of a current monarch in fiction. Dahl is not unknown for his satirical treatment of people in high or public places. My own assessment of the 'subversive' potential of Dahl's presentation of Queen Elizabeth II was tested against that of R and W:

R: Maybe I didn't expect the Queen to react like she did. Maybe a child doesn't quite see the Queen quite as royalty ... anymore ... from reading the book ...

Q: You mean she's made to seem far more human than you imagine her to be?

R: Yes. I felt maybe Roald Dahl even sort of put her down a bit.

Q: You think so?

R: A little bit ... not a lot.

Q: Yes. What kind of picture does Dahl create of Queen Elizabeth? Does she seem to be a person of dignity elsewhere ...?

R: Yes, she comes across dignified, but the way she ... when she sees Sophie, she gets a fright I think ... but there's just something there ... I can't quite put my finger on it. She's not quite as 'nice' as she should be!

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W: I don't think he says anything that makes her seem unpleasant ... he makes her seem quite, er, a normal person really. Even when the giant pops a few whizzpoppers, she doesn't say anything ... isn't annoyed ...

Q: Do you think he brings her down to a human level?

W: Yes, I think so. He doesn't place her on a pedestal ... she's reading her newspaper ... he makes it quite amusing to look into the Queen's lifestyle ... he makes her understandable.

Q: He (Dahl) doesn't create an unflattering picture of her?

W: No, I don't think so.

Q: Do you think some of her royal qualities emerge?

W: Well, she's patient and she does listen to Sophie and her story, and she does something about it.

Q: Do you think she's dignified?

W: I think she's fairly dignified, although she does help them ... She keeps her distance in a way; she doesn't get that close to them.



One cannot come to any conclusion about 'sexist' implications behind the answers of R (female) and W (male), using such a small sample. R's response does, however, suggest that Dahl has removed some of the mystique from the person of the Queen while W's response is possibly more objective. Neither response in any way suggests that the author seeks to make fun of the Queen - on the contrary. Nevertheless, R still feels 'let down' a little, although she cannot really explain why.

Both R and W thought that Dahl made the Queen's military chiefs look foolish and incompetent, and that this added humour to the situation. Neither found it offensive or out of place so far as the story was concerned.

Q: Did you find this amusing, or feel slightly indignant about it perhaps?

W: I found it quite amusing, because often there are people in high positions that are fairly incompetent sometimes ... because they haven't had much active service themselves, but have always had someone to push in front of them - and that's what we saw in the end, that they were quite cowardly.

Q: Do you get the impression that Dahl is implying something like this?

W: I think so - just taking a dig at the army.

In order to sum up the impact and value of The BFG, the following question was posed:

Q: Do you find that The BFG is something like a modern extended fairy tale of a brave little girl using her initiative to outwit brute force, or is there far more to it than just this?

R: No, there must be more to it.

Q: Would you recommend it as something having lasting value?

R: Definitely. It's got lots of little moral issues.

Q: Where do you think its main appeal lies?

R: I think a lot of it is in the friendliness of the giant, and the eagerness to help ... your're left in no doubt what his character is like.

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W: I think that comes into it to a certain extent, but I also feel that perhaps it's a story about how people can get along better - even people in different stations and walks of life. The BFG is totally different to Sophie, yet together they accomplish something good. The Queen is on a different level to Sophie, yet they work together

to do something good as well. I think that it is a story about people, and how they can relate to one another.

Q: So would you say that you could recommend this book as being a humanitarian work and of lasting value?

W: Yes, I think it is of lasting value. The adult reader can gain something from it, although the child will gain more and enjoy it to a greater extent.

### 3.1.2 Danny The Champion Of The World

Although she herself preferred Danny, R felt that children would respond more readily to The BFG. R could identify with Danny, found his situation "very true to life" and the 'idyllic' relationship between Danny and William, his father, did not worry her in the least; it presented something to strive for. At the same time R did not feel that Dahl was intending to influence the behaviour of his readers in any direct way.

W described Danny as a more "realistic" work than The BFG. Although he could not really identify with the boy, he found him to be a sympathetic character. As to the 'idyllic' nature of the father-son relationship, W was of the opinion that Roald Dahl created this in order to provide a contrast with other people such as Hazell and his "so-called friends".

Even so, W thought that Danny was a convincing character in his own right, a view shared by M and R. R expressed the view that Danny developed as a character; apart from growing older, he "learns to reason". W in particular indicated the importance of the first person narrator technique to the credibility of Danny and his father as characters, and of the relationship between the two:

W: ... the story is told by Danny and so he wouldn't bring out every single thing that happened in their day-to-day living. He wants to express his point of view in a certain way, and especially chooses those things which show that the relationship with his father was a good relationship.

Q: Do you think that if it had not been told in the first person, it might have seemed a little sentimental, perhaps, or that some of those things couldn't have been said?

W: Yes; because we rely on Danny and get close to him, so we know his story is ... valid. But if somebody else had said some of those

things about his father, it might have just sounded sentimental ... When Danny has directly experienced the love of his father, he has the right to say what he feels about the relationship with his father.

This led to the question of whether the story is told essentially from the child's point of view, a consideration of vital importance in assessing work written for children:

W: Yes, I think most of the time it is ... now and again it seems Roald Dahl, someone older than Danny, is speaking.

Q: Saying things, perhaps, about snobbishness ...? Some of the observations he makes - do some of them not seem normal for a boy of his age?

W: Yes ... mm ... I can't think of any.

Q: You don't feel perhaps that he (Dahl) ... is climbing into the pages of his book and saying, "hey, listen here!"

M: No. Not at all.

M, R and W all found the portrayal of Victor Hazell convincing - not merely a caricature or an exaggerated portrait of meanness and arrogance. W suggested that perhaps "it (the portrayal) has to be a little exaggerated ... we must have a person a child will not like at all. A child would perhaps have seen poaching as wrong if he had seen goodness" (in Hazell). Two points are raised here. The first is that the portrayal of certain characters according to the extremes of black or white is quite in line with the young child's perception of morality. Good and bad need to be seen unambiguously for what they are, and treated accordingly. This does not necessarily mean that Hazell as a character is painted larger than life. W also expressed the view that it is "quite possible that there could be someone like that." The second point is that the reader's moral response to the act of poaching is likely to be in part determined by the character of Hazell himself. The man's undesirable qualities and actions invite some sort of retribution possibly, and the poaching of his pheasants may be seen as this, more than anything else. What children who completed questionnaires in fact say about the rights and wrongs of poaching will be mentioned later.

What are the implications, as far as M, R and W were concerned?

Q: Does the theme of poaching not seem to condone stealing?

M: I don't really think so.

Q: You're not worried about what the child may be left thinking?

M: No, I wasn't worried.

Q: Would you not hesitate to read it to any class ... expose it to any child?

M. No, I wouldn't.

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 Q: Do you think ... this appears to condone stealing?

R: No, because it is not stealing in the direct sense. He's not stealing from someone who's portrayed as a nice person. Mr Hazell deserved it, and a child can see that.

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 Q: Let's talk about poaching. do you think that this theme perhaps appears to condone stealing?

W: I don't think ... it condones stealing because we see it taking place here, but only if we look at it superficially. If we look a bit deeper at the story and at what Danny's father says especially, we first see that Danny's father only used to poach because he had to, to get enough food, and then we must also bear in mind that Hazell is a totally unpleasant man. Also ... the way he conducts his hunting parties, with all the nobility - it's a cruel way of doing it as well; as well as being an unsporting way. Some of the pheasants are wounded ... so although the book might seem to condone stealing, I think the poaching is justified, especially this last act of Danny and his father poaching those hundred and twenty pheasants - it wasn't merely wanting to eat those pheasants - that wasn't their main objective. It was to teach Mr Hazell a lesson, I think.

Mr Hazell's lack of any redeeming features renders him wholly unpleasant in the eyes of the reader. This, and the agrarian setting of the story would weigh against a facile transfer from this situation in fiction, to say one in real life, in which one might come across an unpleasant manager or owner of a supermarket in a town. There should be no reason to suppose that a reader of Danny would fall into the trap of thinking that an unsympathetic, even nasty proprietor of such a store would need to have it robbed so that justice could be done. Few, if any such people could be as uncompromisingly mean as Dahl's Mr Hazell, and the very nature of poaching is related in an ironic way to the unsporting, even cruel practices carried out on Hazell's estate by himself and his men.

Given that Danny is not a work of fantasy, young readers might be prompted to take the events, including of course poaching, more seriously than they would otherwise have done. When this was raised, R replied that children might

indeed do so, but that Hazell had it coming to him, and that the humanity of the poachers was highlighted when contrasted with Hazell himself. The discussion with W went thus:

Q: Do you think the fact that Danny is not a fantasy would not perhaps suggest to children that this sort of thing is done in real life by decent people?

W: Yes, I think they will see this, but I think for many people, poaching is remote, especially for children living in the city. But ... I don't think that the child will ever begin to think like this - poaching is all right and therefore shoplifting is all right - he won't transfer poaching to shoplifting, because Roald Dahl emphasises that this man Victor Hazell is not a very pleasant person, and that in a way Danny and his father are justified in stealing his pheasants. They aren't stealing them just because they want to steal them because they think it's a good plan; that comes into it slightly. The main reason is that they don't at all like what they see in this man Hazell. They want to teach him a lesson. They're not being selfish ...

Q: Would it be a bit far-fetched to say that Danny and his father want to see justice done?

W: I think that is more or less what I wanted to say.

Arising from the poaching theme, but somewhat broader in its implications is the issue of justice and the law:

Q: Do you think that anything is being said about justice? The nature of justice or the nature of the law? Limitations of the law perhaps?

R: Maybe the limitations of the law, because Mr Hazell was a horrible person, but then if you think about it, Mr Hazell was also defying nature's law by fattening up the pheasants ... so that cancels that out. He was being cruel to the pheasants.

No society allows its citizens to take the law into their own hands. It is possible that Danny demonstrates with what success, and, more importantly, with what 'justice' this can be done, all of which is highly questionable in terms of respect for the institution of the law. If the book does this, it also raises the question of whether the law and its normal channels of enforcement are in fact always just and worthy of being respected on all occasions. This was the subject of some discussion with W, and what emerged throws light on the skill with which Dahl makes a complex issue accessible to young readers:

Q: Is one ... raising doubts as to the justice of the law? Can one be unjust and still be on the right side of the law, and by the same token, be a very just and very kind person, doing the 'right' thing

for the 'right' reasons, and yet technically go against the law?

- W: Yes I think if you look at Mr Hazell - he dug pits to stop poachers from coming on to his land. He was quite justified in doing that, but it's not a very humane thing to do ... he couldn't have been prosecuted for doing something like that ... he was quite within his right ... to notify the authorities, but in this case his motive was selfish. Danny's father did no permanent damage by stealing his (Hazell's) pheasants.
- Q: The question is that someone reading the story, which depicts poachers as heroes - some damage could be done to young readers who might think they were being set a good example. You say you think they won't transfer what happens in the book to their own situation?
- W: No, unless they can see that what they're doing is justified, because I think they'll be able to see in this, that certain things can be done within the law that are still wrong from the moral point of view, but you can do other things which are against the law, but which are still good, from a moral point of view. Even if you look at the doctor. He helped, and fixed Danny's father's leg. Now, if he hadn't done this, serious consequences could have arisen ... actually the doctor was doing something that was against the law by doing anything to this leg in the circumstances. Knowing that William had done something wrong, he did not inform the police. The policeman, at the end, knew about pheasants, and I think he even tried to shoo them into the car.
- Q: Talking of Enoch Samways the sergeant, is this book in any way subversive of good taste, of sound social attitudes, of ethical principles - the fact for example that the sergeant himself is party to this, and is himself a poacher (reputedly) - do you see anything wrong in that?
- W: Well, perhaps it would be wrong if we saw the sergeant poaching - if he didn't have a need for poaching - to feed his family or something. But although we are told that he does like poaching, we don't actually see him poaching, and when we see him riding on his bicycle and talking to Mr Hazell, he says nothing to indicate that he is party to this ...
- Q: Do you think that it in a sense, humanises the law - you know, the arm of the law knowing a thing or two about poaching?
- W: Yes, it's no good having a law that's not functional; in some cases to obtain total justice, I think you have to bend the law, in a way. I think although it's difficult for a child to grasp ... through the story he will to a certain extent be able to grasp this. I think the whole book makes the world ... more realistic; the child is really idealistic to start with.

R felt that one of the limitations of the law was that it "is very black and white", that it pronounces human activity as either right or wrong. The portrayal of Enoch Samways showed that there was a human side to the law as well. R agreed that for the law to be humanised it has to be bent "slightly".

Danny's experiences at school raise the further question of whether the author is undermining respect for the educational establishment. The reader is scarcely left with an optimistic picture of Danny's school as an institution.

Q: What about schooling - do you think that the description of Danny's school and his teachers is a bit uncalled for, perhaps a little one-sided?

R: No.

Q: Is it likely to upset authorities, teachers, parents who read the book?

R: I doubt it. After all there are two nice teachers and one bad one.

W inclined to the view that Dahl's portrayal of the school was rather negative, but qualified this:

W: It's - I think it is negative; all the bad points are brought out, but in fact Roald Dahl does say something complimentary about one of the teachers, in fact even about the one who used to drink gin ... it showed that Danny still respected him because he had a love for children, I think. Yet none of the children liked the other teacher Captain Lancaster, because even his title I think shows that he's a man who never forgets - you do something wrong and he'll always remember it.

Addressing the question of whether the book is subversive in any way at all, of good taste, of sound social attitudes and ethical values, R replied:

R: Not at all. He justifies everything by the creation of a nasty character, and the good wins in the end - the good people, and there's nothing subversive about that.

Q: No. Are the good people themselves shown up to be -

R: That they're not totally good themselves.

Q: And that they're not totally victorious either?

R: No, because the sleeping pills wear off.

Q: They don't think of it.

R: In the end the pheasants are totally free.

Q: Would you call it a very human book?

R: Yes.

M felt that the book was light-hearted and something different, and hardly sub-

versive. As to whether Danny was thought-provoking from the adult point of view:

Q: Would you say that it has in any way altered your thinking, affected your attitude towards anything, perhaps towards people, towards the law? Social attitudes?

R: I think, slightly towards the law. It's slightly more understandable, but apart from that, it hasn't really altered anything. Maybe if you read it when you're younger, you'll think about it more.

Q: So you're saying that for yourself, it doesn't raise anything completely new; it's not as if you'd been totally naive about the law - at this stage of your life.

R: No.

Both R and W said that they would have no hesitation in recommending Danny The Champion Of The World to any reader, or in presenting it to a class. W offered the opinion that he would be happy to "let the children in my class read it and discuss it afterwards, because I think that it's important. I don't think any children would get the wrong ideas, but just to be able to talk about it would help them ..."

The last question asked in these interviews concerned itself with identifying the overall appeal of Danny:

M: It's unusual, humorous and so different.

R: The main appeal is probably in the poaching - the humour that's created out of such a controversial ...

Q: What do you mean by humour? In the sense of ...

R: Irony really; people getting back at something that's wrong.

W provided some insights which, instinct told me, put the effect of the book in a nutshell:

W: It's an exciting book and it's also unusual - the setting is unusual. Not many children these days have an opportunity to stay in the countryside and to experience the things that Danny has experienced. Danny lives in two worlds really. He lives in the workshop and then he lives in the countryside, which seems quite strange really; one minute he's among the grease of the workshop; the next minute he's outside with his father. His father knows so much about mechanical things, as well as about the countryside ... and I think this would be quite fascinating



for the child, and also the fact that, apart from being exciting, the whole story has a feeling of peace about it, because these people, Danny and his father and his friends are at peace with each other, and this is contrasted with people like Victor Hazell and his hunting party friends who only stick together because they can get something out of each other.

Q: The child would pick this up?

W: Yes, the child would see that it's unusual as well, and that it's not a stale theme or plot.

To conclude, the three students interviewed passed a solid vote of confidence in both The BFG and Danny The Champion Of The World, particularly in respect of points highlighted at the end of Chapter One: "the accurate portrayal of the child's world; in particular, authenticity of feeling and perspective". The three were possibly even stronger in their endorsement of the books as being positive, thought-provoking and constructive rather than negative and undermining. The associated educational implications speak for themselves.

### 3.2 Further response to 'The BFG'

In the course of my discussion of The BFG in Chapter Two, I referred to part of what a 14-year-old respondent had said in reply to a question (no. 31: The writer's feelings towards the main characters seem to be ...) from the questionnaire (Appendix D). The first part of her answer to the same question (31) ran as follows:

"... the same as he evokes in his readers. He obviously has a soft spot for the BFG and admires his courage and honesty. He intends to make you sympathise with and love the BFG. The other giants are definitely meant to be disliked."

This was followed up in replying to question 32 (The writer may have been trying to make me feel that ...): "the nicest heroes don't have to be handsome or clever." The respondent demonstrated not only thematic awareness but also sensitivity to author's intention, in her answers to questions 28 and 30 respectively:

28: (Sometimes things were said or done which made me realise something I had never thought of before, for example ...)

"... how human beings are creatures who kill each other whereas not many other creatures do that."

30: (The writer's own feelings towards his story and characters are shown/hidden because ...)

"... (shown because) the difference between good and bad is very clear. The things he makes his characters say reflect what he feels about them and about types of people in general."

The whole nature of the book as being anything but a mere vehicle for satire is expressed as follows:

20: (I feel different after having read this book, as ...)

"I feel good. It's such an enthusiastic book, full of life and fun that you can really become part of and enjoy without looking for depressing hidden meanings."

33: (I imagine the writer to be a person who ...)

"... has a great imagination and sense of humour, whose first aim is not just to put a moral or a meaning across, but to tell a good story."

Regarding the main appeal of The BFG and the way in which it is written (questions 37 and 39), she wrote:

(What I liked most about this book was ...) "its simplicity of character and plot, and the descriptions and words used in it. It is a very easy book to read, and leaves you smiling. It is a book that bubbles and sparkles! ... The descriptions are, as usual, very vivid and the words used, imaginative and exciting. They add colour and a special character to the book. It is written very obviously by someone who understands what children like, and with a sense of humour. The dreams described also add humour and show an understanding of children." }

The last response suggests a breadth of appeal, especially among younger readers. That it is not limited, however, to this group, is indicated by the respondent's answer to question 26, in which she states that she would like to read this book again, because "it is easy to read, is interesting and amusing, and is the sort of book which can be read again and again and enjoyed every time in a new and different way."

### 3.3 Further responses to 'Danny The Champion Of The World'

#### 3.3.1 Reading assignment: teletuition student.

A teacher in Port Elizabeth who was doing English as one of her subjects in a

correspondence (teletuition) course offered by the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College, chose Danny The Champion Of The World for a children's literature assignment on pupil response. This turned into a minor research project in itself which I requested permission to quote in the present work.

The teacher concerned read Danny to a combined class of Standard One and Standard Two boys and girls, who responded with great excitement. She reported that "(Danny's) description of himself as a 'scruffy little boy with grease and oil all over' completely won them over." They identified closely with Danny, as testified by observations by the teacher that the excitement was "almost tangible" and that they "shared every step of the way to the woods".

Opinion was divided over whether Danny's father was justified in leaving Danny alone at night, and "Like Danny some of the children were rather shocked when they heard about his poaching, but I'm afraid in some cases he went up further in the children's estimation." However they were "very impressed when William offered to give up poaching for Danny's sake, especially as he had described how much he loved it."

One part of the assignment involved the responses of selected children to a questionnaire on the chosen book. An important point was raised in the course of the completed assignment:

"I felt wary of giving the children a formal questionnaire as I felt this would spoil the spontaneous feeling of enjoyment and delight in the story so I settled on an informal 'chat session' with the Std Twos while the Std Ones were busy elsewhere."

This teacher was most likely correct in attaching greater value to "chat sessions" than to formal questionnaires. One can never be quite sure that one is not half putting ideas into the heads of respondents when asking them carefully phrased questions, especially when they are to be answered in writing.

Three children, C, N and A (full names were given in the original) emerged as discussion leaders. Apart from the legal aspects of poaching, Danny's family circumstances and other themes, one aspect of the story which generated lively discussion which a questionnaire could not have provided on a one-to-one basis, was about how Danny's character was developing. According to the assignment:

"They at once agreed that he was learning to be independent, able to cope

with many different situations when he was grown up, that he was brave, but his school experience unfortunately showed him that life wasn't fair. N and A, particularly N, suggested that Danny's ability to make up his mind quickly and not panic was a good example to them all."

### 3.3.2 Teaching observation activity: children's responses to 'Danny'

A senior primary student in her first year at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College read Danny to a Standard Two class in Cape Town during teaching observation in 1984. She then administered a questionnaire which I had provided (Appendix E), gaining responses from 13 pupils.

All responded positively to the book, indicating that they could easily identify with Danny and his situation. The novelty of living in a caravan could account for this to some extent, along with the sympathetic portrayal of Danny as a person.

For example:

Section B, 1. (Would you like to swop places with Danny for a week, a month, a year? Why?)

"A month, Because his life is like a dream, But I would still like my mother to be along ..."

and,

Section B, 2. (Do you admire Danny? Why? What do you like most about him?)

"Yes, I liked it when he talked about his father, when he got so dirty when he was so small."

An interesting feature which the children's answers brought to light was that although most (9 out of 13) of the respondents unambiguously saw poaching as wrong - tantamount to stealing - this did not make either Danny or his father less acceptable to them. The impression gained is that the children did not make a conscious connection between what Danny and William did as poachers and what they were like as people.

One child expressed a desire to swop places with Danny "... because it must be nice to run around in the open field and because of the excitement of poaching". She also admired him "... because he was such a brave boy. He is onest." (Original spelling). Yet further on, she had this to say in answer to Section D, 2. (Do you think it was wrong of Danny and his father to go poaching?)

Explain carefully why.):

"Yes because poaching is the same as being a thief."

This answer obviously contains an element of contradiction as far as her statement "He is onest" is concerned. Either the respondent, in Section B 1 and 2, was referring to qualities not necessarily affected by the poaching activities, or she had forgotten what she had said earlier by the time she reached Section D. Either way, this tendency is representative of what most of the other respondents were doing, namely making no meaningful connection between Danny's character and the rights or wrongs of poaching. Excitement, novelty and adventure were far more significant for them. Nevertheless the fact remains that the majority saw poaching as wrong.

Just over half of the children thought it wrong of Danny's father to keep him out of school until the age of seven. Those who did not think it wrong generally gave a more considered reason for their opinion than the others.

Neither the responses of the above 13 children nor those mentioned in the previous sample from Port Elizabeth give any reason to suppose that exposure to Danny The Champion Of The World has had a subversive effect upon them. Perhaps the general tendency of the responses is best typified by the following answer, which indicates a positive and healthy outlook towards the story and its chief protagonist:

Questionnaire (Appendix E) Section B, 2. (Do you admire Danny ...?)

"Yes, he is brave and helpful. He is very exciting to be with."

### 3.3.3 Responses to 'Danny': first-year senior primary class

In 1984 a group of eight first-year senior primary students at the Graaff-Reinet Teachers' College agreed to complete the Appendix D questionnaire, all having read and discussed the book rather carefully.

The general feeling towards the book was strongly positive. The wholesome rural atmosphere of the setting, the community spirit amongst the villagers and Danny's courage and determination were three aspects about which there

was little or no disagreement at all. Several admired the relationship between Danny and his father, seeing it as the endorsement of an invaluable family bond. Some mentioned that good appeared to triumph over evil, while most pinpointed one or two examples of improbability in the narrative, such as Danny's precocious mechanical prowess.

Examples of students' feelings about the quality of life depicted in the book include the following:

"... a happy home, implying domestic bliss, was well portrayed. The fact too, that industrialisation was remote from Danny and his father in their caravan made me feel more at home with them."

"... the feeling of friendship and love between all the villagers especially between Danny and his father."

"... Danny co-operated with his father as did the whole community. Perhaps this book is showing us that people belong together."

One student mentioned that one of the most memorable aspects of the book as far as he was concerned was

"... the quiet, contented lives of 2 individuals who have found their identity with each other and with the nature around them. They use circumstances to find enjoyment but above all rely upon each other to see them through difficult times."

This may be compared with what another student felt she had learned from the book namely

"... that love can bridge all problems if it is given a chance. For example, Danny was motherless while still a baby, and his father added a further dimension to his character by excelling in taking on the role of a mother and offering unconditional love to Danny."

Evidence that the book reflects the point of view of the child, and that this can have a salubrious effect upon an adult reader, is contained in the following:

"... the book has been so written that the world is seen from a child's eyes. The simple implicit values of such a little one has a profound impact upon 'an adult' who has become apathetic, sceptical or even miserable about life, like Mr Hazell. It has reminded me that the world is seen differently by all and sundry."

Another respondent reported that what she liked most about this book (item 37)

was "the way in which it was written from a child's point of view, with his feelings, thoughts and simplicity."

Approximately half of the eight respondents expressed reservations of some sort about the poaching activities. One student, in answer to item 10 (I was very surprised when ...), wrote:

"... Danny's Dad gave such a poor and illogical explanation for his poaching habits and when he glossed over Danny's sensitivity ... a young boy understands justice and good behaviour keenly despite his desire for fun and adventure but Danny's Dad failed to recognize Danny's moral understanding, especially when Danny said, 'But we're not starving here, Dad.'"

The same respondent later commented that one of the things which he disliked most about the book (item 38) was "the fact that Danny and his Dad did not fully discuss the reasons why they should go poaching or not." Yet these reservations did not prevent this person from feeling that Danny was a constructive and wholesome work, as shown in two of his responses quoted previously, concerning "2 individuals who have found their identity ..." and the "simple implicit values" of a child and the effect it could have on apathetic or sceptical adults.

Yet another respondent admitted that she had mixed feelings (item 24) about "what Danny's father was doing, and encouraging his son to enjoy the poaching with him." She went on to say, however, that "justice seemed to play an important role and Danny and his father didn't entirely get their own way either because, I feel, they were not perfectly in the right."

On balance, the respondents felt that Danny was an immensely worthwhile book, despite the abovementioned doubts felt by some of them. In these cases, such doubts were insufficient to create a significantly adverse picture of the book as a whole. As one respondent mentioned, he felt indignant (item 22) about "the fact that the rich have such power over the poor, no matter whether they are good or evil poor people. Like Mr Hazell's attitude towards Danny's father." Another felt that Dahl may have been endeavouring to make readers feel that "despite the evil that men do, a child is a lover of peace and harmony, and that it is the hope of all mankind and its future", while someone else saw the writer's own feelings towards his subject come out because "the issues pertaining to a good, solid family unit-as a norm of life are portrayed and encouraged."

Having thus reviewed representative examples of the most significant issues and

responses arising from the questionnaire, I cannot escape the conclusion that a level-headed critic could find little reason for judging Danny The Champion Of The World to be undesirable or subversive.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSIONS

In my concluding chapter I shall deal chiefly with the following issues which have been raised in the course of this dissertation:

- 4.1 The use of the child's perspective in Dahl's narrative technique.
- 4.2 The question of popularity and quality.
- 4.3 Adult and juvenile responses to Dahl and Blyton: some differences.
- 4.4 Adult appeal as a criterion in children's fiction.
- 4.5 Fiction and the emotional needs of children.
- 4.6 Character portrayal.
- 4.7 Style and reading aloud.
- 4.8 The 'subversive' element?
- 4.9 The place of Dahl's fiction in the education of the child.

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#### 4.1 The use of the child's perspective in Dahl's narrative technique

Any assertion that the bulk of Roald Dahl's literature for juveniles is not narrated from the child's point of view is scarcely borne out by the enthusiastic responses of children reported in this study. Alasdair Campbell points out that, difficult as it is to categorise Dahl as an author in terms of his themes and techniques,

"... with just possibly one exception, I would say that all his books are marked by a powerful creative imagination and an instinctive understanding of the sort of themes and incidents that appeal to young readers."

(Campbell A. 1981 p. 108).

Campbell goes on to say that in all of the four books for the youngest age range, namely The Enormous Crocodile (1978), The Magic Finger (1966), The Twits (1980) and Fantastic Mr Fox (1970),

"the shadows of greed, cruelty and revenge are variously present. If one wishes to avoid such ingredients altogether in books for young children, Dahl must be ruled out; but in my opinion that would be a perverse attitude, indefensible on either psychological or literary grounds. Normal children are bound to take some interest in the darker side of human nature, and books for them should be judged not by picking out separate elements but rather on the basis of their overall balance and effect. Each of these four books is ultimately satisfying, with the principles of justice clearly vindicated."

(Campbell A. 1981 p. 109).

Campbell's remarks would appear to support one of the assertions of this study, namely that it would be a misapprehension to describe much of Dahl's work as being essentially 'adult' in its concerns. Children want to know about the workings of human nature, both the good and the bad. No normal child likes to see childhood portrayed in a 'goody-goody' fashion. Children are also concerned with simple and natural justice. Campbell ventures to suggest that Fantastic Mr Fox seems to have

"all the makings of a genuine children's classic. In six or seven thousand words, and without ever going beyond the likely limits of a six-year-old's imagination, Dahl here offers a constantly-evolving plot, a spectrum of incidents ranging from broad comedy to tingling suspense and, above all, a quiverful of truly memorable characters."

(Campbell A. 1981 p. 110).

It seems logical to assume that an author who has gained such acceptance by children as Dahl has done, has succeeded in producing work to which they can relate easily and which establishes points of contact in keeping with their view of the world. Very little if anything in Dahl's output is beyond the comprehension of children for whose age group particular titles are published. Nina Bawden has said that good books for children should "reflect the emotional landscape they move in". (Bawden N. 1974 p. 10). It would be perverse to suggest that Books such as George's Marvellous Medicine, Fantastic Mr Fox and Danny The Champion Of The World do otherwise.

#### 4.2 The question of popularity and quality

Overwhelming popularity can raise some doubts as to the quality of the work

in question. In order to achieve success, an author may have to exploit certain tastes common to juvenile readers but which adults may deplore. Alasdair Campbell mentions this point, but maintains that this does not mean such work need necessarily be of poor quality. Overwhelming popularity offers no proof of merit, certainly; neither does it disqualify a work from being good or even outstanding. It is important to bear in mind that consistently popular though Dahl's fiction for children may be, his work is not necessarily of a consistent quality throughout. I have attempted to distinguish between the excellent, the good and the lesser works in my discussion of them in Chapter Two, while Chapter Three gives some indication of the enthusiastic juvenile response to several titles, irrespective of literary merit.

I would rate Danny The Champion Of The World and Fantastic Mr Fox far higher, from a literary point of view, than Charlie And The Chocolate Factory. The last-mentioned title appears to be the most widely read of Dahl's books so far, but this need not detract from the popularity of the other two. It just so happens that in the case of Danny and Fantastic Mr Fox, action, excitement and humour are combined with skilful plots and memorable characters which lift them into a higher category. Returning to Nina Bawden's observation, one is reminded that "a good book for children ... should hold an honest mirror up to life" as well as "reflect the emotional landscape ..." (Bawden N. 1974 p.10). While the Charlie stories can hardly be said to mirror life as it is, this claim can be made in the case of a work such as Danny, containing as it does, a "high measure of truth and reality" (Shavreen D. 1977 p. 24) and communicating values and experience well within the comprehension of the middle school child and younger.

Danny is quite far into the world of make-believe, but has a realistic setting. The BFG, on the other hand, is a complete fantasy and yet can with some justice be said to "hold an honest mirror up to life". How does Dahl achieve this? By creating believable characters who come to grips with challenging circumstances by which their strengths and weaknesses are measured. Despite the setting and events which place The BFG firmly in the world of fantasy, Dahl succeeds in creating "a credible environment and a sense of reality" (Ray S. 1982 p. 128). Such an environment the reader inhabits during the reading of the story and "if the skill is great enough, something of that world will always remain with the reader". (Ray S. 1982 p. 128). What remains with the reader in this story is an emotional rather than a physical landscape, in which heroine Sophie and BFG come to terms with the differing worlds and philosophies of each other. In the unlikely reconciliation of two such opposite

beings, skilfully woven into the events, emerges an overall feeling of goodwill, the emanation of two distinct and memorable personalities.

#### 4.3 Adult and juvenile responses to Dahl and Blyton: some differences

A few questions concerning adult and juvenile responses to Dahl's work in comparison to that of Enid Blyton were raised in the introductory chapter. It is perhaps easier to come to a conclusion regarding whether children love Dahl's work for similar reasons as those pertaining to their love of Blyton, than it is to make any confident assertion regarding whether some adults are critical of the two authors for similar reasons. Dealing now with the first issue, one may say that the younger the reader, the less discriminating he will be in regard to the quality of what he reads. A primary school librarian in Port Elizabeth commented that whenever she asks children why they like Roald Dahl's books, they say

"They're 'exciting, funny, exciting, funny' ad nauseam. Fact is: Dahl is one of the few authors' names even very young children know and want more of; fact is: children read the books without coercion from adults or active 'salesmanship'".

A book which offers excitement, action, mystery or humour does not have to have rounded characters or thought-provoking themes to make it a success with younger readers. A case in point is Charlie And The Chocolate Factory, which lifts the reader right out of the everyday world, as does any Noddy story by Enid Blyton. Books such as The BFG or Danny have far more to offer from a literary point of view than Charlie, or for that matter a Famous Five mystery, yet children respond first and foremost to the common denominators of action, excitement and humour. What makes The BFG and Danny fine and perhaps moving stories may be found in an area to which children are not insensitive or completely indifferent, but about which they have difficulty in being articulate.

As to the second question, of whether adult criticism of the two authors has a common platform or not, one cannot hope to answer it with anything approaching fairness except by considering individual works, especially, if not exclusively, in the case of Roald Dahl. Given that Blyton's 'series' titles are all 'much of a muchness' and that Dahl's writing exhibits divergency in both theme and overall aesthetic quality, it is no simple matter to ascribe blanket causes for the varying degrees of opposition which Dahl's work has attracted from time to time. I have found that adults who are doubtful generally cannot pin-

point their reasons for having reservations about some or other aspect of Dahl's writing. One student was reported in a previous chapter as being dubious about George's Marvellous Medicine because it had frightened a young child; the students interviewed on tape had slight reservations about improbabilities occurring in Danny and The BFG; a College first year group were divided as to whether the implications of the poaching were acceptable or not. In short, a variety of reasons for adult reservations about Dahl has emerged from people whose opinions I have elicited. There is not even a reasonable degree of consensus among the few librarians whom I consulted as to the suitability of Dahl as an author for school children: one, previously quoted, finds him quite unsuitable for children mainly because he does not operate through the child's perspective. Another, by contrast, feels that Dahl probes the minds of children better than most, though this does not mean that he will become a classic author. The same librarian comments that children like to be disgusted and respond readily to what is obviously completely good or bad, and maintains that children "can tell Dahl is a great spoof". In the light of such ideas this respondent finds strong authorial presence and character types to be quite acceptable, noting that Dahl's plots are certainly original; furthermore that his themes offer plenty to interest the adult - for example his battle against hypocrisy. This in turn raises the next issue.

#### 4.4 Adult appeal as a criterion in children's literature

How does Roald Dahl's juvenile fiction measure up to the criterion of a good children's book being capable of engaging the interest of adults also? The most searching if not extensive test undertaken by me was in the course of interviewing the three students on Danny and The BFG. They were not without their criticisms of certain flaws in these two works, but were clearly interested in the themes and rather captivated by the atmosphere and characterisation, even if they could not become very involved in the plot of each story. These two books raised some issues which could not be ignored by them as adults, and provided much material for discussion, as demonstrated in Chapter Three. I have yet to meet an adult who feels the slightest inclination to read or re-read a Blyton, W.E. Johns or F.W. Dixon mystery or adventure yarn. These have their place, evidently, in the child's developing reading interests, but are left behind long before maturity.

It should not be thought that a book which is capable of appealing to both children and adults appeals on two separate levels: superficial action for

children and deeper themes for adults. A really worthwhile book can hold a young reader with the action and excitement it offers, but can also engage his mind with reflections on certain points made. Children's reactions to The BFG and Danny have provided ample evidence of this. Undoubtedly certain responses by some of the children would not have occurred had they not been elicited by more adult minds; some children might well have engaged with the narrative at a relatively superficial level.

Myles McDowell's assertion that "a good children's book makes complex experience available to its readers" (McDowell M. 1973 p. 52) is well illustrated, in particular by Danny The Champion Of The World and The BFG. Both are written in "language accessible to children" and have predominantly optimistic themes and clear-cut issues without actually oversimplifying experience. The absence of oversimplification in such works accounts in part for Dahl's ability to hold adult interest too, as does the absence of any tendency to talk down to the reader. One example of where Dahl does appear to talk with a patronising voice is the opening chapter of The Witches. This has already been referred to in the context of its effect upon the aesthetic unity of the work, but also in the context of its potential to frighten. Maturer or more sophisticated readers, say above the age of nine or ten, may well see this as being a tongue-in-cheek preparation for a feast of the grotesque and macabre. This study cannot however offer any factual evidence of how older readers respond to The Witches, but one may perhaps assume that the majority of children are not deterred by the grotesque as such and are not against being disgusted by repellent characters. Judging from their responses to works such as Danny, children relish undiluted badness as much as they like to see goodness triumph, in fiction.

Adults can also enjoy tongue-in-cheek grotesqueness and the portrayal of villainy in original, fast-moving and humorous plots. But there is much in Dahl's juvenile fiction that can satisfy the adult reader at a higher level too: sharp character portrayals, relationships and action that convey satire and which avoid sentimentality and simplistic effects. For example the triumphs of Mr Fox and Danny represent more than merely a victory for sympathetic individual heroes. In the former case Dahl is also saying something about the harm that can be done to the environment by those who have no respect for it; in the latter he is making a powerful indictment of hypocrisy. In both cases he is concerned with seeing justice done. Danny in particular provides for the victory of not merely good over bad, but on a more sophisticated level, of honesty over sham respectability.

#### 4.5 Fiction and the emotional needs of children

In Chapter One it was suggested that fiction is capable of serving emotional needs in children at particular stages in their growth, much as fairy tales are thought to do for early childhood. This possibility was explored briefly in connection with George's Marvellous Medicine. Any story which deals skillfully with childhood fantasies, aggression or other facets of the 'instinctual' life, can assist children in those areas of their lives marked by confusion or uncertainty. As Nicholas Tucker points out, it is reassuring for the child to learn that some of his feelings which seem "grotesquely unique to himself", are shared by others. (Tucker N. 1974 p. 40). While no child can be expected to take George's actions seriously, or to regard the events of that story as anything other than (tongue-in-cheek) fantasy, most children are likely to recognise some of the feelings experienced by the little boy towards his aged relative. This much was indicated by children's responses to the extract from George's Marvellous Medicine which was given out by students in 1983. In that particular exercise, what emerged was a kind of ambivalence in the respondents' attitudes towards the Grandma figure: very few of them went as far as to suggest that they would do or would like to do the same to their own live grandmothers, yet many condoned what George was contemplating doing to his. Tucker, once again, places this situation in perspective: "... in their own lives children also have experience of confused feelings, when we don't always say what we really want to say, or do what is obviously best for us." (Tucker N. 1974 p. 40).

Danny The Champion Of The World may also have some claims in this area. A student at Graaff-Reinet when reviewing this work wrote, "In Danny ... (Dahl) understands that boys need to get up to mischief sometimes and he reveals that adults are also not infallible." Concerning the father-child relationship in this story the same student wrote:

"Every child (boy in this case) needs a father or parent who shows genuine interest in him; someone who will spend time with him and someone who is prepared to share in his interests. Danny's father has been described as an "ideal" father because he had time to spend with Danny."

The following statement, from the same review, is illuminating:

"For children of divorced or widowed parents it offers an attitude of normality. For other children it offers the view that children's efforts are appreciated and spiritual possessions are far superior to material ones."

#### 4.6 Character portrayal

In the Introduction I mentioned Dahl's caricature-type creations and larger-than-life characters in relation to the young child's preference for extreme types rather than less clear-cut figures. In books such as The Twits and Fantastic Mr Fox the villain is clearly established from the beginning. Even Danny, suitable for older readers, has its villain who possesses no redeeming features whatsoever.

Some comparison was suggested between the 'extreme types' of Dahl and of Enid Blyton; the latter produced characters intended to amuse her readers, whereas Dahl's 'caricatures' are identified with a broader, more serious satirical purpose. Whereas Blyton's Mr Twiddle and Mr Meddle have names suggesting their idiosyncracies, the latter are relatively harmless and limited in scope to particular individuals. Dahl's Mr and Mrs Twit likewise have names suggesting personal qualities, but these are not portrayed as harmless. Certainly Mr and Mrs Twit can hardly be said to represent types, so repulsive are they, and their social attitudes and behaviour towards animals are anything but harmless, however outrageously amusing the two characters may be. One may compare what Dahl does with creations such as the Twits, Hazell and the cruel aunts Sponge and Spiker (in James And The Giant Peach) with what Dickens does with his larger-than-life personalities such as Gradgrind and Pumblechook. Not only do these two Dickensian names suggest personal qualities such as harsh, unimaginative autocracy and pompous self-righteousness, but the characters themselves are associated with something unhealthy in society, something which Dickens opposed vigorously in his writing. Many of his unsympathetic characters, even villains, are the subject of mirth, but this does not lessen the firmness of purpose underlying the stories which take issue against social evils. So in Dickens, satirical humour, though entertaining in itself, serves a more serious purpose also.

One can see the same kind of thing happening in several of the Dahl stories. Younger readers respond with delight to the follies, absurdities and often wickednesses of the unsympathetic characters, but maturer readers will gather that something is being said about the behaviour of certain kinds of people which cannot be condoned. Indeed the 'villains' do get their just desserts in the end. In a sense then, both Dahl and Dickens reveal a didactic element; but this need not be overbearing in writing which is fresh and original in style, and which contains the skills of creating credible environments and atmospheres, compelling plots and memorable characters.



Attention was also invited in the Introduction to differences between the ways in which Blyton and Dahl present their central characters. While the 'villains' in Dahl's stories often appear as types rather than rounded characters, his protagonists (with the probable exception of Charlie Bucket) are convincing, and this is borne out by the responses elicited to particular books, as reported in Chapter Three. These responses tend to support my early assertion that readers can come much closer to Roald Dahl's heroes or heroines as people, for what they are, and not merely for what they do. One should remember that Dahl's central concern in his writing for children is not the exploration of character or human relationships per se; most of his readers are too young to perceive or understand moral complexities, but they can and some of them have shown that they do appreciate the qualities of character, the instincts and the motivation of a hero like Danny. It is my belief that Dahl's portrayal of a central character is finer in Danny The Champion Of The World than in anything else he has written for children. The relationship between Danny and his father is crucial; in describing his father Danny says much about himself, and Dahl's use of the first person narrative technique allows for a suitable distance between reader and narrator, as well as for an appropriate tone throughout.

#### 4.7 Style and reading aloud

In Chapter One Sheila Ray was quoted on the question of what constitutes "good style". What she says would seem to be an appropriate description of Roald Dahl's work as a whole. Some of it bears repetition - writing which "avoids clichés, which ... uses challenging language structures and rhythms and in which there is a vivid immediacy of language". (Ray S. p. 128). In the section on Fantastic Mr Fox in Chapter Two, reference was made to Dahl's ability to vary his stylistic effects. At times his descriptions lean a little towards exaggeration, but this should be seen in relation to the great value of Dahl's works as books to be read aloud. The hyperbolic element is certainly not the chief ingredient recommending it for this purpose, however. Several books contain a number of amusing and ingenious rhymes which come into their own when read aloud, apart from also serving to highlight themes and events. The originality and spontaneity, the command of pace, rhythm and imagery, the control of tone, the humour and the variety make for a style which is fresh and appealing and which does not fall flat or go stale. If at times his expressions raise eyebrows, it is because Dahl sets out to horrify or disgust, just as he creates, at other times, moments of poignant beauty.

#### 4.8 The 'subversive' element?

The title of this dissertation refers to a 'subversive' element in Roald Dahl's books for children. The word subversive may normally be taken to imply an undermining, essentially negative or destructive activity. In a literary sense it need not have any negative connotations whatsoever. 'Subversive' writing can be positive or negative; positive if it holds ignorance or prejudice up to ridicule, or challenges the reader to examine his own assumptions about things which he may take for granted or accept at face value; negative if it promotes a rejection of healthy social attitudes and produces a distorted picture of reality. If parents, teachers or librarians wish to keep away from children books which reveal the uglier side of human nature and which question some of the assumptions which make our lives comfortable, then Roald Dahl must be ruled out. But adults who would like this to happen would seem to be misunderstanding the ultimate impact of the books themselves, and either misjudge or ignore the way in which children respond to them. Children do seem to take a delight in being disgusted and horrified just as much as they relish humour, excitement and seeing justice done. Adults who cannot or will not make any allowance for the child's point of view, or who themselves feel threatened, perhaps, may interpret some of the themes of Dahl's books for children as being subversive by nature; subversive in that they hold the Establishment to scorn by undermining 'accepted' social norms.

It would be a most unfortunate distortion of the facts to regard Roald Dahl's fiction which tilts at the Establishment as being a vehicle for expressing his own likes and dislikes built up since childhood. In Chapters Two and Three care was taken, when dealing with controversial issues, to investigate possible interference with the narratives concerned, especially in the case of Danny and The BFG. Neither my own observation nor the responses of adults or children suggest that any of the issues fails to arise naturally from the events, or that the credibility of the characters is at all in question. Nor is there any evidence that the overall response of children to books such as Danny, George and The BFG is anything but enthusiastic. The 'darker' side of these books, such as it exists, appears to have little visible effect upon reader acceptance. I suggested in the Introduction that Enid Blyton's treatment of adults tends to be somewhat 'subversive' in that clever children show them up as being rather boring or incompetent. Dahl's ridiculing of certain adults, however, is not a means of showing how much better children are at doing the 'right' things, but rather a comment on certain aspects of social

behaviour within the Establishment, such as hypocrisy, which are there to be exposed. It would be erroneous to imagine that some of Dahl's caricature-like portraits of unpleasant people are intended to mirror normal adult society. Rather, a Grandma in George's Marvellous Medicine, a Captain Lancaster or a Hazell in Danny or the three farmers in Fantastic Mr Fox, all unpleasant in the extreme, are creations of particular types of people as children would see them. In much the same way the description of Hazell's shooting parties attacks a certain type of behaviour, and not society itself.

The book most likely to arouse controversy is Danny The Champion Of The World, because its main theme concerns poaching. This aspect has been considered in some detail in Chapter Two and was comprehensively discussed with students and scholars who acted as respondents. The school children were reported, in Chapter Three, as being 'inconsistent' in their simultaneous disapproval of poaching and their admiration for Danny himself. It is easier for maturer readers to reconcile these two opposing attitudes - this was successfully done when students were drawn on the ethical implications of poaching. An important point made was that a superficial judgement of the situation might promote the view that, in the mind of the child, if it is acceptable and heroic to poach in a wood, then it is also acceptable to shoplift in a supermarket. As W said during the interview in Chapter three, "it condones stealing ... but only if we look at it superficially." What this means is that taken in isolation, the act of poaching cannot be condoned, but that in the context of Mr Hazell's cruelty, selfishness and abuse of legal rights, and of the 'offending' poachers' more genuine sense of justice and fair play, their transgressions in the wood were relatively harmless. It is important to remember that no respondent failed to recognise the fact that poaching was illegal, though some were mature enough to be aware that this did not, in the circumstances, make the poachers immoral people. W emphasised this point during the interview:

"... I think they'll be able to see this, that certain things can be done within the law that are still wrong from the moral point of view, but you can do other things which are against the law, but which are still good, from a moral point of view."

The three students interviewed felt confident that Dahl had made it possible for even young readers to comprehend this. As W concluded:

"... in some cases to obtain total justice, I think you have to bend the law, in a way. I think although it's difficult for a child to grasp ... through the story he will to a certain extent be able to grasp this. I think the whole book makes the world ... more realistic; the child is really idealistic to start with."

Another student, writing a short review of Danny a few years ago, felt that the book

"... shows the child the other side of what is normally accepted. The reader is treated as a person able to make his own decisions and he is able to more fully understand right and wrong instead of just being told something and having to accept it."

Perhaps the highest tribute to the book's positive qualities is paid by W at the end of the interview in Chapter Three, especially when mentioning that

"... the whole story has a feeling of peace about it, because these people ... are at peace with each other, and this is contrasted with people ... who only stick together because they can get something out of each other."

Far from promoting a disrespect for established institutions or society, Dahl, in this specific work, promotes awareness in young readers of the great need for people to behave in a dignified manner, to act without ulterior motives and to treat one another with consideration and respect.

A similar conclusion may be drawn regarding Fantastic Mr Fox. The hero persuades the dubious Badger that he is "far too respectable" (p. 66) in his hesitation to steal food from the farmers. The animals are, after all, not stooping to the level of the humans - "... we down here are a decent peace-loving people". (p. 67). Again the reader is invited to re-examine his normal, perhaps biased view concerning the position and character of the have-not. The warmth, vitality and humanity of this story will help him to do so.

The BFG also contains potentially controversial material. Again, this can be exaggerated or misjudged. Mankind's propensity for evil, though mentioned, is not dwelt upon, and does not colour the narrative as a whole; the fate of anonymous innocent children is not directly witnessed; even the reputation of the British defence system suffers no real setback for all the fun Dahl creates at the expense of the blundering high-ranking officers. And the Queen, though drawn into a very non-regal, at times earthy situation, is presented with the dignity associated with her office. The book leaves one with an enduring impression of warmth, compassion and understanding; and of course of great excitement and humour. As one respondent concluded in the interview in Chapter Three, "... perhaps it's a story about how people can get along better - even people in different stations and walks of life. The BFG is totally different to Sophie, yet together they accomplish something good."

#### 4.9 The place of Dahl's fiction in the education of the child

I have attempted to show that none of Roald Dahl's writing considered in this dissertation contains any material which would influence children in a negative manner. Any fears that children could be caused to lose their trust in human nature, or to lose their respect for the society in which they live, seem to be quite unfounded. If Dahl has any place in the education of the child, it will be for stimulating the imaginations of his readers with stories which are vigorous, original and challenging in their content and style; for promoting a delight in reading and a genuinely enthusiastic response to quite memorable characters and situations. But perhaps the most outstanding feature of his work for children is the complete honesty with which he creates his characters and their environments, and the honesty with which he relates to his readers. He does not regard them as little angels, as precious beings requiring to be cushioned from some of the more unpleasant realities of the world. At the same time he does not indulge in "clobbering them over the head with the facts of life" (Bawden N. 1974 p. 10), or cater for uncouth tastes. He regards his readers with due respect for the facts and the strange paradoxes of human nature, and it is against this that he creates his own characters. Dahl treats his readers, like many of his characters, as people who are capable of responding spontaneously and without prejudice, as people who can eventually make decisions of their own and as people who will learn to be aware and responsible.

Because awareness and a sense of responsibility are central objectives in the all-round education of children, and the provision of challenges a key method of meeting this, the nature of what they read is not without considerable relevance. One may, once again, bear in mind what Sheila Ray says concerning worthwhile fiction:

"The novel should meet the child's need for achievement, security and acceptance, but should also open his mind to the possibility of change. The reader should be given the opportunity to make evaluative judgements and be given worthy ideals for conduct and achievement. The reading of a story should be an enriching and rewarding experience as well as an enjoyable one, increasing the reader's understanding of the world, widening his sympathies and stimulating his imagination."

(Ray S. 1982 p. 128).

Although the majority of younger children seem happily oblivious of the distinction between 'quality' and 'non-quality' (a complication reserved for

adults) when choosing books to read, what they absorb will play some part in their growing awareness of themselves and the world in which they live, as well as in the growth of their linguistic competence. It is in this area that Roald Dahl has a positive contribution to make.

Finally, one other aspect which can so easily be overlooked is the role which his fiction plays in promoting an educated sense of humour in children. By 'educated' I mean a sense of humour which enables people to laugh not only at the foibles of others, but also to see the potential for humour, the same foibles in themselves and in things which they normally take for granted. If one of the hallmarks of becoming educated is acquiring the capacity to live with oneself and to see the funny side of life, then there is every reason for those concerned with education to regard Roald Dahl as a welcome ally.

APPENDIX AGraaff-Reinet Teachers' CollegeREADING CHOICES.PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE.

Name of school: .....

Name of pupil: ..... Standard: .....

Please tick (✓) opposite the title of any book which you know. If it has been read to you, write a tick in the first column. If you have read it yourself, place a tick in the second column. Then write another tick in any one of the 3 remaining columns, depending on how you enjoyed the book. If you have read more than one of, say, the Famous Five or Secret Seven books, say how many (more or less) by writing the number in the first or second column, depending on whether you read them yourself or not.

IF YOU ARE NOT SURE WHAT TO DO, ASK YOUR STUDENT TEACHER OR TEACHER.

<u>Title of Book.</u>	Book was read to me. (us)	I read it myself.	I enjoyed it very much.	I did not enjoy it as much as some others.	I did not enjoy it at all.
Coral Island	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Doctor Doolittle	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Anne of Green Gables	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The Hobbit	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Through the Looking Glass	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Danny the Champion of the World	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
A Dog so Small	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Carrie's War	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Tom's Midnight Garden	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The House of Sixty Fathers	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
I am David	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Kidnapped	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
George's Marvellous Medicine	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The Peppermint Pig	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The Railway Children	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
White Fang	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

Title of Book.

Book was read to me. (us)	I read it myself.	I enjoyed it very much.	I did not enjoy it as much as some others.	I did not enjoy it at all.
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The Enormous Crocodile				
Biggles				
Biggles Flies South				
The Island of Adventure				
The Castle of Adventure				
The Valley of Adventure				
The Sea of Adventure				
The Mountain of Adventure				
The Circus of Adventure				
The River of Adventure				
Tom Sawyer				
Tom Brown's Schooldays				
Five Run Away Together				
Famous Five; other - how many:				
The Silver Sword				
The Snow Goose				
The Small Miracle				
Heidi				
Elidor				
The Owl Service				
The Wheel on the School				
The Iron Man				
The Prince and the Pauper				
Little House on the Prairie				
Little House in the Big Woods				
The Red Pony				
Watership Down				
Flat Stanley				
The Shrinking of Treehorn				
The Hardy Boys: say how many:				
Nancy Drew: say how many:				
The Green Knowe stories; say how many:				
Swallows and Amazons				
Shane				



<u>Title of Book.</u>	Book was read to me (us)	I read it myself.	I enjoyed it very much.	I did not enjoy it as much as some others.	I did not enjoy it at all.
Good Wives					
Where the Wild Things Are					
Peter Pan					
The Wizard of Oz					
Treasure Island					
The Boy next Door					
The House at Pooh Corner					
A Bear called Paddington					
Stig of the Dump					
The Guardians					
The White Mountains					
The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler					
The Wind in the Willows					
Bobby Brewster					
Fantastic Mr Fox					
James and the Giant Peach					
Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator					
The BFG					
Jennings: any stories: say approx. how many:					
The Mystery of the ... any Secret Seven. Say approx. how many in columns 1 or 2 :					
Winnie the Pooh					
The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm					
Tarka the Otter					
The Tale of Peter Rabbit					
The Tale of Mr Tod					
The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck					
Beatrix Potter: approx. how many other:					
Little Black Sambo					
Charlotte's Web					
On the Run					

Title of Book

Book was read to me (us) I read it myself. I enjoyed it very much. I did not enjoy it as much as some others. I did not enjoy it at all.

Pugwash in the Pacific	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Just So Stories	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The Otterbury Incident	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Moonfleet	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Little Women	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
Josh	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
The Endless Steppe	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
How the Whale Became, & Other Stories	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRE continued.

Only question (a) applies to the given list.

- (a) Which 6 books did you enjoy reading most of all? (from the list)

Try to arrange them in order of enjoyment:

- 1. ....
- 2. ....
- 3. ....
- 4. ....
- 5. ....
- 6. ....

- (b) Who is your favourite writer? .....
- And the one after that? .....

- (c) Why do you enjoy your favourite writer's books so much?  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- (d) Write down the titles of any other 3 or 4 books which you enjoyed, but which do not appear on this list:  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- (e) Which is your favourite book - the one which you have enjoyed more than any other book? .....

- (f) Try to describe why you enjoyed this book more than any other.  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

APPENDIX BTHE MARVELLOUS PLAN

George sat himself down at the table in the kitchen. He was shaking a little. Oh, how he hated Grandma! He really hated that horrid old witchy woman. And all of a sudden he had a tremendous urge to do something about her. Something whopping. Something absolutely terrific. A real shocker. A sort of explosion. He wanted to blow away the witchy smell that hung about her in the next room. He may have been only eight years old but he was a brave little boy. He was ready to take this old woman on.

"I'm not going to be frightened by her," he said softly to himself. But he was frightened. And that's why he wanted suddenly to explode her away.

Well ... not quite away. But he did want to shake the old woman up a bit.

Very well, then. What should it be, this whopping terrific exploding shocker for Grandma?

He would have liked to put a firework banger under her chair but he didn't have one.

He would have liked to put a long green snake down the back of her dress but he didn't have a long green snake.

He would have liked to put six big black rats in the room with her and lock the door but he didn't have six big black rats.

As George sat there pondering this interesting problem, his eye fell upon the bottle of Grandma's brown medicine standing on the sideboard. Rotten stuff it seemed to be. Four times a day a large spoonful of it was shovelled into her mouth and it didn't do her the slightest bit of good. She was always just as horrid after she'd had it as she'd been before. The whole point of medicine, surely, was to make a person better. If it didn't do that, then it was quite useless.

So-ho! thought George suddenly. Ah-ha! Ho-hum! I know exactly what I'll do. I shall make her a new medicine, one that is so strong and so fierce and so fantastic it will either cure her completely or blow off the top of her head. I'll make her a magic medicine, a medicine no doctor in the world has ever made before.

George looked at the kitchen clock. It said five past ten. There was nearly an hour left before Grandma's next dose was due at eleven.

"Here we go, then!" cried George, jumping up from the table. "A magic medicine it shall be!"

"So give me a bug and a jumping flea,  
Give me two snails and lizards three,  
And a slimy squiggler from the sea,  
And the poisonous sting of a bumblebee,  
And the juice from the fruit of the ju-jube tree,  
And the powdered bone of a wombat's knee.  
And one hundred other things as well  
Each with a rather nasty smell.  
I'll stir them up, I'll boil them long,  
A mixture tough, a mixture strong.  
And then, heigh-ho, and down it goes,  
A nice big spoonful (hold your nose)  
Just gulp it down and have no fear.

'How do you like it, Granny dear?'  
Will she go pop? Will she explode?  
Will she go flying down the road?  
Will she go poof in a puff of smoke?  
Start fizzing like a can of Coke?  
Who knows? Not I. Let's wait and see.  
(I'm glad it's neither you nor me.)  
Oh Grandma, if you only knew  
What I have got in store for you!"

APPENDIX CPUPILS' RESPONSE QUESTIONNAIRE.

Extract from Roald Dahl's George's Marvellous Medicine.

INSTRUCTIONS TO PUPIL: Read through 'The Marvellous Plan' and answer the following questions in the spaces provided. Consult the student teacher if you need any help.

A. 'The Marvellous plan'

- (i) If you had a disagreeable grandma, would you like to be able to do what George was thinking of doing? Why? .....
- .....
- (ii) Do you think that it was wrong of George to think up some 'shocker' for his grandma? .....
- (iii) Which do you think would be the most frightening: firework banger, green snake or six rats? .....
- (iv) Do you think that George would really have tried to be horrible to his grandma? .....
- (v) What do you think George means by 'he wanted suddenly to explode her away'?.....
- .....
- .....

Extra assignment: Imagine that you were George, and that you had made up some special medicine. Write a letter to a friend in which you describe how you made it and what you did with it.

APPENDIX D

RESPONSE QUESTIONNAIRE. FICTION.

Book Title:

Author:

1. I felt that I became / did not become involved in the story from the beginning because .....
2. My feelings towards the hero / heroine are .....
3. At times I felt that I myself was one of the characters in the story, such as when .....
4. The most exciting part of the story was when .....
5. One of the most frightening events in the story was when .....
6. I felt pleased / happy / relieved when .....
7. I felt rather sad when .....
8. I wanted to burst out laughing when .....
9. I felt rather confused or doubtful when .....

- 10. I was very surprised when .....  
.....  
because .....
- 11. I could hardly wait to see what would happen next when .....  
.....  
.....
- 12. I felt that I knew what was going to happen next when .....  
.....  
.....
- 13. At times I did not like what I was reading, for instance / I wanted to put  
the book down at the point where .....  
.....  
.....
- 14. Something that made me feel very humble or small was .....  
.....  
.....
- 15. I found the story becoming (very) improbable when .....  
.....  
.....
- 16. The most interesting character was .....  
because .....  
.....
- 17. The character whom I understood best was .....  
.....
- 18. There were times when I felt particularly close to / far away from the  
character(s) or story, because .....  
.....  
.....
- 19. I feel that I have learnt something from reading this book, namely .....  
.....  
.....
- 20. I feel different after having read this book, as .....  
.....  
.....



- 21. What I really admired was .....  
.....  
.....
- 22. What left me feeling uncomfortable / indignant was .....  
.....  
.....
- 23. I did not think it fair when .....  
.....
- 24. I could not make up my mind about / I had mixed feelings about .....  
.....  
.....
- 25. I was happy / satisfied / uncertain / unhappy about the way in which the  
story ended, as .....  
.....  
.....
- 26. I would / would not like to read this book again, because .....  
.....  
.....
- 27. Some of the things which I think I shall always remember about this story  
are .....  
.....  
.....
- 28. Sometimes things were said or done which made me realise something I had  
never thought of before, for example .....  
.....  
.....
- 29. Some of the amusing features of the story are .....  
.....  
.....
- 30. The writer's own feelings towards his story and characters are shown /  
hidden, because .....  
.....  
.....

31. The writer's feelings towards the main characters seem to be .....

.....

.....

.....

32. The writer may have been trying to make me feel that .....

.....

.....

33. I imagine the writer to be a person who .....

.....

34. This book is / is not suitable for reading aloud because .....

.....

.....

.....

35. (a) I can / cannot imagine this book being turned into a play or film because .....

.....

.....

(b) If I were to present on stage an extract from the book, or act in a stage performance of it, I would prefer the part where .....

.....

(c) My reason for this is that .....

.....

.....

36. (a) Other books by the same author which I have read are .....

.....

.....

(b) Compared to the other books, I feel that this one.....

.....

.....

.....

37. What I liked most about this book was .....

.....

.....

.....

38. What I disliked most about this book was .....

.....

.....

.....

39. What struck me most about the way in which the book is written includes the following points:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

40. If I had been a few years / some years younger when I first read this book, my response to it would probably have been different in the following ways, and for the following reasons: .....

.....

.....

.....

APPENDIX E

Pupils' responses to DANNY, THE CHAMPION OF THE WORLD, by Roald Dahl.

SECTION A

1. In one paragraph, tell what the book is about.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2. Do you think that this story could happen in real life? .....  
Because? .....

.....  
.....

3. What did you like most about the book?

.....  
.....  
.....

4. What did you not like about the book?

.....  
.....  
.....

SECTION B

1. Would you like to swop places with Danny for a week, a month, a year?  
Why? .....

.....  
.....

2. Do you admire Danny? Why? What do you like most about him?

.....  
.....  
.....

- 3. Is there anything you do not like about him? Explain.  
.....  
.....  
.....
- 4. How would you feel about having a father like Danny's?  
.....  
.....
- 5. Do you think that Danny and his father ever had a disagreement?  
.....
- 6. Which part of the story did you find most exciting or interesting? Why?  
.....  
.....  
.....
- 7. In which part of the story would you most like to have been in Danny's place? Explain why. ....  
.....  
.....  
.....

SECTION C

- 1. Why did Danny's father dislike Mr Hazell?  
.....  
.....
- 2. Why did Danny's father go poaching? .....  
.....
- 3. Why did he at first not tell Danny about it? .....  
.....  
.....
- 4. Explain why Danny liked his father so much. ....  
.....  
.....
- 5. What were Danny's feelings about school? .....  
.....  
.....

- 6. Do you think that Danny's father influenced him in his attitude towards school once he started going? .....
- .....
- .....

SECTION D

- 1. How wrong or right was it of Danny's father to keep his son out of school until he was seven years old? (Older than normal.)  
.....  
.....  
.....
- 2. Do you think it was wrong of Danny and his father to go poaching? Explain carefully why.  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....
- 3. Who was punished more at the end, Danny and his father, or Mr Hazell?  
.....  
.....  
.....
- 4. (a) Did Mr Hazell deserve to lose his pheasants? Why?  
.....  
.....
- (b) Did Danny, his father and the others deserve to lose them?  
.....  
.....
- 5. Do you think it was really wrong of constable Samways, the doctor and the parson (& his wife) either to have done poaching or to have been involved in it in some way?  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 6. Is there anything which you thought was unfair in the story? Explain.  
 .....  
 .....
- 7. Did you have mixed feelings about anything, or find it difficult to make up your mind about anything? Say what and why. ....  
 .....  
 .....

SECTION E

- 1. Have you read this story or had it read to you before? When?  
 .....  
 If so, how much did you enjoy it this time, compared to last time?  
 .....  
 .....
- 2. Have you read any other books by the same author? .....  
 If so, which? .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....
- 3. If you have read some others, which did you like the most of all?  
 .....  
 Can you explain why? .....  
 .....  
 .....
- 4. Who is your favourite writer? .....  
 And next? .....
- 5. Which book have you enjoyed reading more than any other?  
 .....  
 Try to explain why you enjoyed this one so much. ....  
 .....  
 .....
- 6. Mention a few other books which you have enjoyed particularly.  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

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