



**Repositioning Roald Dahl: Morality and Fantasy in Dahl's Life and
Writing for Children**

being a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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in the University of Hull

by

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January 2021

Acknowledgements

This thesis has taken over five years in the making and it was conceived in mid 2014 when my son was five years old and we were growing together as this thesis progressed. First of all I would like to acknowledge the love of my heart, my son, Natthan Maneeyingsakul, who inspired me to research the values of Dahl's children's books for my own child and to reappraise the renowned author and his morality. I am hugely grateful to my beloved parents, Mana Maneeyingsakul and Banphen Sutthiprapha, who instilled in me the value of education and steered me toward this academic perseverance. My deepest affections go to my mother for her unconditional love, kindness, and moral support, and my sisters for their encouragement. Their guidance taught me to be tough and resilient, especially during the most difficult and vulnerable time of my PhD journey.

But above all, this thesis has benefited from careful scrutiny by my dedicated supervisor, Professor Valerie Sanders, to whom I owe so much gratitude. She has inspired and guided me both academically and personally, her invaluable supervision, corrections and suggestions for revision have made this work as a whole stronger. I would like to thank also my co-supervisor, Dr Bethan Jones, and Professor Veronica O'Mara, for their sage advice and beneficial comments during my annual progress review meetings every year.

I am also grateful to so many people who supported me during this challenging and wonderful experience, including my family, teachers, colleagues and friends both in Thailand and in the UK, a vibrant Thai student community at the University of Hull, the staff of Brynmor Jones Library, and the Doctoral College.

Most of all my thanks are due once more to OCSC for awarding me a scholarship to pursue this highest level of degree; the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University who granted me leave of absence to study overseas; and the staff at OEAUK for fully supporting my period of study in the UK.

I wish also to express my sincere gratitude for the teachings of the Buddha, whose discourses and enlightenment guide me to mindfully practise meritorious deeds and spiritual development.

Such mistakes and omissions that remain are, of course, my sole responsibility.

Abstract

This thesis aims to reposition Roald Dahl and his children's fiction in the evolution of the morality debate in other popular children's writers. His works for children, which were written during the last three decades of his life, have been frequently attacked by critics on grounds of violence, racism, and sexism. Dahl's narrative treatment of his characters and his moral outlook are seen as problematic since his texts often feature amoral adult enemies of the child characters, and an unsentimental and subversive view of families. They have equally been subject to debate over their 'suitability,' and some have been challenged and banned. The author himself denies preaching morality, yet his child characters become moral crusaders and there are moral undertones and overt moral messages in his books.

As a non-Western reader, I discovered that Dahl's stories fire the imagination of both adults and children, but there remains a contradictory treatment of social decency in the texts. Dahl criticism drives my investigation of the relationship between morality, reading, and interpretation in his fiction. Throughout the thesis, I apply close reading techniques to examine the way in which Dahl engages with moral issues in his works. Chapter One examines Dahl's exceptional life through his autobiographies, and children's and adult biographies to uncover Dahl's contradictory personality. Several of his tragic experiences inform the issue of psychological trauma which is discussed in Chapter Two where Dahl appears briefly to acknowledge trauma but minimises the impact on his protagonists who subsequently become more resilient and optimistic. Chapter Three interrogates gender bias and negative representation of men and women, while Chapter Four focuses in detail on how humour, wordplay, and neologism play crucial roles in his comic fantasy. Chapter Five explores the case of his continuing posthumous popularity as evidenced by his endorsement by marketing campaigns, culminating in his 2016 centenary celebration, while the phenomenal success of the Harry Potter series poses a new challenge to his dominance of the market. The thesis as a whole, therefore, reappraises Dahl's works, the significance of his moral position, and his ongoing impact in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

George didn't say a word. He felt quite trembly. He knew something tremendous had taken place that morning. For a few brief moments he had touched with the very tips of his fingers the edge of a magic world
(*George's Marvellous Medicine* 2010:104).

In this short children's book, Roald Dahl (1916-1990) concludes his story by describing how the eight-year-old George comes to feel 'trembly' as he realises that he has been able to touch the world of magic. His marvellous medicine administered to his grandmother does the trick, but not in the way he expected. George's mischief seems to exemplify a typical Dahlesque¹ childhood fantasy where harsh adults are defeated by diminutive child characters through farcical adventures. Adults who have forgotten what childhood is really like may be shocked by the subversive nature of the text where the boy can destroy his cruel grandmother by administering a magical medicine of his own invention.

Most of Dahl's books for children are subversive in one way or another: they express ideas not generally approved of; they make fun of adult figures; and they create irresponsible laughter. The author seems to take the side of children against their parents, grandmother, or teachers who are portrayed as at best silly and needlessly anxious, at worst cruel and stupid. Adults reading his story aloud may feel uneasy as we prefer to think of children as minors incapable of crime, and of family as an established and respectable institution. Dahl subverts family relationships we normally revere, especially with old women, and employs repellent metaphors to dehumanise them. George's grandmother is portrayed as 'a selfish grumpy old woman' whose 'small puckered-up mouth' is compared to 'a dog's bottom' (2). She spends time 'grouching, grouching, grumbling, griping about something or other' (2). 'The miserable old grouch' seems to torture the boy when no one is watching. One Saturday morning, for example, she orders him to serve her several times. First she wants a cup of tea with one spoon of sugar and no milk. When she sips it, she asks him to add another spoonful of sugar from the kitchen. When he brings the cup to the living room, she then asks him to get a saucer. George has to complete the tiresome process of tea-making by going back to the kitchen once again to fetch her a teaspoon. He is really patient but his grandmother still terrorises him by telling him to 'gobble' up disgusting creatures such

¹According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term 'Dahlesque' is defined as 'resembling or characteristic of the style of the British writer Roald Dahl, especially his children's works featuring eccentric plots, villainous or loathsome adult characters, and dark humour' (<https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/dahlesque>).

as worms, beetles, earwigs, and slugs found in cabbage. Like many of his female characters, George's grandmother is demonised and becomes a threat to her grandchild: 'it was her face that frightened him most of all, the frosty smile, the brilliant unblinking eyes' (10): 'Could it be, George wondered, that she was a witch?' (8). When the boy then plans to do something 'whopping' to his grandmother in order to cure her of her bullying habits, he makes a concoction of different household things starting from deodorant spray, and animal pills, to anti-freeze. George's performance and the comic verses he chants whilst dancing round his steaming pot resemble the Three Witches' ritual in *Macbeth*:

Fiery broth and witch's brew
Foamy froth and riches blue
Fume and spume and spoondrift spray
Fizzle swizzle shout hooray
Watch it sloshing, swashing, splashing
Hear it hissing, squishing, spissing
Grandma better start to pray (*George's Marvellous Medicine*, 34).

However, instead of its assumed evil powers as projected by the Weird Sisters, Dahl's alliteration of 'fiery', 'foamy froth', 'fume' and 'sloshing, swashing, splashing' allows George's magical spell to take a comic turn with unexpected results on his victim: 'It had not made her any less grumpy or bad-tempered, but it seemed to have cured all her aches and pains' (71). When she eventually vanishes into thin air, George's mischievous crime is firmly justified by Mr Killy Kranky's confirmation: 'That's what happens to you if you're grumpy and bad-tempered' (103), endorsed by Mrs Kranky, who reaffirms: 'Ah well, I suppose it's all for the best, really. She was a bit of a nuisance around the house, wasn't she?' (104).

The dysfunctional family is regarded as a characteristic feature of Dahl's writing as he portrays constant warfare among family members or authoritative figures that we expect to be respected. While George's Grandma is a wicked witch, Grandmamma in *The Witches*, who is not a witch but talks about witches endlessly, becomes another frightening grandmother type in the family. Dahl's other family members are similarly caricatured. James's two aunts enslave and beat the boy, whilst Matilda often experiences some form of verbal bullying from her father. These disturbing pictures of adults impinge directly on the child characters, creating a force field of emotional vindictiveness within the family. George 'would have liked to put a long green snake down the back of her dress but he didn't have a long green snake' (12), and 'Matilda's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising yet another punishment for the

poisonous parent' (35). Through his potion, George's grandmother is stretched, shrunk back and completely disappears; Matilda's mixture of 'PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG' humiliates her father by changing his hair into a 'much dirtier looking' colour; and James's aunts are squashed by a giant peach. While all the evidence of Dahl's popularity indicates that child readers enjoy his outrageous plots, his extreme punishments, even of obnoxious adults and children, have made critics question the political correctness of *George* as well as Dahl's other texts.

Written in 1981, when Dahl had already established himself as a children's writer, *George's Marvellous Medicine*, is chosen as an example because of its contradictory elements. George starts off as a hero, willing (albeit grudgingly) to take care of his grandmother, but in the end, his marvellous potion makes her completely disappear. The story does not seem to question whether what he does is right or wrong. He is not punished for his mischief and even his parents appreciate the effects of his magic medicine. Furthermore, the closing words of the story suggest that he has achieved something miraculous, leaving us wondering what he is going to do with this new-found power. It ends with no solutions – other than the fact that George has permanently exterminated his Grandma. George's two-day adventure encapsulates everything that is most characteristic of Dahl's writing: set ostensibly in the 'real' world, the story is infused with its imagination of elaborate revenge, its relish for pain and violence, and the undermining of dignity, achieved by slapstick humour. Like the story of other eponymous heroes/ heroines such as James, Charlie and Matilda, *George's* morality becomes problematic as it offers apparent endorsement of extreme child empowerment. George is not the only child to destroy an old woman. Dahl seems equally unsympathetic to the two aunts in *James and the Giant Peach*, the witches, and Miss Trunchbull.

On the other hand, Dahl's treatment of moral issues seems inconsistent from one book to the next. His overt criticism of greed, for instance, changes from story to story. While Augustus Gloop is sucked into a factory pipeway heading for the Fudge Room and forcibly thinned as punishment for his uncontrollable gluttony, over two decades later Bruce Bogtrotter, a 'miserable little gumboil', who 'sneaked like a serpent...and stole a slice of [Miss Trunchbull's] private chocolate cake' (115), is cheered on by the whole school as he finishes 'the gigantic cake' she makes him eat: 'This was nothing less than a battle between him and the mighty Trunchbull' (124). Although both episodes are about greed, they yield entirely different results. Augustus Gloop is

repeatedly tortured and ridiculed: ‘Augustus Gloop could be clearly seen shooting up inside [the pipeway], head first, like a torpedo’ (99), to become ‘Augustus-flavoured chocolate-coated Gloop! No one would buy it!’ (101). Dahl reminds the reader over and over again that the boy is fat, and therefore disgusting: ‘How long could we allow this beast to gorge and guzzle, feed and feast on everything he wanted to?’ (104). With Bruce, however, the author transforms his eating into something heroic as Bruce receives ‘a tremendous cheer’ from the ‘two hundred and fifty watching’ students: ‘Come on, Brucie! You can make it!’ (124). This time, his steady determination to finish the cake foils Miss Trunchbull’s plan to make him vomit in front of the school. At a simple level there seems to be no moral compass to his tales, other than a sense that wicked adults must be punished for their cruelty to children, or (just occasionally), that some badly-behaved children must be equally punished for their ‘sins’.

This inconsistent treatment of offenders, and Dahl’s ingenuity in devising grotesque scenes of humiliation, prompt us to consider what moral framework, if any, he constructs in his books. While it is tempting to dismiss his approach as simple cartoonish or fairytale vengeance, this thesis argues that his techniques may be more subtle and complicated.

In the course of his career, Dahl’s morality becomes increasingly complex, as he begins to tackle larger questions (for example the invasion of child-destroying witches and giants, in *The Witches* and *The BFG* respectively), and he never applies quite the same criteria for revenge in every book. Some plots have been more heavily criticised than others especially for their vulgarity, racism, and sexism. Some of his books have been the focus of censorship attempts both in the UK and the US, especially *The Witches*, which was banned from several school libraries. He even received ‘a number of letters from witches who objected to the book’ (West, 1988:73) for their negative portrayal. Eleanor Cameron (1972), one of Dahl’s most vitriolic critics, accuses *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* of ‘fostering sadism in children’ through ‘tasteless sensationalism’. As recently as 2015 Barbara Basbanes Richter (2015:326) agreed, claiming the children ‘are murdered in a place that ostensibly ought to be a dream come true’. In the fall 1988 issue of *Children’s Literature in Education*, David Rees condemns nearly all of Dahl’s children’s books, and *The Twits* is singled out as one of the worst that fosters a false belief in children that ‘all ugly people are evil’ (West, 1990:115). Moreover, his fantasies for children have often met with parental

disapproval from adults who try to stop children reading books they consider unsuitable or dangerous.

Dahl's place in children's literature criticism

In her introduction to the Roald Dahl *New Casebook*, Catherine Butler (2012) avers that Dahl 'created a new realm within children's literature' (9), experimenting with many different subject matters, and taboos, matched by multiple styles of humour, including derision, cartoon violence, and comic fantasy. The author reinvents linguistic innovation, and promotes some sets of values while also subverting them (as seen in his condemnation of wild duck-hunting or greedy children, while elsewhere expressing his support for 'the art of poaching' and Wonka's chocolate mania). As a children's writer, Dahl 'tends to polarise opinion, dividing critics into detractors and defenders' (2) with an attempt to categorise him into binary positions: a writer who is good or bad, honest or dishonest, and moral or immoral (2). His ambivalence about authority, institutions, family, and vulgarity is often scrutinised, especially where childhood is still regarded as a protected state or concept. However, according to Peter Hunt (2012), Dahl's seminal influence 'is seen in the visible vulgarisation of children's books' (176). His texts offer 'a powerful impetus, both to commercialisation and to commodification' and 'appear to give children a voice' (180).

Talking about children in children's literature criticism is, in any case, as Marah Gubar (2013) argues, 'a very risky business' due to the power imbalance that complicates the relationship between older and younger people (450). When children's books are written, purchased, and promoted by adults, the question is what part children play in creating and transforming the texts they read. Children's literature is basically understood as books written for children and read primarily by them. But its spectrum is so broad that it is problematic to delimit the concept of the children's book. The earliest books for children, according to M O Grenby (2014) and Sheila Ray, were published for educational purposes and were 'overtly didactic' with religious emphasis (quoted in Hunt 1999:6). John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly* (1744) was celebrated as the first book for the entertainment of children, illustrating the educational ideas of John Locke, who advocated teaching through amusement. Newbery's work which was sold 'with a pincushion and ball' shows that publishing children's books could be a commercial success (Rudd, 2012; Grenby, 2014). Twentieth century children's fiction

witnesses more the development of childhood ideology. Some children's stories explore gender identities, warfare, the incongruities of family life, divorce, and the instability of human values. As Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble (2001) remark, the depictions of fictional families and characters from the early nineteenth century to the present day mirror 'a trend towards more liberal and realistic attitudes and subversion of the traditional values' (1).

Hunt (1994) points out that a children's story is inevitably 'educational' or 'influential' and that '[a]ll books must teach something'; children's books are, hence, 'likely to be directive, to predigest experience, to "tell" rather than to "show", and to be more prone to manipulation than others' (3). As Hunt suggests further, the complexity and the ambivalence of the author-reader relationship instigate different modes of manipulation. The paradoxical nature of children's books and their functions has been widely discussed among scholars and critics of children's literature. Hunt's intriguing query: 'what are children's books "good" for?' offers many possible answers depending upon various factors – as 'every reading is different' (11). According to Priscilla Alderson and Tamaki Yoshida, childhood studies scholars, '[c]hildren's knowledge, judgement, foresight, freedom of choice, control and agency are all very limited, but so too are adults' capacities. At all ages, human agency is constantly constrained by structures and by other agents, by resources and chance' (quoted in Nodelman, 2016:268). Some books are considered good for educating, instilling religious beliefs, broadening imagination, communicating social attitudes, guiding one's life, or even just for killing time. Every book has its own purpose; however, as Nodelman suggests, 'readers of all ages, including very young ones, are already in the process of being shaped by the values of their environment' (268). The author of a book, Nodelman notes, therefore, may be responsible for more than his own text; if he acquires some 'importance' in the literary work, his influence can have significant ramifications' (310).

I can see no reason why critics should not focus on how texts might be inviting specific responses from their readers. I believe that texts – indeed, uses of language generally – do often communicate what their authors wanted to communicate (Nodelman, 2016:271).

Dahl began his career as a short story writer for adults, but in his mid-forties, he turned to writing stories for children. There is, however, a wide variety of ways in which his texts can be read, and while they clearly target young readers, they have also

attracted mixed responses from an adult audience. In *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*, Barbara Wall (1991) distinguishes between three different modes of address employed by children's authors: single address (targeted specifically at an audience of either children or adults), double address (at children or adults at different times throughout the text) and dual address (at children and adults at the same time). Wall notes that few writers 'managed to address a dual audience; more usually, adopting a shifting stance, they veered between friendly companionship and uncompromising authoritarianism in their narrative attitudes to their narratees, or addressed adults while pretending to address children' (40). In Dahl's books, both author and narrator claim to be on the side of the child against adults and this becomes one of his hallmarks, as noted by Butler (2012) and Hunt (2012): 'to put readers in an effective arm lock, conscripting them to the views of the narrator in a way that can feel coercive' (Butler, 3), and 'to tell rather than show, to control (while adopting the guise and tone of a friendly confidante) rather than to allow freedom of interpretation' (Hunt:180-1). There are obvious episodes of indirect discourse with the reader 'where it is not clear whether we are reading the character's thought or the author's comment' (Hunt, 2012:185). In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, for instance, upon hearing of Mike Teavee's obsession with shooting and fighting scenes on television, Grandma Josephine 'snaps': 'That's quite enough...I can't bear to listen to it' (40), followed by Grandma Georgina's comment: 'Do all children behave like this nowadays – like these brats we've been hearing about?' (40). Plenty more examples are found in *Matilda*: when Miss Honey 'marvelled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness' (80), or when Matilda tells Miss Honey: 'I am very fond of Charles Dickens...He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr Pickwick' (75). Dahl establishes several layers of discourse and engages his audience with his opinionated statements in all his texts.

For the child reader, the 'author-function' is not universal or constant in all discourse. Some types of text draw little attention to the author's identity or opinions, but in Dahl's case, his distinctively outspoken persona emerges when his 'voice' sounds in his intermittent commentary. Dahl's writing, as Hunt proposes, is similar to Wall's notion of the "double address" – [addressing] children and adults separately within the same text' (186) – which implies the author's power to exercise his control and manipulation over the texts and reader. His children's fictions are written in a language that is specifically directed at children, and they, as Ann Alston (2008) notes, 'superficially at least, seem to have no serious messages at all' (64). However, a close

examination of Dahl's texts reveals that some messages are aimed specifically at an adult audience and this double/ dual address becomes his primary comic mode, allowing him a framework to explore increasingly complex issues in a style that does not alienate its younger readers. Aidan Chambers (1990) in 'The Reader in the Book', for instance, discusses 'the implied child reader' in children's literature, citing 'the implied adult reader' of Dahl's *Danny: The Champion of the World*. Chambers claims that Dahl's narrative voice and textual features 'create a sense of an intimate, yet adult-controlled, relationship between the implied author and the implied child reader' (Benton, 1999:97).

Dahl's adoption of the child's viewpoint to sustain the adult-author/child reader relationship and dialogue forms of adult-child interactions is repeated in many of his books. Examples of this narrative method are witnessed through 'Charlie's quizzing his Grandpa Joe about the history of the mysterious Willy Wonka, Matilda's questioning of Miss Honey..., Sophie's lengthy conversations with the BFG' (Thacker, 2012:25), and the unnamed boy's discussion about the nature of witches with his grandmother. What Dahl demonstrates in his work, Deborah Cogan Thacker (2012) argues, subverts 'the normative role of the author' (27), challenging 'the expected function of children's literature and the unequal relationship between the adult author and child reader' (27). The power structure of Dahl's storytelling reflects some of his own societal views: 'that authorities and social institutions, such as government and schools, should not be trusted' (27). Dahl's 'own sense of himself' (28) and his forthright narrative seem so powerful and so much alive that they prompt us to reconsider the problems around ideas of the author and authorship as proposed by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.

Roland Barthes's theoretical essay 'Death of the Author' (1967) argues the inexistence of the writer after his/her work is complete. The reader needs not to ask what the author intended in his/her work since he/she is merely a 'scriptor' who simply collects pre-existing quotations without explaining them. Barthes's essay is an attack on traditional literary criticism that focused too much on the author's intentions and original meaning, which he sees as irrelevant. The reader's own interpretations of texts will liberate the reader from domination by the author. Similar to Barthes's reader-response critical theory which empowers the implied reader over the author, Michel Foucault's provocative question 'what is an author?' introduces the 'author function' which is connected to a set of beliefs or assumptions governing the production and consumption of texts. Foucault (1969) maintains that authorship is a social construction

and it will vary over cultures and over time: ‘Partially at the expense of themes and concepts that an author places in his work, the “author-function” could also reveal the manner in which discourse is articulated on the basis of social relationships’ (313). Both Barthes and Foucault envision a culture where discourse circulates without any need for an author, and a book belongs to the reader once it is published.

However, the authorial intent and the perspective of reader as author and author as reader raise interesting questions regarding the notion of interaction with and interpretation of a text. In the written mode, the author often assumes the role of his or her own reader. The writer thinks aloud, generates the text, and agonizes over finding the right words through countless re-drafts. There are discrepancies between what the author wanted to convey and what the reader interpreted from it. Difficulties arise when, by trusting entirely to a text as the primary source of meaning, we may devalue the role of the author whose intentions become secondary, yet useful to know, since the author is a product of his culture. In most fiction, the authorial intent will be implicit, meaning it is implied but not clearly stated. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, for example, is not simply a story about animals, but a means of commenting on the Russian Revolution: something the reader uncovers in the text without needing to know about the author’s life. Similarly, it could be argued that both Rowling’s and Dahl’s values can be assumed from what is said in their texts. Pat Pinsent (2005), for instance, claims that the Harry Potter series ‘suggest that [the author] wants her reader to be aware in particular of the importance of courage and integrity’ (20), while in Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Grenby (2008) notes ‘Charlie and The Oompa-Loompas’ songs, gloating over the fate of each sinning child..., are very droll but also expressive of the author’s genuine disdain for over-indulged children’ (Grenby, 2008:42).

While a Barthesian or Foucauldian reading of Dahl’s children’s stories may seem like an attractive option, given their robust free-standing meaning, his media self-promotion as the author behind the texts makes his forceful personality and opinions difficult to separate from his writing. During his lifetime, especially in the last three decades (1960-1990), Dahl boosted his reputation through television and radio interviews, communicating directly with his fans worldwide to express his personal attitudes. As author and narrator Dahl is (still) very much alive, and his allegedly racist and anti-feminist assumptions remain controversial. His eventful life has repeatedly emerged in critical readings as a crucial factor, explaining many of his abrasive comments and social prejudices. As Thacker concludes, ‘[w]hile Dahl appears, to his

more stringent critics, to eschew the moralising function of children's literature, he embraces and invites the strongest moral position: to "write" one's own story and refuse to be subjected to others' (28). His strong childhood memories of being bullied by authoritarian adults, his love of chocolate, reading, and sheer inventiveness are continually communicated through his distinctive narrative style. Indeed, both Dahl and, more recently, Rowling have come under criticism when their positions on some social values are judged as inappropriate or problematic, as with Rowling's recent controversial statements on transgender women (2020). The question is whether we (adult or child) need to know about the author's life experiences and moral values in order to reach a full understanding of their writing.

My argument in this thesis is that we overlook or devalue at least an awareness of Dahl's cultural environment and personal experiences at the cost of gaining a fuller understanding of his moral values. It is difficult to read *Boy*, *Going Solo*, *The BFG*, *Mr Fox* or *Willy Wonka* without thinking of the author himself, as it is the underlying emotions and idiosyncrasies of Dahl's own known experience and nature that suffuse the narrative. As Gillian Lathey (2005) notes, 'autobiography is an imaginative re-creation of personal experience governed by personal interest and changing ideologies,' and the image that an author wishes to present to an audience at the time of writing becomes 'a chain of multiple identities' (68). Dahl deliberately associates his childhood self with the fictional character at the centre of each novel. His self is a construct that changes according to social circumstance and ideological pressures. Both *Boy* and *Going Solo* illustrate Dahl, the adult writer, who fictionalises and reframes his childhood memory. Through his sense of humour, his distinct narrative style, Dahl's autobiographical material is presented as emotionally (if not factually) authentic and woven into an explicitly fictional work where it is often possible to detect his reappraisal of childhood identity, his schooldays, and mother-son relationships. In addition, he often makes 'a direct and personal appeal to children, designed to fly below the radar of parental disapproval' (Butler, 2012:7). The biographical investigation therefore serves to demonstrate why Dahl uses recurrent plot devices to isolate the child protagonists or expose them to the bullying authoritarian adult. Although Barthesian and Foucauldian readers do not need to know about Dahl as an individual in order to understand his texts or retrace his intentions, Dahl's opinionated personality which invites attention to himself via openness to media interviews should not be dismissed or ignored as Dahlian motifs and figurations remain operative in his work. The author will

never be fully dead. As Ann Alston and Heather Worthington (2016) suggest ‘[t]he conscious Dahl...is always dominant – the adult, anglicised Dahl who, while apparently siding with the disempowered, is himself a regulatory presence in his narratives’ (122).

Dahl, at first glance

As a Thai scholar, I first encountered Roald Dahl, a Welsh-born British author, when I was a second-year undergraduate student at Silpakorn University, Thailand. One of his short stories for adults, ‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ (1953), was included in the reading list of the ‘Introduction to Fiction Reading’, a compulsory course for all English major students. In this fiction class, students were to explore and evaluate the elements of fiction in selected British and American short stories and novels including plot, characterisation, setting, irony, point of view, symbolism, and theme. Dahl’s short story incorporated several literary techniques for the in-class discussion. Through the use of irony and suspense, Mary² Maloney, the protagonist, becomes a uniquely complex character who develops from a submissive housewife into an intelligent and subtly dominant killer who lets the policemen partake in eating the evidence, the leg of lamb. As the events of the short story unfold, delicate Mary, a model 1950s housewife, transforms herself into a frightening and vindictive character, who begins to ‘giggle’ whilst listening to the men discussing the case and mentioning that the murder weapon, which has yet to be found, is ‘[p]robably right under [their] very noses’. As we analysed the text thoroughly, the whole class was fascinated by its situational irony and the author’s black humour. At the same time, we were shocked by the wife’s resolution to kill her husband and her meticulous plan to cover up her guilt and remain calm in front of the grocer and police. The motivation of the passive woman to commit a devious murder was another issue we discussed as we recognised the power imbalance of the couple’s relationship and the conflicts between appearance and reality. Whilst Patrick Maloney is idolised for his masculinity and power, Mary is a domestic and dutiful servant taking pleasure in providing him with a relaxing atmosphere to come home to. This ‘short’ story is told through details that allow the reader to discover the other façade of Mary whose harmless and passive personality helps conceal her deceptive appearance. On the surface, the story depicts the normal world of a married couple, but their ordinary everyday scenes exhibit grotesque meaning through Dahl’s ‘perfect

² The significance of the name ‘Mary’ and her frozen lamb ironically resonates with an English language nursery rhyme of the nineteenth-century, ‘Mary had a little lamb’. This children’s song exposes a mutual love between a young girl, Mary, and her pet lamb.

balance between humor and horror' (Warren, 1994:36). Mary's resentment of her bullying husband which is contrary to her silent passivity prefigures some of Dahl's child heroes/ heroines like George, the unnamed boy in *The Witches*, and Matilda, who defy their tormentors especially adult authority figures, albeit in far lighter and more comical situations.

I was subsequently exposed to other stories of Dahl's, such as 'The Way Up to Heaven' (1954), 'The Landlady' (1959), and 'Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat' (1959), and was amazed by the author's narrative techniques and sheer invention. The stories' tension, surprise, sometimes shocking endings, and dark humour became Dahl's stylistic trademark as Alan Warren (1994:27) notes: 'It is this cathartic effect, which no plot summary can convey, that makes Dahl's stories unique'. The tales of such sinister and manipulative characters as Mary and Mrs Foster are among those of Dahl's stories that force readers to question what is good and what is evil, or what is right and what is wrong. Philip Howard (2004) claims that Dahl's short stories, which were published in some of the most influential American magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine*, 'tiptoed along the tightrope between the macabre and the comic in a manner reminiscent of Hector Hugh Munro (Saki)'. Years later, I was introduced by chance to *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and *Matilda* (1988), and was surprised to discover they were all written by the same author who already had a successful career as the writer of macabre adult short stories, although they share a vengeful plot structure whereby a passive victim begins to stand up and fight for justice. Children in my generation (1980-1990) seemed to be more familiar with the translated versions of such classic children's books as *Daddy-Long-Legs* (คุณพ่อขายาว) by Jean Webster (1912), *Charlotte's Web* (แมงมุมเพื่อนรัก) by E. B. White (1952), and *My Sweet Orange Tree* (ต้นส้มแสนรัก) by José Mauro de Vasconcelos (1968), therefore, it is not surprising that when some of Dahl's books were translated into Thai during the 1990s, they were not as widely read as they are now. His tales are mainly rambunctious and grotesque fantasies, unlike those of many of his contemporaries, whose more heart-warming themes of friendship among children, adults and animals were considered the norm. However, Dahl's sardonic humour, his fascination with horror (with elements of black comedy), and grotesqueness, especially in his children's literature attracted a Buddhist reader like me to investigate the moral aspects of his books which are presumably meant to convey some trustworthy guidelines and resources for young readers.

Dahl's sinful characters, however, do not seem to acknowledge any need to change or develop any sense of self-awareness all their lives, even though they are offered several warnings and chances to correct themselves. Although there is a problem with the lack of reflection in the villains or any insights into their inner lives, the reader is convinced by the confidential voice of the narrator that they are unlikely to change their thoughts and habits. Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker, and George's Grandma continue to inflict physical and emotional suffering on the boys in their charge, and instil fear into them, no matter how polite and kind the boys are to them. Miss Trunchbull has persistently tortured Miss Honey since childhood, and her bullying behaviour never softens. Her punishment of Bruce Bogtrotter establishes a crude moral scenario where a small boy can stand up to an angry bully, who is 'turning redder and redder. She's going to kill him if he wins' (124), by overcoming her through his strong determination to finish the gigantic cake. After this event, the headmistress still explicitly expresses her distaste for small children – 'It makes me vomit...to think that I am going to have to put up with a load of garbage like you in my school' (135) – and keeps on coercing her pupils. Mr Wormwood continues bullying Matilda verbally and emotionally, and he never learns any lessons from her clever tricks nor attempts to become a better parent. An act of fair retribution against those wrongdoers seems to be the ultimate solution for them as Dahl's traumatised victims continually alternate their silent passivity with unexpected moments of violence and vengeance. Thus the sinners' unrelenting enmity and the vindictive spirits of their victims become something alien and disturbing for Buddhist philosophy. Perhaps Charlie's story is closely connected to our moral norm where the doer of a good deed is rewarded and bad deeds punished. However, his later children's books reveal Dahl's moral stance as the reverse of passive, in that he shows all his bullied children fighting back against the adults who never even recognise them as human beings with feelings and rights. I cannot help but question those critics such as Cameron and Rees, who condemn the allegedly sadistic and immoral nature of his fiction for children. Even if we do not find an explicit moral basis stated in Dahl's books for children, I would argue that we can read one between the lines.

In this thesis, I therefore propose to examine the relationship between Dahl's narrative styles and his moral perspective through the investigation of his life along with his children's literature in relation to problematic aspects such as violence, gender and fantasy. I assume that the contentious morality of Dahl's works demands critical

reappraisal, and believe that learning about the author will enhance readers' better understanding of his popular texts. There are extensive debates about the ethical importance of literature. It can be argued that the moral function in literature is still a contested issue. Nevertheless, as Ted Cohen (2009:1) suggests, reading literary texts 'at least can be morally uplifting and improving, presumably by exposing readers to human situations—their complexities and necessities—that they would otherwise not be aware of'. From this perspective, the moral calibre of Dahl's child heroes will be tested to see how they respond to a range of challenges, and how Dahl assigns 'morality' or a moral standpoint to each of his characters. As the main theme of my thesis is 'morality' and the possibility of 'repositioning' Dahl in the evolution of the morality debate in other popular children's writers, especially Rowling, every chapter develops and examines topics and issues in accordance with this theme. Since an explicit definition of 'morality' appropriate to discussing Dahl's fiction is difficult to establish, my definition of the term is simply any set of beliefs and values accepted by all rational persons on the basis of a commonly-held, consensual moral judgement. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2019), the term is widely defined as 'Principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour'. As morality may also be specifically synonymous with 'goodness' or 'rightness', such codes of conduct as kindness, forgiveness, and courage will be often used to explain or justify the characters' behaviour. My research questions evolve around what Dahl's works say about the human condition, behaviour, and morality, especially those of children.

In his introduction to a railway guidebook: *Roald Dahl's Guide to Railway Safety* (1991),³ written nearly at the end of his life, Dahl declares 'I have been careful never to preach, never to be moralistic and never to convey any message to the reader'. He laments that children are always instructed to behave as adults expect, and confirms his determination never to write didactically. Dahl's often contradictory treatment of social morality in his fiction for children has made him the subject of fierce critical debate. On the one hand he denies any intention of being moralistic, while on the other, his children's books not only uphold a clear value system, but also punish those (usually adults) who transgress. Dahl's writing is notorious for its scenes of bullying and violence, and his characters endure various kinds of physical and emotional trauma, yet

³ Published in 1991 by the British Railways Board. Dahl's short but funny booklet provides many important rules of safety for young people whilst using the railways, such as not riding a bicycle or skateboard on a station platform, or walking along rail tracks. The booklet was distributed to students in UK primary schools.

his bullying episodes are often his most hilarious. He is not just ridiculing bullies as his way of deploring their behaviour: it is hard to ignore the sheer exuberance, for example, of the scene in *Matilda* where Miss Trunchbull hurls Amanda Thripp across the school playground until she lands softly like a bouncing ball coming to rest. His adult figures are often ruthlessly caricatured, especially the women. His books for children have been criticized for their vulgarity, excessive violence, sexism, racism, disrespect toward adults and contempt for social institutions. The impact of reading his books on young people is constantly under debate. Steven Roxburgh, in his interview with Mark I. West (1988:120-1) in *Trust Your Children*, argues that:

The controversy surrounding Dahl is a classic instance of adults, who think they are the arbiters of good taste and decorum, trying to impose these qualities on children who are not particularly tasteful or decorous. Most children couldn't care less about adult conventions, and that's why they take great delight in Dahl's violations of these conventions.

Roxburgh's argument about Dahl's violations of good manners, which disturb adult readers but at the same time delight children, encapsulates the problem of 'taste' versus 'morality' in Dahl's fiction. This debate drives my investigation of the relationship between morality, reading, and interpretation in Dahl's fiction for children. My thesis considers whether this apparent stalemate in Dahl criticism, which polarises children's relish, not just for violence, but also disrespect for authority, disruptive behaviour, and ribald expletives, with the tight-lipped reservations of critics and parents, can ever be broken, or productively theorised. His stories' plots for adults are recycled for use in his children's fiction and 'the cynical and even sadistic elements within his adult fiction sometimes find disguised expression in his books for children' (Butler, 2012:6) According to Butler (2012) and Hunt (2012), when Dahl was advised that 'his authoritarian self should disapprove of his own books' (181), the author described his writing as a 'tightrope act'. As Alston and Worthington (2016) observe, Dahl's texts 'are as complex – as slippery – as his psyche' (122). He appears to ridicule authority 'while also seeking to "civilise" the reader' (124).

Despite Dahl's contradictory self and some problematic didactic elements in his texts which contribute to critical disapproval of his work, the author sustains his popularity and appeals to child readers as seen through his continuing success until present. As Grenby notes, 'no single writer had grabbed children's imagination as Dahl has done during the 1970s and 1980s' (17). The thesis is, therefore, levelled at repositioning Dahl as a key and continuing influence on twentieth century children's

literature. The author becomes a connecting link between mid-to-late nineteenth century children's literature and a broader culture of twentieth century British social attitudes. The influence of Charles Dickens and Hilaire Belloc is discernible in Dahl's oeuvre while there are echoes of some of Dahl's fiction in J. K. Rowling's, Michael Rosen's, and David Walliams's books for children. The actual similarity between Dahl and Rowling, for instance, 'lies in their ability to speak directly to children without condescension or artifice – a crucial skill for writers for children' (Eccleshare, 2008:298).

Dahl seems to allow all kinds of violence and misbehaviour to take place in his books, and his slapstick humour and fantasy encourage a kind of a 'guilty pleasure' in his readers. Our moral judgement is being challenged as to why we apparently enjoy seeing people publicly humiliated, or laughed at. It does not necessarily mean that we are not concerned about other people's feelings but that we think villains deserve a swift comeuppance. Moreover, the author plays with the reader's sympathy and we are drawn into siding with characters that defeat and ridicule those villains, even if these characters are not themselves morally unimpeachable. Readers, as well as the whole school, are drawn into taking Bruce's side against the headmistress: 'As the very last mouthful disappeared, a tremendous cheer rose up from the audience and children were leaping on to their chairs and yelling and clapping and shouting' (125). One of Dahl's tricks is to invoke a crowd to witness the bully's humiliation. We hope Mr Fox in *Fantastic Mr Fox* will safely escape from the monstrous chase of the 'enormously fat' Boggis, 'dwarfish pot-bellied' Bunce, and 'tall skinny' Bean, whilst the people in the village 'jeered and laughed' at them which 'made the three farmers more furious and more obstinate and more determined' (28). We also want The Twits to fall into Muggle-Wump's trap, and when the cruel couple start to shrink and finally disappear, 'everyone, including Fred, shouted... 'HOORAY!' (87). In several of his stories, the author also plays with readers' expectations. When a furious Miss Trunchbull hits the boy's head with the large empty china platter, to our surprise, Bruce 'simply shook his head a few times and went on grinning' full of cake 'like a sackful of wet cement' (127). Her first and alarming encounter with the newt is also surprising when the athletic Trunchbull 'let out a yell and leapt off the chair as though a firecracker had gone off underneath her' (155). The narrator heightens her fear: 'The Trunchbull, this mighty female giant, stood there in her green breeches, quivering like a blancmange' (155). This episode effectively foreshadows her eventual downfall in the magic blackboard scene. Dahl's

universe is full of such chaotic violence. He makes it clear that authority cannot be trusted. Parents and teachers tell lies to children. A farmer becomes a cruel hunter, while a cunning fox or a poacher can be a hero, providing for his family. Subversive messages are evident everywhere in his children's books, but is it possible for a young reader to look for moral guidance in them?

The argument of the thesis develops through five chapters. The first four chapters each address a key theme, such as Dahl's biography, trauma, violence, gender, and comic fantasy. Various sub-headings are provided in each chapter to outline the most prominent issues with regard to morality and children's books. The final chapter provides an overview of the Dahl phenomenon and his influences thirty years after his death. The Roald Dahl *New Casebook* (2012) edited by Ann Alston and Catherine Butler, has been useful in helping me articulate my methodology.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: Fantastic or Fanatic Mr Dahl?: Dahl's persona as constructed by his auto/biography

Dahl rose to prominence in the 1940s with works for adults, and has been referred to as 'one of the greatest storytellers for children of the twentieth century' (Sturrock, 2011). His children's stories display a 'Dahlesque' delight in grotesque and anarchic humour. Dahl's own life story, in itself tragic and problematic, is treated as an important factor in the development of his subversive writing style which marks him out from other contemporary children's writers. This chapter is divided into three sections: Dahl's autobiographies, the adult biographies, and biographies for children. It considers whether knowledge of the author's life and tastes changes the way we interpret or read his books. My focus is on Dahl's life, his images and his ideology. A controversial and subversive writer, his life story has been discussed through various resources: biographies designed for children, Professor Tom Solomon's examination of Dahl's interest in medical science, and Jeremy Treglown's unauthorized, and Donald Sturrock's authorized biographies for adult readers. Dahl himself was active in encouraging his own, often controversial, public myth, as he shared part of his personal experience in his own autobiographies, *Boy* (1984) and *Going Solo* (1986), and they become a bridge between his life and fiction. As Carrie Smith (2016) suggests: 'Dahl regularly blurred the line between fiction and autobiography, passing material between fiction, essays and what one might call "creative autobiography" or "autobiografiction"'

(13). As a man of three continents (Europe, America, and Africa), he had ample opportunity to experience a full and varied life. The biographical exploration of Dahl's life and his moral values is used as an entry-point into interpreting his works, and arriving at fresh readings by examining the problematic relationship between the life and the writing, and an appropriate methodology for reading Dahl and his identity is identified.

Chapter Two: Trauma, Violence and Bullying in Roald Dahl's Books for Children

Debates about Dahl's work's 'appropriateness' are based mainly on the themes of bullying and violence that inflict traumatic impact on his characters. From the start of several tales, Dahl's child characters experience sudden, catastrophic trauma: most often the loss of parents by random acts of violence. The most extreme is James's, when his parents are gobbled up by an escaped rhinoceros, but Sophie, in *The BFG*, and the nameless boy in *The Witches* are also orphans, and Danny has lost his mother. Although Dahl's portrayal of tragedy in his stories is often conveyed with a macabre sense of humour, it is hard to dismiss the feelings of his traumatised victims as breezily as Dahl himself appears to do. The rampant rhinoceros, especially, seems to symbolize the utter meaninglessness of sudden death in the modern world, and to demand a fuller explanation than the text delivers, especially in terms of its traumatic impact on James. A thorough study of Dahl's biography in the first chapter offers an insight into his life which reveals how his own family was greatly affected by trauma – the death of his father, sister, daughter, and a near-death of his son, his wife and himself. As trauma became more familiar to him, it probably became normal to reflect it in his writing in relation to the family. Dahl, as Richard Marggraf Turley (2016) suggests, 'is trapped in the cycles of repetition around and aetiology of unexorcised memories of combat', and his 'war shocks, complicated by memories of Wales, are carried into the fiction for children' (69). Although Dahl acknowledges trauma, and the issue of death is inevitably mentioned in his texts, he does not dwell on it to the extent of other children's writers, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett or J.K. Rowling, in their work – by depicting recurring feelings of characters suffering from past traumas due to family tragedies. He is more interested in how children recover from loss and move on in their lives – mostly through their resilience and positivity. Interestingly, the bullying episodes in most of Dahl's books concern the verbal and physical harassment performed by adults towards small children. This chapter also examines how children are guided towards distinguishing virtues from vices in the stories: for example by the narrator's

interventions or ‘voice’. Children, as weak and small creatures, appear to be more likely to be victims. Moreover, Charles Dickens’s literary influence on the humorous depiction of aggressive behaviour becomes another significant factor in explaining Dahl’s use of specific, recurrent models of adult-on-child bullying.

Chapter Three: Gender in Dahl’s Texts

The third chapter moves from trauma and violence to a feminist context as it deals with gender bias and the moral orientation of justice and superiority. Since Dahl is accused of anti-feminism and sexism, and in his works most of his major characters are boys (except Matilda, Sophie, and the *Magic Finger* girl), whilst old ladies and even mother figures are usually depicted as malicious and cruel, this chapter investigates the images and representation of men and women – both adults and children – in Dahl’s works. Grotesque women, such as the witches, Miss Trunchbull, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, are depicted as malicious and cruel, and their physical ugliness is stressed, which makes them less feminine and more repulsive. Moreover, Dahl seems to express his misogyny through humour as he comically caricatures women more than men in several of his works. Meanwhile, Sophie and Matilda are positively illustrated as liberal, intellectual, and independent. Readers can be inspired by Matilda’s indomitable nature and regard her as a feminist role model. In examining his attitude towards women and gender positioning in the texts, I consider whether Dahl projects ideological gender perceptions upon his characters. Drawing on influential critiques by Allan Warren and Beverley Pennell, as well as Dahl’s letters to his mother, *Love from Boy* (2017), this chapter focuses on developments in gender history which are directly relevant to Dahl’s interests, and themes such as social attitudes in his books. The chapter examines and interrogates the traditional roles of men and women as presented in Dahl’s fiction for children. Dahl’s problematic construction of male and female characters will be analysed, so as to ascertain to what extent Dahl follows gendered stereotypes.

Chapter Four: Comic Fantasy and Fantastic Characters in the Dahlian Magical World

Dahl’s subversive outlook on trauma, violence and gender can be seen as a creative literary construction through a form of comic fantasy where anarchic humour plays a crucial part. In each of his texts for children, the reader witnesses typical ‘Dahlesque’ societies that are ruthless and cruel, but also funny. His fantasy world is filled with fantastical violence where giants eat children, a teacher lifts a student aloft by his two

ears, witches plan to wipe out children altogether, and children plot to humiliate or destroy cruel adults. Most of the villainous characters are caricatured and cartoonish in their grotesqueness. Although his humour is condemned for its tastelessness I propose that Dahl's comic fantasy works efficiently with his target child who has a broader imagination and finds the slapstick and knock-about violence appealing rather than terrifying. The author, meanwhile, appears to find a new way of exposing the power imbalance between adults and children through preposterous schemes to give the adults a taste of their own medicine. Dahl's style of comic fantasy is the focus of this chapter, especially his extreme plot devices, and nonsensical coinage and wordplay. After a brief history of fantasy, drawing particularly on Colin Manlove's (1999) discussion of comic fantasy, I then trace Dahl's chief literary influences from Charles Dickens's neglected-child theme to Hilaire Belloc's cautionary tale format. The subgroups of comic fantasy, such as the animal fantasy, fairy-tales of witches and giants, and child super-heroes conquering adults are analysed via close readings of his texts. The didactic functions of Dahl's comic fantasy are then scrutinised in light of Manlove's claim that Dahl 'is not finally interested in morals, whether of tempering one's greed or one's sadism' (134): a view that is tested by discussion of specific examples.

Chapter Five: The Dahl Phenomenon

This chapter examines the reputation and reception of Dahl's work, and trends in criticism that provide the necessary background for understanding what happened later in Dahl studies after his death. It asks also whether Dahl's own values are maintained by the 'Dahl Phenomenon'. The celebrations of Dahl's centenary and the Dahl industry are the chapter's focus. Most of my study relies on online resources, articles, and reviews to provide recent evidence of the continuing Dahl phenomenon. The chapter first explores Dahl's fictional strong girl, Matilda, and her profound impact on the world. This empowering small girl is regarded as an inspiring role model for modern women, such as Cressida Cowell, the latest Children's Laureate, and author of the *How to Train Your Dragon*, and English actress Daisy Ridley, who stars as Rey in the *Star Wars* films. In 2018, Matilda was reintroduced as an adult on the covers of the thirtieth anniversary editions, and 'the spirit of Matilda' resonates with millions of readers. I also show how Dahl's work is seen in media and content marketing such as documentaries on BBC Two and BBC Radio Four, Persil's 'interactive storybook of Dahl', and McDonald's 'Happy Readers' campaigns, in order to seek new ways of understanding Dahl's achievements and place in twentieth-century children's culture. This chapter also

discusses what Carole Scott (2012) called ‘the Dahl-Blake dynamic’ and the influence of Blake’s illustrations on readers’ expectations and interpretations of the books. Finally, I offer an overview of current developments in Dahl studies through my first-hand experience of attending the ‘Roald Dahl Centenary Cardiff Conference’ held by Cardiff University in 2016.

The final part of the thesis, the Conclusion, reflects Dahl’s importance as the ‘World’s Number One Storyteller,’ and the essential key findings of the entire thesis under the subheadings of ‘A Life’s Work Beyond Trauma’, ‘Dahl’s Marvellous Philosophy’, and ‘Dahl’s Phenomenal After-Life’. Dahl’s distinctive stories are obviously where the seeds of a child’s love for books and reading are planted. It has been thirty years since his death, and the magic of his books still touches the interior worlds of millions of children, feeds their imagination, and stays with them throughout their childhood and beyond.

Chapter 1 : Fantastic or Fanatic Mr Dahl?: Dahl's persona as constructed by his auto/biography

Roald Dahl (1916-1990)

One of the world's most popular children's authors, Roald Dahl is listed amongst the greatest storytellers of all time. His books, which are translated into 58 languages including a Thai version of his fourteen stories,¹ are known and read by millions of readers all over the world. Almost thirty years after his death his popularity continues to grow along with his memorable characters such as Willy Wonka, Charlie, Matilda, Danny, and George. Readers intrigued by the BFG, and fantastic Mr Fox, or who envy Matilda's intellect and James's adventure with his giant peach might wonder about the man who created all these amazing stories. His birthday, 13th September, is marked as 'Roald Dahl Day' and the Roald Dahl Museum in his home village of Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, celebrates the stories and legacy of Dahl, and offers hands-on activities to inspire his young fans. The Roald Dahl Foundation is a charity set up to help children and adults with serious illness or problems with reading and writing, as the author thought it was vitally important that children should enjoy reading books to instil good reading habits. In addition, the author's life was truly exceptional in its overcoming of a series of family tragedies. Dahl's tremendous success invites curiosity about his life, family and also his resources for creating such distinctive children's stories. Donald Sturrock (2011), whose award-winning biography of Dahl reveals many hidden aspects of his extraordinary life, claims in the endpaper of his book '[t]he man behind the stories, remains an enigma'. It seems fitting that his life story, as well as his writings, attracts praise, controversy, and contradictory emotions among critics and readers. For some, he is a fantastic author who can make all stories suspenseful or funny, or even tell a tragic story in an entertaining way. For others, he becomes 'an absolute sod',² whose 'distasteful' novels expose running themes of vice and sexual sadism as well as darker cruel exploits and moralistic comeuppance. His books for children display a child's native nastiness whose anarchic instincts rival those of crooked adults. Socially, his arrogance and outspokenness have aroused uneasiness in his guests and visitors. He could hurt them easily and once he took a dislike to them,

¹ The number is taken from the official website RoaldDahl.com, which shares information about Dahl's life and works, and about the work of Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity and the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. Available online: <https://www.roalddahl.com/global/in-translation/> [Accessed 14/5/2019].

² According to Kathryn Hughes (2010) in 'Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl' by Donald Sturrock' in *the Guardian*.

they were no longer welcome and rejected. No literary critics were ever admitted to his Gipsy House. He is also accused of being a bully and a self-publicizing trouble-maker (Treglown, 1994:7), a fantasist, anti-Semite, sexist, and even a racist, a charge he resisted.³ His moral convictions are almost always questioned and debated.

What we know about Dahl's personality raises questions about how, and whether, a child can relate to him as their favourite author. Chris Powling's biography of Dahl (1983), for example, notes that for millions of children 'Roald Dahl himself is the Big Friendly Giant' (62), and Sophie in the *BFG* is obviously identified with Dahl's own granddaughter. These connections, as Hollindale (2008) claims, are made simply because 'children know a great deal more about him than they do about most authors and the "life" that they know hovers uncertainly between reality and invention' (277). Since there are controversial allegations of racism and amorality in his work, this chapter aims to provide extensive biographical information to investigate Dahl's childhood upbringing and his personal morality as it feeds into the morality of his books. The fact that Dahl wrote two autobiographies and many personal letters shows that he was interested in reflecting on his life. Although the notion of author 'intentionality' has a long-standing history of critical distrust, this chapter argues that Dahl's own morality and attitudes towards his work benefit from close attention, especially when his target audience is children 'between the ages of seven and nine'.⁴ In his children's fiction, the author's direct discourse to his readers seems to us axiomatic. The narrator of each story plays a crucial part either by favouring, criticising, or conspiring with child readers against adults on several occasions, and his simple retributive morality can seem like that of a child not an adult. In addition, while his narrators discipline the child reader they also discipline the adult reader. This chapter therefore will avoid interpreting the books according to the author's judgement, but rather attempts to examine the connections between the author's life, moral values and

³ Mark I. West (1992) notes how Dahl 'expressed shocked indignation' at Cameron's assault on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, by announcing that her criticisms were 'insensitive and monstrous' (73) since the book was dedicated to his seriously injured son, Theo. Later, Dahl's obvious counterargument against adults' strong objection to his children's books was: 'So often, though, adults judge a children's book by their own standards rather than by the child's standard' (73). When his portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas was criticised for being racist, Dahl 'was a bit taken aback' (71) as he first intended to create them as 'fantasy creatures such as elves or gnomes' (71).

⁴ In his interview with Mark I. West (1988) on the charges against the negative effects and violent portrayals in his books, Dahl explains that he generally writes for 'semicivilized' children, who 'are in the process of becoming civilized' by adults around them, especially their parents and teachers (74).

work since a Dahl-like narrative voice seems to continually order readers to see his characters the way he does. My main concern will be with how Dahl constructs himself as a hero for his child readers as with his characters.

Lucy Rollin (1999:12) states there are alternative approaches to evaluate or interpret a literary work, no matter what theory we are using. We may elect to study the author and his or her domestic and social life to investigate the individual creative mind and thought. We may discover the author's interests, beliefs, fantasies, and development; in this manner, we can possibly learn about real human beings from each fictional character the author creates. More knowledge about the author encourages a fuller interpretation of his or her work and can fundamentally change the reader's understanding of his stories of childhood. To return to Barthes' and Foucault's theory of author function: Dahl's biographical study is not a 'transparent' window that lets the author's intention 'present itself'. However, biography of the author, often carefully devised, cultivated and disseminated, partly contributes to the relationship between text and reader as the biographical material develops along cultural, national and class lines. Kathleen Lines (1960:9) confirms: 'But biography can explain the form and background of a work of genius: it can account for the outward and visible body, even if we must still hold that genius, like the soul, "cometh from afar"'. Hollindale's article, 'The Outrageous Success of Roald Dahl' (2008) further 'stress[es]the importance of the biographical "myths" that have been generated...Dahl as a fighter pilot whose life was punctuated by personal tragedy' (39). He adds: '...pleasure in Dahl's books arouses children's interest in his life, while the life (eventful enough in itself, but selectively presented and opportunistically fictionalised) creates yet more interest in the stories' (277).

In this chapter I shall endeavour to investigate Dahl's life and work, through the study of his own autobiographies and the evaluations of other biographers. From these materials, I seek to find the answers for the following questions: whether Dahl manipulates his autobiography to foster a more positive public persona to present himself as a hero; what images the adult and children's biographies create on his behalf; and to what extent his biographies build a coherent sense of the moral hero. A highly controversial and subversive writer, his life story has been discussed through various resources: biographies designed for children by writers such as Chris Powling and Michael Rosen; an unauthorized biography written for adult readers by Jeremy Treglown; Donald Sturrock's further resurrection of Dahl for adults; and Tom

Solomon's exploration of Dahl's interest in areas of medical science. Dahl himself was active in encouraging his own, often controversial, public myth, as he shared part of his personal experience in his own autobiographies, *Boy* and *Going Solo*. This chapter seeks to discuss the connections between Dahl's life, tales and rumours in all sources, not just his own autobiographies. I will try to discover what kind of a person Dahl turns into from the ways he has been represented or perceived. I hope, in so doing, to bring some findings and facts to light on the author's nature and his influence on children's literature. This introductory chapter will first examine Dahl's autobiographies, and how he presents himself in a similar way to his characters who stand up to bullying and injustice, with the aim of better understanding the challenges his public image presents to his reputation as one of the most popular British children's writers of the twentieth century. The adult biographies are next to be explored, and the final investigation will focus on the children's biographies: what they leave out, and what they consider it appropriate to tell child readers about the author's personal experiences and social attitudes.

Roald Dahl's autobiographies

An autobiography is a book a person writes about his own life and it is usually full of all sorts of boring details. This is not an autobiography... (*Boy*, 2010:7).

The above quotation ostensibly provides Dahl's explanation (whilst disparaging most autobiography) for why his autobiographical narrative is full of exciting and dramatic stories, whilst some precise but 'boring' information is purposely unmentioned. His insistence that *Boy* is *not* an autobiography, Carrie Smith (2016) argues, 'allowed him a degree of creative freedom from the tyranny of fact... to (re)deploy material creatively within a flexible network of literary forms' (13). Dahl's life, just like his books, was nothing short of extraordinary, but it was not until the final decade of his life that he learnt how to boost his own reputation as he was not officially recognised in his own country until 1982 when he was awarded a British literary prize for *The BFG*.⁵ Dahl cooperated with Stephen Roxburgh, then a devoted young editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux, for a self-publicizing project.⁶ Roxburgh became his research assistant to

⁵ The BFG was first published in 1982. Its title is an abbreviation for 'Big Friendly Giant'. The book won the Federation of Children's Book Groups Award in 1982. Dahl dedicated this book to his daughter Olivia, who died of measles encephalitis at the age of seven.

⁶ Roxburgh, who became Dahl's US editor in 1982, he subsequently authorised to write a full biography. Later, Dahl quarrelled with Roxburgh over his editing, and the project was abandoned (Treglown, 1994:ix).

organise his legend into an autobiography with a longer perspective - to record some colourful stories of his early life in *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984), and two years later *Going Solo* (1986) was launched as its sequel. In these two autobiographies, Dahl narrates a fascinating memoir of his childhood and his action-packed wartime adventures. Though one of the world's best-known storytellers, he assumes that not many people realise that his own life is also a remarkable series of stories, some of which may have inspired and influenced his works of fiction. Written from the viewpoint of the aging and experienced Dahl, who knows what ingredients will best attract the audience's interest, the two books successfully accommodate suspense, tragedy, emotion, and humour, whilst exaggerating some episodes starting from his earliest childhood to his epic adventures in exotic places during the Second World War. These tales of his childhood and wartime prepare us to understand some of the many difficulties and complexities he faced in his formative years.

In *Boy*, Dahl's descriptions of childish adventures in a sweet shop, the 'Great Mouse Plot,' chocolate, his idyllic summer holidays in Norway, the family's 'glorious walk' theory to develop a sense of beauty, and his love for games and photography, remind us of his happy childhood and warm family, though without a father. The mouse plot, for example, brings to mind Dahl's anarchic humour when his grotesque plot of putting a dead mouse in a sweet jar is complete: 'I felt like a hero. I *was* a hero. It was marvellous to be so popular' (*Boy*, 37). Here, Dahl projects himself in a similar way to his fictional subversive heroes who seek revenge for unfair treatment by brutal adults. He proudly claims: 'it was I and I alone who had the idea for the great and daring Mouse Plot. We all have our moments of brilliance and glory, and this was mine' (*Boy*, 35). However, this fanciful hero ends up being punished disproportionately by the vengeful shopkeeper. His school life in the 1920s will probably come as a surprise to readers who are not familiar with the cruelties of the old English public school tradition. Such disturbing school stories as the flogging Headmaster, a school 'Boazer',⁷ and corporal punishment raise doubts and questions in the young Dahl, such as 'Did [a clergyman] preach one thing and practise another, these men of God?' (*Boy*, 146). He later confesses his hatred of its principles: 'the authorities did not like me. I was not to be trusted. I did not like rules. I was unpredictable...Some people are born to wield power and to exercise authority. I was not one of them' (*Boy*, 162). Dahl claims to be a

⁷ At Repton School, prefects were called Boazers, who had full power and authority over junior boys. They had the right to punish and beat the boys for any mistakes.

nonconformist, a nicer Boazer, who will deny the whole principle of Boazedom. Ironically, unpredictable Dahl himself turns out to be an overbearing bully amongst his friends and family members. His personality and attitudes were further explored by his biographers, especially Treglown, who seems to capture the negative essence of his legendary reputation.

From the preface to *Going Solo* Dahl states that ‘I have written only about those moments that I consider memorable’, and here comes the great sense of adventure and excitement which Dahl captures perfectly in his writing. The title itself makes him into a brave hero who finally survives the chaos of the war. Instead of going to university, Dahl chooses to work for the Shell Oil Company and is sent to Africa, where he lives in considerable comfort and luxury with local servants. The outbreak of the war leads to a dramatic change in his life when he decides to join the Royal Air Force. His heroic deeds as a fighter pilot in the RAF evoke the confidence of youth, and his account of wartime exploits gives a vivid picture of turmoil and great loss. Dahl writes with great respect for those fellow pilots who were killed in battle. A serious crash leaves him with blinding headaches when flying. Invalided home, he returns to Britain and the book ends with his reunion with his mother.

Critics find some of his stories exaggerated and boastful, a mere fantasy to make the writer himself sound heroic. Other episodes make him appear to have doubts about the organization of English society, the institution of religion and even the existence of God. Some of *Boy*, for instance, ‘is heart-warming, while other parts, such as the description of how Dahl was beaten at school as a child, are sickening’ (Littmann, 2014:186). In *Going Solo*, more adult themes are addressed and a few violent descriptions of war and alcohol are also mentioned. In addition, there remain some inaccurate details and false references to other people, entertaining as the stories are. In his biography *Roald Dahl*, Jeremy Treglown (1994) reveals that Dahl had added fantasy to the story. He misremembered some names, and readers could see the sixty-seven-year-old’s erratic spelling. He conjured up some people so that they were real and independent, not simply characters in a world of his own invention. This was to become a controversial issue because of some of the things he wrote in *Boy* about his school life. Douglas Highton, Dahl’s best friend at St Peter’s, argued that at school the matron and the staff were perfectly normal, capable and kind: ‘None of it was as grim as in *Boy*’ (Treglown, 1994:17).

Treglown (1994) remarks that if the story is ‘enjoyable for its violence – macabre episodes involving dentistry, car accidents, school beatings, the lancing of a friend’s boil – the main *dramatis personae* are correspondingly worked up into caricatures’ (19). In order to boost book sales, Dahl exaggerated his own sufferings at Repton, and mixed up his sadists, corporal punishment and schoolboy homosexuality. However, this created a specific sensation, because of his accusation that a former headmaster of Repton, Geoffrey Fisher, who subsequently became Archbishop of Canterbury, was ‘a sadistic flogger’ (21). In fact, for some of his contemporaries, Fisher was remembered as ‘a great and good man who was ‘liked and admired by all the boys, and certainly not sadistic’ (22). Dahl appeared to confuse Fisher with J.T. Christie, who actually ‘rejoiced in beating boys’. Treglown (1994:22) adds that Dahl was absolutely unrepentant and denied responsibility since Lord Fisher had died twelve years before *Boy* appeared, so there was no risk of libel action.

Some episodes of bullying and punishment in *Boy* seem to promote Dahl’s idea of enjoyable violence which can be seen in several of his fictional stories. Corporal punishment often strikes readers of Dahl’s creatively autobiographical writings as ‘Dahl’s dominant memory of his schooldays’ (Hollindale, 2008:278). In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, for instance, children are heavily penalised for their flaws. The gluttonous Augustus Gloop falls into the chocolate river and is sucked out. The Television Chocolate camera transmits Mike Teavee to a television set across the room, shrinking him to a size that enables him to fit within the screen. Moreover, much of Dahl’s childhood narrative, both autobiographical and fictional, is dominated by bullies: schoolboy bullies in *Boy*, the family bullies in *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Witches* and *Matilda*, the hostile giants in *the BFG*. Dahl’s memories were full of trauma, caused by beatings and other forms of physical punishment. Nonetheless, in discussion with Dahl’s Repton school friend, David Atkins, Treglown discovers Dahl was a bully himself:

David Atkins has written that he remembers Dahl physically tormenting the older Denton Welch, but most say that his was a verbal rather than physical sadism. At Repton he was good at inventing, and persisting with, cruel nicknames. He mercilessly teased a boy who developed breasts. It was impossible to predict whom he would pick on or why (24).

Nevertheless, it seems that in his writing, Dahl himself always emphasises the significance of honesty and keeps confirming that all things that happened to him in both autobiographies are always at the surface of his consciousness and that ‘[a]ll are true’

(*Boy*, 2010:7). Later he insists: ‘When writing about oneself, one must strive to be truthful. Truth is more important than modesty’ (*Boy*, 35). Whether this is meant to be ironic or entertaining, what Dahl tells in this memoir together with his voice and writing styles creates the feeling that all stories are true representations of his life. Each adventure reveals an indomitable spirit of a child narrating a life story to his school friends. Each episode manages to make him sound more sympathetic and heroic. In his *Ideas Books*, Dahl writes: ‘I don’t lie. I merely make the truth a little more interesting...I don’t break my word – I merely bend it slightly’ (quoted in Sturrock, 2011: preface). It seems his slightly ‘bent’ truth achieves its author’s intention. Thus, *Boy*, and its successor *Going Solo*, were immensely well-received by young readers, and helped create what Murray Pollinger, Dahl’s British literary agent, called ‘the Roald Dahl phenomenon’ (Sturrock, 2011:537). Quentin Blake, Dahl’s book illustrator, claims the books are ‘hybrids of true autobiography, recollections and his own imagination’ since the author himself ‘would always take a story in a direction that made it more interesting than in a way that made it more accurate’ (quoted in Sturrock, 2011:537). He portrays himself positively in these books. It seems anyone who worked closely with Dahl saw his enormous potential as a great writer for children, and his autobiographies undoubtedly shed a new light for young readers on their favourite childhood author. Dahl, Tom Solomon (2016) confirms, is ‘a great storyteller’ who ‘was not averse to stretching things a little if it made for a better tale’ (9). In *Boy*, for example, the account of his father’s accident is turned into something hilarious, though with a dreadful result. The tragic scene is narrated thus:

Somebody ran to fetch the doctor, and half an hour later this gentleman made a majestic and drunken arrival in his horse-drawn buggy. He was so drunk that he mistook the fractured elbow for a dislocated shoulder.

‘We’ll soon put this back into place!’ he cried out, and two men were called off the street to help with the pulling. They were instructed to hold my father by the waist while the doctor grabbed him by the wrist of the broken arm and shouted, ‘Pull man, pull! Pull as hard as you can!’...But then the pullers had done so much damage that a splinter of bone was sticking out through the skin of the forearm.

This was in 1877 and orthopaedic surgery was not what it is today. So they simply amputated the arm at the elbow, and for the rest of his life my father had to manage with one arm. Fortunately, it was the left arm that he lost... (*Boy*, 11-12).

From this scene, Solomon insists, Dahl ‘draws [the readers] in, with vivid imagery of the sights and sounds; every time [the readers] think things can’t get any worse, they do, until Dahl’s father loses his arm altogether’ (9).

In his attempts to avoid ‘boring details’ in his autobiography, Dahl dismisses all of his life story after the war. The autobiography ends with his happy return to his beloved mother, who ‘had been standing there when the earlier bus had gone by an hour or two before. But what is one hour or even three hours when you have been waiting three years?’ (*Going Solo*, 210). His life story becomes fictionalised and glorified like those of champion Danny, George, Charlie and Matilda, and infused with touching detail. His earlier failure as a writer both in the US and the UK, his adultery, his less than heroic behaviour as a caring father for some of his children, or even his self-righteous anger and bullying nature which wrecked some of his close relationships, were never discussed or mentioned in his autobiographies. Always representing himself as an adventurous and keen young writer, Dahl ensures that his child readers know only his heroic qualities. This has implications for his readers’ understanding of his truth-telling and moral standpoint, which will be further explored later in this chapter. As Hollindale (2008) suggests, ‘[c]ertain incidents in Dahl’s life are now legendary. Because they form part of a composite myth for children’ (277). Dahl thus ensures that his child readers know about his heroic and positive sides.

The adult biographies: Treglown versus Sturrock and Solomon

Jeremy Treglown in *Roald Dahl*

In 1994, Jeremy Treglown published an insightful unauthorized account of Dahl’s life which included research on all accessible materials about Dahl, and some interviews with Dahl’s close relatives, friends and business partners. Supported by Patricia Neal,⁸ Dahl’s first wife, this first important and detailed account of Dahl’s life is sceptical about his personality, success, and reputation. Treglown illustrates the darker side of Dahl, of which younger readers are unaware or uninformed. Meant for adult readers, Treglown’s biography reveals unfamiliar aspects of Dahl, and it is not as inspiring and uplifting as the biographies written for young readers. Dahl’s numerous actions and behaviours are questioned. Treglown labels him a bully, a liar who often added ‘extra’ and untrue actions to his heroic wartime flying experiences and success. He rummages in Dahl’s personal life and includes numerous shocking things about him: his extensive sexual affairs with many women whilst working as a spy in the US, his materialism, his fraudulent company to deal with tax problems, his grumpiness and quick temper, his egotism, his unsuccessful first marriage, his disloyalty, and his failure as a father to

⁸ Patricia Neal will be referred to as ‘Pat’ (her usual name) throughout this discussion.

prevent one child from becoming a drug addict. Dahl, this time, is not as wonderful as his young fans might have believed.

In this unauthorised biography Treglown acknowledges a number of people who dedicated their time for interviews, reading and commenting on drafts, as well as making suggestions and factual corrections. In his preface, he reckons that Dahl was already so 'active in encouraging his own, often controversial, public myth that it would not be wrong for an outsider to look into it' (1994:ix). As a result, Treglown admits his attempt to be tactful in his writing on this 'so quarrelsome a man' whose life story is neither totally admiring nor condemnatory. Dahl, Treglown (1994:7) admits, was an 'intriguing, contradictory figure'. He claims that 'Many people loved him and had reason to be grateful to him; many – some of them the same people – frankly detested him'. Dahl is labelled a boaster or even a liar. Exaggeration and distortion of the facts are always his style, both in his conversation and in his writing. According to one friend, Dahl, for instance, would say 'If you lost fifty dollars at poker, say you lost five hundred, it was more dramatic' (45). As such, he is a 'stupendous boaster', whose war story 'Shot Down Over Libya'⁹ attracted US readers. It seemingly narrates a factual aerial battle over Libya with Italian fighters who shoot his Hurricane down in flames. However, much later Dahl remembers that he has not been shot down and says that his story has been edited and misleadingly captioned. But, Treglown points out, this contradicted another claim, that no one had altered a word (53), and after the war ends Dahl edits the story with no battle or any Italian fighters. Then, Dahl 'pretended that this version was the original one' (53). In his war account, Treglown adds, unlike other pilots who describe their battles 'in the laconic, understated, passive voice on which the RAF prided itself', Dahl writes more speculative and vivid details: 'I followed for approx. 3 mins. after the two others had broken off,... and left it with Port engine smoking and probably stopped. Rear gunner ceased fire...' (44). His flight and fight are exciting, giving a dramatic picture of a battle-like atmosphere although parts are exaggerated for effect. However, when Tap Jones, the Commanding officer in Alexandria, says 'There is no doubt in my mind that 'Lofty'¹⁰ ... was a very good fighter pilot and gallant' (44), Treglown admits Dahl's exaggeration: 'Dahl had a right to boast and his having been a war hero was to be important to him for the rest of his life' (44). In addition, Dahl also enjoys name-dropping and entertains his listeners with

⁹ The story appeared in August 1942 in an influential US magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*.

¹⁰ During his school pilot training, Dahl was too tall to fit comfortably into a cockpit and thus his fellow trainees gave him his RAF nickname of Lofty (Treglown, 1994:38).

his flamboyant stories. Treglown calls him ‘the much talked-of teller of fairy-tales’ (56) who can influence his ex-wife, Pat into adopting Roald’s values: ‘one of them was a prodigious amount of name-dropping, and gossiping about the people they were name-dropping’ (100).

In keeping with his reputation for deviousness, Dahl once founded a fraudulent, ‘hard-to-trace anonymous’ company called ‘Icarus’ in Switzerland, where part of his salary as a writer was transferred. This was Dahl’s scheme to avoid high income tax on his earlier books and future book earnings with his US collaborator, Knopf publishers. Dahl’s desire for wealth made him less pleasant to deal with. He suggested Pat’s brother, Pete, should start working on a gas station instead of going to university, because Pat had to pay for his ongoing education. Dahl’s mother-in-law repeatedly criticized his obsession with money and rich people. Another aspect that his young readers might not know about their favourite writer was his escapades and his ideas of marriage. Young readers may have heard about some of his family tragedies, but his love affairs are less fully publicized. He had some single girl-friends of his own age, but Dahl was particularly attractive, by the standards of any time and place, to older women, ‘especially if they were married’ (33). In Dennis Pearl’s¹¹ words, Dahl had a tendency to ‘choose something which created difficulties – he seemed to like mystery’ (33). Dahl’s considerable sex appeal may have improved his status in Washington. He had a lasting not-so-romantic¹² relationship with the French actress Annabella. Their close relationship was nothing to be ashamed of, as she admitted - ‘During the war, it’s life against death’ (72) - and they remained close for the rest of their lives. Annabella considers Dahl a great hero and she clearly loved him. But when Treglown asked if she would have thought of being his wife, she quickly responded ‘Certainly not. Because - he was kind of impossible’ (72).

His unsuccessful married life with Pat had already proven how ‘impossible’ a man Dahl was. Even Sofie, Dahl’s beloved mother, was worried whether Dahl would make a good husband because, like his father, ‘he is not easy to live with’ (106). He knew almost nothing about Pat before their marriage, and his attitude towards family life came as a shock to her. During the first two years of marriage, both had difficulties

¹¹ Dennis Pearl was a young Cambridge undergraduate, whom Dahl met on the Newfoundland expedition and who spent many weekends at Bexley.

¹² In her interview with Treglown (1994:72), Annabella admitted that her close relationship with Dahl was like ‘twin brothers’, not really ‘romantic’. She explained ‘we had a complete understanding, and he trusted me’.

in settling down together, due to his dominant personality. Treglown emphasises the fact that Pat's friends were shocked by his demands, perfectionism and intolerance of her. He always seemed to be putting her down and could not get along with his mother-in-law. Less than eight months into their marriage, he asked for a divorce, on the grounds that Pat could not perform the duties of a 'good wife' like his mother. Both her mother and sister thought he was the rudest man alive. He believed 'it was natural to a man to be waited upon,' which highlights Dahl's traditional assumptions of male superiority in the home. Furthermore, her past relationships were more of a trouble to him than his were to her. Although the marriage lasted thirty years and produced five children, Charles Marsh, his protégé, warned Dahl that both he and his wife 'were thinking too much about themselves and too little about each other' (108). Talking about love in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (1949), Dahl divided its meaning into two kinds: whilst one is for family, between children and parents which is always clear and uncomplicated, the other is heterosexual romantic love, which is very difficult as seventy per cent is based on sex and the rest on 'mutual affection and respect' (Treglown, 73). He indicated that only when 'our moral and ecclesiastical codes' allowed momentary entanglements 'for the pleasure and satisfaction' of those involved without marriage commitment, 'then this kind of love would form an excellent basis for such activity' (quoted in Treglown, 1994:73). His feeling for Pat is based on family necessity, rather than romantic attraction.

Dahl's overt attitude towards love led to his eventual divorce after thirty years of marriage and eighteen after Pat's strokes. Having previously trusted him, after the divorce she could not believe he had cheated on her so often. Unsurprisingly, he remarried a young widow, Felicity Crosland, whose taste, class and lifestyle were completely different from those of Pat in her late forties. Treglown expands on how Dahl met Felicity or Liccy (pronounced Lissy), who was a freelance coordinator working for David Ogilvy's advertising agency. Pat felt a strong need for friends and really liked the attentive Liccy. She invited her to Gipsy House where Liccy and Dahl were 'smitten' immediately. Later, Liccy became Dahl's mistress. Whilst Pat was working away from England, he selfishly asked his children not to tell their mother about his affair with Liccy. This time, Dahl's heterosexual romantic love for Liccy proved how egotistic he was when finally he asked Pat to be 'non-jealous and normal' about his strong feelings for Liccy.

Though some blamed Dahl for his egotism in marriage, his love for his family is unquestioned. Still, Dahl was a hard and difficult father for his children, and the way he raised them was problematic. Whilst he dedicated his time to save his brain-injured Theo, Tessa felt ignored and insignificant. Especially when her older sister died of measles, Tessa, at the age of five, craved close attention from her father who at that time seemed heartbroken and utterly destroyed. His depression was beyond a small child's comprehension and he was so consumed with grief that Tessa found herself left behind and desperate. Tessa's worst moment was when Pat could no longer perform her maternal duties and became helpless, ugly and lame after her strokes. Tessa, as well as the other children, was sent to expensive boarding schools, places which Dahl, in *Boy*, described as dreadful and terrible for children.

Whilst Treglown unravelled Dahl's undesirable aspects, he also provided a clear, factual account of his heroic side. Dahl is praised for his sheer determination and knowledge-seeking. His desire to be 'powerful' to conquer illness and other misfortunes was remarkably consistent throughout his life. When Theo had brain damage, unlike other distraught parents, Dahl studied incessantly and helped develop a more efficient kind of valve to insert into a child's brain. The Wade-Dahl-Till Valve¹³ was initially invented to relieve Theo's suffering from an infectious blocked valve in his head. Dahl's first-hand experience of hospitals and his studies were helpful to Kenneth Till, a neurosurgical consultant, who admitted later that '[Dahl] had the coolness ...to want to know the pros and cons, the whys and wherefores' (131-2).

However, fate seemed to press hard on Dahl's family. After Theo's accident on a street in New York, Dahl became more convinced that England was a much safer place to raise a family. However, when Olivia was seven, an outbreak of measles swept through the schools and once she had it, she slept for two whole days. She did not regain consciousness and died the next day. The doctor said she died from a rare complication of the disease called measles encephalitis, and only large doses of gamma globulin, which was rare and unobtainable in England, could have saved her life. This time, Dahl had no opportunity to help her. He told his wife: 'I wish we'd had a chance

¹³This medical breakthrough was named after its inventors: Stanley Wade, a hydraulic engineer; Roald Dahl; and Kenneth Till, a neurosurgeon. The DWT Valve was patented in 1961 and was used to treat children all over the world.

to fight for her' (Neal, 1988:255). Here, the biography narrates Olivia's death in touching detail, which shows how deeply Dahl was affected by her loss.

Dahl did not have to wait long for his chance to 'fight' when three years later, Pat abruptly suffered a series of strokes whilst bathing Tessa. Dahl responded to this incident with quick action, contacting the doctor, and she was immediately sent to hospital. Without his decisive intervention her brain would never have recovered. When Pat regained consciousness, she was partially blind in her right eye, unable to walk, and had impaired speech. Treglown shows how Dahl never gave up, employing a relentless psychological approach to make her re-learn what had been lost: for example, telling her to help herself in her staggering attempt to speak or walk. Despite her recovery, few expected her to act again, but less than three years later, Pat appeared in the film *The Subject Was Roses*, written by Frank D. Gilroy. His method of fighting for her proves, Treglown (1994:166) later added, his deliberate optimism which 'was an unavoidable part of his larger-than-life, fantasizing mentality'. Maybe his previous devastating experiences of family tragedy taught him that no matter what happened, he still needed to live his life.

During the final decade of his life Dahl was viewed as a vociferous writer, since his popularity in his own country 'was not matched by any kind of official recognition' (231). Although he was awarded the Whitbread Prize for *The Witches* in 1983, the author, according to Treglown, 'was beginning to expect a knighthood' (231). He took pride in his achievements, and was gratified by his favourable reception by children in both Europe and the US. Dahl, along with his publisher, planned a campaign of self-publicity to present him 'as not only an extremely good writer of children's books and a bestseller, but a Great Writer' (230). In order to put his legend into colourful stories through the autobiographical project of *Boy*, Steven Roxburgh, then Dahl's young and competent editor, became his research assistant who compiled necessary material for his narratives, including his childhood letters, school essays and photographs. A thorough reader and an academic specialist in children's literature, Roxburgh gave Dahl cautiously-presented suggestions for each draft of *The Witches*, *Boy*, *Going Solo*, and *Matilda*, especially the last book whose original version depicted the heroine as a naughty and clever girl 'inflicting various tortures on her harmless and baffled parents' (242) and her lovely teacher – initially called Miss Hayes – as a compulsive gambler. The 'perfectionist editor' proposed new narrative possibilities for Matilda's intelligence and enthusiasm for books and the conflict over teaching methods between Miss

Trunchbull (characterised much as in the final version of the book) and Miss Hayes (whose name was later changed into Miss Honey). From 1982, Dahl and Roxburgh developed close intimacy as author and editor, but their professional friendship was finally wrecked due to financial disagreement over paperback royalties for *Matilda*. Before its publication Dahl sent a self-extenuating letter to Roxburgh, and the book, which incorporated all of his advice, was published by Viking not Farrar Straus. The book proved a tremendous success, and sold a million copies within six months, whilst its original editor ‘was never acknowledged’ (245). Nevertheless, Roxburgh confirmed Dahl’s sense of ‘Greatness,’ and considered him ‘a truly great writer’ (233).

In his last chapter, Treglown recounts how ‘the elderly Dahl, whose ‘quirks make loyal allies as well as enemies’ (247), remained a consistent philanthropist who devoted his time and money to organisations dealing with troubles similar to those which his family had experienced. He committed himself to charity work, particularly for children. He promoted the love of reading among children, fundraised for children with learning difficulties, especially dyslexia, and visited sick and injured children. A ‘touch chastened’, Dahl ‘spoke of making efforts to become a better person...regretted that he couldn’t fully believe in Christianity’ (252), and believed the most important value of life was ‘kindness’. As proof, it was enough to have found multiple examples of kind heroes and heroines in his children’s books. Dahl’s heroic aspect was reconstructed sixteen years later by Donald Sturrock, whose insightful and detailed adult biography expounds more remarkable images of Dahl.

Donald Sturrock in Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl

Invention, [Dahl] declared, was always more interesting than reality (Sturrock, 2011:2).

In this substantial volume of Dahl’s life story, Donald Sturrock explores further aspects of this complicated author. Unlike Treglown who was not authorised to write about Dahl, Sturrock was asked by Ophelia to write her father’s biography, on her behalf, since she believed Sturrock was the right person, and had known and liked him. Dahl had nominated Ophelia, not Tessa,¹⁴ as his chosen biographer but the time-consuming research on various materials made her unable to complete this work. The fact that Dahl

¹⁴Sturrock notes that Dahl’s decision to nominate Ophelia, Tessa’s younger sister, as his biographer came as a real shock for Tessa, who had genuinely hoped her father would ask her to perform this important task.

trusted Ophelia more than Tessa with relaying his image, suggests that he had a less successful relationship with Tessa, and feared that she might damage his reputable public image, which is evident from her novel, *Working for Love*. Sturrock's biography does not fail Liccy's and Ophelia's desire to make Dahl 'come alive'. Written almost two decades after Treglown's unauthorised biography, Sturrock's becomes an intimate portrait of an intensely private man whose words on every page conjure up Dahl's own voice, and reveal many hidden aspects of the man not previously seen. Sturrock had unprecedented access to his remarkable archive and private papers with reference to hundreds of manuscripts and newly discovered letters. He felt grateful for the cooperation of, and valuable interviews with all Ophelia's siblings and laboriously studied new material which allowed him to discover many contradictions animating Dahl's personality. Calling him a 'valley of fantasy', Sturrock sees in him a man of many nations, not knowing where he really belongs. As Alston and Worthington (2016) note: 'Dahl was very much a conflation of cultures: Norwegian, Welsh, American, English – perhaps most powerfully Anglo-Welsh' (124). Much of what has been written about Dahl since his death over a quarter of a century ago is captured in Sturrock's bibliography and references. Although Sturrock found the same problematic traits of Dahl's tendencies to exaggeration, irony, self-righteousness, and self-dramatization, unlike Treglown, he emphasised the fact that his positive philosophy and psychology truly illustrated how he passed through all difficulties and hardship in his life and his family.

Sturrock meticulously narrates Dahl's family background, his school days, the arduous roads to success for his writing career, the family tragedies, his lingering physical pain, and his contradictory personality. During the Second World War and its aftermath, Dahl spent his time in New York, a city which offered him refuge from his troubles, and a measure of financial security. Yet the Buckinghamshire countryside appealed to his fondness for a simple and peaceful life surrounded by nature: a rather paradoxical life, as he loved the privacy of his writing hut, yet he liked to be in the public eye. He described himself as a family man, living in a modest English village, yet he was married to an Oscar-winning movie star, and kept the company of presidents and politicians, diplomats and spies. He had experienced enough excitement to last a lifetime, and it was writing that now fascinated him. Sturrock discusses Dahl's talent for interweaving truth and fiction, and is amazed at the complex hidden roots of his

imagination and the juxtaposition of fantasy and realism in many of his stories. He praises Dahl's careful concern with word usage and the poetic quality of his writing:

The melodrama, the simple vocabulary, the rhythmic repetition that is almost poetic, the precise yet mystical evocation of place and mood, and the sharp articulation of finely nuanced human feelings were all classic early Dahl ingredients (199).

It is obvious that Dahl is more recognised and better promoted in the US than in his home country, and his huge success in the US did not help him easily settle in the UK. While *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach* had sold over 600,000 and 250,000 copies respectively in the US in 1968, he had to wait seven years to secure a UK publisher for those two titles. The British literary establishment, Dahl claimed, took no heed of his work and failed to make a 'proper commitment' to the books (443). He fought hard to be accepted in his motherland and was accused of being too demanding and interfering with the publisher's business negotiations beyond the duty of a writer. Sturrock found explanation for Dahl's tenacity and pertinacious nature from Barry Farrell's¹⁵ insight into what had kept Dahl going: the reassuring story of Lady Rachel MacRobert, the American widow, whose three sons were killed fighting as bomber pilots in the Second World War.¹⁶ Her determination to fight on and to refuse to be beaten obviously impacted on Dahl's tenacity (441). Moreover, Dahl's admiration for resourceful ingenuity and the ability to think both laterally and practically in the face of a crisis contributed to his strong determination and inventiveness during his critical moments. His family life had been tested, and Dahl seemed not to dwell long on his sorrow. Both Treglown and Sturrock emphasise the fact that he always wanted to be powerful and strong enough to be able to conquer illness and other misfortunes. His unique blend of positive energy to deal with grief was simply 'to bury [it] and not wear it on your sleeve and then roll those sleeves up and get down to putting things right' (391). Sturrock notes that whilst people see him as a bully, Dahl 'prided himself on defending the underdog' (11). He only 'bullied bullies' as 'many of those to whom he

¹⁵ Barry Farrell was the *Life* magazine journalist, who was living with the Dahl family for his magazine article in 1965. Four years later, the article was expanded into a book called *Pat and Roald* and counted as Dahl's only published biography for many years. The book contained Farrell's observations, falsities of his own making, and inaccuracies which led to some disagreements and the ending of his relationship with Dahl.

¹⁶ Instead of dwelling on her tremendous loss and grief, Lady Rachel MacRobert had done what Dahl considered indomitable: signed a cheque for the cost of a new bomber. Her determination to fight on and to refuse to be beaten obviously impacted on Dahl's tenacity (Sturrock, 2011:441).

was rude deserved it' (484-5). Thus, it would become harder to separate the bully from the hero. His caustic character and extremes of behaviour stemmed largely from his sense of irritation which often put friendships under strain, especially after the exacerbation of his drinking, and his inclination to exaggeration and hyperbole. His own personality inevitably mirrors the portrayal of his creations as he admitted:

I find the only way to make my characters really interesting is to exaggerate all their good or bad qualities and so if a person is nasty or bad or cruel, you make them very nasty...And if they're ugly, you make them extremely ugly. That I think is fun and makes an impact (quoted in Sturrock, 2011:512).

However, under the mask of the incandescent entertainer, together with his attempt to disguise his tiredness and ill health, Dahl was actually vulnerable and desolate. At fifty-four, after passing through major traumas, Treglown (1994:182) notes, Dahl was 'hard-working and prosperous, but in poor health, balding, and distinctly lame'. The middle-aged Dahl was less easily definable, looking, according to Pat, 'like Virginia Woolf in drag, except that he was going bald' (182). Being hospitalised for several operations, he became more and more accustomed to loneliness and solitude. Rather than being a great hero, Maria Tucci,¹⁷ thought Dahl was 'a truly tragic figure', whose desire to take control of everything in his life gradually pushed him into the realm of 'a victim of circumstances and events that were beyond his control' (Sturrock, 2011:473). The quarrelsome, cantankerous, unpredictable side of his nature largely eclipsed the pathetic, sensitive and altruistic character. Sturrock views Dahl's moodiness as his childish nature, a generous and kind man whose Norwegian upbringing did not allow him to express much of his feeling or emotion. Sturrock's discovery of Dahl's writings uncovers Dahl's obvious sensibility: the detailed records of his children's critical times contributing a reflex action of a writer recording every detail of the trauma, which was the flip side of the hyperbolic fantasist, his reflective correspondence with his mother, his letters to Pat and his love notes for Licky. When Pat blamed Susan Denson¹⁸ for Theo's accident and wanted to fire her, Dahl insisted it would be cruel and pointless to do so. 'A very maternal daddy' as Treglown called him, Tessa's friend, Amanda Conquy, remembered Dahl as an 'odd' father whose unconventional behaviour ranged from always being at home, at lunchtime during the week, to being actively involved in

¹⁷ Maria Tucci was Bob Gottlieb's wife. Gottlieb was Dahl's new editor at Knopf publishing company in the early 1970s.

¹⁸ Susan was one of Theo's godparents. She helped the Dahls taking care of their children in New York. On the day of the accident, she pushed Theo in his pram off the sidewalk ready to cross the road when a taxi driver careened around the corner and crashed into it.

family life. Dahl enjoyed performing as host at Gipsy House and managed every duty in the household, radiating energy all around.

Both Sturrock and Treglown admit that women were attracted both by his manly beauty, and his attentiveness, energy and humour. During his marriage, Dahl was not entirely faithful. He had affairs, but they were all transient, bringing no harm to his family. Whilst others view his infidelity and secret love affairs as deceit and treachery, Sturrock seems more understanding towards Dahl's complex emotions and relationships. His family problems arose mainly from Pat's personality, and the heavy burden of child rearing he had to take care of, with all their underlying tensions and problems. Pat was a complex, demanding and extraordinary woman. She was also a drunkard. Sturrock concludes that despite all the success in his career and life with presidents and movie stars, this paterfamilias had never yet fallen in love until he met Licky. He was desperately in love with her. Dahl's love story, for Sturrock, is romantic and sweet. In his sixties, he became a melancholic teenager writing imploring letters to his 'girl', full of strong and intense feeling. Licky's gentle warmth that he had discovered so late in life brought back his liveliness and fulfilled his lost comfort. From this biography, the reader appreciates the tender intensity of Dahl's love for Licky and believes them perfectly well matched.

Whilst Treglown broke the story that Dahl's celebrated autobiography was filled with inaccuracies and downright misrepresentations, Sturrock viewed it as compelling. His dreams of glory, his victory over his adversaries, childlike insomniac fantasies about being a hero are all celebrated and truly represent their author. Calling Dahl a 'geriatric child', Sturrock finds in him a communicative capacity with children rather than with adults. His personality is similar to that of his own famous character, Willy Wonka. Whilst he exhibits 'garrulous, exotic, rambunctious' traits, a vulnerable and hidden part of him remained a child (402). Thus, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* most directly unveils Dahl's own moral view. His exuberant pleasure in the magic of invention is one of the great qualities of the book and it mirrors Dahl's own real-life crisis in the aftermath of Theo's accident. The book is thus dedicated to him. Beyond the coarse humour and madcap violent morality lies a fantasy underpinned by powerful emotional ingredients. In many of his stories, the reader can see Dahl's metamorphosis into his own characters. In *Fantastic Mr Fox*, for instance, Sturrock compares Dahl with Mr Fox: a resilient, resourceful and never defeated father. It became an allegory of Dahl's own history during the sixties and is a celebration both of his family life and of

the genius of a prodigious paterfamilias. The Dahl who wrote *Mr Fox* in 1968 had a different voice from the Dahl who finished the story about Charlie. He became ‘tougher, stronger, even more empowered and determined than before’ (440). Four years after Sturrock’s resurrection of Dahl, this ‘tough’ author was revived by Professor Tom Solomon, a doctor who first encountered Dahl in his final weeks at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford back in 1990.

Tom Solomon’s Roald Dahl’s Marvellous Medicine

Maybe we shouldn’t be too harsh on Dahl. As most people get older and tell their favourite stories again and again, they tend to get modified over the years (Solomon, 2016:59).

Written in 2016 as part of Dahl’s centenary celebrations by Professor Tom Solomon, who looked after Dahl towards the end of his life, the book explores Dahl’s fascination with medicine and illustrates his life with excerpts from his writing. While Treglown and some critics dissect the inconsistencies in Dahl’s life stories and call him a boaster or a liar, Solomon, like Sturrock, tends to provide a more sympathetic picture. Solomon, in his prologue to the book published by Liverpool University Press, recounts his initiation into writing about Dahl and his medical work: ‘His was a great life, I argued, not just because of his fantastic literature, but because of the extraordinary way he had dealt with adversity, particularly all the medical challenges he and his family had faced’ (4). As a junior doctor, Solomon had to be on call covering the nightshift at the wards to complete any jobs left over from the day, and deal with any new cases. His first encounter with the aging and frail Dahl on a hospital ward is described as a meeting with the BFG: ‘It was a deep, booming voice. I looked up to see an enormous giant of a man towering over me...He had large ears, and twinkling inquisitive eyes’ (7). Dahl was intrigued by Solomon’s study on malaria in Africa. They had several late-night hospital discussions and ‘chat’ about ‘everything’: ‘People, places, literature, love, music, marriage...and medicine (9). The book embroiders Dahl’s scientific endeavours with his biography, memoir and his own medical encounters. Solomon explores Dahl’s interest in medicine and its intriguing connections with his writing. Dahl’s childhood memoir in *Boy*, Solomon notes, ‘is full of such medical encounters’ (9), his adenoids removed without an anaesthetic in Norway, his detailed observation of his sister Ellen’s appendicitis leading him to fake his own condition to fool the school matron due to his homesickness, or even his nose injury in a motor car accident. Dahl, Solomon confirms, is ‘a great story teller’ who ‘was not averse to stretching things a little if it made for a better tale’, even the tragic events could be

turned into something hilarious. This restless patient in his seventies, Solomon claims, is as brave as his fictional characters until the final chapter of his life: ‘Dahl knew he was very ill himself, and might die soon. But he said he was not frightened. “Make things a laugh and a joke”... “and life will be fun!”’ (36).

Although Dahl, at a younger age, had developed a reputation as ‘an occasionally cantankerous, quarrelsome and sometimes downright rude man’ (34), Solomon finds that he likes Dahl more and more after several chats with him. They share life experience and like to keep a notebook at hand for jotting down ideas, observations, or anything interesting. For Dahl, many of them are developed into a story, for which one of the most significant is: ‘What about a chocolate factory that makes fantastic and marvellous things with a crazy man running it?’ (44). Even though medical practice has advanced considerably since Dahl’s childhood, they agree that ‘the essence of a great doctor [should remain] the same – a combination of clinical skill, empathy and common sense’ (26) as seen in a meaningful conversation of a boy with Dr Dunbar at his surgery in Cathedral road, Cardiff, who understands about his fake appendicitis:

[The doctor] himself sat down behind his desk and fixed me with a penetrating but not unkindly eye. ‘You’re faking, aren’t you?’...
I expect you’re homesick,’ he said.
I nodded miserably.
‘Everyone is at first’... ‘You have to stick it out. And don’t blame your mother for sending you away to boarding-school. She insisted you were too young to go, but it was I who persuaded her it was the right thing to do. Life is tough, and the sooner you learn how to cope with it the better for you.’ (*Boy*, 97-98).

This conversation provides a good lesson for those who have to confront unpleasant realities. In 1990, Solomon sees in an old Dahl, ‘a delight, even when he was very ill’ (34). He admires Dahl’s kindness and care about all people around him: the doctors, nurses, and also other patients.

In addition, Dahl invents many new words in his books, but his veritable use of neologisms in *The BFG*, Solomon notes, came directly from his conversations with his wife who, when recovering from her stroke, struggled with her speech. Pat once told Dahl: ‘you must simply try to be patient and stop squibbling...I know exactly what words I am wanting to say, but somehow ... they is always getting squiff squiddled around ...what I mean and what I says is two different things’ (151). Pat’s sentences sound similar to the BFG’s, who, fifteen years later, has a comparable difficulty with words – ‘Words... is oh such a twitch-tickling problem to me all my life’ (*The BFG*, 44-5) – and ends up saying

exactly the same line as Pat's. As Solomon questions Dahl about the BFG's language and Pat's aphasia, Dahl then admits: 'But I suppose, yes, some of the trouble Pat had did work its way into *The BFG*; yes, it must have' (151). Dahl's 'phizzwizzer' languages are now a trademark of his phenomenon.

In conclusion, Treglown's biography works like a commercial soap-opera, typically digging deep into Dahl's private and unpleasant secret life, to find his repellent side and show the world what kind of a man he really was, while Sturrock's and Solomon's approaches are more sympathetic and forgiving. Nevertheless, both these and every subsequent version of Dahl's life confront the characteristics they all recognise: his tenacity and psychological detachment, his coolness, his insatiable curiosity to know and learn anything he is interested in. The biographies written for children pose additional problems for their authors, in both promoting Dahl's appeal as a charismatic writer without being able to avoid some of the more troublesome aspects of his personality and life.

Biographies for Children

The previous discussions of Dahl's life and personality are mainly taken from the biographies written for adults, and we recognise Dahl as a dogged hero through many of his traumatic life incidents. For readers of his biographies for children, however, the facts of his personal life, were potentially problematic, in terms of narrating his family tragedies, difficult personality, and unstable marriage, challenging authors to explore fresh approaches. In his autobiography *Boy*, Dahl dealt with this by making all tragic events into a joke: the nose cutting, beating by schoolmasters, the dead mouse trick in the sweet jar, and car crash. He ends up being the victim-hero of many unjust events. Apart from the two standard biographies, Dahl's life was recounted in many other versions whether in books, on websites, or documentary films; for example, Chris Powling's two short books (*Roald Dahl* in 1983 and *Tell Me about Dahl* in 1997), a very brief biography (about seven pages) by Alan Warren (1988) in the Milford Series: *Popular Writers of Today; Roald Dahl* (2002) by Charles J. Shields; and *Famous People, Famous Lives: Roald Dahl* (2006) by Emma Fischel. In 2009 two books were launched by Jane Bingham and Andrea Shavick; and in 2012 three more books: *Roald Dahl* (Author Biographies Series) by Charlotte Guillain, *Who was Roald Dahl* by True Kelley, and *Fantastic Mr Dahl* by Michael Rosen. Since most of these later biographies are meant to be read by children the language is simplified, easily understood and

suitable for young readers, with many attractive pictures of Dahl and his family as well as some colourful illustrations and cartoon pictures. All the biographies duplicate the same features of Dahl as a famed author with the repetitive stories and patterns similar to what Dahl himself narrated in *Boy* and *Going Solo*, with further discussion of his later life as a writer. These books help to create a warmer, more appealing image and new myth of Dahl, who is now celebrated as a great, gifted, and special writer as well as a hero. Some charismatic stories of Dahl, and opinions of his work are conveyed by the following writers.

Chris Powling in *Roald Dahl* (1983) and *Tell Me about Roald Dahl* (1997)

No other writer for children is as bold, as exciting, as rude or as funny as Roald Dahl (Powling, 1983:9).

Chris Powling (1983) in *Roald Dahl* produces a memorable picture of Dahl from primary sources, illustrating the ‘extraordinary’ life of the great writer, as he insists ‘there are very few authors whose life is as fascinating as their books. It’s important that you keep this in mind because Roald Dahl was one of the exceptions’ (53). Powling’s story of Dahl leads readers to the inner world of a great storyteller whose major achievement comes both from his strenuous efforts and his special talents. His tightly-knit family also plays a big part in his success as he had a caring and understanding mother and sisters. Powling celebrated Dahl’s success by inviting young readers to explore Dahl’s Gipsy house and his ‘INVENTING ROOM’ where every fantasy was carefully crafted. This biographical book, which was written mainly for children, according to Treglown, was another variation of Dahl’s self-publicity. The book covered what children really wanted to know about their favourite writer, and matched Roxburgh’s attractive suggestion: ‘I think it would be so much better for young children to have your account written as only you can write it of whatever part of your life you choose to make open to them’ (quoted in Treglown, 1994:231). In 1997, Powling wrote another small series called *Tell Me about Roald Dahl*, recounting a very brief life story of Dahl with his old family photographs, cartoon pictures and a painting. Again this time for young readers, Dahl was the most ‘scrumdiddlyumptious’ storyteller who ever lived! An outsider who was not happy at boarding school and sought for big adventures, Dahl directly inspires new writers by saying ‘One of the nice things about being a writer is that all you need is what you’ve got in your head and a pencil and a bit of paper’ (17). A fighter pilot, a spy, a life-saving inventor, a ‘sparky’ father and a best-

selling author, Dahl's 'extraordinary' life was celebrated as truly heroic both for his family and his readers.

Roald Dahl (Who Wrote That?) (2002) by Charles J. Shields

In this version, Shields elaborates Dahl more from his *Boy* story. Dahl's parents played a significant part in forming his character: a disciplined diary-keeper like his father, a devoted parent like his mother and his love of nature, fostered by the 'glorious walk'. Shields mentions briefly Dahl's mishaps and misfortunes. The fact that Dahl's world as well as that of his fiction was populated with harsh and unfeeling adults contributed to more serious complaints about his books for children, nevertheless, his works definitely 'touched the young heart' (67). The wicked characters and disasters which are perversely funny became Dahl's trademark, and his art of knowing how to appeal to children with nonsensical wordplays, deliciously witty use of language and rude jokes was much enjoyed and appreciated. Shields's 'Did you know...' column offers trivial but interesting facts and features about Dahl that clearly explain why readers cannot help coming away admiring him.

Famous People, Famous Lives: Roald Dahl (2006) by Emma Fischel

This 48 - page book tells a brief but intriguing account of Dahl's life: Dahl as a child, a teenager, an adult, a father and a writer. A tall boy, Dahl enjoyed his tricycle in a place where there was no television or cinema. Fischel narrates the by now familiar series of events in his life: his love of sweet shops; his exciting summer time in Norway, a long journey by boat and train; his traumatic life at boarding school with cruel teachers and bullying seniors. After school, his adventurous life in Africa; his flying experience during wartime, including the accident that made him limp for the rest of his life; spying work in America; his acquaintance with C.S. Forester, which significantly changed the course of his life; his married life and five children; his writing hut; his famous works and his devotion to charitable work until the day he died. There is no trace of his failure as a father, a writer, or a husband. Dahl is portrayed as a genuinely great and admirable man.

True Lives: Roald Dahl (2009) by Andrea Shavick, and Roald Dahl Culture in Action (2009) by Jane Bingham

Calling Dahl ‘the Champion Storyteller’, Shavick condenses his life events into a short 32-page generously illustrated book. Her version of Dahl’s story is similar to Fischel’s in presenting an adventurous and strong Dahl, except that Shavick mentions his family tragedy and his heartbreak after Olivia’s death, which seems designed to awaken sympathetic feelings in a child reader. In the same year, Bingham’s 32-page book is packed with high-interest facts, imaginative activities, and photographs concerning Dahl as favourite children’s author. It is designed to reinforce literacy skills and arts knowledge via activities with easy-to-follow instructions.

In 2012, three of Dahl’s biographies for young readers were published, all containing fascinating stories. The first and shortest is *Roald Dahl* (Author Biographies Series) by Charlotte Guillain. This picture book is the briefest with only twenty-four pages, each with an illustration and a quick caption for Dahl’s timeline, with a glossary of simple vocabulary at the end. His stories are often about brave children who ‘do the right thing’ in fighting obnoxious adults. The illustrator, Quentin Blake, was also behind the success of Dahl’s later children’s stories. His comic cartoonish illustrations are now as famous as Dahl’s own narratives. Dahl’s love for art and nature, and his kindness to sick children are also mentioned. A concise timeline of his life and work talks mainly about the author’s impressive personality and achievement.

The next biography printed in 2012 was *Who was Roald Dahl?* by True Kelley which elaborated more on Dahl’s life story. Interestingly, whilst most of the other biographies for children omit Dahl’s divorce story, Kelley emphasises that at sixty-seven with a new married life with Licky, it was the beginning of the most productive time of his life. And for Licky, Dahl was ‘the most stimulating man in the world and the best husband a woman could ever have’ (91). Kelley insists that the stories in Dahl’s autobiographies are not completely true, but this should be overlooked because Dahl himself is a true storyteller. The latest biography about Dahl printed in this same year was Michael Rosen’s *Fantastic Mr Dahl*. Rosen (2012) notes: ‘If a writer can make a reader really want something to be possible, then I think they’ve done a brilliant job. And Roald Dahl was an absolute master at doing it’ (156). As with the other biographies for children, Treglown’s history of controversial Dahl is totally absent from Rosen’s book – perhaps unsurprisingly given that it was launched by children’s imprint

Puffin Books. Rosen, also a children's writer, considers himself Dahl's greatest fan, and strongly admires him in all aspects, especially his inventive use of language. Like Dahl, he knows the ingredients necessary in writing books for young children to make them interesting. He admits to adding or cutting some true stories, as he explains 'Writing often looks simple, clear and truthful, but it's always more complicated than it seems. This book is about that. It's about writing' (5). He foregrounds his first interest in Dahl's family as for him 'it is important to know about a person's background if you are to understand them' (14), and includes new archival materials – family and school photos, Dahl's handwriting, and letters to 'Mama' from his war hero and boarding school days. Like other biographies, Rosen's lingers on Dahl's talent and his writing habits. It makes him larger than life, praising him for his specialisation in the fantastic and the amazing. Dahl is seen as a great storyteller, whose imaginative and unexpected tales influence a child reader's imagination, and most important of all, create a great reading habit in adolescent boys and girls. Rosen invites readers to find out more about Dahl through the Roald Dahl Museum's archive of Dahl's handwritten works. In the end, Rosen suggests he has tried to discover what kind of person Dahl was in writing this biographical book and concludes that this wonderful writer, for him, is truly the 'Fantastic Mr Dahl' (158).

Moreover, in every Puffin Book, small details and short descriptions of Dahl are inserted at the end of each children's story. Child readers can learn about Roald Dahl's Marvellous Children's Charity to support seriously ill children under the strong belief that every child has the right to a marvellous life. The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Great Missenden displays Dahl's unique archive of letters and manuscripts to inspire a love of reading and writing. Dahl had already revealed his ideas about writing when he wrote in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* about the typical traits of an author: a lively imagination, a sense of humour, strong self-discipline and perfectionism. These are absolutely qualities children will find in Dahl in the endpapers of each of his books for children published by Puffin.

Apart from reading books about him, Dahl's fans can discover more about their favourite author through at least two major websites: www.roalddahl.com and www.roalddahlfans.com. www.roalddahl.com is the official Roald Dahl website, which becomes a great link to Dahl's life story, his books and current activities in the Roald Dahl museum and charity work. News items, tweets, blogs and Roald Dahl celebration days are daily communicated and advertised. It also allows children and viewers to

listen to a real interview with him and learn ‘ten tremendous Roald Dahl facts’. In addition, the other website ‘roalddahlfans.com’, which was created in 1996 by Dahl’s real American fan, Kris Howard, provides more appealing information about Dahl. It is dedicated to Dahl and accommodates an incomplete biography from various sources, timelines, some pictures, his works and awards, and letters from Dahl, suggestions about places for his fans to go, such as the Dahl Museum & Story Centre, the Children’s Gallery and Gipsy House, some ‘Fun Stuff’ like ‘Gobblefunk Translator,’ and polls about Dahl’s writing. Some of his entertaining quotations are also found on this site.

In 2016, the BBC One Wales documentary series entitled ‘Great Welsh Writers’ filmed a television programme about Dahl’s early life in Llandaff, his birthplace, with contributions from his wife, Licky, Francesca Simon, and Donald Sturrock, exposing ‘the untold Roald Dahl story, of the triumph and tragedy of his own Welsh childhood’. His early years’ experience in Wales, full of mischief and sadness, helped to shape both his life and his work. At a very young age, his ‘real- life rural paradise’ in Llandaff was shattered by the death of his elder sister followed by that of his father within two months’ time. Following their move to an attractive urban villa called ‘Cumberland Lodge, their new home provided plenty of scenes for adventures in his books and the realm of his ‘intrepid’ mother, Sofie, who was the great influence on his life. According to Sturrock, Sofie represented the formidable and strong single mother who was ‘quite a personality in her own right’. Thus her children, including Dahl, ‘did not conform to any normal middle-class values of the time where people were polite and behaved themselves’. At the age of seven Dahl went to the nearby cathedral school, which was ‘his first taste of a ‘regimented’ world far removed from the free spirit of home’. Schools become dubious places abounding with downright cruelty as depicted in *Matilda*. When talking about the nastiness and the cruelty of adults to children, Simon immediately reminds us of ‘huge and domineering’ Miss Trunchbull, and ‘little tiny’ Matilda. She admires the fact that Dahl not only remembers what it is like to be a child, but he also offers a brilliant defence strategy to children by affirming that ‘you can stand up to them, you can defeat these evil people. Just because they are bigger than you they are not smarter, they are not wiser. Use your brain, hold yourself together. They will be defeated’. After years of adventures, Dahl settled down in a rural Buckinghamshire and cultivated the image ‘of a maverick English country gentleman’, but often returned to Wales for seaside holidays and visited a former home of Dylan Thomas, his literary hero. Dahl, according to Licky, adored Thomas, a Welsh poet and

his near contemporary. His writing hut is a complete replica of Thomas's hut which he measured and designed to suit his need for quiet writing space. Liddy thought Dahl might need some inspiration from Thomas and his close connection to Wales. At Dahl's funeral, his daughter also read Thomas's poem.¹⁹ He 'was and still is one of the world's great story tellers'. Nowadays, Dahl is firmly established himself in Cardiff, with a public space named after him, shows, exhibitions, and commemorative plaques in his honour.²⁰

Dahl's biographies for children and his websites offer an opportunity to examine him in a softer perspective in terms of his representation and images. They provide a convincing portrait of a basically 'good' Dahl. Later children's biographers further depict him according to what he himself had already narrated and portrayed in his non-fiction, *Boy* and *Going Solo*. In addition, they examine the sources he used to produce his stories for children. Although Dahl himself never mentioned his family tragedy or his failed marriage, some biographers seem to bring out these sensitive issues only to make him sound more sympathetic. They completely obliterate his caustic, and contradictory character, creating an eccentric, 'sparky' writer instead. These biographies could be read as anti-biography against those for adults. It seems that his image has been gradually elevated and uplifted. Children are now made to believe that Dahl is a true hero in his real life, a strong fighter after all his problems and difficulties, a hero similar to many of his own major characters in his stories. If we judge from Dahl-titled book sales, these biographies function as a massive part of a marketing campaign which helps in forming a 'myth' of Dahl.

It could be argued that although there remains much controversy in Dahl's life story and images, it seems to have little impact on child readers' understanding of his books. Dahl's children's biographies carefully keep to the safe and positive aspects of his life, thus, helping to boost admiration for him. At least four myths of Dahl are promoted. Firstly, adventurous Dahl is admired as a great story teller full of vivid imaginative and creative ideas. He is a man capable of working magic on young people. The wonderfully weird worlds he evokes are perfectly in tune with children's imaginations. Secondly, Dahl's true morality is also emphasised through the moral lessons in his children's stories, his charity work and his devotion to ill children and

¹⁹ The title of the poem is 'Do not go gentle into that good night.'

²⁰ Transalent (2016) *Great Welsh Writers - Roald Dahl BBC Documentary 2016* [Video]. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTBVJI0Wtcs/> [Accessed 11/3/2019].

those in need of help. Dahl's golden statements such as 'I think probably kindness is my number one attribute in a human being. I'll put it before any of the things like courage or bravery or generosity or anything else. If you're kind, that's it'²¹ are frequently quoted to instruct readers in the importance of being considerate. He also promoted reading instead of time spent watching television. Furthermore, Dahl's writing, even when he seemed to enjoy writing about repellent characters, was underscored with a powerful sense of right and wrong, and that bullies must be punished. He believed that goodness would win in the end. His stories, therefore, could be seen as an attempt to make the world a better and a fairer place. From his biographies, children will learn what their great writer values most.

Dahl is a great inventor, both in medical and linguistic science. His Wade-Dahl-Till valve device helped several thousand children around the world before medical technology progressed beyond it. Moreover, Dahl's use of metaphors and similes in his letter writing as a boy evidences his falling in love with language. Being bilingual may also have allowed him to be creative in inventing his own words. The final myth of Dahl is his marvellous writing hut where the magic of his writing process was performed, and displayed via his writing tools and equipment. His strict daily routine from his house to the hut indicates how disciplined and organised a writer Dahl was. The writing hut myth can obviously fascinate children wanting to know about Dahl's absolute control over his writing.

Conclusion

Representations of Dahl's image and life stories in various biographical dimensions offer a distinctive image of Dahl and appear to truly deepen and broaden readers' perception of the author's life whose popularity has been widely recognised by his inventive tales and creativity for half a century. Judging from the triumph in his school boy and war hero stories in his two autobiographies, which also form significant themes of his museum, it may be argued that Dahl succeeded in manipulating his own reputation and myth, employing the work of fantasy to make his stories heroic, sympathetic and popular. His efficient narrative technique in creating a grotesque, but entertaining, atmosphere stimulates child readers' compassionate understanding.

²¹ This is a synopsis in the endpaper of Puffin books for children. It is called 'Roald Dahl Says'. This engaging quotation was taken from an interview with Brian Sibley, broadcast by the BBC World Service in November 1988.

However, they will never learn much about his genuine moral stance. It should be noted here that while autobiography as a genre seems to require absolute truth-telling, this is not the case for Dahl who had no trouble creating inaccurate but fanciful life stories. Furthermore, later biographies, especially those for children, make further use of his narration to strengthen his heroic myth. While the adult biographers portray Dahl as a malicious bully, who could readily damage his good relationships because of his bad temper and inconsistent mood, the biographies for children, on the contrary, intensify Dahl's horror of bullying and social injustice, such as that in nonsensical school rules. His aggressive and opinionated personality is totally omitted and his other shortcomings become trivial when compared with what he achieved. In addition, children do not need to know much about Dahl's financial problems, family illnesses, and especially his married life. These issues are of no interest and benefit for them. Pat's domineering husband and Tessa's indifferent father entirely disappear from these books. Instead, they are introduced to a pleasanter, more impressive and attractive Dahl. There was a loving Dahl who spent every night with his children telling stories which later became his first children's book at the age of forty-five. These myths turn him into a war hero and Dahl, the 'great' children's writer, the good father and philanthropist. What he writes early on in *The Twits* (Dahl, 2004:7)-

A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly. You can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts they will shine out of your face like sunbeams and you will always look lovely

- partly reveals that even though his stories are often cruel and he seemed to enjoy writing about distasteful characters, he also believed that goodness would prevail in the end. And in the world of stories, in the world of his stories, he could always make sure that happened. Although these are fantasies, they allow us to trace the unseen and unsaid desire in the author and reader's mind, while the many biographical attempts to understand him help readers to identify some, at least, of the moral and personal values that were carried over into his fiction.

Chapter 2 : Trauma, Violence and Bullying in Roald Dahl's Books for Children

Poor James, on the other hand, was still very much alive, and all at once he found himself alone and frightened in a vast unfriendly world (2010:7).

In his first book for children, *James and the Giant Peach*, Dahl begins the story with the portrayal of a small boy being traumatised by the sudden loss of his parents at a very young age: 'Both of them suddenly got eaten up (in full daylight, mind you, and on a crowded street) by an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London Zoo...and they were dead and gone in thirty-five seconds flat' (7). The fact the rhinoceros is a herbivore, as Greg Littmann (2014) notes, 'underlines the arbitrariness of their deaths' (177), thus the bizarre and meaningless death of innocent people is 'a recurring theme' (177) in James's story. However, later in the book, after the death of his two cruel aunts, James shows no sign of depression or suffering, and makes a marvellous journey with his fellow creatures. In Dahl's later stories, his child characters face what might be considered physically and emotionally traumatising situations, even potential death. The practices of unjust caning and corporal punishment, for instance, are found in the tales of Danny, Matilda, and in *Boy*, while Augustus Gloop almost drowns in the chocolate whirlpool, monstrous giants raid cities to consume human children in the night (*The BFG*), and every child in England is about to be exterminated by the witches. As Littmann (2014) suggests '[t]he detail Dahl lavishes on the threats in his stories is striking, especially for children's literature' (175).

In the first chapter, we have noted Dahl's tragedy and his trauma since childhood. In his autobiography, *Boy*, Dahl mentions the death of his father who died a month after his seven-year-old daughter's death from appendicitis. Dahl recalls that his traumatised father was so overwhelmed with grief that he 'refused to fight' (20) for his life. His only desire was to join her in heaven. The same fate came to Dahl when his own daughter, Olivia, at the age of 7, also died from measles. However, unlike his father, the traumatised Dahl after a period of mourning and grief, appears to divert his grief and loss into something intellectually challenging and emotionally beneficial, such as scientific invention. He also used Olivia's death to encourage other parents to vaccinate their children. A few years before the loss of his daughter, Dahl, collaborating with a neurosurgeon and hydraulic engineer, invented a valve to help his only son, Theo, aged four months, who was hit by a taxi and suffered serious injuries, developing hydrocephalus. In search of medical methods to cure and save the lives of his family members, Dahl enjoyed the company of doctors, and liked to share and learn from their

innovative medical research and experiments. Wherever possible, he turned his sorrow into the strength to mitigate tragedy. Dahl sought relief from his own traumatic experiences by looking for practical medical solutions, rather than resorting to introversion. As a tenacious fighter who never gave up, his knowledge proved crucial for a much more compelling and tragic reason. From the archive at the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, Tom Solomon (2016) found that Dahl corresponded persistently with scientists for years in an attempt to find a connection between smallpox vaccination and the measles encephalitis which killed Olivia. He suspected a virus from the smallpox vaccine could sometimes cause severe disease in some patients. Although his smallpox theory came too late for his daughter, he nevertheless dedicated his time to help prevent others suffering the same devastating illness. In addition, his pioneering invention of the valve manifests his major role in a new and useful medical invention for thousands of children. Dahl did show some signs of depression, but he would not linger on these traumas. Rather than allowing himself fully to succumb, Dahl seemed to banish atrocities from his consciousness, and turn to something practical and useful, to others, as well as himself.

Since he experienced so many personal tragedies, it might be expected that in his writing for children, Dahl would be more interested in exploring the effects on his characters of violent or emotionally distressing circumstances; yet in his children's fiction he repeatedly avoids confronting the emotional implications of traumatic events in his characters' lives. In this chapter I trace his interest in narrating violent incidents, including threatening behaviour and bullying, and consider how Dahl recalls traumatic experiences in his autobiographies and in his children's books. I will investigate whether he recognises their existence and their validity, and in what ways his fictional victims of violence and bullying expose or communicate their personal traumas, both on a smaller scale, as in the family, and on a larger scale of multiple traumas at school and in society. My focus will be on exploring children's moral perception of violent incidents, and their ensuing effects in Dahl's writing for children. By categorizing or sub-dividing some particular types of bullying found in Dahl's books, I will then consider the existence of guilt (conscious or unconscious) in those of his characters experiencing the violent legacies of adult bullying, and consider how his child victims discover the resilience to cope with bullies. Dahl's style of caricature and violent punishment will be scrutinised, as there is little doubt that he derives these narrative techniques from one of his favourite authors, Charles Dickens. Finally, this chapter will

examine the humorous, but sadistic, nature of his texts, which is used as a means to prove his characters' success in defeating adversity through indomitable determination.

On trauma and its overcoming

Before turning to the investigation of Dahl's traumatic experience and how his characters cope with the aftermath of unconscious and psychic shock I want first to offer a brief survey of trauma theory. In the mid 1890s, Freud, with his collaborator Joseph Breuer, discovered the method of treatment which became the foundation of modern psychotherapy. Freud called it 'abreaction', which was later known as 'psychoanalysis'. The operation was conducted in the method of a quest, to find the solution to hysterical symptoms through the discussion and reconstruction of the patient's past. Freud's early work on hysteria helps develop clinical achievement in the field. It is generally recognised that trauma such as bullying, abuse and violent punishment can usher in depression and cause long-term damage to its victims. Although traumatic impact can linger throughout a person's life, not everyone experiencing such events becomes depressed or anxious. One of the pioneering clinicians in the field, Judith Lewis Herman (1994), notes that to study psychological trauma means bearing witness to terrible events and at the same time confronting both 'human vulnerability in the natural world and [...] the capacity for evil in human nature' (7). She writes: 'Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death' (1994:33). Cathy Caruth (1995), another key figure whose work in trauma theory helped foster studies in the early 1990s, suggests that trauma is an inherently paradoxical experience and the historical enigma betrayed by trauma 'poses the greatest challenge to psychoanalysis' (6). Experience becomes the key factor in assessing individual trauma. Caruth's work connects to Freud's speculations on the buried trauma which can be analysed according to one's individual psychic history, to 'memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes' and to 'the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place' (Kaplan, 2005:1).

In addition, trauma, including one-time, multiple, or long-lasting repetitive events, affects everyone differently. Some individuals may clearly display criteria associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but many more individuals will exhibit resilient responses. Clearly, not all child victims of trauma will go on to develop PTSD. In the context of how trauma theory has been applied in twentieth-century

literary studies, the question is how Dahl recalls traumatic experiences in his autobiographies and children's books. There are several scenes where his child character falls prey to adult aggression, and is abused and traumatised. Scenes of corporal punishment in Dahl's texts, as Marc Napolitano (2014) notes, are viewed as 'inherently unjust, due not only to its physical severity but also to the emotional trauma produced by the spectacle' (82). This chapter questions whether Dahl is interested in further investigation of the emotional state of those abused children, and in explicating any of the victims' possible psychological defences. The chapter will also consider whether his characters find their own ways of dealing with trauma. Although development of trauma theory has accelerated from the 1990s onwards after Dahl's death, some specific trauma theories, such as repressed memory and dissociation, might be helpful in exploring Dahl's frequent use of traumatic experience in his novels for children, and in explaining how his characters deal with trauma (as in the case of the orphaned Sophie, James and Danny).

In her study of child abuse, Herman (1992) points out that violence, threats, and capricious tyrants instil terror in a child victim whose immature psyche creates some psychological defences such as dissociation and repression. The abused child develops a habit of automatic obedience, isolation, or secrecy. Some prefer to believe that the abuse did not really happen. Some dissociate themselves to 'form separated personality fragments with their own names, psychological functions, and sequestered memories' (102). However, not all abused children have the ability to alter reality by dissociation. The same study also reveals that when signs of danger approach them, abused children try to protect themselves 'either by avoiding or by placating the abuser' (100). Yet Jacob M. Held (2014) in *Roald Dahl and Philosophy* construes that in Dahl's unjust and chaotic world there remain powerful narratives through which child readers can learn 'the value of living virtuously' (6). By exposing the truth of an absurd world which they cannot change, the author urges rebellious children with 'a determined soul' 'to challenge injustice, and never 'let it corrupt [them] and don't relent...' (5). According to Herman, many traumatised victims 'develop the belief that their abusers have absolute or even supernatural powers – by which their lives are controlled entirely (100). George's grandmother, for example, menaces the small child by insisting that some grandmothers 'have magic powers that can twist the creatures of this earth into wondrous shapes' (10) and this terrifies him: 'A tingle of electricity flashed down the length of George's spine' (10). Running away to the kitchen, the boy 'was shaking' and

‘said softly to himself’ that he was ‘not going to be frightened by *her*...But he was frightened’ (12). However, the traumatised boy then starts to think of a ‘whopping terrific exploding shocker’ in order to ‘shake the old woman up a bit’ (12). By scheming against his bully, George mitigates his trauma.

Similarly, the BFG, though himself a giant, is often tortured by the more brutal giants. The Fleshlumpeating Giant, according to the BFG, is the ‘horriblest’ and ‘the biggest of them all’: ‘I is nervous myself...I always gets as jumpsy as a joghopper when the Fleshlumpeating Giant is around’ (63). He cannot run away from this cruel giant because ‘He is galloping easily two times as quicksy as me’ (63). His dream-catching activity becomes one of the BFG’s stress management strategies in order to distract himself from his persistent traumatic stressor. There are scenes where we witness some evidence of the emotional state of the chronically abused character. Yet it seems that Dahl does not show much interest in the traumatic effects of long-term bullying on his heroes and heroines. Moreover, the author makes his stories sound more bizarre and far-fetched by multiplying the trauma. After losing his parents in a cartoonish accident, James is then bullied by his aunts, and nearly eaten by a shark and chased by Cloud Men. Charlie’s trauma is prolonged starvation, while three of the disobedient children’s bodies are permanently altered. The unnamed boy of *The Witches* also loses his parents and is transfigured into a mouse forever. Finally, Matilda’s traumatic experiences of bullying parents and school teachers become more akin to what happens in real life, in terms of her abandonment by her family and adoption by a single woman.

The suppression of trauma can be traced in both Dahl’s life and his novels. As Sturrock (2010) puts it, ‘Dahl seldom dwelt on the traumatic early years of his childhood, and he generally made light of any connection between his fiction and his own life... His fictional childhood bereavements...are never maudlin’ (40). Like himself, his child protagonists find their own ways of dealing with trauma, whether through fellowship with other victims, or companionship with new allies. James, for instance, shows no sign of childhood suffering after his aunts’ death. He copes well with his fellow creatures during his adventurous journey in a giant peach. In the face of multiple dangers, the peach becomes James’s womb-like hiding place, and his nonhuman friends his salvation. The Ladybird offers kind words of consolation to him: ‘You are one of *us* now...You are one of the crew. We’re all in the same boat’ (42); while the Centipede’s cheerful nature allows the boy to feel relaxed and amused: ‘he rather liked the Centipede...a rascal, but what a change it was to hear somebody

laughing once in a while' (46), as he never hears any loud laughter from his two aunts. An orphaned Sophie in *The BFG* briefly tells her friendly Giant: 'I don't have a mother and father...they both died when I was a baby' (30). When asked if she misses her parents, Sophie simply says 'Not really...because I never knew them' (30). The fact that both James and Sophie lose their parents at a young age allows them to feel little emotional attachment to them. Their early loss is completely forgotten and no longer important, since both find their affinity in good-natured friends. Both James's and Sophie's positive encounter with their misfortune reveals Dahl's own pragmatism: 'Perhaps because he never knew his father, he does not seem unduly to have felt the absence' (Sturrock, 2010:41).

The unnamed boy in *The Witches* also lost his parents, in a car accident, when he was seven years old, and finds it difficult to talk about it, admitting: 'I won't go into the horrors of that terrible afternoon. I still get the shivers when I think about it' (7). In this case, Dahl seems to mitigate his traumatic experience with a 'wonderful' grandmother, whom the boy 'felt closer to [...] than to [his] mother' (6). The boy is turned into a mouse after drinking the entire bottle of Formula 86. Even though he knows he will probably live only about another nine years as a mouse, he remains positive, and admits that he does not want to live any longer than his grandmother, since in the end they can both die together. Being transformed and trapped inside a tiny little creature seems traumatising, but the boy is not dispirited. He associates his sense of safety with his kind grandmother. He cheerfully remarks 'I don't mind at all, ... It doesn't matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you' (190). Dahl allows us to look at the bright side of the boy's fate, writing: 'I didn't become just any old ordinary mouse that you catch with mouse-traps. I became a talking thinking intelligent mouse-person who wouldn't go *near* a mouse trap!' (198). He is neither tormented nor frightened of death. He simply prefers to spend his life with the person he loves. In other words, Dahl implies that a child might find his own way to form primary attachments to his only trustworthy adult.

Matilda, a self-made character who empowers her reading capacity through her own self-taught study, is often emotionally abused by her own parents, yet showing no sign of trauma, she even strikes back against her abusers. She tells Mr Wormwood, 'you're cheating people. It's dirty money. I hate it' (19). But sometimes it is better to be silent when his voice becomes soft and dangerous. She 'didn't trust herself to answer him, so she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her. She knew it was

wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so' (22). Matilda is more capable than James of looking after herself and handling her abusers. Her superglue trick on her father makes him 'temporarily' lose 'his taste for boasting and bullying' (32). She also forms a close friendship with her new adult friend, Miss Honey. The BFG, meanwhile, diverts his pain and psychological injuries into the activities of dream-catching for the sake of children's happiness. Upon hearing about Sophie's dead parents, the BFG rubs his eyes and says 'You is making me sad' (30). Although he is badly hurt and made fun of by all nine giants, he expresses his strong concern for Sophie, who is kept hidden in his pocket all the time during his own bullying, saying: 'I is sorry you was having such a whirlgig time' (68). When he heard about children being locked up by Mrs Clonkers in the orphanage as a punishment, 'All at once, a huge tear that would have filled a bucket rolled down one of the BFG's cheeks and fell with a splash on the floor' (31). His empathy astonishes Sophie. Kindness, not trauma, is what Dahl emphasises in relation to his victimised characters. The BFG is shown seeking mutual emotional support from a new friend like Sophie, in whom he can confide his dream-catching activity.

Dahl demonstrates a range of traumatic feelings about devastating losses, family tragedies, and bullying, but he seems not to linger over them and tries to find some appropriate compensation for their tragic impact. The author as well as his child characters appears to cope with trauma both by burying it, and transcending the belief in traumatic memory – through relating to other people, resilience, bravery and cultivating optimism; or sometimes through revenge. Meanwhile, parents (or other adults) in Dahl's fiction also experience a tragic and sudden loss of a loved one, and their sense of grief is mentioned in some scenes where adults and children acknowledge each other's trauma and talk sensitively, albeit briefly, about it. Although children may not fully understand an adult's psychological and emotional trauma, they seem to treat it with compassion and respect. When Danny's father recounts some of his experiences living with his 'wonderful' wife who was also his best companion before Danny was born, Danny 'was beginning to realize what an immense sorrow it must have been to him when she died' (127). The boy himself never experiences the same kind of intense grief, as his mother died when he was only four months old, therefore his life with a single parent in an old gipsy caravan becomes a perfect small world for him: 'During my early years, I never had a moment's unhappiness or illness' (3). Some children even perform

the role of sensitive amateur therapist who encourages traumatised victims to heal from their trauma through talking treatments, as in the case of Matilda and Miss Honey.

Miss Honey becomes a survivor of childhood abuse who is socially isolated herself, and voluntarily suppresses her thoughts to hide her terrifying memories. She admits being too terrified to complain or do anything to protect herself, and accepts whatever threat her aunt makes against her. In this case, Freud's method of curing his patient in the form of a dialogue when he first linked trauma with a symptom, reflects that a cure could be found through the use of language. In communicating trauma Miss Honey confides in Matilda:

At this, Miss Honey seemed to rouse herself. She gave a shake of her shoulders and then very carefully she placed her mug on the tray. 'Why shouldn't you ask?' she said. 'You were bound to ask in the end. You are much too bright not to have wondered. Perhaps I even *wanted* you to ask. Maybe that is why I invited you here after all'. (189)

Then Miss Honey reveals her deeper feelings:

'Up to now,' Miss Honey went on, 'I have found it impossible to talk to anyone about my problems. I couldn't face the embarrassment, and anyway I lack the courage. Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now, all of a sudden I have a sort of desperate wish to tell everything to somebody' (189).

Through the conversation, Miss Honey reports an overwhelming sense of helplessness and gives a hint of her untrustworthy and unsafe feelings. She seems to know her own problems but lacks the encouragement and determination to challenge Miss Trunchbull. As a long-time traumatised victim, what Miss Honey really *wants* is someone to listen to her, someone with whom she can truly share her feelings. Matilda in this scene is similar to a psychiatrist who carefully listens to the story as Miss Honey exposes all her miserable childhood. Matilda becomes a professional listener, who knows how and when to remain silent, react or ask a proper question during Miss Honey's narrative of her life. More importantly, she also interprets Miss Honey's comments: 'I know what you're thinking... You're thinking that the aunt killed him and made it look as though he'd done it himself' (192). Matilda clearly spells out what Miss Honey dare not say and encourages her to articulate her fears and worries. Miss Honey embarrassedly admits: 'I can't think why I am telling you all this' (191), but we realise that as a traumatised patient, she seeks refuge in Matilda's intelligence and strong personality to express her hidden feelings. Her story reveals some signs of repressed experience, as

often seen in trauma patients who gradually develop the belief that their abusers have absolute or even supernatural powers to control their life entirely. She admits ‘over the years I became so completely cowed and dominated by this monster of an aunt’ (193), that she felt unable to complain to anyone in case her aunt hurt her more. Miss Honey’s shocking experience reveals Matilda’s considerable intellectual superiority, as she acts more like a mature adult than a naïve five year old girl. Matilda, in effect, provides Miss Honey with psychotherapy to help her deal with her childhood traumas, conducting the ‘talking cure’ to alleviate her teacher’s lasting psychological injuries. The story’s ending with the happy reunion of the two characters reinforces the idea that traumatised victims can move forward under the supervision of understanding peers. In short, Dahl sees techniques of personal resilience, both for himself and his characters, as a survival tool, producing a diffusive kind of social kindness. It can be seen that Dahl’s idea of trauma is often connected to various forms of bullying and violence. His stories communicate some moral perspective through a painful and chaotic world where his protagonists have to struggle and deal with their bullies and injustice. As Held (2014) notes, ‘Dahl provides a workable and laudable model for his readers, and he does this by bringing philosophical wisdom to bear on the real world through fantasy’ (6). The question is whether his child readers are capable of understanding the characters’ traumatic experiences and relating them to their real life or learning any moral lessons through these narrations of violence and bullying.

Children’s moral perception

Tolkien once said that when children listen to a story they are much less likely to ask whether or not it is true than who is the goodie and who is the baddie, to get people into their proper moral stations and then sit back and wait for things to work out as they have got to (Tucker, 1976:181).

Tolkien’s statement marks one important truth about a child’s moral perception. It might be hard for children whilst reading a story to differentiate between reality and fantasy, fiction and non-fiction. A former educational psychologist, Nicholas Tucker (1976), notes that the child’s moral view of life initially develops in a very egocentric way, by trying to make meaning out of everything they experience and comprehend. They tend to look for tangible results as clear cut rewards and punishment for the ‘goodie’ and ‘baddie’. The clear distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters can more or less contribute to the child’s full comprehension of a story. However, to add some violent or intimidating traits to villains in order to make them easily recognisable,

is also problematic when judging whether it is suitable for child readers. Whether a children's book should ever expose readers to violence and aggression was then a question asked seriously amongst educators. In 'How Children Respond to Fiction', Tucker (1976) argues that because of their 'intellectual limitations'¹ children's preference for books relates mainly to their stage of development. He states:

Growing up is learning to accommodate the fact that the universe does not always make good moral sense unless you are very lucky. For a small child this would be incomprehensible (181).

Tucker gives an interesting explanation of how a fantasy world enables a young child to let go of his or her imagination and 'practise at being a grown-up' (182). The fantasy will either prepare them for adult life or become an escape from it if things go wrong. However, it is important to ask whether an imaginative world full of wickedness and bullying is essential reading for children. Does some experience of fear and harassment contribute to a child's learning progress?

In his article 'Axes for Frozen Seas', Aidan Chambers (2008) points out that traditional scholars believed that by reading only the best of great books, supervised by a discriminating teacher, a child reader learned to be a sensible reader. The modern attitude, however, holds that children became discriminating readers 'by reading anything and everything they wanted to and so learned to decide for themselves what they preferred' (Chambers, 2008:9), and that leads to ambiguity in the terms 'good' and 'bad' literature. Like Chambers, I accept neither extreme, and propose that there are several factors to consider where a book for children is concerned. Debating with his friend about the significant value of literature, Franz Kafka, at twenty, wrote:

It seems to me that one should only read books which bite and sting one. If the book we are reading does not wake us up with a blow on the head, what's the point of reading? (*Briefe*, 1902-24. quoted in Tucker:10-11)

Kafka's remarks point to the fact that literature is not worth readers' attention when it does not offer them any 'biting' ideas nor respond to their literary development, both in desirable and undesirable spheres. As Paul Heins (1974) suggests, 'spontaneous young readers may be devoted to one kind of book, may read indiscriminately, or may be inspired to read certain books recommended by parents, teachers, librarians, or any

¹ Tucker (1976:179) defines the terms 'intellectual limitations' as 'the conceptual boundaries that a child has at some age or another'.

other kind of miscellaneous adult' (409). The important question is how a teacher or parents help children enjoy and 'see' things they find in those books.

Although Dahl's books for children are now widely read by millions of people, there are several debates about his books' 'appropriateness'. It should be pointed out here that violence and bullying are the nub of the problem for rating Dahl's books for children. In *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard (1984) note many adult readers' objections to Dahl's books due to 'a mixture of the glutinous and the cruel' (139). Whilst children love *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the book is hated by adults as 'it is full of fun and virtually amoral' (Carpenter, 1985:1). Murray Knowles and Kirsten Malmkjaer (1996:25) even claim that the world of anarchist Dahl implies the home and family are no place for a child to be submissive. This chapter will now explore the controversial issues in several of Dahl's children's books which obviously expose the hidden and darker side of children's nature – to cope with their trauma through revenge. The themes of bullying, cruelty and aggression will be the focus of a further close reading of Dahl's texts. Questions about didactic functions of a children's book and Dahl's moral education in his books are examined: how Dahl's characters react to cruelty and violence in front of adults, and whether virtues and vices are easily recognised and differentiated for a child reader when coercion is shown repeatedly in the story such as in *James, George, and Matilda*. These books can be classified as 'difficult' and 'unsuitable' for an immature child to handle. By investigating a cruel child, unpleasant adults or even animals, we can address some understanding of the changing nature of the representation of the child and adult as bullies and victims during the last three decades of Dahl's writing career (from 1960 to 1990). This discussion seeks also to explore the ways in which the author views his use of bullying as social commentary. Attention is paid to the narrative strategies employed in an attempt to elucidate some of the major texts that explain these issues.

Since bullying is one of this chapter's major concerns, its fundamental characteristics should be established. Bullying behaviour is a ubiquitous phenomenon occurring across gender, class, race and status in every stratum of society. In schools, for example, it has been a part of school culture for a long time, yet it seems there was little research conducted on this topic before 1980 (Thompson et al., 2002). After over ten years' research into bullying, David Thomson et al. (2002) uncovered the impact of bullying on the victimised child, how to measure and assess the extent of bullying, and a

workable solution to the problem. So, what exactly is ‘bullying’? Since agreed definitions of bullying do not exist, the term can be broadly defined as aggressive behaviour which repeatedly intimidates or humiliates its victims in order to manifest power against others. According to Gayle L. Macklem (2003:1), many researchers admit that ‘the concepts of power and peer abuse are associated with bullying behaviour,’ and bullying is ‘a subcategory of aggression’ (2). Then in 2004, Keith Sullivan et al. (4-5) define bullying as ‘a *negative* and often *aggressive or manipulative* act or series of acts by one or more people against another person or people usually over a period of time’. There are many types of bullying yet at least three basic types are commonly found – verbal threats, physical assault, and emotional or psychological abuse. Home and school become typical places where bullying occurs. Bullying has a strong negative effect on victims because it lowers their self-esteem, causes stress, depression, and loneliness, and ruins their reputation. Many of Dahl’s adult characters traumatise vulnerable victims, especially obvious underdogs, through coercion and corporal punishment.

‘Violence’ is also a key term to be defined for its crucial role in Dahl’s children’s fiction. In the Oxford Dictionary, the term signifies ‘behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something’ (2016), whilst the Cambridge Dictionary online simply defines *violence* as ‘actions or words that are intended to hurt people’ (2016). From these definitions, there seem to be different degrees and different classifications of violence. As with the nature of bullying, there are several environmental risk and resiliency factors for violence: family, peers, school, community, and media. Bullying obviously happens in Dahl’s books mostly in a family or school context. In reading any of Dahl’s popular children’s texts one usually encounters explicit patterns of bullying and violence. While the author does not seem to promote the concept, he certainly reaffirms its existence, especially in the real childhood world of family and school. As Dahl says of his own experience of corporal punishment at school, ‘The violence was bad enough, and being made to watch it was even worse’ (*Boy*, 47). The nature of bullying in Dahl’s fiction for children involves verbal threats, physical assault, and emotional abuse, with the bullying falling into four groups: adults against small children; adults against adults; humans against animals; and creatures against small children. Within these groups, the bullying of adults against small children is found most frequently.

Types of bullying in Dahl's texts

Adult-on-youth bullying

The anarchist Dahl creates a world full of appalling adults who never hesitate to exercise their power through authority over children, be it in school or at home, the places where children are supposed to feel safe and understood. In their homes, James, George, and Matilda meet with unwelcoming and angry parents and relatives. James, in *James and the Giant Peach*, spends his lonely days with his two selfish aunts who force him to do all the household chores, including wood chopping and cooking. The following is an example of how the two cruel aunts bully the little boy:

‘Stop that immediately and get on with your work, you nasty little beast!’
Aunt Sponge ordered.
‘Oh, Auntie Sponge!’ James cried out. ‘And Auntie Spiker! Couldn’t we all – please – just for once – go down to the seaside on the bus?... and I feel so hot and awful and lonely ...’
‘Beat him!’ Cried Aunt Sponge.
‘I certainly will!’ ‘I shall beat you later in the day when I don’t feel so hot,’ (15).

For three years, he is abused and treated as a house slave, beaten for no reason, improperly fed, and forced to sleep alone on bare floorboards in the attic. His aunts pay no regard to feelings or well-being. As an orphan, James has no choice: all he can do is ‘cry and cry’ (15).

It is obvious that adults in Dahl's books view children as paradoxically both weak and dangerous. Children become their number one enemy whose behaviour is always considered mischievous and untrustworthy. In *George's Marvellous Medicine* (1981), the author explains why George ‘couldn’t help disliking Grandma’ (2), because she is different from most grandmothers who ‘are lovely, kind, helpful old ladies’. George’s Grandma spends all her time sitting in her chair by the window and ‘was always complaining, grouching, grousing, grumbling, griping about something or other’ (2). The word choice with the repetitive ‘g’ sounds is used to intensify how annoying the old lady is. She always manipulates George when his parents are out of sight. In *Matilda*, Mr and Mrs Wormwood ignore their intelligent daughter, and ‘look upon [her] in particular as nothing more than a scab’ (4). At home, the relationship between children and their guardians is filled with cruelty, distrust and punishment.

Nor are Dahl's children any safer in their schools. Some books, such as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* associate school stories 'with comfortable nostalgia and with old fashioned chauvinism' (Cullingford, 1998:37), but not Dahl's schools, both fictional and otherwise. He remembers in his autobiography, *Boy*, his own exposure to unjust adult authority all through his school life. He is unfairly accused of cheating by Captain Hardcastle, who canes him severely at St Peter's. Dahl vividly describes that terrifying experience: 'I was frightened of that cane. There is no small boy in the world who wouldn't be. It wasn't simply an instrument for beating you. It was a weapon for wounding. It lacerated the skin.' (120). Similarly, at Repton, the Boazers (prefects) 'had the power of life and death over us junior boys. They could summon us down in our pyjamas at night-time and thrash us for leaving just one football sock on the floor' (141). Dahl emphasises the adults' injustice and violent punishment again in *Matilda* when its heroine and other small children in Crunchem Hall Primary School confront their tyrannical Headmistress, Miss Trunchbull. The name 'Crunchem Hall' sounds like 'crunch them all,' which is similar to the way its headmistress treats her small pupils. In *Danny, the Champion of the World* (1975), Danny faces down Captain Lancaster, a 'horrid' teacher whose 'dreaded cane' unfairly injures school children. He 'was a violent man, and we were all terrified of him. He used to sit at his desk...watching us..., searching for trouble' (113). Danny remarks that Lancaster intentionally calls himself 'Captain' to convey his pride in fighting during the war 'against Hitler,' whilst most people want to forget 'the whole beastly thing' (113). His wartime recollections reflect an inclination towards violence. In light of this, Dahl usually depicts school as a highly dangerous place where submissive characters fall prey to repetitive violence.

Interestingly, Dahl's treatment of adult characters almost always follows an identical pattern. First, he gives them a grotesque physical appearance whose terrifying and uncontrollable emotion easily explodes with no warning. Then, these cruel adults find pleasure in bullying the innocent, weaker or inferior, verbally and physically. In the end, they are all subdued, outwitted and punished by their own victims. Jonathon Culley (1991) contends that Dahl's common usage of 'selfishness, gluttony, greed for power and wealth, violent anger, and cruelty' (60) is explicitly illustrated through actions in the texts. For example, farmers Boggis, Bunce and Bean in *Fantastic Mr Fox* are 'about as nasty and mean as any men you could meet' (1). Boggis is 'enormously fat' (2), Bunce is 'a kind of pot-bellied dwarf' (3) whose 'beastly temper' derives from his disgusting diet, and Bean is 'as thin as a pencil' (4). Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker

in *James and the Giant Peach* are both 'really horrible people. They were selfish and lazy and cruel' (7). The two ladies' silly talk about their beauty can explain why James always suffers nonsensical punishment from them. They have no thought for anything except their own self-love and admiration. Most of Dahl's bullying adults have neither head nor heart. Miss Trunchbull's mindset can be compared to that of the evil headmaster Squeers of Dotheboys Hall in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. Certainly, she has little to recommend her:

Now most head teachers are chosen because they possess a number of fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children's best interests at heart. They are sympathetic. They are fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss Trunchbull possessed none of these qualities (76).

Even worse than her poor qualities, Miss Trunchbull's face, the narrator adds, 'was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever' (77). The misquotation of the opening line of John Keats's *Endymion* emphasises how foul and unattractive she looks. Moreover, Dahl clearly indicates what children and parents expect from the institution and its head. Kindness, a sense of justice, love and understanding are not the rarest qualities to find in an educator, but Dahl seems to point out here that instead of being well-protected and cared for, children are bullied, not by each other, but by their teacher.

For the boy in *The Witches*, the Grand High Witch's face 'was the most frightful and frightening thing I have ever seen [...]. There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed' (60). As previously defined, bullying implies aggressive behaviour which repeatedly intimidates or humiliates its victims in order to manifest power over others. The adults in Dahl's texts who bully children seem to have no explicable reason for it other than their own intense hatred towards them. Miss Trunchbull declares 'I don't like small people... Small people should never be seen by anybody' (144-5), and 'I was never a small person... I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way' (145). Miss Trunchbull's reason seems less than reasonable, and shows no cause for her disgust with 'small' beings. Similarly, George's Grandma tells him that 'Boys who grow too fast become stupid and lazy' (4). She lists a number of 'other nasty childish habits like laziness and disobedience' (4-5), to warn George about his behaviour, and concludes that he is 'as stupid as' (7) his mother. Quite often Dahl describes old women as horrible, terrible, and cruel – he seems to strain his vocabulary – trying to find enough bad and simple words that are not

too sophisticated for child readers. Those straightforward terms are repetitively used to intensify his already negative images of adults.

Dahl exploits his notion of fantasy by presenting a world full of untrustworthy adults and fearless children. Heather Worthington (2012:125) notes that Dahl's writing style is similar to Rosemary Jackson's ideas of the fantasy narrative, whereby fantasy literature becomes a literature of subversion through which the normative social structures are reversed. After introducing a realistic atmosphere, people and events, Dahl then subverts everything into the mode of fantasy, 'where adults 'are depicted as at best thoughtless and at worst actively and intentionally cruel,' and the child is capable of punishing this cruelty because of their magic power. Worthington (2012:125) claims that Dahl's 'temporary subversion within conservatism' may include violence in fantasy, thus enabling his fiction for children to be regarded as unthreatening, morally appropriate and so 'suitable' for a child.

In his article 'Roald Dahl – "It's About Children and It's for Children" – But Is It Suitable', Culley (1991) discusses the problematic moral dimension of Dahl's work, and notes that Charles Sarland sees some danger in 'Dahl's treatment of dislikeable characters' (60). For Sarland, Dahl 'hold[s] elements of society up to ridicule and then annihilate[s] them,' and he is concerned that 'children will unconsciously pick up this underlying fascist message' (Culley, 1991:60). However, it could be argued that Dahl usually emphasises the unpleasant traits of his adult characters to justify the violence of their doom as defeated aggressors. For example, both of James's aunts are destroyed by the giant peach in its escape. Miss Trunchbull is terrified of the dead Magnus resurrected by Matilda, and forever disappears from school. Dahl seems to have a satisfactory explanation for each adult's extreme fate.

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), Dahl's most famous work, Willy Wonka in effect bullies four bad children: the gluttonous Augustus Gloop, the spoiled and petulant Veruca Salt, the gum-addicted Violet Beauregarde, and TV-obsessed Mike Teavee. Since the antagonists are not adults or monsters, but children who receive sadistic punishment, the book is accused by Cameron of 'fostering sadism in children' (quoted in Culley, 1991:59). Dominic Cheetham (2006) states that despite criticisms and complaints about the 'high-handed way in which Mr Willy Wonka treats other people in the book' (3), Mr. Wonka remains 'authoritarian, the supposedly tasteless features remain, the violence to the various children remains, and the supposedly dual

nature of the intended readership also remains firmly unchanged' (7). Wonka's supreme power and his bullying are excused by his own eccentric behaviour, and the Oompa-Loompas' satirical chorus along with each punishment. The story of Charlie and the other four children serves as a cautionary tale at the commencement of Dahl's writing for children, whilst the bully Wonka is obviously allowed to escape any punishment. However, the adult bullying of children in Dahl's later books becomes increasingly grotesque, and typically justice comes in the form of revenge. In *Matilda*, Dahl's last children's book, the intellectual six-year-old girl never hesitates to revenge herself on her ignorant parents. Dahl writes: 'There was no doubt in Matilda's mind that this latest display of foulness by her father deserved severe punishment' (50). The bullies always get their comeuppance.

Adult-on-adult bullying

Apart from adults bullying small children, the violence of adults against adults is a feature of Dahl's narratives. In Dahl's early writings, we witness some adult bullying but in a more ridiculous and less threatening pattern. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Wonka psychologically bullies Mr and Mrs Gloop and thinks only of his own chocolate formulas, not of the life of Augustus:

'You'll have to hurry! If you leave him in the chocolate-mixing barrel too long, he's liable to get poured out into the fudge boiler, and that really would be a disaster wouldn't it? My fudge would become quite uneatable!' ... 'I'm joking', said Mr Wonka, giggling madly behind his beard... Goodbye, Mrs Gloop! And Mr Gloop! Good-bye! I'll see you later...' (103).

Wonka leaves the three of them behind and excitedly leads other children to explore his factory. More obviously, the natives of Loompaland, the Oompa-Loompas, are also exploited and abused. They are imported from thick jungles to work in Wonka's factory. Like other imperialists, Wonka believes he has greatly improved their living conditions, as they do not fall prey to the most dangerous beasts like the hornswogglers, snozzwangers and whangdoodles in their own land. However, in his inventing room, Wonka tries his new chocolate recipes on them, often with catastrophic results at the experimental stage. He admits: 'It always happens like that...I've tried it twenty times in the Testing Room on twenty Oompa-Loompas' (126). These tiny workers are treated as laboratory animals to test his products, and their lives are confined forever to the factory. According to Catherine Keyser (2017), an early manuscript version entitled

‘Charlie’s Chocolate Boy’ which features black Charlie trapped in a chocolate mould reveals an apparently racial hierarchy within a culture of global capitalism. Keyser points out that ‘Dahl metaphorically addresses slavery as an ongoing historical injury undergirding both colonialism and late capitalism’ (404) through one boy’s imprisonment. In the final version of the novel, Keyser adds: ‘Dahl makes his protagonist white and attempts to resolve historical timescales and geographical ranges through the presentist utopia of the chocolate factory, but even in this version racialized bodies thwart Dahl’s attempts at abstraction and carry the traces of early anxiety about the human costs of globalized industry’ (405). The whole message of “Charlie’s Chocolate Boy”, Keyser argues, ‘seems to be how painful it is for a black person to be reduced to an object and treated with violence, and then the Oompa Loompas are all objects. Wonka tests his candies on them as though they were expendable’ (Russo, 2017).

In *The Twits*, the vindictive couple continuously play practical jokes on each other out of mutual contempt. In *Danny the Champion of the World*, Mr. Victor Hazell uses his wealth and power to make trouble for Danny’s father: ‘the long and powerful arm of Mr Hazell was reaching out behind the scenes and trying to run us off our land’ (48). He even digs ‘tiger-traps in his woods for human beings!’ (84) to catch any poachers trespassing on his land. In *Matilda*, the menacing Miss Trunchbull usurps Miss Honey’s inheritance and manipulates her from childhood. Like other small victims, the hapless Miss Honey suffers from her aunt’s aggression and forceful behaviour. She becomes increasingly passive and destitute. Her discussion with Matilda implies that Miss Honey is both physically and psychologically abused. Miss Trunchbull’s bullying has such a strong negative effect on her that she becomes ‘so frightened...[she] used to start shaking when [Miss Trunchbull] came into the room’ (192). It is unusual for Dahl to express the panic-stricken feelings of his characters in this way, although most bullies are finally penalised, to the child reader’s delight. However, in the case of Miss Honey, as an adult character, Dahl represents her as a real victim of bullying whose self-esteem is lowered. She becomes stressed, desperate, and lonely. When asked if her bully ever beat her, she says ‘Let’s not go into details’ and she also admits ‘I was far too terrified to complain’ (193). While Matilda performs the part of an understanding listener, the reader can trace the signs of Miss Honey’s traumatic experience, which is seldom explicated in his other characters.

Human-on-animal bullying

While Dahl focuses on describing violent human behaviour, he does not overlook the torment and misery of animals caused by men. Dahl's own strong feelings against animal cruelty are depicted repeatedly in his texts. He portrays how men mistreat and harm animals, and later those bullies are deservedly punished. Right at the beginning of *The Magic Finger*, the unnamed eight-year-old girl shows her sympathy with the wild ducks: 'I can't stand hunting. I just can't stand it. It doesn't seem right to me that men and boys should kill animals just for the fun they get out of it' (2). The girl's voice intensifies the hatred for hunting and violence performed by men. The Greggs have fun shooting the ducks and by magic are turned into ducks themselves. They learn for once the tortured life of prey and react differently after the lesson. With apologetic expressions Mr Gregg destroys all of his guns; Mrs Gregg places beautiful flowers upon the graves of the ducks they killed the previous day; and their children earnestly feed all kinds of animals in the yard with the best barley. Mr Gregg declares: 'My name is not Gregg any more... In honour of my feathered friends, I have changed it from Gregg to Egg' (54). They all realise the animals' valuable lives after spending a night outside their safe and warm house.

The Twits, who are retired circus trainers, always beat the Muggle-Wumps, their pet monkeys, with Mrs Twit's 'beastly stick' and make them 'do everything upside down' (45). The monkeys hate them 'for making their lives so miserable' (46). Even worse, the couple catch birds by gluing the tree branches, especially Mr Twit, who loves Bird Pie. When he cannot trap a single bird, he screams madly: 'I'll get you next time, you filthy feathery frumps! I'll wring your necks, the whole lot of you, and have you bubbling in the pot for Bird Pie' (53). Once he is free, Muggle-Wump seeks his vengeance against them. They are glued and fixed to the ground in their 'horrid house' permanently. Like George's Grandma, they gradually shrink, until in the end there was 'nothing more left in this world of Mr and Mrs Twit' (89), and everyone, which might include Dahl himself 'shouted... "HOORAY!"' (89).

In *Fantastic Mr Fox*, three dim-witted farmers, Boggis, Bunce and Bean, hunt for Mr Fox and his family. Dahl describes them as collectively foul-mouthed and furious:

Bean's face was purple with rage. Bunce was cursing the fox with dirty words that cannot be printed. Boggis came waddling up. 'Dang and blast that filthy stinking fox!' he said. 'What the heck do we do now?' (29).

Mr Fox, however, is presented as a brave hero fighting for his family against cruel villains determined to kill him: 'It's not over yet, Mr Fox. We're not going home till we've strung you up dead as a dingbat!' (29). They end up losing their food supplies and are left waiting in front of the empty fox hole. Cold-blooded humans in Dahl's writing learn important lessons that they can never be free from their wrongdoings to animals. All the bullies reap what they have sown. They are punished by the same methods they have used to hurt animals.

Creatures-on-children bullying

Dahl's fantasy also permits evil creatures to harm and bully children and weaker victims. Nine giants hurt the BFG and hunt Sophie for food. In *The Witches*, children fall prey to the witches and are gradually eliminated. Like adult bullies, these creatures are portrayed as both cruel and idiotic. The giants 'are coarse and foul and filthy' (88). They have 'an air of menace' (64), and Sophie feels 'no sympathy for this great brute who ate children as though they were sugar-lumps' (84). Though a creature himself, the BFG can get along better with Sophie than with his fellow giants or adults. He is depicted as having a childlike nature. He can hear plants and understand the language of music. He is dreamlike, easily excited and perpetually curious. As a huge giant who has a mind like a child, he is often bullied and hurt by the other giants.

Like Miss Trunchbull, the Grand High Witch is filled with deep hatred towards children. Her harsh voice, which 'rasped. It grated. It snarled. It scraped. It shrieked. And it growled' (62) makes her speech peculiar – perhaps Germanic and suggestive of Nazism - with 'r's rolling and 'w's replaced by 'v's. Her difficulty with language makes her sound even more visceral in her obsessional hatred of children: 'To talk about children is making me sick!... I am feeling sick even *thinking* about them! Fetch me a basin!' (72). This last type of bullying is less frequently found in Dahl's children's fiction, as his everyday adults are sufficiently anti-child without the need to invent extreme child-hating monsters beyond the traditional fairy-tale figures of the Witch and the Giant.

Kindness or cruelty?

The exploration of Dahl's type of bullying partly reflects his moral education in his books through the poetic justice inflicted upon each bully. His children's stories open a window on traumatic experience as they allow readers to listen to what can be told only in indirect and surprising ways. His eye-for-an-eye method provides alternative ways of thinking about and responding to the experience of trauma. Thus, the use of bullying as social commentary becomes problematic for a child reader. In a BBC interview given when he was 72 years old, Dahl admitted:

We're surrounded by horrible people who win and I'm very, very weary of extremely rich men who pretend they are lovely, because they are not. They crush people to get where they are. I think probably kindness is my number one attribute in a human being (Dahl, BBC Interview, 1 January 1989).

The interview corroborates Dahl's firm belief in the essential goodness of human nature. After several years of personal traumatised memory caused by family predicaments and his own physical injuries, the ageing Dahl seems willing to acknowledge kindness as the most vital quality for people in society. Often accused of being a bully himself, however, Dahl and his narratives make it difficult for readers to accept this view. In the depiction of his adult characters, we always witness vulgarity, violence, and bullying. In *The BFG*, the BFG tells Sophie that 'Grown-up human beans is not famous for their kindness. They is all squifflerotters and grinksludgers' (108). Dahl's inventive term 'squifflerotter', which in the *Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary* means someone who is unpleasant and unkind, also mirrors this fact. In his world, adults are unkind and cruel to others. David Rees (1988) in his article 'Dahl's Chickens' suggests 'the moral universe he inhabits seems confused and full of contradictions' (144). He notes that Dahl apparently 'enjoys writing about violence, while at the same time condemning it' (144). Dahl's stories are full of unpleasantly detailed accounts of adult men caning children, which becomes 'an obsessive theme' (144) in his work. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, for instance, the four 'bad' children receive 'sadistic punishment' (145) to cure their deplorable faults. Criticised for his dubious morality filled with personal prejudice, Dahl, according to Rees, 'had no qualms about frightening children into being good' (149). The demanding and spoiled Veruca Salt, for example, is judged by the trained squirrels as a 'bad nut' and is thrown into the 'garbage chute'. For Rees, Dahl's questionable morality is problematic, and the article

ends with the allegation that many parents, teachers, and critics wish that some of his books 'had never been written' (154). Dahl's kindness is not easily recognised by Rees.

Rees' criticism of Dahl's work is more or less similar to Sam Anderson's. Designating Dahl 'the storyteller as benevolent sadist', Anderson (2010) argues that Dahl's book covers acclaiming him 'The World's No. 1 Storyteller' are 'simultaneously thrilling and absurd, and puzzling and oddly disturbing' (1), like Dahl's own fiction. Anderson highlights the fact that Dahl's delight in wild invention 'manages to braid the two opposed strands of his personality, the nasty and the charming, into something unique in the history of storytelling' (2). Sadistic and morally contradictory as Rees and Anderson often see Dahl, perhaps he has somehow hinted at parts of his true personality in *The BFG* when the Big Friendly Giant, or Dahl himself, warned Sophie: 'What I mean and what I say is two different things' (*BFG*, 41). It is difficult to single out a simple interpretation of the message he conveys in his books and in his interviews. In the BBC interview, Dahl admitted 'vicious people are much more interesting than nice, good people. There's nothing more boring than a totally good person. They've got to have quirks, and bad habits, and the things like that' (Dahl, BBC Interview, 1 January 1989).

On the other hand, how much 'kindness' do we see in his writing and is it easily recognised through his tales? In his children's fiction he assigns virtues to all the heroes and heroines of his stories, and kindness is often attributed to them. The Magic Finger girl, for example, is deeply concerned about animal hunting and tries to stop the Gregg family from shooting animals: 'Every time I went to their farm I would do my best to talk them out of it, but they only laughed at me' (*The Magic Finger*, 2). When the helpless BFG tells Sophie about the cruel giants' plan to eat children, she is determined to stop them: 'I can't stand it! Just think of those poor girls and boys who are going to be eaten alive in a few hours' time! We can't just sit here and do nothing! We've got to go after those brutes' (*The BFG*, 108). James forms a close friendship with the 'creatures' who 'were not nearly as terrible as they looked. In fact they weren't really terrible at all. They seemed extremely kind and helpful in spite of all the shouting and arguing that went on between them' (*James and the Giant Peach*, 51). The mouse boy cooperates with his grandmother in ridding the world of witches for children's safety. Matilda herself is not bullied by the other children as they recognize her basic decency. She is kind to her class teacher and friends and never boasts about her knowledge and talent. Dahl's respect for kindness is not limited to human characters for his creatures

such as foxes, badgers, and monkeys also reveal their capacity for fellow-feeling when they help one another under threat.

One explanation for Dahl's self-contradictory stance on kindness alongside his relish for violent scenes of bullying might be traceable to the influence of Charles Dickens's literary work where some violence is necessary to resolve intractable problems, but this is usually offset by equally necessary acts of kindness and reconciliation, be it through the actions of Pip, Oliver, Matilda, James, or George.

From Charles Dickens to Dahl's Chickens

It should be noted that Dickens's literary influence² is intermittently found in Dahl's stories. The BFG tells Sophie that he taught himself to write by reading a 'very old and tattered' (104) book called *Nicholas Nickleby* written by 'Dahl's Chickens' (105). It is 'the most scrumdiddlyumptious story' (105), and he reads it hundreds of times. In the end, the self-taught, friendly giant turns into 'a tremendous reader' who reads 'all of Charles Dickens (whom he no longer called Dahl's Chickens)' (198). In *Boy*, too, the young Dahl said: 'I must have read the entire works of Dickens sitting on that Boazer's bog during my first winter at Repton' (159). In *Matilda*, Dahl narrates a 5-year-old girl's real passion for Dickens's stories:

Within a week, Matilda had finished *Great Expectations* which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. 'I loved it,' she said to Mrs Phelps. 'Has Mr Dickens written any others?' (11).

This precocious reader is 'totally absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham and her cobwebbed house' (10), and over the next six months she also reads *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*. Dahl's love of Dickens has played a crucial part in his own writing career, and is especially noticeable in its impact on Dahl's written style, especially his coining of comic names and neologisms. Whilst Dickens is well-known for his gift for creating characters who become household names, Dahl's child characters are also instantly recognisable and memorable for readers. Both are credited with giving a central role in the novel to the figure of the innocent child – often suffering and orphaned, abandoned, or simply neglected.

² A more detailed discussion of Charles Dickens's literary influence on Dahl's narrative styles will be found in Chapter Four on Dahl's comic fantasy.

Moreover, Dahl features bullying and violence in his texts much as Dickens's depiction of bullying is repeatedly resonant in his. As Brian Cheadle (2001) puts it, 'Dickens presents a society in which life's basic exchanges are permeated with the resentful violence of power relations and a competitive economy' (79). The bullying is mostly treated by both authors in a comic way, allowing young readers to have a good laugh and temporary escape from their monotonous daily life. Their external treatment of character in this way is more like caricature to make a point about a particular weakness or obsession, or to suggest how children learn to function in an aggressive, competitive society. Matilda, for example, can humiliate Mr Wormwood, and returns Miss Trunchbull's violence with a weapon that Dahl has provided: telekinesis. However, adults like Mrs Joe in *Great Expectations* and Miss Trunchbull are depicted as far more malicious and sadistic. The head teacher's misopedia and Mrs Joe's resentment of her class position lead both to find compensation in bullying those beneath them. Both appear to be 'on the rampage' all the time and frequently exercise their brute force in traumatising small children. Whilst Miss Trunchbull is obsessed with violence, and keeps a vicious, makeshift torture chamber called the Chokey in her office, Mrs Joe possesses a 'Tickler' to impose her power over Pip. Humour and violence are combined in the comedy of their weapons of torture, and their throwing ability as seen in the following scene:

My sister, Mrs. Joe, throwing the door wide open, and finding an obstruction behind it, immediately divined the cause, and applied Tickler to its further investigation. She concluded by throwing me – I often served her as a connubial missile – at Joe, who, glad to get hold of me on any terms, passed me on into the chimney and quietly fenced me up there with his great leg (Dickens, 1999:13-4).

A 'connubial missile,' Pip is also 'brought up by hand', which literally means to be raised on a bottle instead of breast-fed; but Pip, 'knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand, and to be much in the habit of laying it upon [Joe]' (12), has used his observational powers to deduce that it means 'to be hit around a lot'. He reckons his sister 'must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand' (12). This comic pun implies that Pip has been brought up mostly by Mrs Joe's frequent use of 'Tickler,' and her 'hand' rather than by any warmth and affection. This bullying is a repeated motif in the early chapters, and Pip's literal-minded naivety enhances its comic effects. The novel illustrates 'Dickens's ethic of moral sentiment' through the soft-hearted Pip, who, despite being traumatised by his sister, displays a moral victory by 'turning repugnance into a love for the outcast' (Cheadle, 2001:79) and adopting forgiveness all round.

Likewise, in *Matilda*, Miss Trunchbull's cruel treatment of the school children is considered inhuman and merciless. She is always depicted as flinging, swinging, spinning or throwing small children out of the classroom window, like a frisbee or javelin. The pigtailed Amanda Thripp, for instance, is swung round and round and 'was travelling so fast she became a blur...sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence...and high up into the sky' (109). Eventually Amanda 'landed on the grass and bounced three times and finally came to rest' (110). Like other school children, Amanda becomes a victim of Miss Trunchbull's misopedia. She thinks Amanda looks 'like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!' (108). Nevertheless, Amanda does not seem to be hurt or have any physical injuries after being thrown like a ball. Instead she quickly recovers and reels back to the playground. More humour is added when one student shouts at Miss Trunchbull: 'Well thrown, sir!' and the Headmistress, very proud and satisfied with her achievement, says 'Not bad... considering I'm not in strict training. Not bad at all' (110). Her grotesque ideas of punishment are given more of a comic treatment than her aggressive and formidable character.

Furthermore, Dickens's and Dahl's description of Mrs Joe's and Miss Trunchbull's physical appearance serves to intensify their tyrannical behaviour. Mrs Joe's wearing a coarse apron, 'fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square impregnable bib in front that was stuck full of pins and needles' (13), stresses her non-existent maternal instincts, reminding us of Miss Trunchbull's coarse and 'extremely odd' clothes (77). Her formidable outfit is similarly described:

She always had on a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches, bottle-green in colour and made of coarse twill (77).

Whilst Mrs Joe's 'pins and needles' outfit is a travesty of motherly dress, Miss Trunchbull's leather belt 'fastened' with its enormous silver buckle offers an image of a whip-like instrument for corporal punishment in school. The green twill breeches obviously signify a military costume which makes her look completely unfeminine and threatening. Both women's tight and coarse outfits symbolise their aggression and lack of feeling. The 'pinched in' and 'fastened' clothes indicate a barely contained violent power and physical strength.

In addition, the undeserved harsh treatment of children at school reminds us of one scene in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* when the pale, exhausted, half-starved children are forced to swallow doses of brimstone and treacle in order to suppress their appetites. Mrs Squeers is described as having 'administered a large instalment to each boy in succession, using for the purpose a common wooden spoon, ...which widened every young gentleman's mouth... they all being obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole of the bowl at a gasp' (152). Bruce Bogtrotter is also bullied by 'the Trunchbull' to finish the enormous cake. She loudly yells at the boy: 'Eat!... Greedy little thieves who eat cake must have cake! Eat faster boy! Eat faster! We don't want to be here all day!' (*Matilda*, 122). When the boy eats half of the entire cake, she 'stood with hands on hips, glaring at him. "Get on with it!" she shouted. "Eat it up!"' (*Matilda*, 123). The adults' mistreatment of children performed either at home or in school diminishes children's significance and existence as human beings. In *Great Expectations*, Pip is compared to a pig and is often made to feel guilty and unhappy. He has been treated 'as if [he] were dog in disgrace' (62). His first encounter with an indifferent Estella, who gives him some food and beer without looking at him, makes the boy feel 'so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry' (*Great Expectations*, Chapter VIII). Cheadle (2001) notes that Estella's 'initial disdain fills Pip with an intense "smart" of injustice' (80). A self-possessed Estella also finds other ways of bullying him psychologically whilst the unpleasant conditions of James's and Matilda's home life are not significantly different. James can be only 'the disgusting little brute' (33), and Matilda is 'an ignorant little squirt' (19). Readers are made to heed extremes in the human condition and physical bullying illustrated by both Dickens and Dahl. According to Cheadle (2001), Mrs Joe's frustration with her class position 'leads her to find compensation in bullying those beneath her' (79). Children in Dickens's world represent the corruption of nineteenth-century society, whilst those in Dahl satirise bad families and education. In the work of both authors, cruelty to children, however comically portrayed, functions as an indictment of a society's selfish values.

Optimistic, humorous but sadistic?

Dahl's sadistic sense of humour is seen again in his autobiography, *Boy*, where he narrates several examples of school bullying. As Sturrock testifies, Dahl was 'profoundly unhappy' at Repton. He spent two long years as a Fag or servant of the study holder, and believed most masters were 'amazingly dull and totally colourless' (150). At Repton, school prefects or boazers, who were 'a dangerous breed' (154), had

‘the power of life and death over us junior boys’ (141). One boazer, Williamson, is famous for ‘the speed of his strokes’. As a great footballer, cricketer and athlete, he ‘always delivered his strokes in a series of swift back and forth movements without any pause’ (141). This beating ritual becomes more amusing when Dahl concludes that the damage to each victim is inspected by many beating ‘experts’, who express highly professional opinions such as ‘What a super job’, or ‘He’s got *every single* one in the same place!’ and ‘Boy, that Williamson’s got a *terrific* eye!’ (142). The accuracy of each blow on small boys, not their pain, is valued by those bullies who see the punishment as being like a game or sport. The violence against weaker victims is also found in *The BFG* when the friendly giant is tossed and thrown high in the air by the Fleshlumpeater. All the unsympathetic giants play ball with him, they kick and dump him on the ground. When he is going to run away, they hurl rocks after him, shouting at him ‘Ruddy little Runt’ and ‘Troggy little twit! Shrivelly little shrimp! Mucky little midget! (67). In this episode the BFG is physically hurt, but Dahl’s comic word play and alliteration, as in ‘Ruddy-Runt’ or ‘Shrivelly-shrimp,’ effectively distract the reader from identifying too closely with the BFG’s pain and humiliation.

Similar coercion is shown in *Matilda* when Bruce Bogtrotter is forced to eat all the ‘gigantic’ chocolate cake for the alleged crime of stealing. Dahl’s subversive humour is clearly depicted in the scene where Miss Trunchbull attempts to humiliate Bruce in front of two hundred and fifty school children:

‘This *clot*,’ boomed the Headmistress, pointing the riding-crop at him like a rapier, ‘this *black-head*, this *foul carbuncle*, this *poisonous pustule* that you see before you is none other than a disgusting criminal, a denizen of the underworld, a member of the Mafia!’ (114).

A puzzled eleven-year-old Bruce is seriously condemned and charged with a crime he is not aware of. He is compared, in extravagant language to disgusting skin diseases and international criminals: ‘A thief’, ‘A crook! A pirate! A brigand! A rustler!’ (114). These are increasingly exaggerated, often archaic, terms which again draw attention to themselves and away from overmuch emotional identification with Bruce’s suffering. Bruce does not totally understand this condemnation, but he does extremely well with the cake, which the other children cheer him on to finish. Unlike Frank Richards’ Billy Bunter, Bruce is no comic glutton. He has, after all, taken only one slice of Miss Trunchbull’s cake, and readers are encouraged to side with him in this scene of public humiliation. Hence, the cheerily optimistic Bruce heroically vanquishes the irritable

schoolmistress to roars of applause from his friends. Feeling defeated, Miss Trunchbull furiously smashes him on the head with a platter, but this does not bother him. He ‘simply shook his head a few times and went on grinning’ (127). Miss Trunchbull abuses the boy both verbally and physically; however, she does no lasting harm to him. This proves a real victory of a minor over the oppressor. Like several intimidating behaviours of his adult characters, Dahl repeatedly blends violence with comedy, subverting the bully’s authority. Slapstick is often used in Dahl’s books when a character being brutally thrown, hit, or beaten, turns into a comical, surreal and cartoonlike caricature. The victims’ feelings of hurt and resentment do not linger long enough for readers to identify with them at any deep emotional level. Rather, we admire the ingenuity of the cunning and mischievous little victims who finally find ways to strike their tyrants back. Often Dahl’s story reflects a world full of foolish adults wielding arbitrary power over thoughtful children.

Jackie E. Stallcup (2012) refers to Dahl’s frequent intertwining of humour with horror or disgust as ‘incongruity’, a common technique adopted by humorists. Vital to most jokes, incongruity is achieved when the reader’s expectations and interest are highly aroused, and suddenly dissolved by a single moment of disordered categories. Stallcup notes ‘Dahl creates incongruity through disordering the category of “normal adult behaviour”’ (34). A girl being swung, a boy being lifted right out of his seat by his ears, or even hit by a platter are not what we expect to see in school, but Dahl allows Miss Trunchbull to perform all these horrifying deeds without proper reasons. However, all situations become humorous when Dahl concludes that there are no serious consequences to the children and no one is likely to be badly hurt. Each scene, Stallcup adds, ‘stays on the side of slapstick and never dissolves into the horror of actual blood, gore and broken bones’ (34). We can have both humour and disgust springing from a single moment of disordered categories. The adults’ full wrath and their comically verbal abuse of a child combine to make a character that succeeds in being highly entertaining but which rarely attracts the young reader’s lasting sympathy. Far from conventional, Dahl does not seem to care about writing a book to satisfy adult standards of what was considered appropriate for children. He exploits what seem to be simple ideas, culminating in acts of playful retributive violence to celebrate the triumph of the underdog over the powerful. Dahl acknowledges children’s love of comedy and simply writes about them in order to offer ‘young readers multiple outlets for their frustrations and aggressions through the humorous ways in which his small characters often get the

better of those who have more power' (Stallcup, 2012:43). The following sentences in *James and the Giant Peach* confirm Dahl's preference for humour at the beginning of his career:

James decided that he rather liked the Centipede. He was obviously a rascal, but what a change it was to hear somebody laughing once in a while. He had never heard Aunt Sponge or Aunt Spiker laughing aloud in all the time he had been with them (46-7).

In Dahl's stories, the notion of abuse has wider connotations than the physical. The language used by both adults and children often denotes vulgarity. Adults tend to verbally abuse children by calling them unpleasant names or sometimes comparing them with disgusting animals or foul things. Dahl himself in the opening chapter of *Matilda* hints at some adults' negative views of little children:

It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think he or she is wonderful (1).

Right from the start a child is regarded as a 'disgusting little blister'. The parents' blind adoration for their own child is introduced as 'a funny thing' and becomes 'the way of the world' (1). Humour is further added when the narrator feels 'sick' and asks for a basin 'when the parents begin telling us about the brilliance of their own revolting offspring' (1). Even school teachers 'suffer a good deal' (2) listening to those proud parents. The narrator's mocking humour escalates when he advises: 'If I were a teacher I would cook up some real scorches for the children of doting parents' (2), and spends a few more paragraphs describing children as 'a total wash-out' with 'no hearing-organs', or 'a particularly poisonous little girl', or 'the stinkers' (2-3). We wonder why the narrator has such negative feelings towards these small children. Here, Butler (2012) notes that Dahl's narrator 'fantasises about being a truculent teacher' whose indignation is mainly targeted on 'the deluded, doting parents...rather than children themselves' (7). Thus his usage of such terms as 'total wash-out', 'grub', 'stinker' is similar to 'the abusive language of Miss Trunchbull' (7). In *Matilda*, Miss Trunchbull tells Nigel Hicks: 'I knew as soon as I saw you that you were nothing but a piece of filth!' (137-8) and 'you little fool' (139). She shouts at Rupert calling him 'You ignorant little slug!', 'You witless weed! You empty-headed hamster! You stupid glob of glue!' (142) and 'you squirming worm!' (144). The Grand High Witch in *The Witches* calls the narrator 'the spying little vurm'. James is never called by his real name, his aunts refer to him as

‘you disgusting little beast’ or ‘you filthy nuisance’ or ‘you miserable creature’ (8). Mr Wormwood condemns his daughter ‘You’re a little cheat, madam, that’s what you are! A cheat and a liar!’ (49). All these names reflect surprisingly visceral images of children, stemming from deep-rooted revulsion in adults. With some exceptions for Danny, and Matilda, whose parents are ‘so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they [fail] to notice anything unusual about their daughter’, most children in Dahl’s books (4) are raised by unwilling relatives, or even in an orphanage. Their relatives simply ignore their needs, and treat them as beneath contempt. We wonder why child characters, who are often seen as meagre and harmless, especially in Quentin Blake’s illustrations, are called such harsh names. Hinting at the jealousy of the old against the young, it may be that Dahl is drawing on the irrational hatred for children often seen in fairy tales: itself based on resentment of the child’s potential for success and happiness, which is no longer possible for those whose opportunities have passed.

Dahl’s abusive language is not limited to his narrative description of each character. He does not waste time on sugar-coating his vocabulary, he simply ‘gobblefunks’ and adopts many bullying verbs. Such words as shout, boom, bark, yell, explode, scream, bellow, snort, snap, and thunder, are used by adults to bully a child repeatedly in all of his stories. Knowles and Malmkjaer (1995) note the avoidance of the possessive determiner when Dahl addresses Mr Wormwood as ‘the father’ to refer to Matilda’s father. This ‘has the effect of removing any hint of affection or familial solidarity’ (134-5). In fact, this pattern allows ‘the representation of the father as a cheat, liar and bully’ (135), as in the following example:

The father glanced down at the paper in his hand. He seemed to stiffen. He became very quiet. There was a silence. Then he said, ‘Say that again.’
‘Four thousand three hundred and three pounds fifty,’ Matilda said.
There was another silence. The father’s face was beginning to go dark red.
‘I’m sure it’s right,’ Matilda said.
‘You...you little cheat!’ the father suddenly shouted, pointing at her with his finger (47-8).

This extract reflects the high tension of a father who bullies and is then exposed by his own child. Matilda is presented as more mature, calm and gentle than her aggressive father. She is far cleverer and can even defeat him with her intelligence. The bullying nature of the adults illustrates how keen Dahl was to describe the difference between the gentle and the violent. The adults are one-dimensional examples of sinfulness –

selfishness, greed, wrath – while Dahl’s child heroes are model children: kind, loving, respectful and resourceful.

Dahl’s invention and his language innovation are also praised by David Rudd in “‘Don’t’ gobbelfunk [sic] around with words”: Roald Dahl and Language’ (2012). Rudd suggests that it may be more appropriate to locate Dahl’s use of language ‘within the nonsense tradition’ (54) where the joke, the earthy folk tale and cartoons can accommodate violence and morbidity rather than assessing him ‘according to traditional literary criteria’ (54). Dahl can create a world where ‘the powerless poke fun at those in charge, pointing out their hypocrisies and the ugly physicality’ (53). His characters certainly challenge notions of what is appropriate behaviour for children, by pushing at the boundaries of what was acceptable subject matter. The BFG farts in front of Her Majesty the Queen, and Matilda can put the superglue on her father’s hat or scare him with a talking parrot. She does not depend on her parents, which makes her behaviour unusual and socially unacceptable for a normal family.

Dahl provides deserved penalties for these tyrannical adults. At the end of the story, except for Willy Wonka, each character gets his or her own comeuppance. Miss Trunchbull and George’s Grandma become objects of ridicule, and Grandma and the Twits shrink into oblivion. Three aggressive farmers lose their livestock while waiting for the cunning fox to emerge from the hole. In addition, Dahl’s books for children read like morality fables whose violence is veiled by rewards: good Charlie wins the chocolate factory; clever Matilda lives happily with Miss Honey; generous James becomes a famous writer residing in the enormous peach stone; and resourceful orphan Sophie and the dream-catching Big Friendly Giant have their special houses built next to the Queen’s Castle in Windsor Great Park. These rewards obviously offer some satisfactory knowledge that justice does prevail in the world for the young, morally immature child reader.

Children, moreover, are given multiple opportunities to redress the balance, either in their own words, or voiced through Dahl’s narrative. James’s aunts are ‘two ghastly hags’ (12), Miss Trunchbull looks like ‘the Gorgon’, George’s Grandma is ‘the old hag’ who makes ‘a thin icy smile’ like a snake preparing to bite its prey, and he really hates ‘that horrid old witchy woman’ (12). Bruno calls the Grand High Witch ‘the filthy old cow’ (115). For Danny Mr Victor Hazell ‘was a roaring snob’ (44), and

Mr and Mrs Twit are already shown to be rotten by their moronic names. Dahl, the narrator, and children collude with one another in applauding their downfall.

In 1986 Dahl celebrated his 70th birthday talking about his flying accident and severe head injury. He argued that one cannot discount the possibility of change following bumps to the head. He gave an example of a man who was blinded all his life, but suddenly saw again once he was hit over the head with his wife's saucepan. His own head injury, Dahl believes, more or less contributes to his successful writing career. Tom Solomon, then a junior doctor who looked after Dahl during his final days in hospital in 1990, writes in *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Medicine* (2016) about Dahl's love for literature, his keen eye for detail and the head trauma that possibly affected his character and personality (64). Solomon does not totally discount Dahl's claims and explains that when people experience brain damage especially to the frontal lobes, this can 'unlock the genius within' and make them become slightly 'disinhibited'. In Dahl's case, he comments that what might have happened to him after the accident is that it gave him 'ability to be a bit rude, a bit outrageous and to write the sorts of thing people don't dare write and that was clearly one of the things that came out of his writing' (Hall, *The Great Lives*, BBC Radio Four, 2 January 2015). The blow to Dahl's head, some critics (Sturrock, Solomon) explain is partly responsible for his violent and macabre stories. Solomon (2016) suspects that Dahl's head injury affected both his personal life and his writing. He could be 'troublesome, argumentative and opinionated, and he didn't mind winding people up' (65). As for his stories for children, 'cruel and outrageous things can happen' (64) and '[a]s long as the stories were funny and made people laugh, [Dahl] did not care' (65). Solomon notes, Dahl's disinhibited behaviour due to the frontal lobe damage manifests in the BFG's dual personality when he is able to laugh and cry at the slightest little thing, as when Sophie contemplates:

What a strange and moody creature this is... One moment he is telling me my head is full of squashed flies and the next moment his heart is melting for me... (31).

Conclusion

As violence, threats, and bullies instil terror in a child's mind, the investigation of trauma theories is helpful in exploring Dahl's use of traumatic experience in his fiction, which at the same time adds the new complicated factor of a child reader. Dahl's writing for a juvenile audience does not exclude the unpleasant truth about vengeful children and cruel adults, especially when their behaviour is evidently unfair and illogical. In Dahl's world, there exist cruel adults who repeatedly abuse their power and commit violence against children. Dahl's writing is criticised for its aggression because his child characters never yield to adults' unjust treatment, and Dahl allows them to stand up and fight against their bullies. Normally children are relatively powerless in comparison to adults, and are particularly susceptible to harm, but in Dahl's texts, his child characters appear not to be scared, and are brave enough to fight. They can react instinctively to protect themselves, but when unharmed they are portrayed as kind and gentle. Although Dahl seems to be aware of the existence of trauma in each episode of violence and bullying, he does not express much concern over it. In addition, I argue that trauma in Dahl's fiction is suitable for children to read about and learn from, since children in his novels are no longer the object of pity, nor reveal much conscious memory of traumatic events. They transform themselves into powerful small creatures who stand up for themselves and attract admiration for their courage and unyielding nature. Instead of feeling traumatised or liable for psychiatric illness, Dahl's heroes and heroines are remarkably resilient and are able to cope with difficulties and injustice. Even though the moral messages are not explicitly displayed, readers will notice that in the end all bullies are deservedly punished and expelled from the text, while his victimised characters remain cheerful in adversity. Dahl provides optimistic solutions (or possible moral guidance) for calamitous situations by reaffirming that love, wit, bravery, and resilience matter in a cruel world. He also employs humour and fantasy to mitigate the aggressive elements of a story, which is the same technique that children learn to use when expressing feelings of hostility and insecurity.³ I shall propose further that in his writing, Dahl's major focus is to entertain his child readers, to capture their attention, and help them enjoy what they are reading, no matter how cruel and violent it may seem, as he regards his stories as a form of life experience. Ultimately they are designed to encourage children's love of reading and validate their imaginative world.

³ Dahl's application of humour and fantasy will be further discussed in Chapter Four: Comic Fantasy and Fantastic Characters in The Dahlian Magical World.

Chapter 3 : Gender in Dahl's Texts

'Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog' (*Matilda*, 111).

This bold proclamation made by Dahl's celebrated heroine, Matilda, displays her superior understanding of adult thinking. The girl explains to Lavender the philosophy that drives Miss Trunchbull's appalling actions with which parents never interfere. In many ways, Matilda is a great feminist role model, who has become an inspiration for many young girls. The book makes the feminist project visible and provides multifaceted views of girlhood and childhood. This chapter therefore shifts the focus from the trauma and violence of the previous chapter to the investigation of gender and feminist issues in Dahl's texts. Dahl is often accused of sexism, some critics further denouncing his fictions as antifeminist or misogynist. Indeed, much of the criticism levelled at his books engages with his alleged misogyny. In his texts, there is some serious stereotyping involved, not only in character depiction but also in the anterior assumptions about gender. The author often depicts men and women as so dramatically different from one another, with his portrayal of male characters accepted as the norm, that they do not attract as much comment as his depiction of women. In addition, while most of his child characters are sensible, quiet, and patient, it is adults that are larger-than-life characters. Some of his male characters exemplify the socially desirable role of a father, be it Danny's father or Mr Fox, but much more rarely are women presented positively in his children's fiction. Some are presented particularly negatively: for example, 'fearful' Mrs Twit who has been 'ugly and beastly' (31); and Miss Trunchbull, a manly woman who 'was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike' (*Matilda*, 61). While most of his major characters are boys, except the two heroines in *Matilda* and *The BFG*, and the unnamed girl in *The Magic Finger*, his stories display an abundance of old ladies, or mother figures who are normally depicted as malicious and cruel. It seems to critics that Dahl's depiction of women is much more offensive than the way he writes about men, yet many of his books offer up feminist complexities. The witches are terrifying under the guise of kind and beautiful ladies. Aunt Sponge, Aunt Spiker and George's grandmother represent cruel relatives who torture their charges, as Miss Trunchbull does her pupils. Yet we also have the positive examples of Miss Honey, the Magic Finger Girl, Sophie, Matilda, and even a sympathetic British Queen. Dahl is unique in the sheer grotesquerie of his female characters and makes their appearance unpredictable, or oppositional to normal social expectations.

Growing up in a house surrounded by women – his mother, three sisters, and nannies – Dahl wrote many stories showing his capacity as an advocate of female power as seen in the intelligent girls and independent women in *Matilda*, *The BFG*, and *The Witches* (the grandmother). Through a revisionary reading of Dahl's texts, this chapter considers whether it is possible to regard Dahl as in any sense a 'feminist' writer whose iconic Matilda, Sophie and Miss Honey markedly articulate liberal feminism from within a patriarchal social structure, as well as offer 'a new female metanarrative' (Pennell, 2012:112). Miss Honey, for instance, is a victim herself and needs rescuing from domestic violence. Through her career, she manages to free herself from her abusive aunt and makes her own decision to adopt Matilda at the end. On the other hand, Dahl's all too evident visceral disgust with (in particular) older women accounts for the animosity of his feminist critics. Nevertheless, Dahl's collections of comic verse, *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and *Rhyme Stew* (1989), as the titles suggest, reinterpret some of the world's renowned fairy tales from Cinderella to Hansel and Gretel by reconstructing and empowering the female roles; for example, when Miss Red Riding Hood 'whips a pistol from her knickers. She aims it at the creature's head' (25) – and turns herself into a businesswoman. Some of Dahl's parodies feature transfiguring aspects of women in the modern world and their surprise endings 'hinge on the introduction of modern devices' (West, 1992:117). The question then is whether there is sufficient evidence to build a case for viewing Dahl as a profeminist. Failing that, is it possible to identify any consistent attitude towards women and gender positioning in the texts?

The focus of discussion in this chapter will be the images and representation of men and women and the traditional roles of males and females presented in Dahl's books in a feminist context dealing with gender bias and moral orientation of justice and superiority. A brief contextual background of the women's movements is provided here alongside an explanation of their influence on Dahl's works. Mark I West's *Roald Dahl* (1992), Allan Warren's *Roald Dahl: From the Gremlins to the Chocolate Factory* (1994), Ann Alston's analysis of the 'unlikely' family romance in Dahl's texts, and Beverley Pennell's chapter in the *Roald Dahl Casebook* on Dahl's contribution to a feminist project in children's literature form the critical context for this chapter. It should be noted that there are still relatively few full-length critical studies of Dahl, though the four aforementioned critics write extensively about him. However, West and Warren are not particularly interested in feminist issues, while Alston focuses more on

Dahl's 'anti-authoritarian' stance and the 'Romantic mode' of his fictional families where the child 'metaphorically becomes the "father of the man"' (87). Pennell, on the contrary, displays an attempt to investigate some positive aspects of Dahl's portrayal of girls and women. In addition, a revelatory collection of Dahl's letters, *Love from Boy: Roald Dahl's Letters to His Mother* (2016), edited and introduced by Donald Sturrock, is also used to explore Dahl's art of writing and his overall attitude towards the two sexes, which he exclusively shares with his first female reader, his mother. Whereas critics have piled negative responses on Dahl's construction of female characters, I intend to analyze and interpret some of Dahl's texts against the usual critical views of him as misogynist, and to consider how the controversial nature of his work contributes to that accusation, through examination of those materials and the process of close-reading. Some of Dahl's most popular books which glorify heroines, such as *The BFG* (1982) and *Matilda* (1988), were published during the height of second-wave feminism and were claimed to support female figures, while *The Witches* (1983) 'has attracted the ire of some feminists' (West, 1988:71) whose campaign to ban it from several libraries in England proved successful.¹ The term 'feminism' is often posed in opposition to Dahl's works, thus a brief history of the women's movement might be helpful here in providing a context for discussion of his representation of female characters.

Feminist movements

The feminist movement widely refers to a series of political campaigns for reforms of several important issues for women who had little control over their own lives. The term 'feminism' was first used by French socialist Charles Fourier in 1837 to describe support for women's emancipation. According to the online *Oxford Living Dictionary* (2017) the term was derived from the French 'féminisme' and is defined as 'the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes'. The online *Cambridge Dictionary* (2017) provides a more detailed definition for the term as 'the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state'. This belief, it seems, has endured a persistent struggle for equality through at least three phases and the general use of the wave metaphor for the term is commonly accepted. In

¹ The American Library Association (ALA) rejects censorship and helps librarians resist censorship attempts. Its campaign also encourages free access to information by revealing a list of the 'Top Ten Most Challenged Books' every year to inform the public about censorship in libraries and schools. The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) collects reports from libraries, schools, and the media on attempts to ban books in communities.

order to organise the history of feminism, scholars have studied and raised questions about each wave's distinction and achievement. When do these waves start and end? What activities do they perform? In what countries are the concepts embraced? However, there is no one definitive history of feminist theory debates worldwide and no specific volume to capture this vast diversity in the development of discussion (Nicholson, 1997; Colebrook, 2004).

Although there is little consensus in defining the three phases of feminism, first-wave feminism, beginning in the late eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) focused mainly on better education, employment options and legal obstacles to gender equality, such as access to divorce, property ownership, and voting rights, which women had never gained before (Liddington & Norris, 1984; Sunderland, 2012). Their main goal was to increase opportunities for women who at that time felt strictly bound by their limited education and household duties due to traditional patriarchal authority. Another influential text of first wave feminism is John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which defends full political equality for women and argues that sex inequality inhibits the progress of humanity (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005). The first wave of the women's movement allowed women to obtain some equality through legislation and amendment to some existing laws. The term 'first wave' was coined after the term 'second-wave' feminism began to be used to describe a newer feminist movement that focused more on the reformation of social and cultural inequalities.

In the US, the 'second-wave' women's movement emerged in the late 1960s as part of women's activism after World War II (Evans, 1995; Cudd and Andreasen, 2005; Kolmar and Bartkowski, 2005). Women stepped further out of their domestic zone and called for sex equality. The movement attempted to challenge received wisdoms and hierarchical authorities, such as men's power over women, and was more 'concerned with material conditions' such as pay, equal opportunities, and contraception and abortion (Sunderland, 2012:21). In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues. Their major achievements in the US were the passing of the Civil Rights Act to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in the field of education and employment, legalising abortion and allowing sexual liberation. Simone de Beauvoir's statement in her key work *The Second Sex* (1952), 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (76), is regarded as one of the starting points of modern, radical, feminist thought and raises a number of important themes in current feminist debate. In the US,

Betty Friedan's ground-breaking work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), also offers major statements on the underpinnings of sex discrimination, false images of women and their limited social roles. Women, Friedan notes, are trapped in domesticity and all share 'the same problem, the problem that has no name' (17). Friedan's work is often cited as initiating the second wave of the women's movement.

The feminist activity that had blossomed from the late 1960s through the late 1980s inspired the struggle for women's rights across the world and tremendous progress had been made since the first wave. However, many women demanded fuller recognition of women's diversity and believed feminism was not just a political movement but an ideology (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005). Third-wave feminism arose in the early 1990s as a response to perceived failures of the second wave and a challenge to the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, considered good for women. Having its origins in the late 1980s from feminists who wanted to take social circumstance into account for 'a multiplicity of feminist goals', the third wave has been overly eager to define itself as something 'different' from previous feminisms and question the category of 'woman' (Colebrook, 2004; Cudd and Andreasen, 2005:8). It challenges the sex-gender distinction assumed by theoretical traditions and campaigns for acceptance and a true understanding of the term 'feminism'. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is the key to the third wave's ideology.

Viewed by feminists and sociologists, women have always been unfairly treated and taught to think of themselves in terms of gender binaries as their existence and social roles lie at the heart of a series of oppressive structures, which then produce different modes of subjectivity. Many literary works in the past contribute to specific gender norms where boys, men or fathers are commonly identified with a figure of authority and power, whereas girls, women, and mothers are connected with a less autonomous and more sympathetic and passive femininity. In her essay 'Feminism revisited', Lissa Paul (1991) argues that although feminist criticism has become 'an integral part of the landscape of children's book criticism in the twenty-first century' (115), issues of gender equity 'remain unresolved' (115). Moreover, women's literature as well as children's literature 'are devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities' (114). Paul claims: '[w]hat feminist theory has done for children's literature studies – and for all fields of literary studies – is to insist on the right to be included, not just as honorary white men' (Paul, 1999:116). By the early 1970s, feminist critics, Paul notes, tend to search for a feminine plot and 'a

feminine tradition of “other” stories: mother, daughter, sister stories’ (116). In addition, the relations between children’s literature critics and feminist critics which were challenged by Beverly Lyon Clark (1993) in her essay ‘Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers?’ ‘continued to resonate through the 1990s’ (116).

Dahl’s children’s texts of the 1960s to 1990s, which fall into the second wave movement, also depict roles of girls and women in a problematic way. While his small girls are resilient and smart, his adult women in his children’s books are rarely described as intelligent or morally decent, except for Miss Honey, and Grandmamma in *The Witches*. According to Alston (2012), Dahl’s ‘abhorrent’ and non-parental figures who ‘act *in loco parentis*’ ‘tend to be women who refuse to embrace their traditional caring roles’ (88). As Dahl himself was a product of a patriarchal society, his letters to his mother, first written when he was young, provide valuable insights into his attitudes as a boy and then a man in the twentieth century. Dahl’s caricatures of the people he meets at school and work tell us a great deal about how he viewed both men and women in his formative years. While Dahl has been especially vilified for his portrayal of women and girls, considerably less has been said about his depiction of male characters, and his own concept of masculinity, both as exemplified in his life, and in his portrayal of men and boys. With models as varied as Mr Wormwood, Willy Wonka, Danny’s father, Mr Twit, Mr Fox, and the BFG, alongside George, Charlie, and James, Dahl’s gallery of men is at least as rich and complex as his women. The foundations for these studies of masculinity were clearly laid at school, as shown in his early letters to his mother.

Dahl’s letters to his mother

From the latest collection of Dahl’s letters, *Love from Boy: Roald Dahl’s Letters to His Mother* edited by his biographer, Donald Sturrock (2016), we can trace Dahl’s narrative ability to select and blend some fascinating ingredients into compelling stories for his sole audience, Sofie Magdalene, his strong-willed, widowed mother. This four-decade correspondence was published in 2016 on the 100th anniversary of Dahl’s birth. Written over forty years from 1925 to 1965, these letters total more than six hundred. Reading these letters, we witness Roald Dahl turning from a boy to a man, and finally becoming a writer whose narration mirrors some parts of his creativity as well as his moral views. His first letter was written when he was only nine years old living away from home for the first time at St Peter’s, a boarding school. His letters become his only means of

communication to keep his family close to him; at the same time he satirises men and boys for a female reader. Dahl's narration in *Boy* (2010) reveals his habit of writing letters to his mother:

From that very first Sunday at St Peter's until the day my mother died thirty-two years later, I wrote to her once a week, sometimes more often, whenever I was away from home. I wrote to her...from my next school, Repton, and every week from Dar es Salaam...and then every week during the war from Kenya (81).

Dahl's correspondence with his mother over forty years not only emphasises the strong bond between mother and child, but also reflects Dahl's consistent and disciplined nature. The letters witness Dahl's life path as a naughty boy, a scheming teenager, an adventurous oil worker, a venturesome pilot, a successful writer and a caring father. Sturrock (2016) remarks: '[m]any of his early letters touch fondly on the domestic life he had left behind him' (5). We learn about his childhood adventures, his enemies, friends and teachers, his pleasure in deceiving or making fun of people, and several illnesses such as pneumonia, flu, measles and even a death at school. Once his schooldays at Repton end, his adulthood starts. Dahl has no further interest in the institution and even detests it after the unfair treatment he received there. He applies for a job at Royal Dutch Oil and starts his adventurous life there.

Dahl's letters reveal Sofie as an understanding and open-minded mother. Dahl, according to the BBC One Wales documentary on the occasion of his centenary in 2016, had his 'own real life champion in the shape of his mother' since his childhood. She is an 'extraordinary woman, ahead of her time: bold, well read, and with a wicked sense of humour' (Transalent, 2016). Those qualities are to be found later in him. Although his father died when he was little, he found an unlikely male role model in his mother. With her, Dahl can express his feelings freely, and is uninhibited in his use of improper words, schoolboy slang or demeaning criticism. The letters touch on subjects such as lavatorial humour, alcohol, and sex, that some might find odd for a son to share with his mother. Some of Dahl's childhood excitement and relish for the absurd in life are illustrated in his letters: for example: 'Mr. Wall is the most bad [sic] tempered man on the staff, but otherwise he is very nice. When he looses [sic] his temper he goes completely mad...on Wednesday he nearly threw himself out of the window! I've never seen anything so funny in my life' (Sturrock, 2016:52). These letters show Dahl's capacity as a satirical narrator writing for a reader who appreciates his ribald sense of

humour, and was presumably unshocked by his crude language. He depicts his maths master at Repton as ‘half-baked’ and ‘a short man with a face like a field elderberry, and a moustache which closely resembles the African jungle. A voice like a frog, no chest and a pot belly, no doubt a species of Rumble-hound’ (2016:45). At the age of fourteen, Dahl exercises his word choice and makes unusual comparisons, such as ‘a face like field elderberry’, and ‘a species of Rumble-hound’. He seems to be experimenting with language, especially the sounds of unusual, evocative words, and it was the bodies of his school-teachers – misshapen and flabby – that most attracted his attention. Dahl’s extensive correspondence may reveal many more facets of his exceptionally close relationships with his mother. Since his childhood, he was able to write freely to her and treat her as a friend and equal – which rarely happens with the women in his children’s fiction. We can see some characteristics of bold and determined women in Miss Honey and Grandmama; however, there are not many characters like Sofie Dahl.

Forty years later, the mature Dahl provides a more macabre detailed personality for each of his characters, both male and female, focusing on their faces, bodies, shape and size. Thus Captain Lancaster or Lankers, Danny’s teacher in *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975), ‘had fiery carrot-coloured hair and a little clipped carrot moustache and a fiery temper’. Dahl notes that ‘carrotty-coloured hairs were also sprouting out of his nostrils and his earholes’ (113), and that Lankers is sitting at his desk and making ‘queer snuffling grunts through his nose, like some dog sniffing round a rabbit hole’ (113). In *Boy* (1984), Dahl dedicates a whole page to discussing the ridiculous appearance of Captain Hardcastle, one of his St Peter’s teachers. He is ‘slim and wiry’; his hard and thin legs are compared to a ram’s. His hair is parted strictly straight till you can see a white line down the middle of the scalp. His moustache is the same colour as his hair, and becomes ‘[a] truly terrifying sight, a thick orange hedge that sprouted and flourished between his nose and his upper lip’ (2010, 109). Worse than his savage appearance, Dahl adds, is his ‘very limited intelligence’. Although Dahl is notorious for his physically repellent images of women in his children’s fiction, his depiction of men’s bodies, targeting facial hair and disproportionate limbs, is also a regular feature of his writing. He seems especially critical of hairy-faced men and correlates a moustache with aggressive, anti-social behaviour. Hairiness – the ultimate marker of masculinity – is his favourite target, but more often than not it signifies compromised virility, to the point of disgust and ridicule. Mr Twit’s whole face, for

instance, is covered with thick hair, which again ‘sprouted in revolting tufts out of his nostrils and ear-holes’ (2). His hairy face is ironically connected with his intellect as the narrator notes: ‘Mr Twit felt that his hairiness made him look terrifically wise and grand. But in truth he was neither of these things, Mr Twit was a twit’ (2). He is also ‘an extremely horrid old man’ (5). Mr Wormwood is ‘a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache’ (17). Clean-shaven himself, Dahl, Warren (1994) notes, ‘had a phobia regarding hirsuteness; it is described time and again, in tones of dismay if not outright horror’ (102). While beards might be considered the ultimate marker of masculinity, Michael Rosen, one of Dahl’s biggest fans, also notes Dahl’s serious concern about people’s facial hair. He recounts an experience when he and his five-year-old son Joe first met Dahl in 1980 when they were invited to the same TV programme. Rosen (2012) reminisces about how Dahl firmly told Joe that his father’s beard was disgusting. In the beard, Dahl insisted, collected bits of rubbish, even ‘a bicycle wheel’. Rosen concludes: ‘And that’s what Roald Dahl was like. When he spoke, he did sound very, very certain – even if what he was saying was extraordinary, amazing, weird, fantastical or downright crazy’ (2-3). In addition, bodies in Dahl’s writing are often distorted and out of proportion. In *Fantastic Mr Fox* the three farmers’ physical imperfections are heavily emphasised and identified with their undesirable personality. Boggis is ‘enormously fat’ (2); Bunce is ‘a kind of pot-bellied dwarf...so short his chin would have been underwater in the shallow end of any swimming pool’ (3); and Bean is ‘as thin as a pencil’ (4). All are ‘about as nasty and mean as any men you could meet’ (1). Once a body image disorder develops, the person’s weight and look become the central preoccupation, regardless of any other personal qualities, such as talent, understanding or thoughtfulness.

Among thirty masters at Repton, Corkers, a mathematics teacher, is the only one that Dahl finds at all interesting. He describes him in *Boy* as ‘a charmer, a vast ungainly man with drooping bloodhound cheeks and filthy clothes’ who ‘was meant to teach us mathematics, but in truth he taught us nothing at all’ (150). His lessons were filled with ‘thousands of splendid things’ he ‘cooked up to keep his class happy’ (152). He recounts a time when Corkers, while teaching, suddenly stopped ‘in mid-sentence and a look of intense pain cloud[ed] his countenance’ (152). He moved his head slowly from side to side and started sniffing the air ‘as though searching for a leak of gas’ (152). Later, he cried ‘This is unbearable!’ followed by ‘Somebody’s farted!’, the whole classroom then sprang into frantic activity to dispel the bad odour whilst the teacher

himself left the room, grumbling: 'It's the cabbage that does it! All they give you is disgusting cabbage and Brussels sprouts and you go off like fire-crackers!' (153). Warren (1994) might be correct in claiming that the book reveals Dahl 'in one of his most relaxed moods: neither vengeful nor self-aggrandizing, merely nostalgic for a period of time long gone and vividly remembered' (88). It reads like another version of Dahl's letters to his mother.

Dahl's male caricatures thus show that he can be as disparaging of men as he is of women. However, comparison of his male and female caricatures suggests that Dahl treats the two sexes differently. However negatively his male characters are presented, either through the keen eyes of the young or mature Dahl, his female characters are usually worse. Both their physical appearance and their behaviour are thoroughly scrutinised and depicted with disgust, especially for their extremes of weight (whether obese or skinny), which can dramatically distort their body images and our perception of their true nature. In his earlier letters, Dahl hardly mentions any women as his boarding schools are all-male communities. Nonetheless, when working for the Shell Oil Company in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, he meets new friends, discovers a different culture, and starts to satirise the women:

George & I were asked to go and have a drink at Mrs. Wilkin's house. Mrs. Wilkin is a frightful old hag who weighs 19½ stone (and is proud of it) and looks like a suet dumpling covered in lipstick & powder (Sturrock, 2016:132).

Still writing as a son to his mother, Dahl piles up the negative language (the precise figure of '19½ stone' and the image of 'a suet dumpling' tainted by cosmetics) to convey his sense of the woman's physical repulsiveness. Mrs Wilkin's obesity clearly disgusts him and obese women remain lifelong targets of Dahl's criticism. Mrs. Wilkin is in many ways a forerunner of female characters such as Aunt Sponge, who is 'enormously fat and very short' (11); Miss Trunchbull, who 'could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half (77); and Mrs Twit, whose 'fearful ugliness' (6) develops every day until 'you can hardly bear to look at it' (7). This physical aversion is strengthened by emphatic emotional words and detailed depiction of outrageous masculine traits in women. Even the matron at St Peter's in *Boy* is 'a large fair-haired woman' (85). Her 'enormous bosom' is like 'a battering-ram or the bows of an icebreaker or maybe a couple of high-explosive bombs' (90). The aggressive sound of these words - 'battering', 'bows', 'icebreaker' and 'bombs' - is purposely exploited to

reinforce the suggestions of women as a menace and threat to children, but also perhaps, a threat to men with their exaggerated sexual features. Dahl can convey a fearsome feeling from a woman's bosom by exaggeratedly comparing it with something heavy and dangerous such as a battering ram or a bomb, which, Dahl emphasises, 'scared me most of all' (90).

It is not only women's bodies that Dahl finds repellent, but also their overall vulgarity, appearance and crude display of wealth. At the age of 28, when working as a spy for British Security Co-ordination in New York without his mother's knowledge, Dahl gossips about American people, society and women. One letter is entirely about a wealthy woman named Mrs Evalyn Walsh McLean, whom Alf, Dahl's half-brother, calls 'Mrs Bloody Hope Diamond' (Sturrock, 2016:261), based on her display of a showy necklace:

It's a hell of a diamond; bright blue colour of an aquamarine and about this shape and size, and she walks around in her enormous house with this bloody thing around her neck and a small vicious dog under her arm (259).

Although his descriptions of both men and women are exaggerated, it seems that he describes the men differently and makes the women sound uglier and more disgusting. There is a specific distaste for women's bodies that is more sexualised than his depiction of 'ratty' or bandy-legged men, whose sexuality is if anything too improbable to be feared. Mrs Wormwood, for instance, is depicted as a large woman who 'had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out' (21). As Alston (2008) remarks 'food is used to make implicit judgements about a woman' (108), and we know, from her unhealthy TV dinners, that Mrs Wormwood is another of Dahl's monstrous consuming women. Equally repellent, though thin, unsmiling Mrs Pratchett, the owner of the sweetshop in *Boy*, 'was a small skinny old hag with a *moustache* on her upper lip and a mouth as sour as a green gooseberry' (33). Her filthy hands and greasy apron and dress make her 'the most loathsome' for the young Dahl. She is 'a horror,' a 'terrible drawback' of the shop (33). Dahl believes children hate her for 'good reason': 'She never welcomed us when we went in, and the only times she spoke were when she said things like, "I'm watchin' you so keep yer thievin' fingers off them chocolates!"' (34). Moreover, children hate her meanness: 'Unless you spent a whole sixpence all in one go, she wouldn't give you a bag' (34). Always a stickler for personal hygiene, Dahl observes that 'this disgusting old woman' (34) seems to know nothing about health regulations as she uses 'her

grimy right hand with its black fingernails' (34) to stir around inside the jars to get out the sweets. On his 'Great Mouse Plot' day, Mrs Pratchett 'stood behind the counter, and her small malignant pig-eyes watched us suspiciously' (36). Mrs Snoddy, in *Danny the Champion of the World*, is also negatively portrayed as 'a frightful woman...a sort of witch...she has seven toes on each foot' (115). On her husband's habit of drinking gin at school, Danny's father suggests: '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' (115). Miss Trunchbull's body is even more grotesque. She has a bull-neck, big shoulders, thick arms and powerful legs. Her face is more unsightly with 'an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes' (77). Nevertheless, before we encounter the bullying headteacher, Miss Trunchbull, in 1988, Dahl has already familiarised us with a menacing woman teacher in *The BFG* (1982) when the friendly giant tells Sophie his dream of saving the life of a 'fine arithmetic teacher' from drowning: 'Mr Figgins, who was unfortunately pushed off the bridge into the river by our gym-teacher, Miss Amelia Upscotch' (93). These portrayals distort women's bodies, making them less feminine and more repulsive. While his close relationship with his mother, both when they lived together or apart, suggests that he respects her as a unique female role model, the question remains as to why Dahl so often depicts his female characters grotesquely.

Female representation

Dahl's capricious universe is full of victims who fall prey to manipulative people. His books for adults depict largely grim versions of married life, featuring domestic comedy, violence, civilized savagery, and entrapment. Dahlian couples, for instance, are typically and equally portrayed in a negative way, often linked with their unfaithful and/or malicious nature. A vindictive wife and controlling husband expect to avenge one another if opportunity allows. Both men and women can exact equally their own private revenge. Marriage for Dahl then becomes 'domestic life enslavement' (103) and as Warren suggests: 'perhaps the most protracted conflict in all of Dahl's fiction is the battle between the sexes, most often exemplified by a mismatched couple' (97). In one of his short stories, *The Way Up to Heaven* (1962), Dahl allows Mrs Foster a good opportunity to free herself from her cruel husband by purposely leaving him trapped in a broken elevator. It becomes revenge against his sadistic behaviour as he knows that she has a pathological fear of being late, but always torments her by making her wait for him unnecessarily. Warren does see some problems in couples; he does not however address feminist issues or Dahl's portrayal of women in his analysis. While his adult

fiction provides no place or protection against this ‘irresponsible cruelty’ (113) for his surrogate characters, the child protagonists in his children’s books are opportunely allowed to overcome their misfortune in the end. Young readers can at least find some moral order presented. Ben Indick interestingly comments that Dahl is ‘less interested in correcting the world’s sins than in describing them’ (quoted in Warren, 1994:112). However sinful and morbid the world appears, it seems Dahl assigns much more wickedness and vice to his female characters, especially those in his books for children.

The Witches: Misrepresentations of women in the eighties.

Dahl’s witches are the most extreme embodiment of female wickedness and vice. It therefore seems perverse or provocative of Dahl to publish his most misogynist children’s text during the 1980s, a decade of revived feminist activity. The brief history of feminist thought, and the three recognised ‘waves’ of feminist theory discussed earlier partly elucidate the situation of women and their epistemology. The ongoing developments of gender history, especially those of second wave feminism, can be traced as directly relevant to Dahl’s interests, and social concerns as well as the themes portrayed in his books. The following section is concerned mainly with gender relations in Dahl’s books for children. There exists a diversity of feminist views on several of his books which evokes considerable controversy. While *Matilda* is highly praised as a feminist example of a girl’s fighting against injustice, *The Witches* becomes the most problematic book and most often attacked for its alleged sexism. When asked if any of his books caused an uproar, Dahl confirmed that ‘the one that has been attacked most frequently is *The Witches*...because some feminists claim that it presents women in a bad light’ (West, 1988:72). Dahl did not view this as a reasonable attack but felt disconcerted by the fact that the book was banned from school libraries in some cities in England. His insightful comment on the censorship is that the left-wing tends to be too ‘extreme’ in censoring books ‘for all their ideological differences’ (quoted in Hunt, 1994:206).

In his preface to the narrative of *The Witches*, titled ‘A Note about Witches,’ the narrator emphasises how ‘ordinary’ real witches are. They ‘dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ORDINARY JOBS’ (1). No human can easily catch them. Nevertheless, they are not really ordinary. They possess ‘a red-hot sizzling hatred’ (1) toward children and find pleasure in plotting, scheming and planning to get rid of them. Dahl repeatedly employs

the term 'ordinary' to forewarn young readers that they cannot trust any single woman on the basis of their appearance. Moreover, the narrator concludes that a witch can only be a woman. More importantly, they all look nice and kind. Dahl chose the figure of the witch as someone whose existence is profoundly connected with the myth of cruelty to children. It is fitting that the witches' antagonistic actions toward children correlate with female authority to control and repress children by instilling a fear of the supernatural.

In her 'Women Behaving Badly: Dahl's Witches Meet the Women of the Eighties', Anne-Marie Bird (1998) discusses the issue of misogyny in *The Witches*, and compares it with the film version directed by maverick British filmmaker, Nicolas Roeg (1994). Both Dahl and Roeg explore the unequal balance of power between the child and the adult, but the director seems to discuss it in much greater detail. Dahl's text could be viewed as misogynistic on a less explicit level by comparing the witch with the male Devil or a ghoul. Quentin Blake's illustrations and Dahl's humour help lessen the horrifying nature of the witch. Although there are some fairly grotesque images of the witches in Dahl's text, those witches are relatively asexual and less horrifying than in Roeg's film, which are more likely to frighten young viewers. James M. Curtis (2014) also points to the fact that Dahl's 'absurd caricaturization of his witch character' (175) is used to evoke a sense of comic relief and reduce 'the potential "tension"' (175) created by their horrifying images. While the notion of women as evil is found in both works, female sexuality is claimed as a stronger weapon or threat in Roeg's film. Roeg's witch, Bird notes, emphasises how women are conventionally depicted and defined in terms of their sexuality. The 'good woman' is usually passive, helpless, blonde and dressed in white, whilst the 'bad woman' is sexually active, predatory, dark-haired and dressed in black. The Grand High Witch in Dahl's text is nameless, and connected mainly with an evil and malicious plot under her mask, whereas Roeg's witch is named Eva, a derivative of Eve, signifying sins of seduction and temptation, an erotic object of desire. The negative representation of female sexuality, Bird argues, is dependent upon a construction of patriarchal society and the male-dominated film industry. Bird further discusses Freudian fears and castration anxiety in the male viewer through the representation of woman. Traditionally, women are viewed as castrated beings; the Grand High Witch or Eva in Roeg's screen narrative displays fetishistic images and becomes 'objectified, lulling the male...into a false sense of security' (123). Eva is a signifier of both sex and death, Bird argues, whilst in Dahl's text, evil is not gender-specific but is located within the 'all-powerful' threatening adult figure' (121).

Even though Roeg's film can capture the core element of the book, his female witches are presented as far more fiendish and frightening women.

Dahl's text serves different purposes connected with the time of its publication. In the latter half of the 1980s, gender politics had a greater impact and received more interest than the dynamics of the adult-child relationship. Published in 1983, *The Witches*, as well as Dahl, received considerable criticism for misrepresenting females by stating that witches could only ever be women:

A witch is always a woman. I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches are women. There is no such thing as a male witch. On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male ... Both are dangerous. But neither of them is half as dangerous as a REAL WITCH (3).

As noted by Elizabeth Oliver (2008), Dahl's statement 'does split the sexes', guiding readers towards the misconception that extreme evil inhabits only the female sex. Nonetheless Bird concludes that the witch in the film symbolises the powerful 'new woman' whose sexual appearance awakens the anxiety of contemporary, patriarchal society: a fear of social change. Interestingly, while in *The Witches*, the narrator insists on the non-existence of a male witch, the opposite affirmation is stated in *The BFG*, when the BFG responds resentfully when asked about his mother: 'My Mother! Giants don't have mothers! Whoever heard of a woman giant! Giants is always men!' (42) For Dahl, each creature is typically assigned to their specific role and sex and it is impossible to transcend their designated stereotype.

In her interpretation of horror films conceptualising women as victims of the monster, not as the female monster her/itself (1), Barbara Creed (1993) in *The Monstrous-Feminine* challenges this overriding patriarchal and one-dimensional understanding of women. Creed notes that Freud's connection of the sight of the Medusa with the horrifying sight of the mother's genitals implies the problem of sexual difference and castration: 'As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality' (3). The concept of monstrous-feminine is constructed by a patriarchal ideology where men see women as castrated or the toothed nightmare of *vagina dentata*. This myth about women as castrators illustrates 'male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces' (106). In addition, Creed points out that 'the witch' becomes 'one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that

belongs to woman' (73). Their frequent alleged crimes are of a sexual nature (75) as they are considered 'the "other", the weaker but dangerous complement of man' (75). The image of the witch, she notes, 'continues to play an important role in the discourses of popular culture – particularly in children's fairy stories and in the horror film' (76). The witch is defined as 'an abject figure whose supernatural powers are linked to the female reproductive system' (77). Thus the representation of Dahl's witches in the 1980s as castrating women rather than mothers, who are plotting to eliminate all children in the world, possibly reflects man's fear of castration which leads him 'to construct another monstrous phantasy – that of woman as castrator' (7). The narrator in *The Witches* convinces the reader of the terrifying power of witches:

A witch never gets caught. Don't forget that she has magic in her fingers and devilry dancing in her blood. She can make stones jump about like frogs and she can make tongues of flame go flickering across the surface of the water. These magic powers are very frightening (3).

The narrator's feeling of abjection along with his demonic portrayal of the witches in their uncanny humanlike camouflage can be viewed as an example of the misogynistic notion of monstrous-feminine. In addition, while Bird gives a more positive image of the witch in Dahl's book, most of the witches as often represented in films and books represent heartless women whose power is hidden underneath their pretty and charming appearance. The Grand High Witch, when removing her mask, looks 'foul and putrid and decayed' (60). Once she announces: 'You may rrrree-moof your vigs!' (63), all the witches reveal their true identity: bald female heads and red, naked scalps. Baldness in women is highlighted to intensify their ugliness. Their grotesque regional hotel conference appears to the narrator 'monstrous' and 'unnatural' (64). This exaggerated portrayal of women is often found in Dahl's stories, linked with aggressive behaviour. The Grand High Witch and Miss Trunchbull, for instance, are harsh and terrifying beings. When they talk, no one can answer back or argue with them. Anyone who dared to do so would be severely punished. The Grand High Witch's initially harmless appearance completely contrasts with her bestial, grudging manner:

A vitch who dares to say I'm wrrrong
Vill not be vith us very long! (69)

Her dictatorial German accent, in which the letter 'w' is pronounced as a 'v', intimidates all her followers in the meeting room. Dahl's witches, as Anna Wing Bo Tso (2012) notes, 'are represented as the ambiguous, nameless creatures' whose

grotesque physical appearance and nonhuman identity ‘disturb the border between human and beast, natural and supernatural...self and other’ (223). Dahl’s witches and headmistress become abject figures that threaten and challenge our physical identity. Their victims shake with fear when confronting these women. Dahl uses many verbs to describe how the Witch expresses herself in a less than womanly manner. She can ‘snarl’, ‘shriek’, ‘growl’ and ‘glare’ at the other witches. All these verbs bear derogatory meanings and represent wild and animalistic behaviour. A *femme fatale*, she becomes the source of visceral fear with a hideously deformed face. Such presentation completely subverts the expected feminine characteristics. The witches’ song constitutes a ritual recitation performed as political propaganda, which effectively arouses a child-hate feeling. Their well-plotted scheme with the assistance of a clever chemical will be achieved by turning all children into mice and letting their parents eliminate their own mice-transformed children through the cruel device of a mouse-trap. William Todd Schultz (1998) also notes the child-hatred inherent in these powerful women who ‘despise children, and particularly enjoy turning kids into creatures all grownups hate and therefore destroy... In fact, the witches take special delight in making grownups eat their own offspring’ (472). Instead of fulfilling the role of caring and loving mothers, Dahl’s witches exemplify the impending dangers hidden beneath a mask of benevolence and beauty.

In her article ‘Are witches the ultimate feminists?’ (*The Guardian*, 5 July 2017), Kim Kelley gives a brief overview of Kristin J Sollee’s book: *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (2017), arguing that ‘men have always feared powerful women’. Sollee explains why certain women have been condemned and persecuted for their perceived connection with witchcraft, as the witch is the ultimate personification of terror. The book elucidates patriarchy’s terror of witches, sluts, and feminists since they ‘embody the potential for self-directed feminine power, and sexual and intellectual freedom’. The witches in general are deemed the epitome of evil. Interestingly, the presentation of all witches in Dahl’s text, in effect a tale of witchcraft in contemporary England, can be related to traditional witches, since both are the ultimate personification of terror. They can perfectly instil fear in both the unnamed boy and young readers. Many adults, therefore, protest against the reading of Dahl’s book out of concern about the misrepresentation of women as witches. In a parody of a global federation of women’s institutes, *The Witches* envisages a more inclusive and creative community than those which assume the social actor always to be a man. Instead of living on the edges of society as old and poor women, these two hundred witches enjoy a comfortable

life, and form a large network of witches around the world. Each owns a magnificent sweet shop to trap children. They set their goal and aim to achieve it with careful instruction from the 'Brainy One' (78). They even run a prestigious version of the RSPCC, which stands for 'the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children' (a slight variation on the real-life NSPCC). When they chant in unison, they bring a sense of eeriness. The creative Grand High Witch invents the 'Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker' a Lewis Carroll-like magic formula, comprising a boiled telescope, fried tails of forty-five brown mice, a roasted alarm-clock, a grundle's egg, the claw of a crabcruncher, the beak of a blabbersnitch, the snout of a grobblesquirt and the tongue of a catspringer (89). Her gloating song: 'Down vith children! Do them in! Boil their bones and fry their skin! (79) demonstrates the witches' vindictive plan to destroy every child. The only person who discovers their plans is significantly male: the boy who enters the meeting room unintentionally.

The multifaceted relationship between self and gender is thoroughly discussed in Jennifer Mitchell's "'A Sort of Mouse-Person': Radicalizing Gender in *The Witches*' (2012). The article notes the ambiguity of the narrator's gender in the story and claims 'the narrator's bodily shift as a model for transgender transformations' (39). A nameless and genderless narrator is recognised forty pages into the story. He is not given a chance to grow into a man, and his transformation from boy to mouse evokes a serious question about his true gender identity since his sex as a mouse is never defined. The narrator becomes 'a mouse-person' and willingly accepts his loss of identity: 'I feel rather good. I know I'm not a boy any longer and I never will be again' (120). It possibly suggests an alternative gender, which need not be categorised. Apart from 'the boys-turned-mice', readers witness 'the women-turned-witches', who draw their attention to the implication of the transitions. Although the traditional characterisation of the witches reinforces the idea that male witches are virtually unimaginable, Mitchell claims a strangely conflicting presentation of the witch creature, whose performance and physical traits suggest gender ambiguity in the novel. The witches' appearance, outfits and accessories such as gloves, hats and pointed shoes exaggerate their femininity. However, without these and their masks, the witches resume their non-gender. They have no toes; their feet are wide and square; their gestures and voice are even less feminine. There is some 'potentially subversive representation of non-heteronormative characters' (29). Mitchell points to the fact that the ambiguity of gender presentation allows child readers to refigure and project images of themselves. As Mitchell suggests, the narrator's bodily

shift can be read as a model for transgender as Dahl infuses the story with ‘radical gender politics’ (39). A similar pattern of gender shift can also be traced in Dahl’s other female characters, such as the Olympic champion, Miss Trunchbull, and the menacing Mrs Twit, whose repulsive-looking, unfeminine gestures and personality invite readers to laugh at their gender ambiguity.

Mrs Wormwood vs Miss Honey: the myth of true feminine fulfilment

Whilst such powerful women as the witches and Miss Trunchbull are condemned for their unfeminine personality, most of Dahl’s other women are depicted as repulsive or ludicrous. Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker boast of their timeless beauty. Aunt Sponge declares ‘I look and smell as lovely as a rose!’ (7) and Aunt Spiker claims ‘Oh, beauteous me! How I adore/ My radiant looks!’ (7). The overly made-up Mrs Wormwood, who is described as ‘the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face’ (92), is always proud of her looks. Dahl ridicules the limitations of women who live within specific social expectations. They reflect Dahl’s way of showing how society demands women be pretty in order to satisfy men and achieve success. In *Matilda*, Mrs Wormwood and Miss Honey are introduced as women whose attitudes and personality are diametric opposites. Mrs Wormwood’s mode of living is similar to that of conventional women in the mid twentieth century, of whom Friedan (1963) rightly observes: ‘They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights...’ (198). She further adds that ‘Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife...They gloried in their role as women’ (199). What Friedan observes effectively mirrors the conservative social values of American women after the Second World War. Interestingly, written in the eighties, *Matilda*’s female characters like Mrs Wormwood still maintain this kind of vanity. She embraces the traditional gender stereotype, and lets herself be trapped within traditional notions of femininity. In her conversation with Miss Honey, she asserts:

‘I’m not in favour of blue-stockings girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books...Now look at *me*. Then look at *you*. You chose books. I chose looks’ (91-2).

The happy and uneducated housewife Mrs Wormwood triumphantly concludes: ‘And who’s finished up the better off? Me, of course. I’m sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you’re slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children

the ABC' (92). Insisting that '[a] girl doesn't get a man by being brainy' (93), she proudly embraces a passive dependence upon her husband and feels fully satisfied with this idealised housewife role. However, instead of carefully looking after her children, she seeks happiness in bingo playing and wearing make-up. Her hair-colouring products along with her Elizabeth Arden face powder reflect the passive housewife consumer whose enjoyment is found in fashion and beauty. Moreover, in her discussion of the family meal in children's literature, Alston (2008) suggests that the types of food and the places a family eat 'reinforce notions of idealistic families' where a good family 'will eat home-made food round the dinner table at set times, ... a bad family will eat takeaway or at different times, or in different rooms' (105). In opposition to the 'good' mother, Mrs Wormwood allows her children to have their suppers 'on their knees in front of the telly' in the living-room. Their 'TV dinners' are prepared 'in floppy aluminium containers with separate compartments' (*Matilda*, 20). Her failure to feed good wholesome food to her children and her indulgence in cosmetics possibly construct another type of 'a sexual being' and 'a consumer who refuses to conform to the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother' (Alston, 2008:112). In the end it seems that this merry housewife is not as successful and as happy as she thought. The whole family escapes to Spain to avoid being caught by the police because of Mr Wormwood's car-dealing crimes. Matilda adds 'Daddy said we were *never* coming back!' (228).

Miss Honey, on the contrary, finds happiness and meaning through the pursuit of personal authority, autonomy and freedom. She 'characterises unquestioningly' as a university graduate and her visit to the Wormwoods symbolises 'the war against anti-intellectualism' (Beauvais, 2015:283). Her femininity is to be found through her mild and quiet nature. On the outside, she may seem to be very fragile but inside she is really strong and self-reliant. She remains determined to live by herself in a small cottage and manages to survive on a low salary, which, as Matilda remarks, 'was your chance of freedom' (195). Matilda also thinks her poor teacher is 'marvellously brave' (197) and a real heroine. Her final decision to adopt Matilda at the end of the story implies that women should develop themselves and their intellectual abilities, rather than making a choice to be just a housewife or under anyone's control. In the end, Mrs Wormwood is shown as a witless woman who failed to perform the task of a caring mother and easily decided to desert her child because 'It'll be one less to look after' (232). In conclusion, education becomes the key force that can ensure equal treatment of the sexes, as was argued by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: 'Men

and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in' (36-37). It is through education that girls and women like Matilda, Miss Honey, or the grandmother in *The Witches* deliberately free themselves from the control of powerful men and adults in society.

Matilda, Sophie and the magic finger girl: liberal feminists against injustice

As feminism has offered women possible ways of looking at themselves and their society from different angles, there was a wide range of forms of feminist activity and thinking during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s which engaged in a new and vital practice for women (Hollows, 2000:3). Many feminists attempted to change every aspect of their lives, to be able to make decisions about their own body. They fought for equal pay, equal access to education, free contraception and abortion. Such apparent changes of fashion, lifestyles and dress as cutting their hair short, or wearing turtleneck pullovers, and trousers or jeans gave them a sense of freedom. These garments became a common metaphor for intelligence and power. However, girls and women prior to and during Dahl's period seemed to be overlooked and marginalised in society. After over fifty years of suffrage, the question of how much feminism had really achieved by the 1960s remains unresolved. Women still lived in a patriarchal society that limited their choices and maintained expectations of gender-specific roles. In addition, the post-war reconstruction, which was based on a large work force, full male employment and mass consumption of the new consumer goods usually known as Fordism, contributed to new modes of consumption. Women, Hollows (2000) notes, played their role as 'consumers rather than producers' (124) in capitalist modernity. As Friedan (1963) pointed out, some books, advertisements and stories in women's magazines in the US insisted on the feminine mystique of the mother's and wife's role: to devote their lives to their children, to fulfil their children's needs, and 'to choose among all possible careers the career of wife-mother-homemaker' (193). Capitalism, together with creative selling campaigns, set out to convince young women and brides to gain 'happiness through things' and to establish a comfortable home through a great number of desirable household products. She adds 'there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future' (55).

In 2018, the UK commemorated the centenary of women over 30 years old who held £5 of property winning the right to vote, and many societies' attempt to make male and female roles more egalitarian in terms of housework, childcare, and paid

employment. Although huge changes for women's life and careers are seen globally, they are still far from being equal with men. During the last three decades of Dahl's writing for children (from 1960 to 1990), most girls and women in his books are shown as powerless and barred from speaking or expressing their thoughts, especially by male adults. The small girl who has no name in *The Magic Finger* receives no attention when she politely pleads that the Greggs should stop hunting. They only laugh at her, and Mr Gregg, the girl realises, 'just walked on past me as if I weren't there' (2) and tells her to go home, the only place for women to spend their time, and mind their own 'P's and Q's' (4). The 'minding her own Ps and Qs' statement highlights the view that girls and women should admit the limits of their ability. Similarly, no one has taken any notice of an orphan like Sophie in *The BFG* as she admits: 'No one is going to be worrying too much about me' (25). Matilda is taught that 'small girls should be seen and not heard' (5). Although in most traditional literature boys are placed in the role of heroes by gender stereotyping, in his writing from the 1960s to 1980s, Dahl proves that girls can become heroines. Most of his girls start off as powerless and are ignored or ridiculed; nevertheless, they possess those qualities once assumed to be found only in boys and men. They are determined, brave and intelligent. In order to prove themselves perhaps they need extra magical powers or intellect to achieve recognition and equal rights with those around them.

In examining the three novels, *The Magic Finger* (1966), *The BFG* (1982) and *Matilda* (1988), Pennell (2012) notes Dahl's reconfigurations of conceptualisations of 'girl', 'woman', and 'family' across two decades. During these twenty years, the UK witnessed leading women achieve active roles which more or less reflected changes in women's status in society. An increasing number of women moved into jobs that used to be done by men. More women worked as members of parliament and took more roles in professional fields, not only in social welfare or education. To date the UK has had two female Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May. Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister of the UK from 1979 to 1990. Her 11 years in the post made her the longest serving British Prime Minister. In an interview with BBC Radio 4 on 11 January 1972, she emphasised 'the need for more women in Parliament,' and repeated her belief that there would be no female Prime Minister in her lifetime. Known as the 'Iron Lady', Thatcher did not consider herself self-consciously feminine but the reverse. Working with many male politicians, she claimed 'men are not a reasoned or reasonable sex' (King, 1972). Her speech to the National Union of Townswomen's

Guilts Conference on May 20, 1965 revealed her attitudes towards power relations between males and females: ‘If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman.’² This quotation marks her as a proto-feminist leader; nonetheless some consider her political leadership that of a surrogate man. She became leader of the Conservative party at the height of the women’s movement, another version of the monstrous feminine, as illustrated, due to her personal toughness and potential to disrupt the patriarchal symbolic order. In one caricature, satirical cartoonist Gerald Scarfe, draws her ‘as aggressive or cutting or biting, like an axe or scissors or something that was really, really attacking’ (Bushby, 2013). In one cartoon she has bitten the head off a doll-sized man.



Figure 3:1 Scarfe’s Baroness Thatcher as ‘the monstrous feminine’ (Bushby, 1983)

Her aggressive image may remind us of two of Dahl’s chief female characters whose leadership and achievements in grasping power set a negative example of a woman in power: the Grand High Witch and Miss Trunchbull. They possess the courage of their convictions and embody what patriarchal men have always liked: violence, the defence of the status quo, established and absolute power. On the platform at the annual convention, the Grand High Witch denounces her ‘Inkland vitches’ as: ‘Useless lazy

² Thatcher’s speech was taken from the website of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, which offers free access to more than 8,000 Thatcher’s statements and historical documents relating to her period. Available online: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/101374> [Accessed 5/4/2018].

vitches! Feeble frribbling vitches! You are a heap of idle good-for-nothing vurms!’ (66). All the witches gaze at her ‘with such a mixture of adoration, awe and fear’ (59). Miss Trunchbull, ‘a giant in green breeches’ (106), stands towering over Amanda Tripp, giving her a powerful order: ‘I want those filthy pigtails off before you come back to school tomorrow!...Chop’em off and throw’em in the dustbin, you understand?’ (108). When asked if Thatcher was considered a feminist icon, novelist Linda Grant said: ‘We regarded her as a man dressed up in a skirt suit’ (The women’s blog, 2012). Nevertheless, these women pushed their way into a man’s world and promoted leadership as a female quality in a way that women today struggle to do, especially Thatcher, a pioneering woman prime minister, who really ‘normalised female success’ (*The Guardian*, 5 January 2012). In August 1983, when the Prime Minister had a minor operation to repair slight damage to the retina of her right eye at a private hospital in Windsor, Dahl sent flowers and a letter to her: ‘Please accept this little posy from a neighbour who is mighty relieved that you have made such a good recovery’ [released 2013].

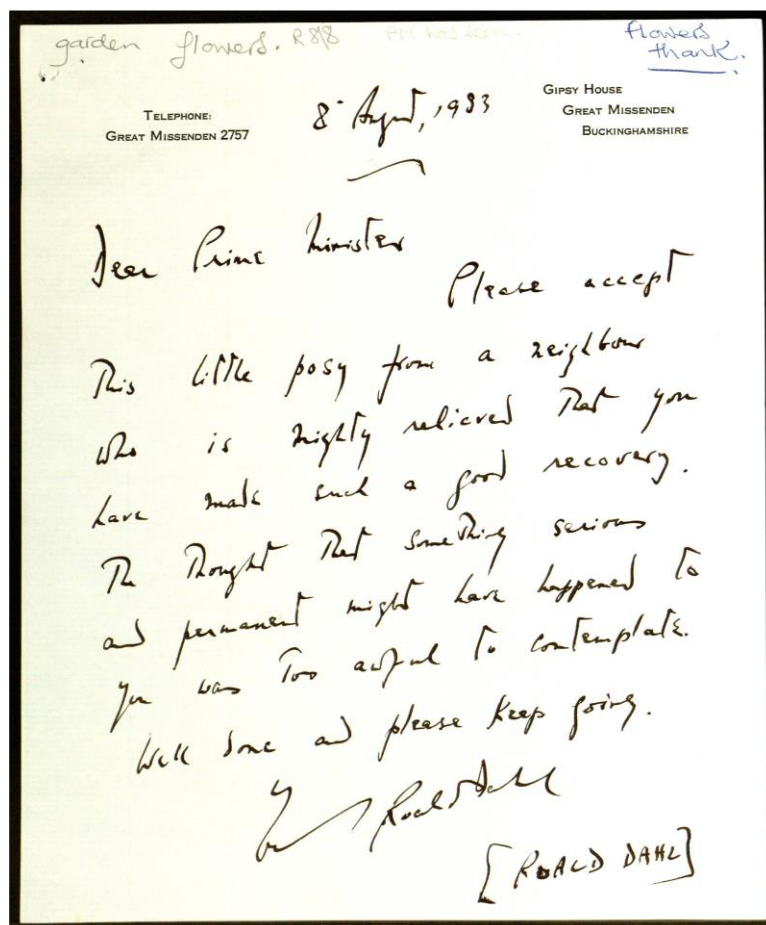


Figure 3:2 Roald Dahl letter to MT
(Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1983)

Thatcher replied to Dahl in appreciation of his kindness, the quality Dahl always emphasises as the most significant attribute for humanity.

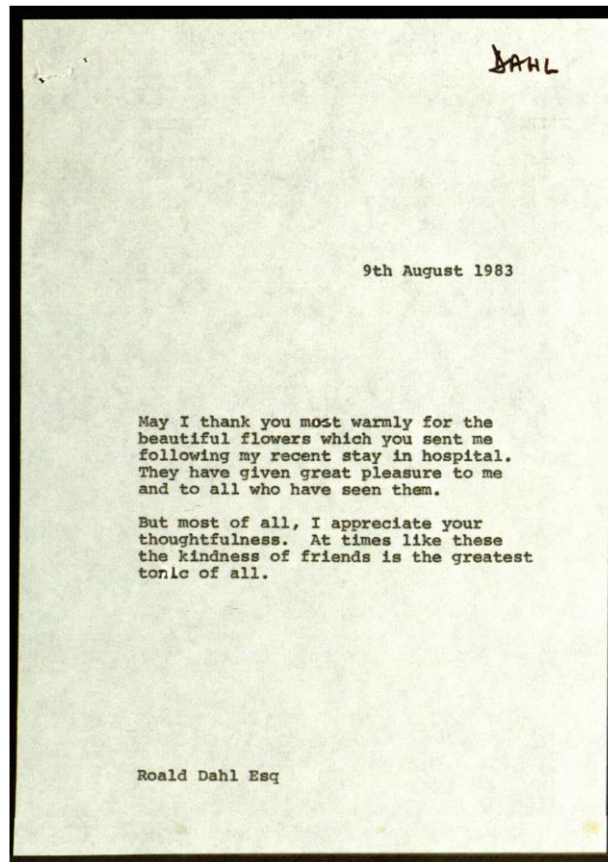


Figure 3:3 MT's reply to Roald Dahl
(Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 1983)

Another example of a successful woman in the media, Dame Jenni Murray, an English journalist, broadcaster, and alumna of the University of Hull, has been a regular presenter of *Woman's Hour* since 1987. *Woman's Hour* has been broadcast on Radio 4 since 1973, and its daily programme offers a female perspective on the world through reports, interviews and debates on crucial issues affecting women's lives. She declares a woman should not be defined by her marital status and encourages women to understand how gendered socialization works and how it harms women. In 1987, Diane Abbott, a Labour politician, became the first black woman to be elected to the House of Commons. Julie Hayward, a canteen cook at a shipyard in Liverpool, is the first woman to win a case under the amended Equal Pay Act. In 1988, she took her case to court when she had not received equal pay with her male colleagues for the reason that her job was valued as less skilled. She won finally. These are all examples of individual women in the news who successfully challenged social and legal attitudes to women's status. These women's achievements and symbolic leaps forward led to some positive social change during the

last two decades of Dahl's life which might have influenced his portrayal of strong girls in his writing. However, Miss Honey in *Matilda* is less fortunate in her situation. She is abused by the head teacher who 'arranged with the school authorities to have [her] salary paid directly into [Miss Trunchbull's] own account' (195). She was allowed only one pound a week pocket money. She manages to live poorly, yet happily and freely, in a cheaply-rented cottage.

Learning about gender roles is an essential part of children's knowledge construction and helps them become aware of their roles in society. The focal novels of Dahl during the 1960s to 1980s have now been widely analysed to uncover gender messages. The stories of three heroines reconfigure patriarchal narrative conventions by permitting little girls to take crucial roles in the primary storyline. His narrative strategies, Pennell adds, exhibit girl characters' self-reflexivity about their gender positioning in both the public and private spheres. *The Magic Finger* is then projected as a proto-feminist novel, whose protagonist is an 'agential girl' (108) who symbolises the fairy tale character of the young witch. She is self-reflexive about her uncontrollable magic finger, which works effectively on two occasions. Her finger assigns a cat's whiskers and tail to her abusive teacher, Mrs Winter. It also transforms the Greggs into ducks. She justifies her actions by applying suitable punishment to all inappropriate behaviours. This superpower, the young narrator admits, comes whenever she gets angry and starts to see 'red'. The magic finger, Pennell suggests, can be read as 'the symbolic phallus' as it arises within her own body: the girl gets 'very, very hot all over' followed by a tingling feeling in her right forefinger; finally 'a quick flash, like something electric' (8) comes out of her. Another interpretation of her finger is 'an offensive gesture' (105) to fight against powerful adults. Unaware of the girl's inner power, men laugh at her protest against animal killing. Are their laughs, Pennell questions, pointed directly at the girl's fussiness and bossiness which are traditional female traits, or to her 'girly, soft-on-violence attitude' (108) against blood sports? Whatever their reason, the girl's victory can be achieved only through her witchcraft, which is considered as traditional femininity. The girl's major concern is about social issues, in which case her ultimate mission is to transform the attitudes of male characters towards the patriarchal practice of hunting. The girl needs special powers since her rational talk fails to convince them. Writing the text in 1966, the same year Friedan founded the National Organisation for Women (NOW), when women started to raise awareness of female authority, Dahl allowed his female character to step out of the

private sphere and assert her voice in the public sphere. Still the girl can be viewed as a transgressive child instead of a transgressive female. The girl with her wild magic cannot fully develop herself into a true heroic figure in the 1960s because of her major flaw, which is typically connected to a negative female characteristic: the inability to control both her special powers and her righteous indignation against attack.

Dahl's reconfiguration of his second female protagonist, Sophie in *The BFG*, distinctively reflects crucial concepts of second-wave feminism: courage, independence, intellect, with the art of negotiation and without magical powers. Pennell points out that the traditional aspects of masculinity, such as brave effort and rationality, are added to female character attributes. Sophie is also self-reflexive about her powerless situation whilst being wrapped in the Giant's blanket, and tries to control her fears. Her self-reflexivity is found later in her scheme to convince the Queen of the harmful child-eating giants. Dahl diversifies Sophie's experience in the public sphere by exposing her to several places outside her orphanage, allowing her to react and respond to various unusual sequences of events. Several conversations with the BFG reveal Sophie as a self-contained and assertive girl with a lively inquiring mind. Upon hearing of the Bonecrunching giant's preference for Turkish human flesh, she sardonically asks 'What's wrong with the English?' (18). Once the girl child and the aged giant form a deep friendship, the plot, as Mark West observes, 'is driven by decisions made mostly by Sophie' (Pennell, 2012:108). The Queen is introduced as a powerful Head of State, whose authority is far beyond the reach of ordinary people. Nevertheless, she is willing to listen to a small girl and cooperates with her. She is self-controlled when seeing Sophie sitting on the window-ledge and remains 'astonishingly self-composed' (151) as when she first meets the giant. As the Head of State, she firmly gives orders to her army. The story brings them all together, two females and one giant to accomplish their tasks. The Queen performs a supporting task similar to what the Grandmother does in *The Witches*. However, while Pennell thinks that Sophie's relegation to the role of the BFG's mentor undermines the novel's feminism as she finally 'returns to being of secondary importance' (112), I find that she is upholding the same storyline as the BFG. She becomes a girl who surpasses the sentimental construction of femininity and can play several roles whilst staying with the friendly giant. They both treat each other as equals. Her extensive knowledge may seem to make the girl far superior, but she never embraces this advantage. She is clever enough to know when to ask, and how to teach him, and is key to Dahl's success as the author of this book.

It can, however, be argued that *Matilda* reveals Dahl at his best as a defender of gender equality, and ‘makes a significant contribution to the feminist project’ (Pennell, 2012:113). Clementine Beauvais (2015), however, in investigating ‘interconnected aspects of the novel’s system of restorative justice: class prejudice and child giftedness’ (277), further argues that Miss Honey makes a good mother because she is educated. Dahl’s support for child empowerment against adults is thus ‘infused with class prejudice’ (278). The Wormwoods, archetypal villains, obviously represent ‘materialistic petty bourgeoisie’ (277) with ‘a “distinctive set of values,” including being “individualistic, and proud of it” (280). Their social and gender bias, she affirms, ‘emerges throughout the novel: they value their son Michael more than they do his sister’ (280). Through his subversive use of humour, ‘slippery narrative voice and the implied reader’ (278), the class tensions of the novel are overlooked in favour of Matilda’s precocity. Beauvais acknowledges ‘Dahl’s immense talent’ which contributes to Matilda’s ‘canonization as role model for reading and education’ which helps ‘absolve the novel from its more contentious ideological undertones’ (291). While Sophie exposes all the good traits of female power, Matilda is portrayed as a more perfect feminist icon. Her attributes comprise independence, sheer intelligence, determination, empathy, modesty, and resilience. Her close connection with her teacher, Miss Honey, demonstrates a new female metanarrative in a real world. They symbolise educated professional women ‘with the potential for economic and social independence’ (Pennell, 2012:113). On the contrary, Miss Trunchbull and Mrs Wormwood are illustrated in an unrealistic and more comic mode. The strong female character, such as Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter* of the 90s and 2000s, is foreshadowed by Matilda. As the icons of their era, both Matilda and Hermione are well known for one thing – they are amazingly intelligent. Their quest for knowledge is substantially represented by the image of having their nose in a book, the origin of their unfailing cleverness. It is their emotional and intellectual brilliance that saves others from crisis. Matilda, nonetheless, is more calm and consistent than Hermione and can be regarded as a more modest version of girlhood, as she never shows off or openly presents herself as special or knowledgeable.

A self-made girl, Matilda pays no heed to her parents’ nonsensical instructions. Her worth is never recognised by them, and she is confident enough to find her own method to achieve what she wants. For example, she walks to the library on her own and makes a cup of chocolate by herself. Dahl does not present these girls and a sensible

woman like Miss Honey through a single definition of femininity, whilst a vain woman like Mrs Wormwood, whose fashion and beauty can be thought of as pleasurable feminine practices, is always presented as someone whose knowledge and worldly experience are confined and limited within her house. She is also depicted as a lazy housewife. We witness the power of gender as Mr Wormwood proudly declares to his son, Michael: 'Well, my boy, your father feels he's in for another great money-making day today at the garage! I've got a few little beauties I'm going to flog to the idiots this morning. Where's my breakfast?' (54). Mr Wormwood's statement reveals him as a typical husband who is being macho and showing off. At the same time this commanding husband can freely express his negative views towards women in front of his children without caring about their feelings. It should not always be the female character's job to show empathy. Whilst Sophie and Matilda freely reveal their sympathy in an emotional incident, I do not believe Dahl makes these girls emotional or sympathetic just because they are female. Sophie 'felt like crying' (138) when the BFG kissed her cheek whilst waiting for the Queen in her back garden. Their tears must not be seen as weakness, but the result of compassionate thoughts about other living things.

The Magic Finger can be counted as a forerunner of *Matilda* which allows him to experiment with creating a powerful girl who resolves both a personal and a wider social problem. Hence, over a decade later, *The BFG* and *Matilda* prove that in both a real and fictional world where girls are constantly suppressed and dominated, there remain dignified women who can resist every stereotype ordained by men. They represent the essence of a true female character who inspires, and knows their own mind to achieve what they desire. However, it should be noted that while Dahl's boys such as James, Charlie and Danny, can achieve their tasks simply because of help from others and a degree of good luck, Dahl's girls have to work harder and require both their intellect and some extra magic power in order to fully overcome their obstacles. When considering the characteristics of their enemies, to some extent, the boys have to confront less terrible and wicked opponents than the girls do; thus the boys' achievements are far less notable and memorable than those of the girls (*The Witches* are perhaps the main exception as the boy suffers the worst fate of being turned permanently into a mouse by the Grand High Witch).

The absence of a mother figure and a family

It is noticeable that many of Dahl's books for children do not seem to promote the institution of the family as most of his child characters lack parents. Several stories focus on orphans or children under the care of their relatives. The Wormwood family can be considered atypical – both of Dahl's usual family configuration in his children's fiction, and of the traditional nuclear family of the time, as the parents do not view their child as a valued member of the family. The absence of parents in his other texts, especially a mother figure, is so obvious that we wonder whether Dahl intentionally omits the mother or father role in each story. In 'A Drive in the Motor-Car' in *Boy*, Dahl tells readers about his mother's love and dedication when he, at the age of nine on a Christmas holiday, has been involved in a car accident. Dahl and his whole family (five siblings and his mother) go for their first drive in the new motor-car. The driver is his half-sister, who has taken only two half-hour driving lessons and has no experience of a sharpish bend in the road. She takes the bend at high speed and loses control of the car, which crashes into the hedge. Fortunately, nobody is hurt except Dahl, whose nose has been 'cut clean off my face' (103). He remembers how his mother handled the situation:

My mother disentangled herself from the scrimmage and grabbed a handkerchief from her purse. She clapped the dangling nose back into place fast and held it there... 'Never mind the glass!' my mother said. 'We've got to get this boy to the doctor fast!' (103-5)

The extract shows how quickly a responsive mother reacts instinctively to a sudden accident to save her son's life. The most impressive example of maternal care in *Boy*, however, is when Dahl reminisces about the time he was in hospital waiting for an operation on his spine, and discovered his mother had kept all his letters:

my mother...kept every one of these letters, binding them carefully in neat bundles with green tape, but this was her own secret. She never told me she was doing it. In 1967, when she knew she was dying, I was in hospital... she didn't tell me she was dying nor did anyone else because I was in a fairly serious condition myself at the time. She simply asked me how I was and hoped I would get better soon and sent me her love. I had no idea she would die the next day...when I recovered and went home, I was given this vast collection of my letters (81).

Dahl's mother had carefully treasured every one of her son's letters despite several house moves during wartime bombing. Dahl himself never knew of her actions but felt tremendously touched by this. He remembers her as a protective and heroic mother who would come to rescue her children when needed. In *Boy*, while waiting for a brutal

caning at school, he wishes his mother ‘would come bursting into the room shouting, “Stop! How dare you do that to my son!”’ (49). Yet however much love both Dahl and his mother had for each other, we hardly see much evidence of a mother’s love and care for her child in his stories. Except for Charlie, who has both parents and grandparents living under the same roof, and George and Matilda, whose parents are both alive, other children meet with unexpected twists of fate, many of them preposterous. James, for example, is orphaned when his parents are killed by a rhinoceros. Making these unreal and uncommon situations for twentieth century children funny could potentially eliminate any emotional feeling of loss and death. The unnamed boy in *The Witches* loses his parents in a car accident, and is in the custody of his loving grandmother, of whom the boy admits: ‘I felt closer to her than my mother’ (6). Sophie is raised in an orphanage. Danny never meets his mother, and spends all his life with his caring father. Even the giants in *The BFG* are not born of a mother, but rather ‘they simply appears, the same way as the sun and the stars’ (42). In short, most of Dahl’s texts focus on only one adult and one child. As Alston (2008) points out, the author ‘is notorious for emphasising the divide between parents and children, insisting that adults and children fight against each other rather than live together’ (65). Yet his subversive opposition becomes ‘a didactic notion of what families should ideally be like’ (65), illustrated by both positive and negative examples.

Although Dahl never had the chance to live and learn from his father, since he died when Dahl was only four years old, his imagination of ‘the most marvellous and exciting father’ (8) is seen through his portrayal of Danny’s father in *Danny, the Champion of the World*. His father is a wildly funny person whose smile is tracked through his ‘brilliant blue eyes’ (9). Danny also marks his father’s sincerity through the expression of his eyes. His plots and plans never bore Danny and he is as ‘sparky’ a father as any boy ever had. Like Danny’s father, Dahl himself was a marvellous storyteller who could turn a single bedtime story into serials for many nights. Although he cherished memories of his mother, and illustrates some of them in his narration, he exposes a more complex imagination of a father role in some novels. In addition, the cigar-smoking grandmother in *The Witches* more or less resembles Willy Wonka, Harald Dahl and Dahl himself. Schultz notes the similarity between the Grandmother’s eyes and those of Wonka, as both are bright and sparkling. She also walks around the house with a ‘gold-topped cane’ (473) like Wonka. Her missing thumb can be compared with Harald Dahl’s amputated left arm. While the Grandmother survives pneumonia,

Harald died from it. Like Dahl, she is 'a wonderful story-teller'. All share a deep-rooted personality, and it seems that Dahl 'continually reworked the same material...in an attempt to make metaphorical sense of it' (Schultz, 473). In the absence of parents, his Grandmother becomes the guardian of the unnamed boy, whose ambiguous self is trapped in a mouse body. The boy frankly welcomes his fate stating: 'I was not just trying to console her. I was being absolutely honest about the way I felt' (120). This is mainly because he knows that his Grandmamma will wholeheartedly accept his altered self. Grandmamma's unconditional love and acceptance positively reinforce the model of loving and caring parenting. The boy can confide in her, and their bonding experience 'intensely solidified his closeness with Grandmamma and the ensuing celebration of this alternative family structure' (Mitchell, 2012:34).

Dahl seems to be repeatedly creating fractured or partial families which are free to remake themselves in new ways. Sophie successfully reconstructs a new family with the Queen and the BFG, while the conventional family becomes less significant in *Matilda*. Although both of her parents are present through the whole story, Matilda finds comfort, love and care, not from them, but from her teacher, Miss Honey. Their expressions of intimacy are unlimited as both can openly share their feelings and secrets. Though Matilda is still a young child at the end of the text, Dahl nonetheless connects her experience to that of an adult woman by placing her in relation to the divergent stereotypes represented by Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull. Although the last two female figures retain their single status, they are represented by completely contrasting characteristics. Miss Trunchbull is single and brutal, while Miss Honey is gentler and more sympathetic. These female subjects explicitly assert their growing independence and rely solely on their own mental, physical and intellectual abilities. Furthermore, Miss Honey can also be claimed as a great example of a liberal woman who is not trapped in the feminine role assigned and expected by a selfish patriarchal society. As a single woman, she finds a way of working and adopting a child of her own choice. She is also good at her job as a caring teacher who does not hesitate to visit Matilda's parents once she realises her remarkable talents. She becomes more assertive towards the end of the book, and able to give useful advice on how to adopt Matilda legally. Quentin Blake, Dahl's illustrator, also draws her looking more vigorous in an active outfit at the end of the story.

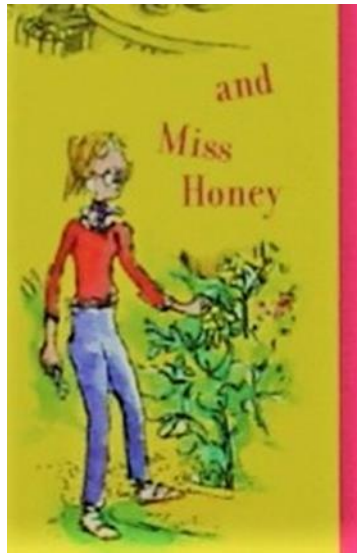


Figure 3:4 Miss Honey illustrated by Quentin Blake
(*Matilda*, 1988)

Beauvais (2015) additionally views ‘Matilda’s literal adoption by a schoolteacher’ as a sign of ‘problematic ideas of a complete absorption, by a benevolent, middle-class educational system, of the genius child who will champion its values’ (291). In other words, Dahl assumes that his readers share his disdain for the vulgar Wormwoods, and align themselves, as he does, with Matilda’s middle-class precocity, as recognised by her teacher. Dahl reconstitutes his fictional families, here and elsewhere, to show that just one sympathetic parent or any surrogate person – whether father, grandmother or giant – can substitute for the ideal family as long as they fully provide love, care and understanding for small children and allow them all the opportunities they need to live a fulfilling and successful life.

Rewriting woman: Dahl’s reconstruction of female roles from the classics

There remain some doubts among feminist critics about the essential values in fairy tales where boys and girls are presented in ‘different developmental paradigms which are products of gendered social practices’ (Bettelheim quoted in Stephens & McCallum, 2013:204). While fairy tales, as Bettelheim suggests, characteristically offer ‘maturational rites of passage’ which allow the child to deal with a ‘universal human problem’ (204), their primary mechanisms for cultivating roles and behaviours distinctively between boys and girls remain unresolvable issues. Boys in fairy tales possess an active and powerful role with courageous and clever attributes. On the contrary, girls are often shown as passive, dependent and self-sacrificing. According to Stephens and McCallum (2013:205-6), from the mid-1970s, ‘folktale collections began

to appear which bring together only stories in which female characters are central and manifest agency through cleverness, resourcefulness, courage, perseverance, and related qualities'. Women from the classics, like Cinderella, Snow White, and Little Red Riding Hood, are frequently retold and their roles are redefined, especially concerning gender representation. Dahl himself takes many significant or recurrent themes and motifs from the classics in his narration. Suzy Evans (2014), in 'Who's Afraid of Roald Dahl', calls attention to the similarity between James' giant and growing peach and the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk; and also between Cinderella's ugly stepsisters and James' cruel Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge. Pennell sees two parallel Cinderella stories in *Matilda*. A young Cinderella is to be found in *Matilda*, while the adult Cinderella exists in *Miss Honey*, whose woodland dwelling and living conditions contain some elements of the fairy tale genre. Miss Trunchbull becomes the 'Ugly Sister' or cruel stepmother, and her gigantic being inflicts misery on the two characters. Both need a rescue and their act of each rescuing the other reflects 'feminist reversion of the patriarchal storyline' (115). While in most traditional literature boys are placed in the role of heroes by gender stereotyping, Dahl proves that girls can become heroines. Independent of male assistance, Dahl's women rely chiefly on their own prowess and encouragement. Tom de Castella (2011) writes: 'Dahl is picking up the baton of the evil stepmother and the fairy godmother' (BBC News Magazine online). However, Dahl not only contemporises these classic ingredients, he also subverts the traditional conceptualisations of girls and women. Delicate and subservient women are then converted into headstrong and bold fighters. Still, there are elements of caricature in the portrayal of some heroines and other female antagonists, who are often depicted grotesquely. Hortensia, for example, 'is a role model for Matilda' because she 'is an outsider, a subversive. She does not complain. She is fearless' (Sturrock, 2017:7). It is interesting to note that women in Dahl's fiction who show their remarkable confidence and resilience are always categorised as outsiders. Similar to Hortensia are those female characters in many renowned classic fairy tales who were once a victim and are then turned into powerful and strong-minded heroines under Dahl's reconstruction and inversions in *Revolting Rhymes* (1982). Little Red Riding Hood is no longer deceived by a hungry wolf. Instead, she shoots him dead. Manly and modern, Miss Riding Hood keeps her weapon safely hidden. Instead of carrying the gun at her waist under her belt, like a man, she conceals it in her 'knickers', a true parody of a woman's most secure and secret place. No amateur shooter, she points straight to the wolf's head and 'bang bang bang', she fires at it not once but thrice. At the end of the story, the writer

concludes that a few weeks after the wolf was killed, he meets Miss Riding Hood wearing a 'lovely furry WOLFSKIN COAT' (24). She is now carrying a new weapon – the wolfskin coat to warn off other wolves – for her self-defence. Dahl further reformulates Miss Riding Hood in 'The Three Little Pigs' story. She is not only outsmarting the shrewd wolf but is also turning against the pig. The last stanza of the rhyme reads like this:

Ah, Piglet, you must never trust
Young ladies from the upper crust.
For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes,
Not only has two wolfskin coats,
But when she goes from place to place,
She has a PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE (25).

Readers are now forewarned about the untrustworthy characteristics of young women from the upper class. They should have no fear of their nobility but of their shrewd and witty behaviour. Dahl's reworking of these stories allows readers to witness a stronger, more confident and business-like Little Red Riding Hood. She achieves connected conquests through her cunning opportunism. The traditional Snow-White, meanwhile, becomes a hitchhiker, a worker in a city, and even a burglar who steals 'a magic talking looking-glass' (13) from her cruel stepmother. The mirror is finally used for a betting forecast on the races and earns Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs a fortune. Dahl's Cinderella becomes even more assertive and vigorous. He forewarns the readers that his real Cinderella story is 'much more gory' than the 'phoney' old story (3). His robust 'Cindy' can 'beat her fist against the wall,' and instructs the Magic Fairy to send her to the ball to compete with her jealous Ugly Sisters. This new Cinderella expresses her simple wish to the Magic Fairy: 'Oh kind Fairy, this time I shall be more wary. No more princes, no more money...I'm wishing for a decent man' (6). Ultimately, she chooses not to be chosen, to marry a jam-maker and create a happily- ever after marriage by herself. Gretel in *Rhyme Stew* (1989) seeks no further help from any man. She still saves her brother, as told in the old tale from the prison-stable and the boiling pot, but in a more sturdy and vigorous fashion: 'Young Gretel in her pinafore / Flings open wide the oven door... / And Gretel with a springy jump / Takes aim and kicks [the old dame] on the rump. / She totters forward, in she goes / Head first, and last of all her toes' (63-4). Gretel dives into the scene as a classic hero, but this time in her 'pinafore' dress. She dares to kick her evil enemy into the oven. Dahl's classic women are no longer kept in their passive domain, nor expected to be viewed as epitomes of weakness and irrationality. They wait no more for a romantic rescue from a 'heroic' Prince Charming.

They become more independent and audacious, able to make their own choices and claim their position in society.

Conclusion

Assessment of Dahl's depiction of male and female figures presents some difficulty in defending him as a protofeminist writer whose iconic Matilda and Sophie display a kind of heroic feminism, whereas some characters, such as Mrs Wormwood and the two aunts in James's story, both satirize and reinforce the traditional stereotypes of a woman's role in society. His texts also configure patterns of masculine and feminine desirability and it may well be that children will accept the following paradigm:

Good men: clean-shaven, brave, clever, a leader of family

Bad men: hairy-faced, dirty beards, 'fat, short, lean' (*Mr Fox*, 5), deceitful

Good women: gentle, 'mild and quiet' (*Matilda*, 60), slim, thoughtful

Bad women: vulgar, loud, have an 'ugly thought' (*The Twits*, 7), either too 'tiny' or 'gigantic'.

Dahl's children's texts make effective use of the grotesque in depicting males and females which suggest that in constructing oppositional notions of masculinity and femininity, our society has standardized what is grotesque in feminine and masculine appearance and behaviour. While critics and readers have long debated whether Dahl is an anti-feminist, the reality is that his children's fiction immerses the reader in a grotesque, satirical world, which over time has accumulated changing relevance to the continuing debate about sexism in our real world. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it veers from offensive caricature of women to sympathetic portrayal of those who are exploited by those more powerful than themselves. There is little evidence that Dahl set out to rectify gender inequality in his writing, nor can we argue that his writing becomes consistently more supportive of oppressed women and girls. It is perhaps true to say, however, that Dahl's writing supports the child underdog of both sexes, and it is easier to make a case for this, than for any more specific feminist agenda. If anything, Dahl creates compassionate relationships across the generations and beyond the family to sustain both girls and boys, men and women. At present, women across the world still struggle over their rights as well as the meaning of gendered identity as the unequal relations between men and women are still unresolved in the twenty-first century, long after Dahl's death. Dahl's late writing during the 1980s reflects his concern about

gender roles and creates inspiring female characters who can stand alongside men or individually fight for their own justice. In a talk with children during his visit to Melbourne, Australia in 1989, Dahl, at the age of 73, told his audience how he came up with a humorous poem about 'Mother Christmas'. He gave credit to his wife, Liccy, who initiated the project to raise money for Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity by selling a Christmas card. Dahl wrote a rhyme and Quentin Blake drew the picture of a female Father Christmas, and the rhyme went like this:

Where art thou, Mother Christmas?
I only wish I knew
Why Father should get all the praise
And no one mentions you.
I'll bet you buy the presents
And wrap them large and small
While all the time that rotten dirty swine
Pretends he's done it all.
So Hail To Mother Christmas
The uncomplaining slave!
And down with Father Christmas,
That something something knave! (Lily Steiner, 2016)

Dahl assumed that his 'cunning card' would attract mothers who did all the shopping to buy his cards. Meanwhile, this short narration of a female Father Christmas satirises the assumption of stereotyped social and cultural roles of men and women. It also reflects that gender inequality is experienced differently. It is the wife who shoulders all the tasks during the festive season, cooking, buying and wrapping all presents, whilst the husband takes all the credit for Mother Christmas' hard work.

Dahl's reconstruction of the family should not be viewed as replacing the mother role in society but rather as another plausible reordering of the social system. The nuclear family, therefore, would not be the only model adhered to as long as children learn to become more resilient and rational under the close supervision of understanding and caring adults. The notion of a surrogate family as a secure and warm unit can be encapsulated through a firm statement of the boy in *The Witches*: 'The fact that I am still here and able to speak to you...is due entirely to my wonderful grandmother' (6). As Erica Jong in the *New York Times Book Review* suggests, the grandmother not only represents 'a loving and understanding woman', but also 'possesses qualities often associated with male heroes' (West, 1992:88). The book is, for Nancy C. Hammond, 'an appealing, fanciful tale of devotion', and for Jong, 'finally a love story'. In *The Witches*, Dahl's most attacked novel, the author creates a 'curious'

but 'honest' tale, which 'deals with matters of crucial importance to children: smallness, the existence of evil in the world, mourning, separation, death' (Jong quoted in West, 1992:88).

Chapter 4 : Comic Fantasy and Fantastic Characters in the Dahlia Magical World

No animal is half as vile
As Crocky-Wock, the crocodile.
On Saturdays he likes to crunch
Six juicy children for his lunch
And he especially enjoys
Just three of each, three girls, three boys.
He smears the boys (to make them hot)
With mustard from the mustard pot.
But mustard doesn't go with girls,
It tastes all wrong with plaits and curls.
With them, what goes extremely well
Is butterscotch and caramel.
It's such a super marvellous treat
When boys are hot and girls are sweet.
At least that's Crocky's point of view
He ought to know. He's had a few.
That's all for now. It's time for bed.
Lie down and rest your sleepy head.
Ssh. Listen. What is that I hear,
Galumphing softly up the stair?
Go lock the door and fetch my gun!
Go on child, hurry! Quickly run!
No stop! Stand back! He's coming in!
Oh, look, that greasy greenish skin!
The shining teeth, the greedy smile!
It's Crocky-Wock, the Crocodile!
(‘The Crocodile’, *Dirty Beasts*, 1983)

Dahl's whole philosophy of humour and fantasy can be seen as encapsulated in this short tale taken from *Dirty Beasts*. Published in 1983, the book is one of Dahl's classic collections of comic verse for children featuring a set of aggressive animals in conflict with human beings. Dahl characteristically exaggerates the animals' sadistic and vengeful behaviour, though Crocky-Wock is perhaps the worst. The opening line of the poem, 'No animal is half as vile as Crocky-Wock, the crocodile' warns the reader to beware of him, possibly evoking memories of Dahl's previous book *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), which also features a crocodile determined to devour 'juicy' children. What is striking here, and typical of Dahl's work as a whole, is his founding of a comic fantasy on a deeply repellent idea: not just the crocodile's voracious appetite, but the poem's enactment of his entry into the child reader's bedroom to eat him too.

As we follow the story, we know that 'Crocky-Wock' eats six children every Saturday. There is no explanation as to why he needs three boys and three girls to satisfy his appetite, but being specific about numbers is very much a feature of

traditional nonsense writing: as for example in Edward Lear's limerick about the old man with a beard housing 'Two owls and a hen, four larks and wren.' When the crocodile's eating process begins, Dahl fully exploits the juxtaposition of violence and comic rhyme schemes in his narration. For Crocky-Wock the children are just a regular weekend treat needing appropriate seasoning. With perhaps an oblique reference to the rhyme 'What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice, and all things nice,' the girls are associated with sweet things, 'butterscotch and caramel,' while the boys ('slugs and snails and puppy-dogs' tails') are smeared with mustard.¹ More sickening still are the rhyming of 'crunch' and 'lunch,' and the notion of children as 'juicy' to eat. Finally, the 'greasy, greenish,' 'greedy' crocodile is heard 'galumphing softly up the stair' (perhaps an echo of Carroll's poem 'Jabberwocky' – as indeed is the crocodile's name), ready to gobble up the child listener, no longer safely positioned outside the poem. The creature's stealthy menace – beautifully captured in 'galumphing *softly*' – closes the poem with the frisson of a horror film, though in Carroll's poem (which invented the word) it is the triumphant boy who is 'galumphing back' with the head of the slain beast to show his father.

It is easy to dismiss this poem and others like it as simply tasteless, exacerbated by Dahl's obvious enjoyment of the whole simultaneous performance of both writing the poem and imagining its being read aloud as a bedtime story. Martin Butler,² who set three of the *Dirty Beasts*, including 'The Crocodile' to music in 1988, remarks in his programme notes: 'Although Dahl's poems were written for children, he makes no compromises when it comes to sophistication of language or confronting challenging, even disturbing, concepts' (Butler, 2017:6). This is indeed the essence not just of Dahl's comic fantasy, but as this thesis has argued, his overall philosophy as a children's writer. Dahl assumes the child reader or listener will relish the hilarious horrors of his world as much as he does himself, and if the poem ends with the crocodile creeping up

¹The rhyme sometimes appears as part of a larger work of a children's poem called *What Folks Are Made Of or What All the World Is Made Of*. Other stanzas describe what babies, young men, young women, sailors, soldiers, nurses, fathers, mothers, old men, old women, and all folks are made of. Most scholars attribute the original children's version of the poem to the English poet Robert Southey (1774-1843). In the early versions of this children's poem, the first ingredient for boys is either 'snips' or 'snigs', the latter being a Cumbrian dialect word for a small, slippery eel. Available online: <https://www.famlii.com/girls-sugar-spice-little-boys-made-childrens-poem/> [Accessed 9/10/2018].

² Martin Butler is a composer, pianist and Professor of Music at Sussex University. He recorded the *Dirty Beasts* in 2016 with the New London Chamber Ensemble, performing 'Telling Tales: Musical Stories', with Guest Narrator, Simon Callow' at the Middleton Hall, the University of Hull on 24 February 2017.

the stairs to get him, this is no worse than what happens in the traditional nursery rhymes we take for granted. Greg Littmann (2014) notes that ‘Dahl’s ability to enrapture children through his horror fiction makes him too important a cultural force not to be made widely available to children’ (189). His artistic and ‘consummate’ skill of narrating stories of terror, violence, and death brings readers pleasure as ‘what children are discovering is not the joy of cruelty but the joy of *literature*’ (188).

Watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don’t believe in magic will never find it (*The Minpins*,³ published posthumously in 1991).

Dahl’s parting words to his young audience at the end of his last children’s book, *The Minpins*, explicate his distinctive belief that the world is a wondrous land where magical things can happen, whereas for those, especially adults, who do not look for magic, the world becomes a mundane place. Fantasy, in Dahl’s books, brings the world alive, and frees one from a relationship with it based upon submission or compliance. *Esio Trot* (1990), Dahl’s last book to be published while he was still alive, is the only book for young readers that does not contain any fantasy elements. Although it includes comical illustrations and farfetched situations, ‘everything that happens in the story could conceivably happen in the real world’ (West, 1992:108). Dahl’s magical element is not separated or explained away and for the author, ‘the impossible or unreal parts of life mix freely with the everyday’ (Nell, 2014:196). In the *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy* edited by John Clute and John Grant (1997), Dahl is described as a ‘UK writer, long famous for a succession of CHILDREN’S FANTASIES running from his first publication...to the end of his life’ (245). In truth, what his books do is demonstrate his uncanny ability to sometimes think and write from the child’s perspective or that of a manipulative and domineering narrator who tends ‘to control (while adopting the guise and tone of a friendly confidante) rather than to allow freedom of interpretation’ (Hunt, 2012:180-1).

This chapter shifts the focus away from the gender issues of the previous chapter and takes the reader through Dahl’s magical, fantastical and sometimes nonsensical world. Its aim is to examine the nature of fantasy in Dahl’s works in the context of

³*The Minpins* is perhaps the only one of Dahl’s works for children in which humour does not play a major role. He referred to this book as a fairy tale (West, 1992:111).

comic modern fantasy, as all of his children's books deal with humour and belong to the post-war period. The first section will offer a brief history and definition of fantasy. The remainder of this chapter will discuss in more detail the technical aspects of fantasy, its sub-genres and the secondary worlds and purposes for which Dahl has used these concepts. Dahl's style of comic fantasy and his main influences will be the chapter's focus in order to discover whether his writing develops and changes over his career, and how he uses and reconfigures pre-existing forms. As Cheryl Lyn Blake (2009) explains, if 'a struggle of good battling evil is an integral element and driving force of the text in the world of children's fantasy' (3), the major concern is how the fantasy world helps instil moral attitudes in the young. Fantasy can be an effective genre for exploring moral themes as it allows the reader to view the world ironically. Dahl's stories lead the reader into those new fantasy worlds where human nature is satirised and criticised: thus extreme lessons are learned through a series of ironical events.

Modern Fantasy, and the Fantastic

Before investigating Dahl's fantasy works, the concept and history of fantasy will be defined to explicate the general details of the term in a literary sense. Fantasy is a popular genre with child readers and has been increasingly attracting attention in literature research. In his introduction of *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Gary K. Wolfe (1986) asserts that fantastic literature and the literary criticism associated with it have long experienced a vaguely distrustful relationship. The growing acceptance of the genre emerged after the dramatic blossoming of science fiction and fantasy scholarship in the mid-1970s when they began to be 'among the most scrutinized, catalogued..., and cross-referenced phenomena in modern literature' (xi). However, fantasy is often associated with the still-marginalised literary form that is children's literature. C. S. Lewis points out that fantasy is more widely accepted in juvenile literature, and therefore a writer fascinated by fantasy often adopts it to find an audience. The appearance of modern fantasy emerges in the guise of children's literature, and George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858), Wolfe notes, could be viewed as the first modern fantasy novel (xviii), quickly followed by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). At this time, the terminology for the genre was not settled. Many fantasies in this era were termed fairy tales. It was not until 1923 that the term 'fantasist' was used to describe a writer of this genre. Even so, fantasy literature has remained notoriously difficult to pin down since 'there is no rigorous critical consensus over the precise definition' (Clute and Grant, 1997:337).

The term 'fantasy' generally describes a self-coherent narrative whose incidents seem impossible and unrealistic in the reader's perception. Clute and Grant (1997) also note that the term 'fantastic' in the late twentieth century 'has more and more frequently been substituted for "fantasy" when modes are being discussed' (337). The Fantastic thus can be defined as 'an uncanny hovering of perception between belief in the supernatural, and disbelief' (Clute and Grant, 1997:512). As part of an individual genre it is generally connected to tales of dragons, castles and knights in shining armour, but in fact, the genre as a whole encompasses much more. Some examples of sub-genres are Romance Fantasy, Fairy Tales, High and Low Fantasy, Dark Fantasy, Modern Fantasy and Comic Fantasy.

In 1938, J. R. R. Tolkien gave a lecture titled 'On Fairy-Stories' at the University of St. Andrews, which 'outlined a number of concepts that have since become staples in fantasy theory' (Wolfe, 1986:xix). Tolkien defines the term 'fantasy' as 'embodying both the "Sub-creative Art" in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression...not a lower but a higher form of Art' (quoted in Swinfen, 1984:5). Tolkien's fantasy offers four principal psychological functions for the reader. First of all, fantasy itself is 'the purest form of human creativity' (Wolfe, 1986:xx) through which the reader must distinguish the real from the unreal; it becomes 'a means of setting free needs and desires' (Apter, 1982:6). Its 'recovery' implies the 'regaining of a clear view' and recovery of fragmented or lost desires. The third function is to 'escape', a coping mechanism, and the final state, 'consolation', offers a happy ending (Wolfe, 1986:xx). Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970; trans 1973), is one of the first systematic theoretical works to discuss fantastic literature. Todorov's definition of 'the fantastic' is more restrictive as he construes that since the world we know contains no vampires, devils, or demons, 'the concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary' (25). The fantastic leads a life full of dangers. It may evaporate at any moment, and can be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny. In fantastic texts, Todorov adds, the author describes events which are not likely to occur in everyday life. The reader 'must judge the fantastic tale not so much by the author's intentions and the mechanisms of the plot, but by the emotional intensity it provokes...A tale is fantastic if the reader experiences an emotion of profound fear and terror, the presence of unsuspected worlds and powers' (34-5). Although fear is often linked to the fantastic, it is not a necessary condition of the genre. Fairy tales, Todorov

claims, may include stories of fear, but at the same time ‘there are certain fantastic narratives from which all terror is absent’ (35), as we have seen in case of Dahl’s fantastical world. In *La Littérature Fantastique en France*, Marcel Schneider notes: ‘The fantastic explores inner space; it sides with the imagination, the anxiety of existence, and the hope of salvation’ (Todorov, 1973:36). Some theorists connect the reader’s reaction with the text. H.P. Lovecraft, for example, thinks that ‘the criterion of the fantastic is not situated within the work but in the reader’s individual experience’ (Todorov 1973). Wolfe (1986), agreeing with Todorov, concludes: ‘No one is quite certain whether “the fantastic” describes a group of texts, something that happens within a text, or something that happens to the reader encountering the text’ (xiii).

T.E. Apter (1982), in her discussion of the methods and achievements of fantasy in the modern novel and story, argues how and why fantasy is ‘essential to the author’s various purposes,’ and it must not be regarded as ‘an escape from reality but as an investigation of it’ (2). In addition, fantasy reveals ‘the thread of reason which can restore peace and harmony’ and serves as ‘a means of escaping from habitual assumptions and expectations’ (6). It also allows us to realize how ‘awful, how limiting and imprisoning, the human world is’ (6). Ann Swinfen’s *In Defence of Fantasy* (1984) notes the interchangeability of ‘fantasy’, ‘fancy’ and ‘imagination’ which are also widely employed by various writers at various periods, and these ubiquitous terms lack commonly accepted meanings. The term as suggested by Swinfen (1984) refers both to the sub-creative art, and the literary works which such art produces. ‘The marvellous’ then becomes its essential ingredient (5). The writer creates ‘a complete and self-consistent “secondary world” contributing to the reader’s ‘secondary belief’ (5). Swinfen’s close study includes mainstream modern English and American fantasy novels post-1945 of such renowned writers as C.S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin and Carol Kendall, with the deliberate omission of J.R.R. Tolkien’s works as his have already received considerable critical attention. However, Dahl’s children’s fantasy works up to 1984 are not included in her assessment.

Carpenter and Prichard provide a useful description where fantasy is seen ‘as a term used in the context of children’s literature to describe works of fiction, written by a specific author (i.e. not traditional) and usually novel length, which involve the supernatural or some other unreal element’ (Knowles and Malmkjaer, 1996:17). If we turn to twentieth-century fantasy, and in particular the commercially successful fantasy of the second half of the twentieth century, after Tolkien’s classic essay, the most

valuable theoretical text for formulating an objective is Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992). In *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz (2001) offer three of the most accepted definitions of fantasy: formulaic, childish, and escapist.

If fantasy then seems to have a restricted number of recurrent motifs and elements, in which subgenre should we place Dahl's books for children? Hunt (1994) in *An Introduction to Children's Literature* describes Dahl as a successful British children's writer, who is 'a very intelligent, highly professional, self-aware writer, with a sharp eye for the less attractive sides of the human condition, and an edgy sense of humour' (20). His intellectual capacity as well as his sanguine temperament are displayed through his stories which comprise a mixture of fantasy types. Described as the darkest and most ambiguous trickster figure himself, Dahl assumes the challenge of dealing with absolute evil (Levy and Mendelsohn, 2016:110) and seems to be 'wholly on the side of anarchy' (Hunt, 1994:21). His best-known characters such as James, Charlie, Sophie and Matilda, tend to live oppressed lives which are later transformed by a comically perplexing narrative. The trope of escapism becomes more powerful in these tales as Dahl represents children's personal problems (whether in the family, school, or even the orphanage) 'to a degree extremely uncommon in the fantasy of this period' (Levy and Mendelsohn, 2016:110). In addition, his *Rhyme Stew* and *Revolting Rhymes* employ the plot and characters from such well-known fairy tales as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. He bases his stories on their original structure and creatively twists them into more modern, comical and multi-dimensional tales. These updated characters possess more complex traits than the traditional ones, and Dahl's macabre sense of humour has greater play in his world of fantasy. Through nonsensical and comic elements, Dahl pushes the boundaries of taboo subjects and extends them out into extreme forms of comic fantasy. According to Miranda Nell (2014), Dahl 'has been accused of allowing characters too cruel or distasteful into his stories...but in truth these are reasons that children love him' (191-2). Nell insists that Dahl's work is 'purposively nonsensical, as well as specifically contradictory in three ways: through humor, through his particular form of magic, and through his use of the taboo' (192). His imagination/ creativity with some magical elements and unexpected descriptions 'arouse[s] a sense of wonder and delight in the reader' (194). Interestingly, he

often includes ‘nonmagical solutions or endings even when the initial situations are paranormal’ (196). James’s adventure, for instance, does not finish in a fairyland, but in New York City, ‘when the peach is spiked by the Empire State Building’ (196). Nell concludes that the use of earthly components of the stories keeps ‘the flights of fancy connected to the ordinary, humble, and even unpleasant’ (196).

Peter Hunt (2012) furthermore expounds that although ‘Dahl’s seminal influence is seen in the visible vulgarisation of children’s books’, his role in ‘the commodification of fantasy and its genres is far more significant’ (176). His method of commodification is the reduction of fantasy to ‘psychologically insignificant, saleable norms’ (180) through ‘carnival – the apparent freedom given to the deprived or dependent through wild, but ultimately circumscribed, play’ (180). His fiction ‘appear[s] to give children a voice, to give them that street wisdom that later writers have capitalised on’ (180). In addition, his fantasies, Hunt notes, ‘might be better compared with those of writers like Michael Bond, ...and Enid Blyton’ (177), but his treatment of fantasy, persona and approach to his audience is quite different from Blyton’s. Her work is, for example, ‘designed for an audience characterised as innately civilised’ while Dahl’s is for ‘an audience in need of civilising’ (178). Nevertheless, his ‘robust brand of fantasy’ (178), though exhibiting ‘a playfulness and a sense of spontaneity’ (Nell, 2014:191), is often targeted by some critics for their disapproval ‘of unnecessary tone of glee and spite’ (Rees quoted in Hunt, 2012:178) or of his ‘new literary frankness’ (as seen in George’s tale) which reverses ‘older norms’. However, Dahl, Hunt argues, ‘made a major contribution to changing the nature of a generation’s response to fantasy’ (178) as his ‘true legacy was the commodified and to some extent denatured children’s-book fantasies of the twenty-first century’ (178).

Dahl’s comic fantasy world

Comic fantasy is a subgenre of fantasy, whose setting is usually in imaginary worlds. It is sometimes referred to as low fantasy, due to its humorous nature in both intent and tone. In *The Fantasy Literature of England*, Colin Manlove (1999) has characterized fantasy broadly as ‘A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms’ (ix). Manlove notes that comic fantasy has established itself well in England, where

‘preposterous worlds of wits’ and the impulse to create and ‘laugh at absurdity’ (114) are both embraced. Comic fantasy relates to ‘the extreme of fantasy, the impossible’ (114), and comprises the wild elements of the world we know cannot exist. The genre ‘has become particularly developed...since the Romantics, with their emphasis on creativity, but there are prominent examples in earlier literature’ (114). *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (c.1385-95) written by Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, might be considered England’s first major comic fantasy, and involves a world of talking animals who reflect human perception and fallacy, ending with a warning against flattery and reckless decision making. The story of the fox as a trickster was to be refashioned in Dahl’s *Fantastic Mr Fox*, a more modern leader of the fox family whose smart and quick decision-making outwits the ludicrous three farmers. In addition, the interplay of high and low, or the little and the large, Manlove adds, is a technique often found in comic fantasy. Littleness and the comic use of midget fairies are also employed in such well-known works as Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), Pope’s mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), or Swift’s comic fantasy *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). English fairy-tales then become distinctive in their interest in giants which were traditionally regarded as ‘the earliest inhabitants of Britain,’ and the idea of demolishing them inevitably followed (12). The fantasy in both *The BFG* and *The Witches* centres on giants and witches that menace children. Dahl also comically introduces Wonka’s midget workers, the Oompa-Loompas into his Chocolate Factory.

Over the past centuries, comic fantasy has served different purposes. In the eighteenth century, literary parody or imitation formed the basis of comic fantasy and writers applied it to measure and mock contemporary triviality or corruption. *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, becomes ‘a parody of the travel books of the day’ or Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World* (1760) ‘derides triviality in the form of a prince’ (Manlove, 1999:118). Manlove, according to W.A. Senior (2000), ‘sees English fantasy unfolding through various stages, with many overlaps and exceptions, and developing from secondary world fantasy across to subversive fantasy’ (322). During Romanticism comic fantasy was used in more serious criticism of its age, while in the high Victorian decades of the 1850s and 1860s, the period of social disruption, many fantasies ‘migrate to Fairy- or Wonder-Lands, or to the imaginary past’ (122). The world becomes more dreamlike, full of bizarre imagery. The comedy is often targeted at children rather than adults, as in Kingsley’s *Water-Babies* and Carroll’s *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* worlds.

Comic fantasy during the twentieth century is continually developed through the theme of freedom and creativity. While the fantasy genre is heavily influenced by Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which borrowed from medieval elements, Dahl's fantasy world takes place mainly in the present world where children and adults live their daily normal lives. In a very real sense the magical world of Dahl needs giants and monsters to give heroes the chance to demonstrate superhuman powers and victory of the human over the inhuman forces of the world. Strange and incomprehensible events occur in the life of James, Charlie and Sophie, but those around them do not usually doubt the reality of their experience. The *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (2012) suggests that British children's fantasy of the early 1960s revealed a distinct preference for real-world settings; however, Dahl's real world location is uniquely conspicuous. His books underpin the fantasy of reality within which childhood itself is seen as fantasy. Dahl's fantasy can thus be viewed as a creative departure from previous fantasy narratives.

Levy and Mendlesohn (2016) point to the fact that many of Dahl's best works for children discuss 'the personal issues of children to a degree extremely uncommon in the fantasy of this period' (110). He employs comic fantasy to ridicule people into adopting better behaviour and allowing child readers to experience vicarious comeuppance. He is fully aware that children generally enjoy fantasy elements and extreme humour and wordplay. Word-play, as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (1999) notes, 'is a trait characteristically associated with fantasies and childhood' (200), and it serves important purposes in Dahl's creation of fantasy. Moreover, Dahl coins a large number of witty neologisms throughout his writing career. These are thoroughly examined by Dominic Cheetham (2015), who argues that 'the humour of the created words may act as a cue to readers' (1). David Rudd (2012), meanwhile, explores Dahl's various story writing techniques from the micro to the macro levels of the language. Dahl's lexical, phonological and semantic innovation, Rudd concludes, has completely set him against the Great Automatic Grammatizator, namely a genius writing machine whose strict rules of grammar are already fixed by mathematical principles. Dahl's 'The Great Automatic Grammatizator', a short story written in 1954 for adults, is also a bleak fantasy satire when the computing machine is employed as 'an effective metaphor for how literature becomes commodified in mass society' (Rudd, 2012:52). The story of this great breakthrough reveals how Dahl views twentieth-century technology, as compared with the original creative effort of an author. Unlike the process of machine-

writing, Rudd points out that ‘writers have to struggle endlessly’ (52) to produce a great and ‘fresh’ piece of writing. Dahl, certainly, is also searching for new and surprising endings to his stories. He utilises several methods in his writing for children, including inventing distinctive personalities for insects and foxes, using nonsense language, and modernising fairy stories and nursery rhymes ‘to cater for a more savvy, twentieth-century young audience, and fashioning a language more appropriate for those reared on cartoons, TV, advertising slogans and the like’ (53). Dahl himself might feel alienated by the idea of the Grammatizator since his parents were both Norwegian, and English was their second language. His school report in *Boy* exposes how the young Dahl struggled in his English class: ‘a persistent muddler. Vocabulary negligible, sentences malconstructed...indolent and illiterate’ (53). However, this BFG-like reader grew up with a tacit appreciation of Charles Dickens, Hilaire Belloc, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, and E. Nesbit whose influences are witnessed through his literary nonsense, facility at wordplay and fantasy. Nesbit’s introduction of magic fantasy into a child’s world, for example, may have expanded Dahl’s vision to include the combination of magic and realism into his fantasy world. The next section will, however, focus only on Dickens and Belloc who significantly influenced his writing for children.

Major influences: Charles Dickens and Hilaire Belloc

Dickens’s influence

The BFG’s respect for Dickens is found in his conversation with Sophie when he tells her how he taught himself to write by reading *Nicholas Nickleby*, which, he claimed, is written by ‘Dahl’s Chickens’. The giant praises the book for its ‘most scrumdiddlyumptious story’ as he ‘is reading it hundreds of times...[he] is still reading it and teaching new words to [him]self and how to write them’ (105). Dickens’s name is later mentioned in *Matilda*’s first chapter ‘The Reader of Books’ when Matilda replies to Mrs Phelps’s query about the type of book she wants to read. The girl tells the librarian: ‘I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don’t know any names’ (9). The librarian then introduces *Great Expectations* to the girl who, over the next few afternoons, is ‘totally absorbed in the wonderful adventure of Pip and old Miss Havisham... and by the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words’ (10). Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist* also appear in Matilda’s ‘formidable’ reading list over the next six months.

In *A Companion to Charles Dickens* edited by David Paroissien (2011), Juliet John begins her article 'The Novels and Popular Culture' with Dickens's 'memorable mantra': 'People must be amused' (*Hard Times* bk.1, ch. 6). This line, John argues, is characteristic not 'only of the lisping circus-master, Mr. Sleary, but of Dickens himself' (142). Mr. Sleary's conviction reminds us of Dahl and his eccentric character, Mr Willy Wonka, who has created many incredible and nonsensical sweets and objects in his Inventing Room. Wonka, according to Seth Lerer (2008), is 'a blend of Captain Hook, circus ringmaster, puppeteer, and mad scientist' (302). He is a bully and a recluse in his own factory. However, he is also a genius who relishes nonsense and his eccentricity creates an unpredictable character. His quick response to Grandma Georgina's reproach for his nonsensical talk, that 'A little nonsense now and then, is the relish for the wisest man' (*Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, 108) mirrors his own ludicrous views about all the seemingly inexplicable events that happened in the story. Although he is considered a bully who tyrannises the golden ticket winners, his fantasies and role-playing are a source of much comic delight, and he is just as entertaining when being himself as when he is acting out a leading role in both of Dahl's Charlie stories. As John notes, Dickens seems to be appealing to the 'emotional, moral, and populist tendencies of melodrama' (149), and his insistence on the value of popular amusements and his belief in 'dramatic entertainment' as the natural imaginative outlet of the 'common people' are exemplified by his persistent use of melodramatic models in his novels. His ideal of popular culture for all classes of people is then viewed as a 'defence of intelligent popular entertainment for working class people' (144).

Dickens's emphasis on the crucial functions of amusement in the literary world seems to have had a great effect on Dahl, who frequently references Dickens's works in his books. A battle between good and evil is the backbone of melodrama where the goodness or wickedness of the characters is greatly exaggerated, and the concept of melodrama where 'good people look good and bad people look bad (and usually ugly)' (148) is typically highlighted in both Dickens's and Dahl's characterization. Furthermore, Dickens's growing concern for children is reflected in several of his novels. In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), his characterization of poor children as 'Ignorance and Want' highlights society's abandonment of those children and its consequences. Poor and abused children will grow into adults who live a life of crime: 'This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree' (Stave 3: The Second of the Three Spirits). In a discussion of the relationship between

child psychology and children's literature, Nicholas Tucker (1992) explores the dramatic portrayals of Dickens's children: Steerforth's 'poor character' (in *David Copperfield*, 1849-50) 'is shown as the result of unwise parenting; David himself is always guided by a good inner spirit' (158), and 'Oliver is portrayed as driven by purely inner forces of goodness and nobility consistent with the exalted social origins whose existence he only discovers at the end of the book' (157). Both David and Oliver remind us of Dahl's ill-fated James and innocent Charlie, whose personal kindness or goodness results in a miraculous gift of prosperity as a just reward for their endurance. Dahl's heroes, note Levy and Mendlesohn (2016), are passive and 'have their passivity rewarded, a much more Victorian model for child protagonists' (110). We sympathise even more with James and his unfortunate fate when he could not embrace the luck granted by a mysterious old man. Dahl highlights the boy's ill fate with this miserable scene: 'if only he hadn't slipped and fallen and dropped that precious bag. All hope of a happier life had gone completely now. Today and tomorrow and the next day and all the other days as well would be nothing but punishment and pain, unhappiness and despair' (*James and the Giant Peach*, 23). Charlie's extreme poverty, meanwhile, strengthens the love and care of the family amid hardship and hunger.

Dickens's extensive use of fairy-tale plot in his novels and his neglected-child theme are also repeated in Dahl's comic fantasy. As Robert Newsom (2001) argues: 'Dickens is conventionally credited with having imported into a central role in the novel the figure of the innocent child – often suffering and orphaned, abandoned, or simply neglected' (92). Dahl's James, Sophie, Matilda and the unnamed boy in *The Witches* all follow this pattern. It seems that children of Dickens and Dahl are made orphans in order to give the authors more freedom to plot adventures for children who already live unconventional lives and are free of family ties. The idealised real parents are substituted by an evil stepmother, relatives or witches. However, Matilda's real parents become problematic as both are very much alive, but vulgar bullies, and this makes Dahl differ strikingly from Dickens. The abandoned child subject shares the universal theme of the child's fear, and resentment of its parents' refusal to fulfil its wishes at the core of the fantasy. Newsom further suggests that 'there are some very wicked children in the Dickens world and relatively few successfully nurturing adults'. The additional complication in Dickens's fiction is that 'we are actually invited to take some pleasure ourselves [...] in the spectacle of the abused child, even, [...] when it is peculiarly grotesque and over the top' (96). Nevertheless, both Dickens's and Dahl's books are not

merely packed with innocent child victims, but also wise boys and girls who are commonly presented as leading characters in their works.

Dickens's tough upbringing, and Dahl's hardship at school were clearly felt by both to have been critically determining of their repulsive fictional adult characters. While Dickens's Mr. Wackford Squeers, the Proprietor of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, exposes the shocking truth about the abused and neglected pupils in Yorkshire boarding schools during his time, Dahl's Crunchem Hall Primary school and its Headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, become an updated representation of how insecure small children may feel under the supervision of callous headteachers. However, both authors mitigate the school's horrors by making use of caricatures and humorous naming. Dickens's coining of comically grotesque names is notorious. Characters such as Sweedlepipe, Honeythunder, Bumble, Pumblechook, and M'Choakumchild are recognisable as Dickensian even by those unfamiliar with the stories. Similarly, one technique Dahl often uses for creating an atmosphere of unreality in his fantasy world is inventing fantastical names. However, Cheetham (2015), in his examination of Dahl's neologisms, argues that instead of introducing an atmosphere of fantasy, such names as 'Crunchem Hall', 'Miss Trunchbull', or 'Bruce Bogtrotter' 'rather work to create humour and to distance outrageous or violent actions, thus reducing any shock or discomfort' (6). Dahl's lexical creations as found in *Matilda's* humorous names, adds Cheetham, share some similar naming techniques with Dickens where each name is formed through a combination of identifiable English root words and has clear associations of meaning. 'Mr M'Choakumchild' in Dickens's *Hard Times* and 'Crunchem' in Dahl's *Matilda*, for instance, reveal contracted and compounded forms of 'choke them child' and 'crunch them' respectively while "Trunchbull" could be a blend of *Trunch(eon) and bull* (Cheetham, 2015:7). Several words of Dahl's coinage, such as frobscottle, snozzwangers, and Oompa Loompas nevertheless, have no clear connotations of meaning though they sound grotesquely comical.

Both Dickens's characters, such as Scrooge and Pecksniff and Dahl's word inventions have moved out of the confines of literature and into everyday language. In May 2016, Oxford University Press published *The Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary* for children, complete with 8,000 words coined or popularised by the author, while in September of the same year, *The Oxford English Dictionary* revised and updated its latest entries containing six new words connected to Dahl and his writing to celebrate the centenary of his birth. The six newly added words were 'Dahlesque', 'golden ticket,'

‘human bean,’⁴ ‘Oompa Loompa’, ‘scrumdiddlyumptious,’ and ‘witching hour.’⁵ Sharing Dickens’s commitment to entertainment, Dahl includes in his stories larger-than-life characters like Dickens’s more extreme examples.

Belloc’s Cautionary Tales

As Levy and Mendlesohn suggest ‘One problem for the modern critic when dealing with Dahl is that his values are often those of an older period’ (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016:110). Hilaire Belloc’s *Cautionary Tales* (1939), with their mock-solemn parody of Victorian moral tales and fables, for instance, are obviously among the major influences shown in Dahl’s works. Sturrock (2010) concurs that among children’s books such as Beatrix Potter’s stories, A.A. Milne, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, Hilaire Belloc’s *Cautionary Verses* ‘were the first to leave “a permanent impression”’ (55) on the young Dahl at St. Peter’s school. In an interview at the Singapore Puffin Book Fair in 1989, Dahl talked about Belloc’s influence:

I always have been a lover of Hilaire Belloc’s cautionary tales. I knew every one of those Belloc tales by heart by the time I was 8, 9, 10... I wanted to do something a bit funny like that [and] I remembered those tales (Cornwell, 2016).

Dahl’s books for children demonstrate Belloc’s influence to a greater or lesser degree, even down to the recycling of names. Belloc’s characters such as George, Matilda, and Augustus seem to reappear in Dahl’s books but with different characteristics. In Belloc’s, Matilda is ‘a little liar’ and is burned to death for it, while George, ‘who played with a Dangerous Toy, and suffered a Catastrophe of considerable Dimensions’ (Belloc, 1997:37), is given an immense balloon which then explodes, destroying his entire house, and many people. Belloc’s children all meet with severe punishment for what seem relatively minor forms of misconduct, at least to modern readers. Jim, who runs away from his nurse at the zoo, is eaten by a lion; Henry King, who chews bits of string, dies of knots in his stomach; and Rebecca, who slams doors just for fun, is knocked flat by a marble bust placed above the door. Jim’s mother responds, in relation to her son, ‘Well—it gives me no surprise, He would not do as he was told!’ (Belloc,

⁴ Although this play on ‘human being’ was originally used in the mid-nineteenth century and later by Mary Norton in *The Borrowers* (1952), it became popularised by Dahl’s novel *The BFG* (1982).

⁵ Available online: <https://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2016/09/12/roald-dahl-oed-update/> [Accessed 4/11/2018].

1997:17). These children remind us of the four children in Wonka's factory who are all disobedient, and then finally punished for their improper behaviour. They represent grotesque parodies of childish vices such as greed, selfishness, spoiling, or television addiction. Warned by Wonka not to touch the chocolate river in his factory, Augustus Gloop, for example, 'was deaf to everything except the call of his enormous stomach. He was now lying ...with his head far out over the river, lapping up the chocolate like a dog' (97). Augustus accidentally falls into the brown pool and is sucked and squeezed in the great pipe. The subject of human gluttony is also mentioned in Belloc's cautionary tales. He writes: 'But Man- proud man! (As Dryden sings)/ Though wolfing quantities of things... – is not contented with his Prandial lot' (44). Unlike some animals, such as the elephant, the lion and the bear which 'confine their appetites to what may happen to be on the spot' (43), Man can devour a large amount and all kinds of food, not because of being famished, but because of his own insatiable appetite. Belloc denounces Man as 'an UNGRATEFUL BEAST' (44). In the end, the 'ungrateful' Augustus is punished for his habitual greed, and leaves Wonka's factory 'thin as a straw' (182). Dahl makes use of Belloc's exaggerated method of punishment for such trivial wrongdoings, but his ridiculous penalties do not lead to any death or loss. He is just poking fun at spoiled children by fanciful retribution.

Calvin Tomkins (2017), writing in *The New Yorker*, summarises Belloc's life and work, concluding that his rhymes are 'designed for the admonition of children between the ages of eight and fourteen years'. However, as Tomkins remarks, 'their slyly satiric assaults on upper-class Victorian society have always appealed primarily to adults'. Dahl's books for children, targeted variously at different aged groups ranging from five to fourteen years, also advocate Victorian values where children are no longer exposed to the hardships and responsibilities of adult life, but a new expectation that a child's life should be one of resilience, kindness, and common decency. Re-read by adults, his books seem to convey much darker traits. Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge, who are rolled over by a giant peach, are examples of abusive relatives; teachers, such as the bullying Miss Trunchbull, can become devious and untrustworthy, and Matilda's vulgar parents demonstrate aspects of English class snobbery. What happens to George's Grandma, and the act of giants snatching children out of their beds at night may be terrifying for small children. However, Dahl's special dash of magic together with his zesty language and cartoonish punishment help to mitigate the fear. The death of the two brutal aunts is simply depicted as their lying ironed out 'as flat and thin and

lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book' (57). Miss Trunchbull, in the end, is so agitated by what seems to be her dead brother's writing on the blackboard, that '[her] face had turned white as snow and her mouth was opening and shutting like a halibut out of water and giving out a series of strangled gasps' (216). When she faints and falls down on the floor, her suffering is reduced to undignified comedy. Both the paper dolls analogy and the suffering halibut belittle adults who have loomed large in their victims' lives. No matter how macabre his story may appear, Dahl seems to 'do something a bit funny' to all of his children's fiction. He punishes his cruel adult characters in such ridiculous or extreme ways that we no longer sympathise with them as in the cases of shrunk Mr and Mrs Twit, the 'platinum-blond' Mr Wormwood, and James' two aunts.

Apart from his reworking of his predecessor's tales, Dahl shares some similar biographical experiences with Belloc. Both lost their father when they were very small – Belloc at two and Dahl at three – but spent their boyhood with caring mothers and sisters. They experienced dual nationality: Belloc was Anglo-French while Dahl was born British to Norwegian immigrant parents. For men of mixed background and unique gifts, their prose and satirical verse became their perfect outlet, and their bilingual upbringings perhaps contributed to a specific use of language in their writing. Both men were considered charismatic personalities, and both (coincidentally) fathered five children. Among the books Dahl read to his were 'absurdist fables such as Hilaire Belloc's Cautionary verses' (Sturrock, 2010:350). Belloc's epigrammatic comic style is echoed in Dahl's, immediately at the commencement of his first children's book: *James and the Giant Peach*. The two aunts' nonsensical appraisal of their attractiveness is thus portrayed as:

'I look and smell,' Aunt Sponge declared, 'as lovely as a rose!
Just feast your eyes upon my face, observe my shapely nose!
Behold my heavenly silky locks!
And if I take off both my socks
You'll see my dainty toes.'
'But don't forget,' Aunt Spiker cried, 'how much your tummy shows!' (13)

Dahl mocks the self-delusions of the two women, one too lean and one too gross, who always gloat over their physical attractions with an unfavourable comparison. In his

sardonic poem: ‘Maria Who Made Faces and a Deplorable Marriage’,⁶ Belloc has the narrator recite Maria’s offensive behaviour of pulling a face ‘where nose and mouth and all were screwed into a kind of ball’ (45), eventually resulting in the permanent distorted shape of her face. Maria’s twisted face impairs all her superior qualities, as the narrator describes:

Her wit was pointed, loud and raw,
She shone at laying down the law,
She drank liqueurs instead of tea,
Her verse was admirably free
And quoted in the latest books –
But people couldn’t stand her looks (46).

The two incompatible concepts of ‘books’ and looks’ are repeated in Dahl’s *Matilda* when Mrs. Wormwood announces firmly to Miss Honey that ‘You chose books. I chose looks’ (92). Belloc’s thorough description of Maria raises questions about the ‘proto-feminism’ of the poem’s account of a clever, but ugly woman. Her exceptional quality reflects the ‘New Woman’ of her era, though her unattractiveness diminishes all her great qualities. Belloc overtly criticises a society where women are mainly adored for their beauty, not for their brains. Belloc’s Maria reminds us of Dahl’s formidable woman, Miss Trunchbull, the least ordinary character in *Matilda*. She can also represent a ‘modern woman’ whose great professions as a school headmistress and an Olympic athlete in the women’s hammer throw come mainly from her own ability. Like Maria, she is independent, clever, athletic, and extrovert. The major flaw that tarnishes all her capability is her masculine body and threatening appearance. ‘The Headmistress’, the narrator describes, ‘was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster’ who ‘marched like a storm-trooper with long strides and arms aswinging’ (61). Whereas Belloc in his poem is creating a kind of protofeminist New Woman, Dahl seems to split the attributes of modern women as seen in Miss Trunchbull (ugly, aggressive but clever), and Miss Honey (gentle, intelligent but submissive). In the end, Belloc scornfully mocks poor Maria’s marriage:

The upshot of it was Maria
Was married to a neighbouring Squire
Who, being blind, could never guess
His wife’s appalling ugliness.

⁶Maria’s tale is in the collection of *New Cautionary Tales* published in 1930. This work followed two previous popular works by Belloc, *The Bad Child’s Book of Beasts* (1896) and *Cautionary Tales for Children* (1907).

The man was independent, dull,
Offensive, poor and masterful (49).

Both Dahl and Belloc were opinionated, and did not hesitate to state their viewpoint, most of the time in ruthless mockery. According to Sturrock, 'Dahl's attitude to the people around him was always clear-cut. A person was either good or bad, positive or negative. There was no room for shades of grey' (179). Dahl often equips his evil characters with all possible negative attributes which culminate in their crude public exposure. Furthermore, both Belloc and Dahl share ability to combine caricature with a well-aimed epigram. While Dahl ridicules women's vanity, Belloc entertains a more philosophical view of the power of beauty and physical appearance, one which is more disturbing than pleasant. Maria's distinctive intellect is perhaps foregrounded more than Miss Honey's because she is more daring and assertive.

However, Belloc occasionally writes something positive into his rhymes. His Charles Augustus Fortescue, 'the nicest child' 'Who always Did what was Right, and so accumulated an Immense Fortune' (39), is highly applauded:

He never lost his cap, or tore
His stockings or his pinafore:
In eating Bread he made no Crumbs,
He was extremely fond of sums, (39).

This didactic poem ends with the narrator emphasising Charles Augustus's affluence. His well-deserved reward provides a classic example 'to show what Everybody might become by SIMPLY DOING RIGHT' (39). Dahl's story of James also, towards the end, stresses the importance of humble virtues, as James makes an appealing presentation of his fellow creatures, as with: 'The Earthworm, on the other hand,'/ Said James, beginning to expand,/ 'Is great for digging up the land/ And making old soils newer.' (145-6).

Celebrated by James, an ordinary earthworm normally preyed upon by many species of bird turns out to be a significant living thing through its contribution to soil fertility, and the other creatures are applauded for their own excellent qualities. The light verse in James's story as well as Dahl's rhythmic lines mainly serve the purpose of sheer entertainment, not as an extreme caution for readers, as in his second book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Here, Wonka introduces the mischievous Oompa-Loompas from Loompaland who are 'no larger than medium-sized dolls' (92),

and love practical jokes, singing and dancing. Barging in every time each unruly child meets their fate, they sing moralizing songs, apparently made up on the spot:

Augustus Gloop! Augustus Gloop!
The great big greedy nincompoop!
How long could we allow this beast
To gorge and guzzle, feed and feast
On everything he wanted to? (104)

In addition to some obvious rhymes (such as ‘Gloop’ with ‘nincompoop’), Dahl often seems to surprise the reader by selecting an unanticipated and sometimes nonsensical word of the second line to rhyme with the first line. Nonsense, as Rudd points out, allows ‘the worlds to come to life within language’ (55), and especially in Dahl’s work ‘always has a sense of the metafictional, of things being on the verge of stepping outside their allotted semantic space’ (55). Violet Beauregarde, for instance, a gum-chewing girl, can turn into a purple blueberry balloon after chewing Mr Wonka’s magic chewing-gum meal. The Oompa-Loompas then sing about Miss Bigelow, a ‘dreadful woman’ who ‘saw no wrong in chewing, chewing all day long’. She chewed ‘in the tub’, ‘at the club’ and even ‘on the bus’. And if she ‘couldn’t find her gum, she’d chew up the linoleum’ (128). Following ‘gum,’ which makes it sound almost normal, the unexpected word ‘linoleum’ exaggerates the absurdity of her behaviour. Dahl constantly employs such clusters of unpredictable, but connected words, to reinforce his values through comic sequences. The following is another example of the Oompa-Loompas’ song for Mike Teavee:

And in the bedroom, by the bed,
More books were waiting to be read!
Such wondrous, fine, fantastic tales
Of dragons, gypsies, queens, and whales...
The younger ones had Beatrix Potter
With Mr Tod, the dirty rotter,
And Squirrel Nutkin, Pigling Bland
And Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and –
Just How The Camel Got His Hump,
And How The Monkey Lost His Rump, (173).

Here Dahl is playing with the sounds of names, forcing them to work as rhymes, as children are reminded of their favourite books through allusions to Beatrix Potter and Rudyard Kipling. One of Belloc’s poems about ladies and gentlemen entitled ‘The Example’ also exhibits those qualities of contrast, wit, rhythm and rhyme:

And when she met her brother Jack
She used to smack him on the back
So smartly as to make him jump,
And cry, 'what-ho! You've got the hump!'
A phrase which, more than any other,
Was gall and wormwood to her brother (119).

The term 'wormwood' here reminds us of Dahl's resentful characters: Mr and Mrs Wormwood, who are also 'gall' to their own daughter, and perhaps so-named to recall the Nurse in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* who uses wormwood on her breast to wean the baby Juliet (Act 1, iii.27).

The contrived word choice, the repetition of the words, the quirky second rhyme, the allusion as well as the alliteration found in each of the Oompa-Loompas' songs, all help reinforce his value-laden fantasy. They work like Belloc's cautionary tales but are lengthier, and have been updated to address contemporary bad habits. As in Belloc's comic verses the Oompa-Loompas sing a warning song for each child, and those songs often contain valuable lessons:

So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall (173-4).

On this subject, Dahl insists on the intrinsically harmful impact of TV watching and specifically emphasizes this concern by capitalising all important messages in the Oompa-Loompas' song: 'IT ROTTS THE SENSES IN THE HEAD!/IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!' (172). All these massive lines and rhymes seem to bludgeon his readers both adults and children into accepting the futility of television. In 1961, when Dahl had completed his second draft of *Charlie*, he sent it to Sheila St Lawrence, his literary agent at the Watkins Agency. She enjoyed the book, but suggested more humour, 'more like Dahlesque touches' (Sturrock, 2010:398). She proposed some additional details, including allowing Augustus to be stuck in a glass pipe after falling in the river and 'having the gloating Hilaire Belloc-like songs about how the bad children get their just deserts delivered by the white coated factory workers, rather than by a "chorus of tiny whispering voices"' (398). Dahl acknowledged her suggestions, and while Tomkins (2017) concludes in his article that 'the bad things that happen to Belloc's bad children don't teach us lessons; they make us laugh', I argue that Dahl's, as well as Belloc's literary works, subtly warn children to beware of their conduct so

as not to meet a similar catastrophe. The reader is kept at an emotional distance in these stories by the comedy of both authors, but the children's vices in *Charlie* (mostly variations on consumer-culture greed) are familiar enough to be meaningful and relevant.

In his last major book, *Matilda*, Dahl also includes some humorous poems in the story. After Matilda reads a limerick about 'an epicure dining at Crewe' who found a rather large mouse in his stew (71) in Miss Jenny Honey's class, she begins reciting her own limerick:

The thing we all ask about Jenny
Is, 'Surely there cannot be many
Young girls in the place
With so lovely a face?'
The answer to that is, 'Not any!' (73)

Dahl shows how a voracious reader like the five-year-old Matilda can become an amateur poet capable of writing these lines for her class teacher. Miss Honey is not only flattered by this lovely poem but also by the warm and sincere feelings of the children in her class. Both authors could compose, with equal facility a satire or a piece of nonsense verse. According to Deborah Cogan Thacker (2012), Dahl also allows Matilda to teach her traumatised father lessons through her 'subversive' use of a cautionary tale about a boy and his superglued finger which 'got stuck inside his nose' and made him look 'an awful fool' (28) for a week. In this regard, Thacker notes, his powerless child characters are then placed in a momentary position of authority through their cautionary story embedded in fictional narratives.

In their light verses, both Belloc and Dahl assume the perspective of an adult lecturing both adults and children on the inevitable tragic outcome of their bad behaviour. Furthermore, the transformation of Dahl's disobedient children into something edible, such as Augustus Gloop, who will be 'made into strawberry-flavoured chocolate-coated fudge' (100), or Violet Beauregarde, whose swelling body is turned into a great round fruit like 'a gigantic blueberry' (126), as well as the name of Miss Honey, which symbolises sweetness – both in her name and nature – all signal Dahl's food obsession and the theme of eaten children. Dahl carries them to extremes in his references in several novels to the pleasures of eating sweet-tasting or juicy children in his fantasy lands.

Children being eaten

The classic children's poem of 'What are little girls made of?' mentioned at the beginning of this chapter addresses the differences between boys and girls by analogy with something 'edible' or disgusting. Little children, especially girls, are always considered nicer and sweeter by nature. The cannibalistic menace of the monster, the man-eating ogres, as well as the function of children as food, dominate fairy tales and modern fantasies. Dahl's children, possibly due to their small size, often fall prey to callous adults or greedy giants. In Dahl's biography, Sturrock mentions how much the poet John Hall Wheelock, Maxwell Perkins's⁷ close associate at Scribner's had the greatest confidence in Dahl's talent. Wheelock describes Dahl's novel *Some Time Never* (1948) as 'a contemporary satire in the mould of Jonathan Swift' (267). The book is celebrated for its 'outrageous fantasy and wit' (267). There is a vigorous balance of fantastical satire and earthy reality in his storytelling. Swift's blistering satire *A Modest Proposal* (1729),⁸ one of the most savage and powerful tracts in the English language, ironically offers children as the nation's staple food:

It is true a child just dropt from its dam,⁹ may be supported by her Milk, for a Solar year with little other Nourishment, at most not above the Value of two Shillings, which the Mother may certainly get, or the Value in Scraps, by her lawful Occupation of begging, and it is exactly at one year Old that I propose to provide for them, in such a manner, as, instead of being a Charge upon their Parents, or the Parish, or wanting Food and Raiment for the rest of their Lives, they shall, on the Contrary, contribute to the Feeding and partly to the Cloathing of many Thousands (Swift & Hawes, 2003:325).

Swift captures the attention of the reader through his 'modest' solution: making children, especially one-year-old babies, more 'beneficial' through the practice of selling and eating them. By converting the starving children into 'a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled' (quoted in

⁷ Maxwell Perkins (1884 - 1947) was an American book editor at the publishing house of Charles Scribner's Sons. Perkins is remembered for discovering authors Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe. Wheelock sent Dahl's manuscript of *Some Time Never* to Perkins's home in Connecticut but he contracted viral pneumonia and died two days after receiving the copy. Sturrock notes that Dahl's story was 'possibly the last thing he ever read' (267) as the book was left on Perkins's desk with his notes by its side.

⁸ Swift's full title is *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland, from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country; and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. He published it anonymously, but his authorship soon got out.

⁹ The term 'dam' refers to the mother of beasts, or other animals not human, or 'A human mother: in contempt or detestation' in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson, 1839). Available online: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=1fMxAQAAMAAJ>. [Accessed 9/10/2018].

Hawes, 2003:325), this once ‘no saleable commodity’ can then be sold and cooked as food at age one in meat markets. Swift satirises the economic and political policies of the Irish and English governments and Protestant-Catholic divisions with outrageous humour. Written in a dispassionate, matter-of-fact tone and in specific and succinct language, the essay progresses through a series of surprises that both engage and shock the audience. He ironically suggests that the meat of the children of Ireland would be considered a delicacy to both the English and to Irish landowners, and would therefore be highly sought after for feasts and special occasions. The narrator in this short satirical essay becomes an ironic character because he ignores any distasteful moral implications of his proposal and favours only economic progress, reckoning that his opinion is better than any other measure that has ever been proposed.

In many of his novels for children, Dahl, like Swift, employs an outrageous concept to deliver messages which expose the problems inherent to societies. Instead of making bold proclamations about these issues, both authors write entertaining texts that use irony, especially in terms of characterization, to point them out. In their ritual performance, the Oompa-Loompas, for instance, disclose their plan to alter ‘the brat’, ‘into something that will give great pleasure to us all’ (104) when:

A hundred knives go slice, slice, slice;
We add some sugar, cream, and spice;
We boil him for a minute more,
Until we’re absolutely sure
That all the greed and all the gall
Is boiled away for once and all (105).

The song not only reveals how Dahl skilfully makes the ordinary into the preposterous by turning Augustus Gloop into fudge, but also makes light of children being consumed. Swift’s gory description of slicing the children alive and his imagination of profits and benefits from the babies’ skin are reiterated in Dahl’s discussion of children, who are referred to as food or objects. His children are often jokingly viewed either as consumable items or disgusting creatures.

Recent critical interest in the fictional theme of eating children includes studies by Robert M. Kachur (2009) and Jacqueline Labbe (2012). Kachur provides evidence of the text’s complex socio-religious origins. Apart from its subversion of adult authority and righteous punishment, one intriguing issue rendering its success is the culturally reinforced metanarrative involving food and the lost father of the story. Kachur views

the children's passage through Wonka's factory as socio-religious identity formation, where disobedient children, through their original sins such as gluttony and pride, finally lose their paradise, namely the Chocolate Room, which is described by Wonka, the Creator and regulator of food, as 'the nerve centre of the whole factory, the heart of the whole business! And so beautiful!' (87). Kachur bases his discussion of a biblical metanarrative of creation, paradise, fall, and redemption on Stephens's and McCallum's explanation in *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (1998). A pure boy like Charlie eventually discovers his true identity and reunites with his father by finding a balanced relationship to food. The whole story resonates with 'the longstanding Western socio-religious tradition of linking food and identity' (222). In addition, the journeys of all the sinful children through Wonka's 'kingdom' serve as 'parodies of the Eucharist experience' (227). Kachur contemplates the children's final destination as consolidating into the objects of their own transgressive desire. These children are 'literally consumed by, taken up into, what they consume' (227).

Labbe, meanwhile, discusses texts where children either sacrifice themselves as food, or are hunted and eaten by giants or monsters for their sinful behaviour. Food became a contentious subject in the Victorian era due to the scandal of food adulteration: the motif of food was frequently employed in children's literature of the period. The religious overtones of Labbe's examples resonate with goodness, allowing a pure child's self-sacrifice as food for others as they were taught to believe in the value of such a gesture. However, a sinful child is also ironically consumed as the best punishment for their sin, and the giant, Labbe insists, 'is the only eater capable of ingesting the bad child' (2012:107). Spoiled, bad children are considered 'perfect fodder for a giant' (108). The most familiar hungry giant lives at the top of the beanstalk and proclaims 'be he live or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread' (17).

The threat of children being eaten is commonly recounted in classical myths and fairy tales. Children in Dahl's fiction, nevertheless, are prone to be eaten, not because of their good or bad conduct. If discarding the religious implications of the story, the act of eating relentlessly mentioned in Dahl's stories has innumerable associations and meanings. Children are considered small, weak, and useless; a 'burden' needing to be rid of. Children in *The Witches*, for example, must be wiped out of the world. 'One child a week is fifty-two a year. Squish them and squiggle them and make them disappear' (2) is the witches' motto. Dahl makes use of the arithmetical calculations in

the poem to highlight the exact number of children a real witch must destroy to get ‘the same pleasure from squelching a child as you get from eating a plateful of strawberries and thick cream’ (2). The Grand High Witch, in her gloating song, declares ‘Down with children! Do them in! Boil their bones and fry their skin!’ (79). She uses such gruesome terms as ‘bish’, ‘sqvish’, ‘bash’, ‘mash’, ‘shake’, and ‘slash’ to refer to practical cooking methods of dealing with any captured children.

The children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are transformed into edible products as suitable punishment for their disobedience, while innocent children in *The BFG* are routinely hunted and eaten by the hungry giants, except the BFG, who affirms ‘Eating human beans is wrong and evil’ (53). The BFG is represented as a kind and eccentric creature whose nature is completely different from that of the other giants. He merely enjoys the snozzcumbers and book reading. Both motifs of ‘little and large’ and ‘consumable children’ are highlighted in *The BFG*. The nine giants hunt ‘human beans’ every night and eat children ‘as though they were sugar-lumps’ (84). The story of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ is now alluded to as the ‘dreaded human bean’ (85) when the Fleshlumpeater is having a nightmare about ‘the grueful gruncious Jack’ (84) and his ‘terrible spikesticking beanstalk’ (85). However frightful and alarming such names as the Child-Snatcher and the Fleshlumpchewer sound, Dahl’s giants become far less terrifying than the vengeful Giant in Jack’s tale, due to Dahl’s ridiculous descriptions of their habits and nature. If they are easily fooled and trapped, their ideas of taste sound even more humorous. The Bonecrunching Giant, for example, claims that the children from Turkey taste of turkey: ‘Turks is tasting oh ever so much juicier and more scrumdiddlyumptious!’ (18).¹⁰ The BFG further adds that ‘Every human bean is diddly and different. Some is scrumdiddlyumptious and some is uckyslush’ (18). Panamanian children taste of hats, while no giant eats Greeks because they are ‘all tasting greasy’ (18). In the Giants’ realm, children from different countries have unique and ridiculous tastes depending on their country of origin. The reader can then imagine the flavour of children from Wales, Denmark, or Wellington. David Rees (1988) confirms that ‘There is too much emphasis in *The BFG* on eating children, but some of the book is pleasant and amusing’ (153). Dahl’s style of comic fantasy could be seen as a major combination of the outrageous and the comic, further invigorated by humorous and witty language and clever wordplay. If eating children is an extreme expression of sadistic cruelty in

¹⁰ The term is a humorous alteration of scrumptious and is originally US slang during the 1940s. It was popularised by Dahl’s novel *The BFG* (1982) (*Oxford Dictionary* in lexico.com).

Dahl's world, his comic fantasy is by no means limited only to human activities: the animal world is another place of obscene abuse, which Dahl exposed with searing humour.

Animal fantasy

In their introduction to children's fantasy literature, Levy and Mendlesohn (2016) aim to include in their discussion the best selection of children's fantasy texts which have been loved enough to survive. The book attempts to cover all historical genres such as myths and legends, fairy tales, ghost fantasies and romances. Although they do not specifically mention comic fantasy, they use the term 'nonsense tales' for stories that employ comic techniques to achieve a moral purpose. *Aesop's Fables*, they argue, is 'the taproot of many modern tales' (12) whose combination of moral lessons and anthropomorphic animals is obviously associated with stories for children. Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), they suggest, illustrates a modern version of *Reynard the Fox*, another beast fable which creates the trickster, 'darker and more subversive than in *Aesop's Fables*' (12).¹¹ Dahl's Mr Fox is redesigned 'to encourage emulation of the subversive' by telling people to live their lives through cleverness, rather than obedience (13). Just one unique characteristic of Mr Fox links him with Reynard the Fox, hero of several medieval European cycles of versified animal tales that satirise contemporary human society: his unfailing craftiness. Contrary to the stereotype of foxes as sly, amoral, cowardly, and self-seeking, Mr Fox becomes a sympathetic hero, whose cunning is a necessity for survival. The Fox family becomes the moral force of the story against human beings. He symbolises the triumph of craft over brute strength, personified by the greedy and dull-witted three farmers. Levy and Mendlesohn consider the fox's battle as class warfare, the subversion of social order, as the fox uses his tongue to talk his way out of trouble. The story also highlights the theme of absolute evil (in this case represented through the three farmers), which is often repeated in Dahl's stories.

Dahl includes short and humorous poems in Mr. Fox's story. In his introduction of the three farmers, a set of exaggerated physical traits is given as:

Boggis and Bunce and Bean

¹¹ *Aesop's Fables* came to the British from the Greeks via the Romans and was translated into English by William Caxton in 1484. Aesop, a slave and storyteller is believed to have lived in ancient Greece between 620 and 564 BCE. Aesop's stories continue to be reinterpreted in modern times.

One fat, one short, one lean.
These horrible crooks
So different in looks
Were nonetheless equally mean (5).

He repeats their appearance often throughout the book to help young readers remember and differentiate between the characters who are the antagonists of the story. Each farmer's unpleasant attribute is directly related to their way of making a living. For Mr Fox, 'Boggis gives off a filthy stink of rotten chicken-skins. Bunce reeks of goose-livers, and as for Bean, the fumes of apple cider hang around him like poisonous gases' (10). These vindictive men symbolise the worst of human nature. The farmers' lack of compassion for animals and the environment strikingly contrasts with the Fox family and their friends, who are depicted as highly moral, resilient and intelligent. When the farmers cannot catch the foxes with shovels, they start using enormous tractors, and '[a] sort of madness had taken hold of the three men' (27). The use of technology such as powerful machines completely destroys the environment. However, they still cannot beat the foxes. The narrator keeps informing the reader of the damaged landscapes of the hill where the foxes are hunted, with illustrations of what the hill looks like. People in the villages laugh at them when they hear 'We're after a fox!' (28). This fox hunting process seems wholly disproportionate to the farmers' purpose. Badger summarises clearly what happens when men start destroying nature: 'It's chaos! Half the wood has disappeared and there are men with guns all over the countryside! None of us can get out, even at night! We're all starving to death!' (46). The exclamation marks at the end of the Badger's sentences emphasise his anxious feelings as innocent victims of men's passion for hunting. After the day-long desperate race, Bunce then starts 'cursing the fox with dirty words that cannot be printed' (29), and Bean declares: 'It's not over yet, Mr Fox! We're not going home till we've strung you up dead as a dingbat' (29).

Dahl satirises the farmers' senseless battle against a small animal like a fox. Fully aware of the farmers' killing mission, Mr Fox assures Badger that '*we're not going to stoop to [the three farmers'] level. We don't want to kill them*' (59) and '*If they want to be horrible, let them... We down here are decent peace-loving people*' (60). Mr Fox does not have to make efforts to preserve his own sense of superiority to men. When Badger casts doubt on his act of stealing, Mr Fox simply justifies it as a necessity for survival: '*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?*' (58). Mr Fox's line resonates with the narrator's voice in Nesbit's *Five Children and It*: 'I cannot

pretend that stealing is right. I can only say that on this occasion it did not look like stealing to the hungry four, but appeared in the light of a fair and reasonable business transaction' (2008, 104). The hunger of any small child can justify a food heist. In addition, Mr Fox employs many human words such as 'people', 'children' and 'wife', which directly connects wild animals to human beings. The scene of all twenty-nine animals gathering in the banquet marks their mutual cooperation. While the animals enjoy a great feast underground, the three cruel farmers are portrayed as sitting 'beside their tents with their guns on their laps... Water was trickling down the necks of the three men and into their shoes' (81). The narrator mocks the farmers' stubborn determination to get rid of the fox by ending the book with: 'And so far as I know, they are still waiting.' (82). The animals' combined resistance secures their victory over the impact of humans and modern technology.

For Dahl, seeing animals as people encourages readers to identify with them in their suffering. In *The Magic Finger* (1962), the nameless girl's sense of injustice about hunting reflects Dahl's own opposition to animal cruelty. The Greggs' metamorphosis into ducks relates how animals would feel when being threatened by human beings. Left in the wood, the Greggs must learn to survive by their own natural and basic instincts. They search for leaves, feathers and sticks to build a nest using only wings and mouths. Mr Gregg, in his transfiguration, advises his children to steal some food from their own house 'when the ducks aren't looking'. Nevertheless, they try to maintain the superiority of human beings by refusing to eat worms and insects like normal ducks: 'Just because we have wings, we don't have to eat bird food. We shall eat apples instead' (32). The ducks living in the Greggs' house meanwhile act as human beings. They cook, play with toys, sleep in their bed, and even hold guns in their hands to shoot the Gregg family. At the hunting ground, there is a brief exchange between a duck and Mr Gregg:

'You are always shooting at us.'
'Oh, but that's not the same!' said Mr Gregg. 'We are allowed to shoot ducks!'
'Who allows you?' asked the duck.
'We allow each other,' said Mr Gregg (40).

This conversation reveals the self-centred and selfish attitude of humans who never admit their wrongs when they kill animals just for fun. Mr Gregg then implores the ducks not to kill his children and promises never to kill any animal again. The Greggs' one miserable night in the wood exhibits what it would be like to be a vulnerable bird.

True to his word, he destroys all his guns, and Mr Gregg's name is then humorously changed into 'Egg' out of respect for his 'feathered friends' (54). Dahl's short narratives of the fox and duck family make us empathise with their threatened lives. Readers will realise how they as animals feel when humans threaten and offer no room for them to live naturally.

Animals with human characteristics are also found in Dahl's *The Twits* (1980), where we witness the same angst and vengeance of human beings against animals: 'I'll get you next time, you filthy feathery frumps! I will wring your necks, the whole lot of you, and have you bubbling in the pot for Bird Pie before this day is out!' (53). Human beings, this time, are presented as dangerously desensitised to violence and the suffering of others. The Twits, from the beginning, enjoy torturing each other, and later commit violent acts against animals. The relationships between the couple appear to be based on mutual irritation, and all seem self-preoccupied. However, they share one common trait: the love of Bird Pie, and violence against animals. Mr Twit introduces an effective bird hunting technique by painting 'Hugtight Sticky Glue' along the branches of 'The Big Dead Tree' which can catch all kinds of birds that land on it: 'song thrushes, blackbirds, sparrows, crows, little jenny wrens, robins, anything – they all went into the pot for Wednesday's Bird Pie supper' (40). When the four naughty little boys are stuck in the tree, the furious Mr Twit reveals his savage plan to eat them instead, since 'Boy Pie might be better than Bird Pie...More meat and not so many tiny little bones!' (41). The three boys can think only of how Mr Twit will cook them. He may boil, stew or cook them with carrots, while the fourth boy, 'who had more sense than the others' (43), tells his friends to unbutton their pants and slip out of the tree on their naked bottoms. Little children are again threatened with being eaten by adults. However, their tense situation is suddenly resolved by a humorous solution: by running away semi-naked. It seems that small children do not care what they look like, which explains why they have no shame in being naked. Quentin Blake foregrounds the empty trousers, and Mr Twit's dismay as the boys make their gleeful escape:



Figure 4:1 Running away from the Twits by Quentin Blake
(*The Twits*, 1980:43)

The four monkeys in *The Twits* are perhaps amongst the most tortured and suffering animals in Dahl's animal fantasy. They are forced to 'do everything upside down' (45), since Mr Twit has a dream of establishing the first 'Great Upside Down Monkey Circus' in the world. They have to practise their performance six hours a day, and are frightened by Mrs Twit's 'beastly stick' (45). The two small monkey children are described as 'faint with so much blood going to their heads' (45). Highlighting their physical abuse Dahl shows that animals, like humans, have feelings, and desire to live a happy life. Muggle-Wump, the clever monkey, and his family, the narrator adds, 'longed to escape from the cage...and go back to the African jungle where they came from' (46). They also feel pain when being tortured by ruthless people: 'They hated [The Twits] for making their lives so miserable', and 'for what they did to the birds' (46). Animals are shown as caring for their fellow creatures while humans kill animals for the thrill of it. In *Fantastic Mr Fox*, Dahl presents a thoughtful Mr Fox apologising to Badger for the damage he has caused — 'this mess you're in is all my fault...' (47) — and inviting all the animals to join his family for a great dinner. In addition, while the other small foxes do not display much personality, the Smallest Fox makes his mark by proposing his father fetch some carrots for the herbivorous animals coming to their feast. Mr. Fox never thinks of this and praises his son for being considerate of others: 'What a thoughtful little fellow you are!' (56). This also suggests that the intelligence and compassion of children can surpass those of adults.

The Twits extends Dahl's considerable concern about cruelty to animals. Forewarned by Muggle-Wump, the African Roly-Poly Bird then sings out to other English birds:

There's sticky stick stuff all over the tree!
If you land in the branches, you'll never get free!
So fly away! Fly away! Stay up high!
Or you'll finish up tomorrow in a hot Bird Pie! (49)

Ultimately, all the birds survive the Twits' Hugtight Sticky Glue, and with careful collaboration and a clever plan, the animals again outwit the dangerous human beings. The cruel couple are tricked into believing that they are standing upside down when everything in their house is stuck to the ceiling. They then 'feel giddy,' and Mrs Twit even thinks 'all the blood's going to [her] head' (80). Mr Twit comes up with an idea of standing on their heads. They are then stuck, 'cemented, glued, fixed to the floorboards' (80). Muggle-Wump's upside down plot finally destroys the Twits, who, like George's Grandma, physically disappear.



Figure 4:2 'The Twits Get the Shrinks' by Quentin Blake
(*The Twits*, 1980:85)

While the animals discussed previously are cruelly hunted, tortured and killed by humans, in 1983, Dahl introduces us to another set of vengeful animals in his collection of poetry, *Dirty Beasts*, which details the exploits of various creatures. Through his wicked humour, Dahl creates a ghastly menagerie of dirty beasts that eat people. The first poem introduces a 'wonderfully clever pig', who has 'a massive brain' (47). The Pig asks himself some philosophical questions such as 'What LIFE was really all about' and 'Why was he placed upon this earth?' (47) in an attempt to find answers for the

nature of his existence. After pondering them for some time, he realises ('All in a flash, he saw the light' (48)), that he is eventually going to be butchered and sold for his meat. In order to save his own bacon, the pig comes up with an unmentionable plan. Instead of being killed by the farmer as we would expect, the pig begins eating the farmer 'from head to toe, chewing the pieces nice and slow' (49). When he finishes his feast, he then justifies his course of action with the thought 'And so, because I feared the worst, I thought I'd better eat *him* first' (49). A pig, which in ancient Christian symbolism, is associated with sloth, in this grotesquely comic verse turns out to be a self-aware and smart animal. He does what we are expected to do in order to save our life when being threatened. Instead of falling prey to his hunter, he manages to survive, and his reaction can be regarded as no more unreasonable than the big hungry wolf eating the little pigs in the fairy tale.

The studious pig, wily fox, sharp-witted monkey, and the like are the central characters in a significant number of Dahl's animal fantasies. His fantasy reveals how animals perceive themselves and how we think of them, and his fiction can be credited with the potential of raising children's awareness of animal welfare, and reducing the human-inflicted suffering of animals: an important factor behind the global decline of violence against other living things. Dahl is also satirising human beings seen from the intelligent perspective of animals. In addition, this type of fantasy allows James and the Magic Finger girl to challenge family and school authority by providing animals to take the place of adults. These characters have special connections with the animal world. They feel such strong ties to animals that they form a magical bond with them. Dahl's stories feature a small boy who relates to his new friends — the insects underground — and a small girl to the ducks. He empowers both children and animals who feel for each other to fight against their oppressors. At the same time, he delivers kindness, empathy, and understanding to them. Apart from creating talking animals who are able to outsmart humans, however, Dahl also introduces us to a more disturbing kind of comic fantasy where grotesque creatures threaten children with cannibalism or irreversible transformation into vulnerable animals. These more sinister stories introduce the giants and witches of traditional fairy tale into the everyday realistic world of modern childhood.

The giants and witches

The BFG: one friendly and funny giant against nine cannibalistic trolls.

I is a freaky Giant! I is a nice and jumbly Giant! I is THE BIG FRIENDLY GIANT! I is the BFG (*The BFG*, 1982:22).

Declaring himself friendly, nice and freaky, Dahl's BFG ultimately changes the way we normally conceive of mythical giants. 'Jack the Giant Killer', for example, is among fairy tales that have long formed the modern perception of giants as stupid and violent trolls. Dahl's giant, as well as Swift's, however, is portrayed as amiable, funny, and intelligent. The BFG's language, childlike personality, and humour make him an engaging character, who, far from being 'repulsive, filthy, diabolical' (81) like his fellow giants, becomes an outcast in the giants' society, where his kindly nature differentiates him from the child-eating ogres. Published the same year as *Revolting Rhymes*, and one year after *George's Marvellous Medicine*, *The BFG*¹² conveys yet another version of the comic fantasy in the realm of menacing giants. Like his previous books, it is highly praised for its humour. The novel expands a book chapter entitled 'The Big Friendly Giant' from *Danny, the Champion of the World* (1975). Often described as carrying a suitcase and a blowpipe to spread 'a marvellous and fantastic dream' (*Danny*, 2010:13), the BFG in both books, together with his magic powders and dream-catching net, resonates powerfully with Dahl's strong belief in the powers of a magical, yet comical fantasy world. In *The Roald Dahl Treasury* (1997), one of Dahl's daughters, Ophelia, in the chapter 'About my father', reminisces about the way her father instils a spirit of adventure in his children. He hung fifty different coloured glass (witch balls) from their bedroom ceiling to forbid any witches entering their room because of their hideous reflection in the balls. His bedtime stories were 'rarely cosy or sweet' but with 'a spooky edge' (8) (he was, after all, credited with inventing the Child-Catcher in the film of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) for which he wrote the screenplay): stories of marvellous dream powders blown into a bedroom to 'work wonders' while the children were sleeping. He claimed: 'these extraordinary powders will work on anything from maths problems to constipation' (9). Ophelia then recounts how the story of the BFG came to life:

after the lights had been switched out and we were almost asleep, I heard a noise outside the window...a long stick push[sic] between the curtains... the

¹² The book is dedicated to Dahl's late daughter, Olivia, who died of measles encephalitis at the age of seven.

loud whoosh of a blowing sound...it was Dad who, after leaving our bedroom, had fetched a ladder and a yellow bamboo cane...and climbed up to our window to blow the magic powder over us (9).¹³

Ophelia's account of her father and his creative character, the BFG, plausibly explains the duplication of the BFG in Dahl's writing. In his study of Dahl's language, Rudd (2012) also points out how Dahl likes to 'fudge the divide between events in his life and his fiction, famously aligning himself with the BFG' (55) who announces, 'What I mean and what I say is two different things' (*The BFG*, 41), as Dahl himself is reported to have been 'a boy who so persistently writes the exact opposite of what he means' (56). Now the mature Dahl, well-known for his inventive, playful use of language, takes more pleasure in adopting spoonerisms and malapropisms through the narration of the BFG. The book's comical nature comes mainly from the BFG's naive view of the world and his 'gobblefunking'¹⁴ with words, and both Dahl and the BFG seem to know no limit to their linguistic experiments. The giant's prodigious size and strength seem to be contradictory of his childish character. Referring to people as 'human beans', the BFG, in Dahl's guise, can freely criticize several unpleasant traits of human nature. The giants' cannibal nature seems less horrifying than human beings who 'is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it' and 'is the only animals that is killing their own kind' (70). His remarks allow Sophie as well as the readers to 'wonder whether humans were actually really any better than giants' (71), and it is Men's inequitable rule-making process that allows them to treat others unfairly: 'The human beans is making rules to suit themselves...But the rules they is making do not suit the little piggy-wiggies. Am I right or left?' (71). He further points out that 'human beans is thinking they is very clever, but they is not. They is nearly all of them notmuchers and squeakpip' (91). His repetitive question 'right or left?' intensifies his quirkily authoritative way of speaking which makes his comments on men sound both authoritative and satirical.

¹³ In the preface to *The BFG*'s 2016 edition, Lucy, another of Dahl's daughters, also recaps how her father tells the story of the BFG, himself performing the role, and creating the atmosphere in the bedroom to involve his children in his imaginative story. Although tempted to think that adults might tell lies to lure children, they still half-believe and trust their father who insists on the realistic nature of his tale.

¹⁴ In *The Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary* (2016), compiled by lexicographer Dr Susan Rennie, 'Gobblefunk' is defined as to 'play around with [words] and invent new words or meanings' (102). The term appears in *The BFG*: "'You mean whales,' Sophie said. 'Wales is something quite different.' 'Wales is whales,' the Giant said. 'Don't gobblefunk around with words'" (20).

An article on the online BBC news – ‘Roald Dahl’s swashboggling words get their own dictionary’ (2016) – discusses how the lexicographer Dr Susan Rennie studied Dahl’s formation of new words based on familiar sounds, and further adds that he ‘didn’t always explain what his words meant, but children can work them out because they often sound like a word they know, and he loved using onomatopoeia’. In addition to his craft with language, Dr Rennie points to the fact that the writer ‘used sounds that children love to say, like squishous and squizzle, or fizzlecrump and fizzwiggler, which makes his stories so much fun to read, whatever age you are’ (BBC.co.uk, 2019). Dahl’s neology would be invented by scribbling down his words before swapping letters around or sometimes he jumbles pronunciations. Thus, the BFG’s dialogues are often shown as confusing and nonsensical, but readers can feel amused by the way he talks. He tells Sophie: ‘Meaning is not important...I cannot be right all the time. Quite often I is left instead of right’ (27). The size of his fellow giants, for instance, is described as ‘two times my wideness and double my royal highness’ (28). His emotion is then illustrated as ‘Whenever I is feeling a bit scrotty... a few gollops of frobscottle is always making me hopscotchy again’ since ‘[it]’s a razztwizzler...It’s gloriumptious’ (62). His harmless appearance in ‘a pair of ridiculous sandals’ with a large hole ‘where his toes stuck out’ (16) befits his eccentric behaviour and might suggest why Sophie forgets her fear and befriends him. During the critical moment when the trembling Sophie thinks the BFG is going to eat her, she bursts out asking: ‘What’s wrong with the English?’ (18) after hearing that the Bonecrunching Giant has to travel far off to Turkey to eat Turks for the ‘more scrumdiddlyumptious’ turkey-like taste. While Sophie spends her life with nine little girls in the village orphanage, the BFG has to live with nine other giants in Giant Country. Both suffer isolation and gradually develop mutual empathy through sincere conversation. Hearing about the BFG’s physical inferiority to his giant friends, Sophie responds empathically: ‘You mustn’t feel bad about it...I think you are just great. Why even your toes must be as big as sausages’ (28). The BFG deplores Sophie’s miserable life under the care of Mrs Clonkers, whom he calls the ‘filthy old fizzwiggler!’ (31). The nine Giants’ relish for eating children is described with such comic energy that their air of threat is far less menacing. The Bloodbottler, for example, tells the BFG: ‘I is choosing Chile...because I is fed up with the taste of Esquimos...I has plenty of cold eats in this scuddling hot weather, and the next coldest thing to an Esquimo is a Chile bean’ (53). The giant’s justifiable connection of each country with its specific taste may sound comical but has a certain logic as a Chile bean must be ‘very chilly’. In reality, adults, viewed by a small

child, loom like giants, thus the BFG represents the ‘good adult’ archetype, and the other giants the ‘bad adults’.

Calling Oscar Wilde and Dahl ‘bad boys’ of their eras, Hope Howell Hodgkins (2002) in her article ‘White Blossoms and Snozzcumbers: Alternative Sentimentalities in the Giants of Oscar Wilde and Roald Dahl’ analyses Wilde’s ‘Selfish Giant’ (1888) and Dahl’s *The Big Friendly Giant* (1982) to illustrate major differences, and similarities, ‘between modernist aestheticism and popular postmodernism’ (41) through their rhetoric and intentions. Hodgkins traces a sentimentalizing progression of the giants in both texts and points out that although their tales ‘uncover and defuse’ (41) childhood fears, they are ‘utterly dissimilar in rhetoric, in values, and in the final pax celebrated in each case between the children and their giants’ (41). While Dahl ‘offers no final answer for the century of gigaton’, Wilde’s fairy tales depend on ‘moralistic cures and utopian endings’ (41). Both authors utilise the theme of ‘the adult co-opting of childhood fears’ where their giants are tamed by the children they first frightened, which becomes ‘a solution less common in fairy-tale terms’ (42). Unlike Wilde’s ‘selfish giant’, Dahl’s BFG is the ‘ultimate vulgarian, gleefully “whizzpopping” ... in the presence of the Queen of England’ (42). The author’s concerns with language and the rhetoric used in the texts reveal ‘the drastic change from a fear of unyielding law and judgement in Wilde’s day to a new fear of free-floating language and the uncertainties of meaning in Dahl’s postmodern world’ (42). Wilde’s story is a moral lesson against selfishness as it pays particular attention to the Giant’s limitations, and his moral growth, symbolising adult guilt and loss of the beautiful innocence of childhood. On the contrary, Dahl’s BFG embodies ‘a particularly late twentieth-century challenge and fear for Dahl’s child-readers’ about language and the world of adulthood. Dahl’s novel showcases its postmodernism, ‘while raising questions about its author’s intentions’ (47). Hodgkins notes that the scrambled language of the BFG and the wordplay allow children to gain ‘confidence in coping with real-life giants’. Meanwhile, Dahl claims ‘good children’s books teach children “the joy of playing with language” and therefore “not to be frightened of books” (West quoted in Hodgkins, 2002:47). The BFG plays the role of ‘model learner’ and his ‘humorous self-referentiality and wordplay’ distinguish the novel from ‘its late-twentieth-century cohorts’ (47). The evil giants in Dahl’s text in the end are

punished but they never repent. Hodgkins sums up that Wilde's novel shows some sign of hope, 'if only through artifice,' whereas Dahl 'urges the postmodern child to cope and contain' (48). The giants, he infers, 'represent true terrors, for children and for adults' (48). The philosophical conclusion, as Hodgkins suggests, is that 'absolute semantic instability' 'is terrifying and cannot be gotten over, like death itself' (48). Meanwhile, although *The BFG* features an underlying warm sentiment formed between a big, friendly giant and a little girl under the threat of the evil trolls, a year later Dahl introduces us to a more disturbing fantasy and its grotesque creatures: the Witches.

The Witches: the unnamed boy vs the mythical creature

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 Witches*, 1983:1).

Dahl begins his novel with the narrator's extensive, almost obsessional confirmation of the real existence of witches in the ordinary world, and their gruesome plots to 'get rid of the children' (1). The narrator, who later turns out to be the protagonist, the unnamed boy in a mouse body, and a mixture of Dahl's own voice (as it seems to be written by an adult),¹⁵ spends a disproportionate amount of time on the history of witches, and seems to relish the prospect of any child encountering a witch as 'no country in the world is completely free from WITCHES' and 'you can still never be quite sure whether it is a real witch you are gazing at or just a kind lady' (3). Having two first-person narrators in the opening pages causes confusion, and this awkwardness 'uncover[s] a deeper quality of Dahl's writing' (Rudd, 2012:63) where an intrusive and opinionated narrator emerges intermittently. Like Enid Blyton, Rudd suggests, Dahl can associate his narration with the oral tradition. Dahl's witches no longer use broomsticks or are seen with 'silly' black hats, but they are 'ordinary' working women with magic powers. Children can be turned into stone statues against which visitors can lean their umbrellas, a lovely young porpoise, or even part of a painting as 'some very mysterious things go on in the world of witches' (13). The narrator insists that the inconvenient truth about witches is that any 'lady' can be a witch in disguise, even 'your lovely school-teacher who is reading

¹⁵ In *Matilda*, the introductory part exposes the writer's narrative voice as deriding doting parents who cling to their belief that no one on Earth has better, smarter, more talented, or better-looking children than their own. Here the attack is mainly against parents in general – 'It's funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful' (*Matilda*:1).

these words to you at this very moment' (5), which can mischievously incite childhood mistrust of their teachers. While witches are often represented as mythical creatures and readers may doubt their real existence, the narrator creates a paranoia about their omnipresence by warning readers to be constantly on their guard: 'I am not, of course, telling you for one second that your teacher actually is a witch. All I am saying is that she *might* be one. It is most unlikely. But – and here comes the big 'but' – *it is not impossible*' (5). While the narrative tone is ambiguous, the narrator's grandmother, with her extensive knowledge of witches and her own missing thumb, appears increasingly witchlike herself. On the other hand Dahl's satirical account of the witches' convention in a hotel conference suite partially mitigates the horror of their scheme to destroy all children by turning them into mice. Wearing pretty clothes and hats, they greet each other like members of the Women's Institute: 'Come and sit next to me, Millie dear,... Oh, hel-*lo*, Beatrice! I haven't seen you since the last meeting! What an adorable dress you have on!' (55). Divested of their business suits and accessories, the witches look bizarre and deformed, since they have no finger-nails or toes, and they have 'wigrash' on their bald heads, larger nose-holes, little black dots in their eyes and blue spittle. Before they expose themselves as witches, they are described as 'all scratching away like mad at their hair on the backs of their necks!' (56). The narrator humorously links their hair-scratching manner with 'nose-picking' and 'bottom-scratching' as these behaviours are secretly done when a person thinks no one is looking. He guesses that there might be fleas or nits in their hair and further extends readers' suspense with the amusing story of Ashton, a school boy who had nits in his hair. The boy was made to 'dip his whole head in turpentine. It killed the nits all right, but it nearly killed Ashton as well. Half the skin came away from his scalp' (56). Then the shocking moment comes when the narrator notices that these women are wearing wigs and '*Every one of them [is] wearing gloves!*' (57). Dahl may also want to warn children of 'stranger danger' but his child abduction stories are particularly grotesque as children are simply 'vanished' with the arrival of a strange lady.

The witches at the (ironically named) RSPCC private meeting in the hotel can be compared to political groups whose hidden agenda is revealed when, left to themselves, they gradually expose their true nature. These 'splendid ladies' obediently follow their dictatorial ruler, 'the Grand High Witch,' with 'a mixture of adoration, awe and fear' (59). The leader declares her programme – to exterminate the 'stink' of children – and launches 'Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker' for their own benefit. The name

of their society - 'the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children' - effectively makes the narrator believe in their concept: 'they would be wonderful kind people' (50). The German accent and the dictatorial language of the Grand High Witch such as 'Nor vill you be able to catch the crrraberrruncher, who lives high up on rrocky cliffs' (100), along with her humorous poems such as 'A foolish vitch vithout a brain must sizzle in the fiery flame!' (968), and the 'hard metallic quality' of her voice, are rigorously employed in the service of humour and help reinforce the 'foul and putrid and decayed' (60) appearance of this female leader.

Inspired by Dahl's childhood fascination with witches and magic, *The Witches* contains no 'gifted' or special children, but the power of love and friendship to overcome difficulties while magical instruments are in the hands of adults, who use them to victimise the underdog. At his transfiguration, the boy can develop new skills as a mouse and performs incredible tasks. His thoughts are frequently shown as optimistic and trouble-free: '*It is not bad after all, ..., to be tiny as well as speedy when there is a bunch of dangerous females after your blood*' (111). Dahl, at the beginning, foreshadows some capabilities of mice by introducing us to William and Mary, the two tame and trainable mice that can do several tricks such as creeping, climbing up, and tight-rope walking. The narrator at first dreams of becoming the owner of a 'White Mouse Circus', and travelling around the world to show his 'world-famous performing mice walking on tight-ropes, swinging from trapezes, turning somersaults in the air, bouncing on trampolines and all the rest of it' (53). Ironically, the boy himself is turned into a trained mouse in his grandmother's house in Norway in the end but the fact that mice are very versatile animals, and their ability to climb and reach hard to find places makes them very difficult to catch, can more or less compensate for his irreversible metamorphosis. The book ends with the young hero and his grandmother clinging to each other and 'go [ing] on a crusade to poison all the witches in the world' (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016:111). While the ending of a film version of *The Witches* directed by Nicholas Roeg (1990) was changed to reassure audiences (Sturrock, 2012:536), Dahl's vision is magical and exhilarating, affirming that change, though terrifying, is a natural part of the world as one cannot promise children that everything will be all right in this real world. However, an image of love and the boy's contentment at the prospect of living and dying together with his grandmother speak powerfully. The grandmother in the book was partially inspired by Dahl's Norwegian mother, whose caring and understanding personality features in the story. Underneath the polished surface, it

seems we confront real life witches in all shapes and forms in our society and that is what Dahl's sense of humour is based on. His characters may be unlikely, but they are not entirely impossible. However, as Eileen Donaldson (2004) suggests, Dahl's young characters are not left stranded, since his magical spell binds the children into what she calls 'new, loving familial relationships' (131). Through an adult's guidance, a child can develop a 'warm, caring and stable relationship', and this newfound bond, as Donaldson explains, 'is obviously gratifying for the children who read Dahl's books' (134). Without transcending reality, Dahl, Donaldson points out, 'offers something to his readers that will enable them to cope with the alienation and rejection they may feel in the real world in which they live' (140). Dahl's comic fantasy, like Nesbit's, sets his stories in the 'real' world where alienation and isolation may seem too threatening for children to cope with, but his inventive brand of fun can help alleviate the horrors and distress. Nevertheless, Dahl's comic fantasy realm is not limited to the intervention of subversive creatures in the world: he embroiders our familiar fairy tales, modernises them, and plays around with rhyming words and unanticipated yet comical endings.

Revolting Rhymes: Dahlesque reinterpretations of six well-known fairy tales

Published in 1982, the same year as *The BFG*, *Revolting Rhymes* is the first of Dahl's collection of comic verse for children with illustrations by Quentin Blake. A parody of six popular folk tales told in verse, Dahl gives them a brand new set of ironic twists as opposed to their original happily-ever-after finishes. These parodies narrate radical changes of characters' personalities and plot twists. Some of the rhyming words are considered obscene and inappropriate, though comical, for young readers. His first retold Cinderella story starts with his challenge to readers of its already-known storyline.

I guess you think you know this story.
You don't. The real one's much more gory.
The phoney one, the one you know,
Was cooked up years and years ago (3).

He affirms that his story is a lot more gruesome, unlike the old version, which was censored 'just to keep the children happy'. The writer claims to share a darker side of the story which adults do not dare to expose to their child. The story retains the two ugly sisters, a Magic Fairy, the hot-tempered and rude Prince, and the demanding and audacious Cinderella. Some lines describe the odd girl who 'ran out in her underwear, / And lost one slipper on the stair' (5), or the cruel prince who 'cried, "Who's this dirty

slut? / Off with her nut! Off with her nut!” (6). Cinderella’s surprising ending, as previously discussed in the Gender chapter, reveals a real ‘revolting’ New Woman, who rejects the expected happy reunion with the prince, but makes her own choice to marry ‘a decent man’, a ‘simple jam-maker,’ and ‘[t]heir house was filled with smiles and laughter / And they were happy ever after’ (6).

The story of a heroic Jack and the Beanstalk is turned into a household story of a scolding mother and a frightened boy. Jack is found being told off and beaten by his mother with the ‘handle of a vacuum-cleaner’. His mean mother is then shown as having ‘hitched her skirts above her knee and disappeared right up the tree’ (10) to fetch some golden leaves off the huge beanstalk. She is then eaten by the Giant, whose clever nose, as Jack explains, “‘smelled her out! She’s in his belly! / I had a hunch that she was smelly”” (12). The story ends with Jack’s becoming ‘an instant millionaire’ and the last line reads: “‘A bath”, he said, “does seem to pay. / I’m going to have one every day”” (12). Ironically, the Giant is not killed as expected but it is Jack’s mother who dies because of her disgusting smell (another example of the writer’s misogynistic prejudices, similar to *The Witches*). The moral lesson, if any, seems to be for a child to wash regularly like Jack, who as the poem recites, ‘scrubbed his body everywhere./ He even washed and rinsed his hair./ He did his teeth, he blew his nose/ And went out smelling like a rose’ (12).

Snow-White still has to confront the evil stepmother, whose name, this time, is ‘Miss Maclahose’. Again jealous of Snow-White’s beauty, the savage Queen ‘went absolutely wild./ She yelled, “I’m going to scrag that child! / I’ll cook her flaming goose! I’ll skin’er! / I will have her rotten guts for dinner!””(14). The crafty Snow-White neatly escapes the Queen’s wicked plan and ‘[she]’d found it easy, being pretty, / To hitch a ride in to the city, / And there she’d got a job, unpaid, / As general cook and parlour-maid’ (16). The magic talking looking-glass is cleverly exploited as a trusted and accurate fortune teller for Snow-White, and the Seven Dwarfs’ betting on the horses makes them into millionaires. The writer then concludes: ‘Which shows that gambling’s not a sin / Provided that you always win’ (18).

Surprisingly, the writer turns against the story of Goldilocks, whose tale then foreshadows Dahl’s sharp criticism of a badly-behaved child and ignorant parents, who later appear in *Matilda*:

It is a mystery to me
Why loving parents cannot see
That this is actually a book
About a brazen little crook (19).

Goldilocks is depicted as reckless and self-obsessed: ‘She doesn’t care, she doesn’t mind,/ And now she plonks her fat behind’ (21), and ‘Her filthy shoes were thick with grime,/ And mud and mush and slush and slime’ (21-22). She is then called several undesirable names for a small girl, such as a ‘little toad’, ‘revolting little clown’, and ‘little beast’. The fact that the little girl can run away with no explanation or apology for the Bear family seems to disturb the writer’s righteous spirit as he finally suggests sending ‘Young Goldie to a sticky end’ (22) by allowing the Baby Bear ‘to eat *her* up as well’ (22) for her ‘crime’. Again, small children are apt to be consumed by an animal as we have seen before.

The Little Red Riding Hood legend, in Dahl’s version, is sharply twisted and becomes much more gory and shocking in a short poem. The small girl asks no more innocent questions about the Wolf’s big teeth, but bursts out saying: ‘But Grandma,/ what a lovely great big furry coat you have on’ (26). The girl ‘whips a pistol from her knickers’ (26) to kill the hungry wolf, and ‘Miss Riding Hood’ is transformed:

But what a change! No cloak of red,
No silly hood upon her head.
She said, ‘Hello, and do please note
‘My lovely furry WOLFSKIN COAT’ (26).

Immediately following the story of Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf is the tale of the three little Pigs. Compared with Dahl’s other poems, the pigs have a far worse destiny than their original. Although the last pig survives the wolf, he is killed by the armed Miss Riding Hood, who turns his skin into a ‘PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE’ (32). The last line is capitalised to emphasise how confident and cunning Miss Riding Hood becomes. She can shoot not only two hungry wolves but also the miserable pig. Unlike his other books, these humorous rewritten fairy tales allow Dahl to transcend reality. Where many classic fairy tales end with people being killed, Dahl is freer to punish any of his characters for pure entertainment.

Conclusion

In the course of his career as Britain’s most popular writer of children’s comic fiction, Dahl develops many varieties of comic fantasy. His tales combine realistic,

contemporary children with a 'real world' setting, and their juxtaposition of fantasy and realism is perhaps their most striking quality. Comic fantasy enables the author to rescue and rehabilitate children from extreme situations: the Oompa-Loompas and the BFG are introduced to help solve problems, the giant peach is used to save James from Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, and George is rescued from a miserable childhood by the marvellous medicine. Ultimately, Dahl's fiction for children showcases a range of distinctive comic styles we call 'Dahlesque.' Developed over a thirty-year career, and characterised by neologistic wordplay and the reconfiguring of pre-existing forms, especially fairy tales, this style is both outrageous and moralistic. A didactic undercurrent persists throughout his career, most obviously in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which satirises childhood misbehaviour via a morality tale structure. While the more Dickensian style of caricature emerges through aptly-named characters, from Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, to the Twits and Miss Trunchbull, old-fashioned knockabout slapstick is present in all his stories, from Augustus Gloop's fall into the chocolate river, to Bruce Bogtrotter's triumphant consumption of the enormous chocolate cake. Over time, his targets, while all, more or less, abusers of children or animals, become increasingly grotesque, even Swiftian, in the flesh-eating giants of *The BFG*, and the bald-headed, megalomaniac Witches. With the Giants, Witches, and Miss Trunchbull, Dahl's comic style can be said to flood his fantasies with torrents of crazy talk, before subsiding into the relative calm of quiet resolution (the boy's return to his Grandmother, in *The Witches*, and Matilda's new life with Miss Honey). While Dahl's style of comic fantasy has often been deplored as 'tasteless,' it consistently updates traditional forms to voice his anger with injustice and cruelty, albeit via violent fantasies of cannibalism and anti-child persecution. This, in the end, is the paradox of Dahl's style of comic fantasy. In order to quiet his fury with all forms of cruelty against the weak, he has to imagine ever more bizarre variations of inhumanity, and attack them with a relish that sounds almost joyous.

Chapter 5 : The Dahl Phenomenon

All you do is to look
At a page in this book
Because that's where we always will be.
No book ever ends
When it's full of your friends
The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me
(*The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, 1985).

This cheerful song of farewell is sung by the Monkey for his human friend, little Billy, during a visit to his new sweet shop. The rhyme concludes the book with a 'feel good' ending whose last line resonates with its title, and also reflects Dahl's sheer ability at instilling in his audience moral values such as beautiful friendships from the strangest of places and patterns, which is considered one of his major themes. Although they are from different species, the boy, the Giraffe, the Pelican and the Monkey develop a close partnership through 'The Ladderless Window-Cleaning Company'. They help and care for each other and live in harmony through a collective responsibility as do James and his insect friends during their sky-floating adventure. The publication of many of Dahl's final works came after his death in November 1990. These works such as *The Minpins*, his last children's story; *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*, written for the Dyslexia Institute in London; and *Roald Dahl's Guide to Railway Safety* are meant to be read by his child readers for the purposes of both instruction and entertainment. The last two stories also reflect the ways in which Dahl has extended the boundaries of his subversive world of fantasy in children's books by promoting understanding of dyslexia and providing some educational resources while having fun with wordplay. In addition, a particular image and brand of Dahl is then constructed after his death through the advertising industry with numerous successful product marketing campaigns and activities.

Shifting the focus from the fantasy, creative and comic aspects in the Dahlian magical world, this chapter will examine the reputation and reception of Dahl's work and trends in criticism that provide the necessary background for understanding what happened later in Dahl studies. *Boy's* and *Going Solo's* immense popularity accelerate what Murray Pollinger calls 'the Roald Dahl phenomenon' (Sturrock, 2011:537), 'hybrids of true autobiography, recollections and his own imagination because Roald would always take a story in a direction that made it more interesting than in a way that made it more accurate' (Blake quoted in Sturrock, 2011:537). Excluding the major issue

of film adaptations, which, for reasons of space and disciplinary specialist knowledge, fall beyond the reach of this thesis, this chapter considers what we mean by the ‘Roald Dahl phenomenon, and how this has created new ways of understanding Dahl’s achievements and place in twentieth-century and contemporary culture. Drawing on theories of cultural materialism appropriate to the analysis of children’s literature, Dahl’s posthumous association with advertising campaigns and other promotional activities will be assessed through the exploration of the Dahl industry as seen in media, content marketing, and publishing, culminating in celebrations of Dahl’s centenary in 2016. Finally, the chapter will briefly reflect on how Dahl’s extensive work for both children and adults was discussed among academic scholars attending the Roald Dahl Centenary Conference held on 16-18 June 2016 to celebrate the author known as ‘the world’s number one storyteller’.

This chapter applies a theory of cultural materialism, which views culture as a productive process focusing on arts such as literature to explore Dahl’s texts and their continuing impact on contemporary society, its economy, values and promotion of a distinctive children’s culture. In the 1950s, Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson, as well as Raymond Williams, fashioned new historical approaches to literature in Britain emphasizing the importance of literary texts in shaping history, historical and materialist approaches to culture (Brannigan, 1998:95). This research method emerged in the late 1960s and developed more fully in the 1980s. Since ‘literature was not autonomous’, Williams argues ‘we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws’ (Williams 1980,43). Williams embraced the political nature of Marx’s theory and helped create the field of cultural studies in the 1980s. His theory of cultural materialism focuses on power and class structures. Similarly, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (1985) point out that ‘cultural materialism studies the implication of literary texts in history’ (viii) as it closely links capitalism and literature. Both critics claim that ‘culture is inseparable from its conditions of production and reception in history’. Dollimore further suggests: ‘there is no cultural practice without political significance.’ (Sim 1998: 217). Cultures, therefore, play crucial roles in the promotion of widely held values, beliefs, and worldviews of a period. Through close study of cultural products and their language usage, sociologists as well as critics can discern how those values connect to social structure and explain why products are created in a

given place and context. This materialist approach is applied to the study of British culture especially in relation to Dahl's centenary. His popularity lives on via promotional and advertising campaigns that target particular social groups and classes to whom his writing appeals.

Although his career started in 1960, Dahl has remained popular and relevant for over thirty years and his works can still draw people's attention. The timeless Dahl 'brand' has been adopted by many businesses, companies, and bookshops, and though some of his values have been questioned, his children's fiction has maintained its popularity. Moreover, his collaborations with Quentin Blake 'charm generations of children with [Blake's] imaginative depictions of characters' (Roalddahl.com) which make them look modern and lively. His fictional characters and some moral values, such as love of reading, adventures, and creativities, are actively promoted and advertised through everyday consumer products such as McDonald's 'Happy Reader', Persil washing powder for adventurous children and parents, and Premier Foods' Mr Kipling, and its limited edition Roald Dahl-themed cakes.

Dahl's trademark as 'the world's number one storyteller' was at times extreme. Harry Kemble (2017), in *The Mirror*, refers to Dahl as 'a brilliant children's writer' who can 'beat' Shakespeare and Dickens. Kemble alludes to Canon UK's¹ poll which was conducted with a sample of 2,000 adults in 2017 on 'the top 50 storytellers' through different narrative forms such as music, writing, or photography. It was significant that 58 per cent of voters rated Dahl as 'the greatest storyteller of all time', while Charles Dickens came a close second. This 'staggering' result also overtakes William Shakespeare and J.K. Rowling, who were listed among the top five. The vote was part of Canon UK's research project for its '365 Days of Summer' competition to find a storyteller to participate through the whole year, 'identifying and living 365 new stories' around the world. Matthew Searle, Country Director, Canon UK and Ireland, states that due to new developments in technology, people can tell their own story through various narrative methods. Dahl's inventive language is indisputable, he notes, 'but the images which accompanied many of his children's books have helped to paint

¹ Canon UK is a subsidiary of Canon Inc. in Europe. Canon was founded in Japan in 1933 and is now one of the world's leading companies providing innovative digital imaging technologies and solutions. Its main commitment is to help people preserve the experiences and emotions of precious moments as high-quality images taken with advanced digital cameras.

the picture for children for generations'. Dahl's lead in the poll carried out with adults suggests his popularity among adult readers who may remember reading his stories themselves since childhood, or read them to their own children. The children who, 31 years ago, read *Matilda*, are now adults who can read it again both for themselves and their children. The humour and sophistication of his writing for children still attract them as adult readers.

Three of his children's stories – *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *Matilda* – were listed in *Publishers' Weekly* among the 150 best-selling books of all time up to 2000 (Infoplease, 2017). When Puffin children's books released a list of its seventy favourites to celebrate its seventieth anniversary in 2010, amongst them were a set of Dahls known as 'the best phizzwizzers' including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG*, *Matilda*, and *Fantastic Mr Fox* (Puffin's 70 best books for children, 2010). In the article '50 best children's books that parents love to read as well', by Amanda Killelea (2018), Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) took first place, while four books of Dahl's featured in the list: *The BFG* (within the top five – which may be due to his sophisticated word-play), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda* and *James and the Giant Peach*. The poll was carried out by ChannelMum.com to celebrate World Book Day and inspire other parents with ideas for books to read with children. This year 2019, *TIME* Web Site compiled a survey in close collaboration with respected peers such as U.S. Children's Poet Laureate, children's-book historian and the National Centre for Children's Illustrated Literature. It then announced 'THE 100 BEST YOUNG-ADULT BOOKS OF ALL TIME',² where *Matilda* ranked 7, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* 32, and *Danny the Champion of the World* came nearly the last at 99 out of 100. However, it is noticeable that Rowling's Harry Potter series is always within the top five in all these 'best books or best selling of all time' rankings. This raises the question of whether Rowling's extraordinary success with her Harry Potter books overshadows Dahl's popularity – while some significant similarities between the two authors' works can be traced particularly in the depiction of the Dursley family, which echoes the nightmarish guardians seen in many of Dahl's books, such as the Wormwoods and Aunt Sponge and

² Top of the poll is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman, followed by *Harry Potter* (series). Whilst the author is still alive, Harry Potter's disciples are waiting for a new Potter story whenever there is the slightest rumour of one.

Aunt Spiker, and in the similarities between Matilda and Hermione. The occasion of Dahl's birth centenary on 13 September 2016, provides a timely opportunity to reappraise his current standing within the cultural and commercial culture with which he still interacts through posthumous popularity. Before exploring the impact of Dahl's centenary celebration, it is first necessary to discuss Matilda, Dahl's child prodigy, who symbolises both his recognised status as 'a great storyteller,' and her subversive status after the death of her creator.

Matilda: a bookworm who calmly defies injustice through her cleverness

According to the aforementioned poll results, *Matilda*³ always appears in the top half of the list, and is ranked as one of Dahl's best books. In *TIME*'s 'all-time list of classics', *Matilda* is categorised as a 'young-adult' book similar to a coming of age novel such as *The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), while its 100 best children's books include picture books – designated for younger readers – such as Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1984) and Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Matilda, though merely a girl of five and a half years old, is depicted as a highly precocious and intelligent character. The book became a compelling read for young people, as the protagonist, sharing the preadolescent's feeling, feels thwarted and ignored by her family: 'She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't' (23). Her emotional response is similar to the angst of a preteen: 'she knew it was wrong to hate her parents...but she was finding it very hard not to do so' (22). She decides to strike back against her parents' maltreatment and is 'determined to have a go' (23). Moreover, the 'gutsy and adventurous' (96) Matilda stands up firmly for reading and intellectual pursuits, while her parents prefer the television, junk food and cheating customers.

In 2018, the year Matilda turned thirty, although Dahl was no longer around to write about Matilda's adulthood, the book's current publishers, Puffin, wanted the adults who first read the book thirty years ago to meet Matilda again as an adult on the covers of the thirtieth anniversary editions through the lens of Quentin Blake. He says: 'I have had a lot of fun imagining what that little girl might be doing now...as a small

³ In October 2018 the BBC News reported that 17 million copies of *Matilda* were sold worldwide since it was first published, and eight million people in 65 cities around the world saw the award-winning *Matilda the Musical* (BBC News, 2018). Its sales had particularly soared in the previous two years and outsold all of Dahl's other books.

child, Matilda was gifted in several different ways, it wasn't very difficult... Illustrating MATILDA was a wonderful experience. It has been very special to revisit her all these years later and marvel at the woman she would have become' (Penguin, 2018). Blake created Matilda's eight possible professions, three of which appeared on the book covers, as follows: an explorer, astrophysicist, and a chief executive of the British Library.

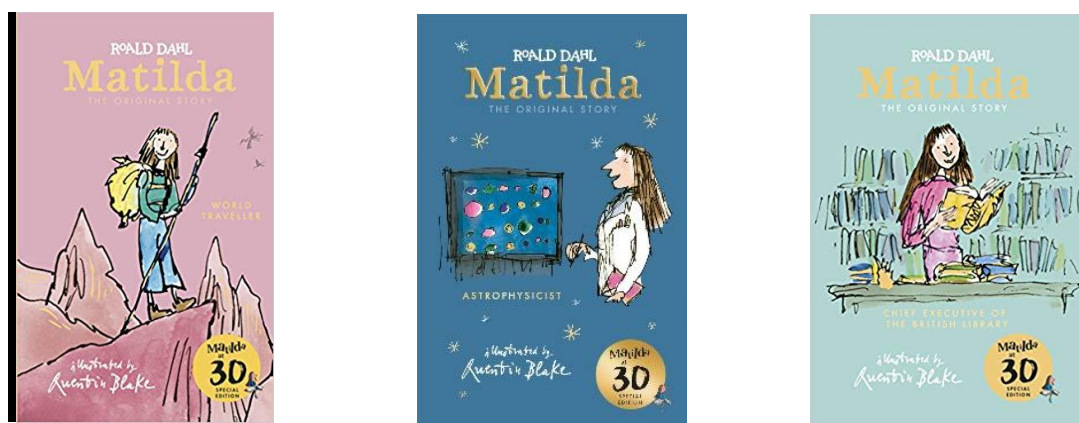


Figure 5:1 Matilda in the new edition (Eyre, 2018)

In addition, to celebrate her birthday, six children's writers also imagine what Matilda would be doing at thirty alongside Blake's new illustrations. Francesca Simon, for instance, believes a good listener like Matilda would either be a children's librarian or an education minister as '[s]haring books is what gives her joy'. Matt Haig sees her as a resilient writer who 'would be writing her own version of *Game of Thrones*' since books 'will continue to be her salvation'. Jeff Kinney, author of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, allows her to work in a bookstore with a robust children's section where she can put the book in the child's hand as 'a sacred act'. For Kate Pankhurst, Matilda would co-found a school for children with special powers. She would then be the school librarian, and Miss Honey would be the headmistress. While most authors relate Matilda's job to books and education, Michael Rosen, Dahl's number one fan, imagines Matilda, a traumatised girl, as a very successful stand-up comedian who 'shows her own fallibilities and hopes on stage' since comedy can help 'keep her feelings of sadness at bay' (Ferguson, D. et al., 2018). In addition to her exceptional intelligence, Rosen never forgets what children really need: a good sense of humour and an ability to laugh at simple silly little things. As a piece of children's literature, *Matilda* can be interpreted as a historical representation of the plight of educated and independent women. Dahl

uses education as a means to satirise the cultural limitations of the lower class. The reimagining of Matilda at thirty proves that this female character has remained part of today's culture.

Even though the character may have grown up, her eventful childhood and impressive personality as portrayed by the author are still meaningful to modern readers. Another reader of *Matilda*, Cressida Cowell (2018), the author and illustrator of the *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Wizards of Once* books, comments on Matilda's appearance at thirty in the article 'Matilda, stay young: why seeing Roald Dahl's hero at 30 is bittersweet'. Cowell admits that there is a contradictory feeling in seeing her favourite character growing up and choosing her career path. It is both 'empowering and bittersweet' as deep in readers' hearts, they never want their favourite characters to grow up but to stay eternally young, like Peter Pan, with peculiarly child-like characteristics, for fear that they might 'lose their magic'. She reminisces about her childhood growing up with the stories of Pippi Longstocking, Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time*, and 'the unnamed but powerful and headstrong girl' in Dahl's *The Magic Finger*, a precursor to Matilda. She was emotionally attached to those 'strong girl heroes' since they were rare 'in books or in films, or in real life'. *Matilda*, she adds, had not been written yet when she was a child but she wished adults to learn with no prejudice from children about 'their hopefulness, their endless questioning, and their belief in the impossible'. However, meeting the 30-year-old Matilda and her career prospects reminds Cowell of how slow progress is in the real world for women to succeed. She concludes with the 'bittersweet' ending of 'So go, Matilda, go! Be an inventor, be an explorer, be a brilliant politician (we really, really need one). But stay young, stay obstinate and, for goodness sake, stay magic' (Cowell, 2018).

The visual appearance of Matilda as an adult with a full academic profile reveals the extent to which readers want to believe in her as a role model. In her provocative article 'Roald Dahl's Matilda at 30: A heroine who changed lives', Daisy Buchanan (2018) concurs that although Dahl himself is a 'problematic' man, which possibly explains why many readers 'exclude' themselves from his stories, he creates a heroine who has inspired millennial women 'to change the world for the better'. Matilda as a sophisticated female character becomes part of modern culture when she teaches young girls that it is acceptable to express their rage as it grants them extra strength to think creatively and deal effectively with their bullies. It is Matilda's intelligence that

‘separates’ her from the rest of the characters in the book. Buchanan assents to the idea that ‘the spirit of Matilda’ allows millions of readers, who have grown up with her and found comfort in her story, subconsciously to utilise the power of intelligence, anger and humour for contemporary political engagement in social change such as the #MeToo campaign. She also hopes that Matilda’s anniversary will inspire writers to create ‘more Matildas,’ since such empowering books can ‘make the marginalised and ignored feel dazzlingly visible – the heroines, not the victims’.

Matilda resonates not only with young readers, but also with those who grew up with the book and the film.⁴ English actress Daisy Ridley, who stars as Rey, a headstrong and brave scavenger in the *Star Wars* sequel *The Force Awakens* (2015), admits that *Matilda* is her favourite film, and its little protagonist her role model. Ridley was only four years old when the book came out, but the film, which particularly features its own type of Jedi – self-improvement through knowledge and wisdom – displays the type of girl that Ridley ‘aspired to be like...a girl who could make a jug of water tip into a glass’ (Garcia, 2015). For Mara Wilson, who played the role of the tiny rebel in the 1996 film, Matilda remains inspiring, intelligent, thoughtful and considerate of others. Rereading the book when she was in college, she felt very privileged to play the leading role of the brave little girl who had a strong sense of justice. In an article written in 2018, Wilson, at 31, revisited her experiences of sharing her life with this literary icon and imagined what Matilda would be like as an adult. The former child star relates her childhood experience when she was often asked to reveal her magic powers by hundreds of people after they watched the film. She was frustrated by the fact that so many people missed the ‘allegorical’ point of the film and the book which emphasize Matilda’s passion for reading and her intellectual ability to solve problems, while the powers are not the most important part of the story. She states ‘Reading and education *do* give you powers, just not necessarily telepathic ones,’ as Matilda tends to use her brilliance instead of telekinetic powers to seek revenge. She believes that at thirty, ‘gifted’ Matilda, who possesses her own ‘radical ideas’, ‘would tire of Oxbridge or Ivy League elitism,’ and must have gravitated to libraries. Wilson concludes that the special power of books and librarians is something both Dahl and the production team of the film version of *Matilda* truly acknowledge, as the film itself ‘ends with Matilda reading

⁴ The novel was made into a popular film in 1996. The film has sold over 4.2 million DVD copies and ‘regularly appears in lists of the best Family Films of all-time’ (Arrackistan, 2018).

Moby Dick to Miss Honey' (Wilson, 2018). Moreover, an American singer, songwriter and the first winner of *American Idol*'s inaugural season in 2002, Kelly Clarkson also cites *Matilda* as her major influence. Turning towards the literary world, Clarkson, the author of a children's book, *River Rose and the Magical Lullaby* (2016), shares her experiences of being a pop star and a writer with *BuzzFeed*. She said *Matilda* changed her life since she was a child because she loved reading the book and often related to the little girl, even though she did not possess any magical talent. She admitted: 'I'm not magical, so we didn't have that in common, but I just related to her and I loved how the book made me a reader. My mom had really forced me to read until that moment, and *Matilda* really kind of turned a new page for me. Automatically after that moment I just loved starting to read after that' (Yandoli & Harris, 2016).

Matilda ultimately symbolises the power of education and curiosity that captures the joy of reading. She goes from enjoying reading to deploying what 'it' taught her: how to exploit knowledge and bravery to overcome circumstances and fight for justice. While in 1988 an intrepid *Matilda* confronted a formidable Miss Trunchbull in Dahl's book, thirty years later the brave little girl had her statue confront President Donald Trump while standing on a stack of classic novels including *Moby Dick* and *Great Expectations* to celebrate the book's thirtieth anniversary. The statues were created as part of a public survey by The Roald Dahl Story Company to reimagine *Matilda* in her thirties. On 2 October 2018, Rob Picheta from the website CNN news reported that the poll was conducted by over 2,000 British people about what *Matilda*'s life would be like and who she would be standing up to as a champion of freedom from today's world in 2018. Trump was the respondents' top choice (42%) for *Matilda*'s modern-day nemesis to replace Miss Trunchbull, while Theresa May (21%) and TV presenter Piers Morgan (16%) came second and third respectively. Lexicographer Susie Dent, a member of the project, told CNN that it was not surprising for Trump to be chosen since he seemed to share some characteristics with Miss Trunchbull. Like other fans of *Matilda*, Dent believes the book is 'an exceptionally timeless story' and points out that although female rage is considered 'a big taboo', *Matilda* 'channels' it so effectively that 'it can be a hugely important agent of protest'. Bernie Hall, a marketing director of the Roald Dahl Story Company, said *Matilda* was the first book she loved as a young reader and it hugely inspired her to believe in the power of reading. Hall admires the quintessential young rebel who 'demonstrates that it is possible for anyone, no matter how small and

powerless they feel, to defeat the Trunchbulls in their own lives – a message that feels even more relevant today than it did 30 years ago’ (Picheta, 2018). The Press Association from *The Telegraph* also revealed the poll’s results which suggested Matilda’s most plausible career choices as follows: school teacher (24%), UN ambassador (12%) or librarian (11%). According to the survey, Matilda would be friends with Harry Potter actress Emma Watson (24%), Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle (14%) and musician Ed Sheeran (9%) as popular celebrities acclaimed for their creativity, self expression, and resilience. The temporary installation was positioned in fields outside Dahl’s museum and former home at Great Missenden, in Buckinghamshire, and was available to be viewed for a few weeks.



Figure 5:2 The statues show Matilda looking defiant at the former US President while the real girl, Amilie Bravington, aged 6, from High Wycombe, gives a quizzical look at the statue of Donald Trump (Burnett, 2018)

Matilda’s impact on the world was profound and undeniable. Apart from the thirtieth anniversary celebrations, a new viral challenge with the hashtag ‘Matilda Challenge’ was inspired by the scene from the 1996 film when the title character masters her telekinetic abilities to the tune of Thurston Harris’s ‘Little Bitty Pretty One’ while various objects are flying around her. As there have been many hashtag-based challenges on social media such as ‘The Ice Bucket Challenge’, ‘The Dele Alli Hand Challenge’, and ‘Bottle-Flipping Challenge’ over the years, the #MatildaChallenge, is a familiar phenomenon. When the earliest version was produced and uploaded to YouTube on 6th August 2018 by user @beto.musiic on the application Musical.ly, the

video received more than 19,000 views within two weeks, and was followed by many Twitter users who published a variation of the challenge to recreate the famous scene in which objects are seemingly moved around by telekinetic influence. In *Time* online magazine, Megan Mccluskey's article 'The Viral New "Matilda Challenge" Has People Mastering Objects With Their Mind Powers' (14 August 2018) construed that the cult classic 'is still motivating fans to try their hand at summoning their inner telekinetic powers' (Mccluskey, 2018). There are examples of the challenge all over YouTube, Facebook and Twitter (twitter.com/hashtag/MatildaChallenge). In one version posted by a Twitter user @catarebolo from Argentina which has garnered more than 16,000 retweets and 84,000 likes within four days,⁵ a schoolgirl points at various classroom objects, which proceed to 'fly' with a little help from her hidden classmates. The videos result in hilarious versions of the iconic scene. For many readers, *Matilda* is as celebratory as it is empowering, and this fictional strong girl is Dahl's most lucrative creation in a career of inventing charismatic and unconventional heroes.

Dahl's Centenary

The year 2020 falls exactly three decades after Dahl's death. However, seven years after he died, Dahl's position as the most popular children's writer faced a major challenge in the coming of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. The scale of the Potter series' popularity is unprecedented as the novels have been translated into 79 languages and sold over 500 million copies worldwide over the past two decades,⁶ (through much more aggressive marketing than Dahl's – thanks to the advanced information technology where people stay connected globally via a single click), making the writer one of the top five wealthiest women in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, Dahl's 'timeless magic' seems persistently to stir feelings and memories of childhood in his readers. Moreover, people have drawn attention to the similarities between Dahl's works and those of Rowling and David Walliams. Rowling admits she has been compared to him more than any other writers and acknowledges some similarities especially in 'humour'. However, she believes her writing is quite dissimilar as it is 'ultimately more moral'. Her books, she claims 'are not moralistic, but there is often a

⁵ Up to the present, the clip accumulates over 87,000 likes and has been viewed by 1.34 million Twitter users (18 April 2019).

⁶The figures were taken from *The Telegraph* online website on *Harry Potter*-related statistics published on 26 June 2017.

good-versus-evil subtext’ (Renton, 2001). On the other hand, Walliams credits the influence of Dahl, praising his books as ‘perfect’. He also confesses ‘[Dahl is] a hero of mine, so definitely I’ve tried to emulate him in some ways’ (STV News, 2016). These connections will be more fully explored later in this chapter after an overview of the non-literary centenary celebrations.

As part of his centenary celebration, a new rose with peach colouring was developed and called ‘the Roald Dahl’, as gardening was one of Dahl’s strong passions (iWonder, 2016).



Figure 5:3 The ‘glorumptious’ Roald Dahl Rose (iWonder, 2016)

The postage stamps

The Phenomenon of Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl is one of the most unusual fiction writers of the 20th century. Years after establishing himself as a celebrated author of short stories for adults, in middle age he transformed into a distinctive and original writer of children’s fiction.

Though he was born in Cardiff in 1916, it was not a Celtic flavour that chiefly permeated his sensibility, but rather a Scandinavian one. Both his parents were Norwegian and the stories he learned at his mother’s knee were dark, Nordic fantasies of giants, trolls and other strange and gruesome creatures.

Initially a reluctant author, Roald did not start writing until he was in his mid 20s, when he was invalided out of the RAF during the Second World War and sent to Washington, DC as an Assistant Air Attaché. There he started writing about his experiences as a wartime flyer. His first stories were mystical, almost poetic explorations of what it was like to be a fighter pilot, and they were written in a spare, taut prose that owed much to his literary hero Ernest Hemingway.

It took Roald several years to attempt a story that was not in some way involved with flying. However, as he did so, he evolved into a writer of Grand Guignol fables. The press dubbed him “the master of the macabre”. But Roald was restless. Somehow he sensed he had not found his true métier. He tried writing for the theatre and for cinema before embarking upon his first children’s story, *James and the Giant Peach*, in 1958. After that, he never looked back.

This cover is available with a choice of either the six Roald Dahl stamps or The BFG miniature sheet. **Date of issue:** 10 January 2012. **Design:** Maggie Studio **Printer:** Cartor Security Printing, Meaucé, France **Process:** lithography **Phosphor:** all over **Gum:** PVA **Roald Dahl stamps – Number of stamps:** six **Acknowledgements:** *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Fantastic Mr Fox, James and the Giant Peach, Matilda, The Twits and The Witches*

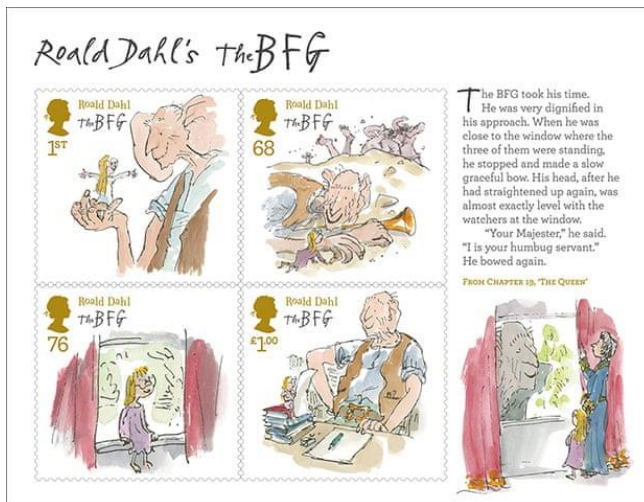
© Roald Dahl Nominee Ltd; artwork © Quentin Blake 2004, 2001, 1999, 2001, 2010 & 1997 **Format:** portrait **Size:** 27mm x 37mm **Perforations:** 14 x 14 **Number per sheet:** 25/50 **The BFG miniature sheet – Number of stamps:** four **Acknowledgements:** *The BFG* title and text © Roald Dahl Nominee Ltd; *The BFG* artwork © Quentin Blake 1963 & 2012 **Sheet size:** 115mm x 65mm **Format:** landscape **Size:** 37mm x 35mm **Perforations:** 14 x 14.5 **Stamp design:** © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2012 **Cover design:** Maggie Studio **Words:** Donald Sturrock **Acknowledgements:** envelope and card illustrations © Quentin Blake 1997 & 2003. Cover design © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2012. Further details about British postage stamps and philatelic facilities may be obtained from: Royal Mail, FREEPOST, Edinburgh EH12 9PE or visit our website: www.royalmail.com/stamps. Royal Mail and the Cuckiform are registered Trade Marks of Royal Mail Group Ltd © Royal Mail Group Ltd 2012. All rights reserved.

10 The age at which Roald Dahl wrote his first short story, 'The Kite Runner'.	1983 The year in which Roald won the Whitbread Best Children's Novel Award for <i>The Witches</i> .
6 The number of sharpened pencils that Roald put in a jar at the start of every working day.	100 The estimated worldwide sales (in millions) of Roald Dahl's books.

Figure 5:4 Roald Dahl Prestige Stamp ‘First Day Cover Insert’ by the Royal Mail 178

(CollectGBstamps, 2012)

In tribute to the work of Dahl, the Royal Mail in 2012, four years before the centenary, issued a unique new collection of stamps featuring some of his memorable characters originally illustrated by his collaborator, Quentin Blake, whose drawings are synonymous with our image of Dahl's popular heroes/ heroines. As Dahl himself wrote thousands of letters home and corresponded with many people throughout his life, it was an appropriate tribute to the writer to have his characters gracing a stamp. The first day cover insert (from the above picture) depicts Dahl's brief career paths before transforming into a great storyteller for children. It includes some interesting anecdotes, such as the reference to his preparing exactly six sharpened pencils in his jar ready for writing each day. Letter writing is encouraged as a simple cultural activity that everyone can do and enjoy anywhere and anytime.



The postmark



Figure 5:5 The 30th anniversary of The BFG was marked by a special sheet of four stamps all of which feature scenes from the story (Collect GBstamps, 2012)



Figure 5:6 The official Roald Dahl stamps & Gloriously collectable. Ashley Queyrel-Jordan, 11, assists in promoting special issue stamps at the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre in Buckinghamshire (photographed by Geoff Caddick) (*The Guardian*, 2012)

Throughout his birth centenary year of 2016 there were numerous events celebrating his many extraordinary creations, including public ceremonies, seminars, and publications. His presence and work were to be seen everywhere as many of his books had been adapted to the big screen and on stage. Evidence of Dahl's popularity with children is not only illustrated by many polls but also through his sales figures around the world. Vivienne Nunis's review, 'Roald Dahl: As popular - and profitable - as ever', in the BBC's world business report (August 2016), proclaims that 26 years after the British writer died, 'a Roald Dahl book continues to sell every five seconds and adaptations are as popular as ever'. His books have sold more than 250 million copies globally. It then concludes that 'neither Roald Dahl nor his stories show any sign of losing their appeal' (the BBC World Business Report, 2016). The article 'Roald Dahl phenomenon – 200 million and counting' written by Debarati S Sen in September 2016 in the online entertainment news *The Times of India*– predicted that another 200 million of Dahl's books would be sold since this 'beloved' writer entertained readers with 'his wonderful worlds full of charming characters and made-up words'. A CEO of a popular bookstore chain in India also praised how this 'truly ageless' writer 'has a subtle way to

bring to public notice the poor section of society’ and makes children ‘feel involved in his stories’. The news of his centenary celebration in several Indian bookstores made a fan ‘jump with excitement’ (Sen, 2016).

On 13 April 2016, on the website *The List*, Rowena McIntosh (2016) listed top events including stage shows, concert performances taken from Dahl’s versions of ‘The Three Little Pigs’ and *The Minpins*, and exhibitions celebrating Dahl’s centenary across the UK. All through the whole year, there were numerous theatrical performances, such as a musical production of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* directed by Academy Award winner Sam Mendes at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London; *James and the Giant Peach* presented by Sell A Door Theatre Company, which toured many cities including London, Edinburgh, and Blackpool; and David Wood’s adaptation of Dahl’s *George’s Marvellous Medicine* brought by the Birmingham Stage Company to be shown in Manchester, to name but a few. In addition, award-winning company, Ballet Cymru (Welsh Ballet), presented Dahl’s ‘scrumptious, lip-smackingly tasty’ two stories: ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ and ‘The Three Little Pigs’ from *Revolting Rhymes*. Both works are based on the musical scores by composer Paul Patterson (commissioned by The Dahl Foundation). The company also won the Best Dance Production 2016 at the Wales Theatre Awards for ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ (Ballet Cymru, 2017). There was also an interactive exhibition, ‘The Wondercrump World of Roald Dahl,’ displaying the author’s life and inspirations with exclusive archival material at the Southbank Centre in London.

The Irish Times Magazine on 3 September 2016 celebrated the Dahl centenary with several feature articles based on the theme of ‘Dahl at 100’. The extended headline of the front cover read ‘Roald Dahl 100. From war to witches and Wonka: a phizz-whizzing wander through his swashboggling life and work’, and the author received extensive coverage in the magazine including ‘A storytelling genius’ written by many Irish authors and illustrators, ‘The day Dahl came to Galway’, and ‘Dahl’s delights.’ In Wales, Dahl’s birthplace, WalesOnline, a Welsh platform to deliver accurate coverage of the latest breaking news, published an invitation in June 2016 for pupils in Wales to submit their own Roald Dahl-inspired adventure story for the chance to win prizes for their school. To celebrate the birth of the Cardiff-born author, the city of Cardiff unveiled a series of blue plaques around the town to mark locations that influenced Dahl during his childhood. The first blue plaque was placed in 2009 in Llandaff’s High

Street, locating Mrs Pratchett's sweet shop. Geraint Thomas (2016) reported on BBC Wales News how Roald Dahl's centenary became the 'biggest Cardiff arts event'. The Welsh capital was transformed into 'the City of the Unexpected' with visual spectacles and events in its iconic locations involving at least 6,000 performers on 17-18 September. The two-day event unfolded 'the magic and wonder' of Dahl's creations as they continued to inspire readers twenty-six years after his death, particularly in his city and country of birth.

His exact birthday, 13 September, 'Roald Dahl Day',⁷ which is celebrated every year, was especially promoted in 2016 as 'the most fantabulous celebration the world has ever seen!' with plenty of events and activities for his fans to participate in. In the UK, the website roalddahl.com invited children to visit the Roald Dahl Museum on the day for a special celebration of 'Roald Dahl's after school birthday party'. In order for his fans to join in these worldwide celebrations, Roald Dahl 100, a 'gloriumptious' party pack⁸ containing ideas, games and decorations, was produced for free download. The packs were translated into several languages, such as Bulgarian, Catalan, German and Italian so that children all over the globe were able to participate in this most 'swizzfiggling' Roald Dahl party on the same day, no matter where they were.

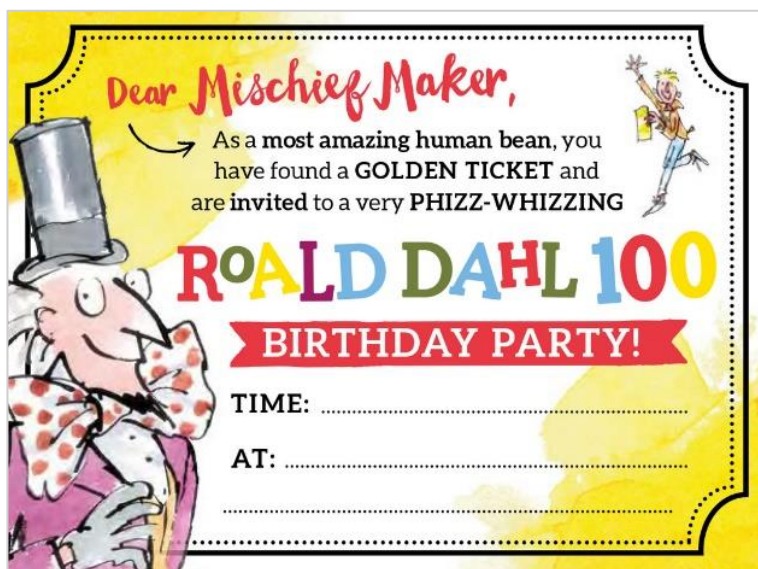
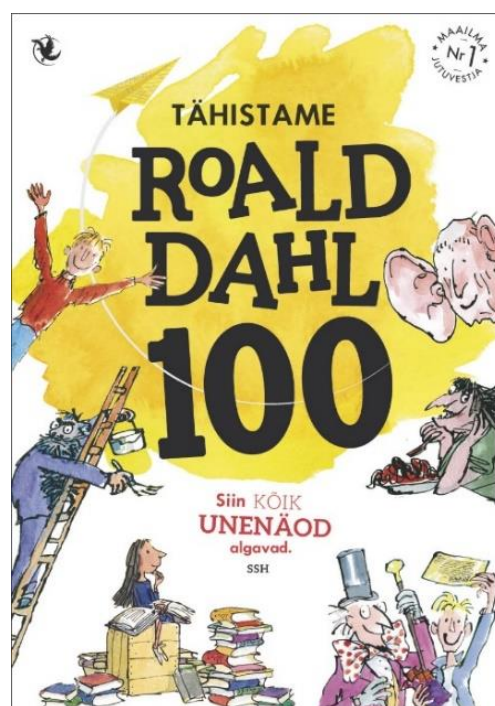
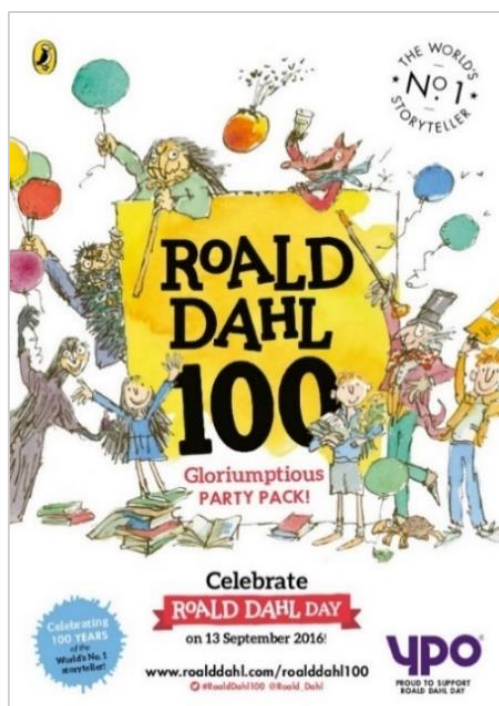


Figure 5:7 Included in the Roald Dahl Day party packs are invitation cards for children to throw their own 'splendiferous' party with their friends (roalddahl.com, 2018)

⁷ The first national Roald Dahl Day was celebrated on what would have been his 90th birthday, 13 September 2006. Response to the event was so phenomenal that Roald Dahl Day is now marked annually throughout the world.

⁸ Roald Dahl Party Packs are redesigned and developed every year on Roald Dahl Day, with more activities and resources available for children to download.



In Estonian



In French

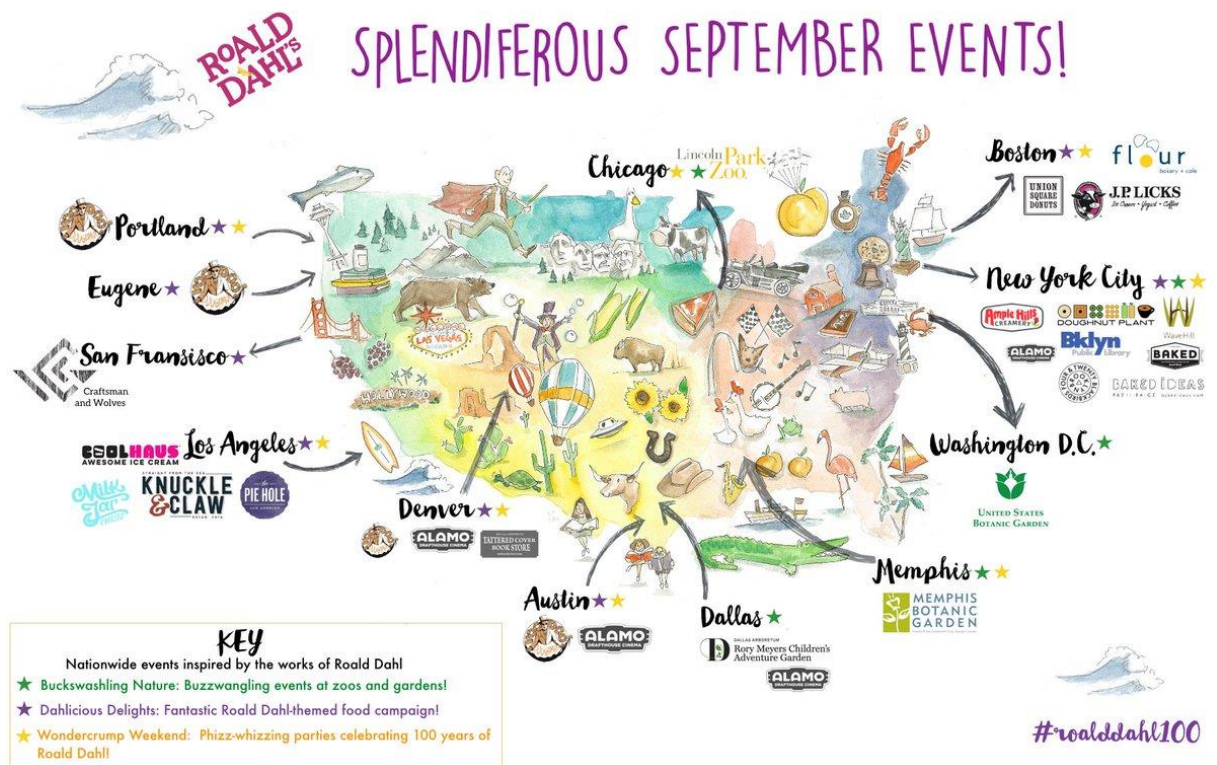
Figure 5:8 Examples of the Roald Dahl 100 Celebration party pack in different languages (roalddahl.com, 2018)

British schools also summoned children to dress as their favourite Roald Dahl character and donate £1 to the Roald Dahl Marvellous Children’s Charity on ‘Dahlicious Dress Up Day’. On that day teachers could also sign up for pupils in school to watch ‘Puffin Virtually Live’s Roald Dahl Special’ at 2 pm.

In the US, the country that held special meaning for Dahl, the website roalddahl.com/usa announced some ‘jumpsquiffing celebrations’ all across the country. Throughout September 2016, which was referred to as ‘Roald Dahl Month’, a series of

events were designed in honour of Roald Dahl 100. Dahlicious Delights, for example, allowed creative restaurants to sell ‘phizz-whizzing’ foods such as ‘Lavender and Miss Honey’s cupcake in New York and Frobscottle ice cream in Boston as foods and desserts featured widely in Dahl’s books. The Buckswashing Nature program introduces educational activities celebrating Dahl’s love of nature and animals. The U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. exhibited the Garden’s cacao tree and chocolate-tasting samples; and Wave Hill in the Bronx organised a special weekend garden based on Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach*, displaying live and preserved insects, and pop-up book crafts. Wondercrump Weekend became a nationwide celebration hosted by libraries, bookstores, zoos, and gardens organising Dahl-themed crafts, games and films at participating locations.

(c) Illustrations Lauren Kaelin



BUCKSWASHING NATURE EVENTS

Sept. 24-25, 10am-3pm, NEW YORK

- James and the Giant Peach-themed weekend
- Bug guru presenting live and preserved insects
- Pop-up book crafts
- Interactive performance with a visiting artist

Sept. 11, 1-4pm, WASHINGTON D.C.

- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory inspired activities
- Learn about cacao trees in the Botanical Garden
- Taste samples from a local chocolatier

Sept. 18, 6-8pm, CHICAGO

- Scavenger hunt with sensory stations
- Wondercrump party with author readings from Peter Kujawinski and Wendy McClure
- Annual DreamNight will be Roald Dahl themed!

Throughout September, MEMPHIS

- Exploration of the plants that become candy
- Roald Dahl story readings every Saturday
- Screening of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (Sept. 16, 6-9pm)

Every Saturday in September, DALLAS

- Roald Dahl story time readings at the Dallas Arboretum
- Taste testing
- Exploring habitats in the Rory Meyer's Children's Adventure Garden

DAHLICIOUS DELIGHTS & WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

Throughout September, LOS ANGELES

Sept. 18, 3-5pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- Mrs. Twit Knuckle Roll - a grilled cheese sandwich with worms (lobster), inspired by Mrs Twit
- Wondercrump party with author readings from Lucy Dahl, Sherri Smith and Keith Campbell

Throughout September, LOS ANGELES

Sept. 18, 12-5pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- James and the Giant Peach-flavoured cookie
- Wondercrump party with marvelous magicians, phizz-whizzing activities and face painting

Throughout September, LOS ANGELES

Sept. 17, 12-4pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- Matilda-inspired Miss Honey Pie filled with a honey mousse
- Poisoned Chocolate Pie with chocolate cream on a Coco Krispy crust inspired by The Witches!
- Wondercrump party with author readings from Romina Russell and Aditi Khorana, dahlicious dressing up and lots more exciting activities

Throughout September, LOS ANGELES

Sept. 17, 12-4pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- Bruce Bogtrotter's chocolate ice cream inspired by Matilda!
- Co-hosting a Wondercrump Weekend party with The Pie Hole!

Throughout September, NEW YORK

Sept. 17, 12-4pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- A scrumdiddlyumpious apple cider ice cream inspired by Fantastic Mr Fox
- Wondercrump party with author readings from Paul Griffin, Jabe Marciano Bemelmann, Mara Wilson and Abby Hanlon
- Fantastic books supplied by Greenlight Bookstore

Sept. 18, 1.30-4pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND NEW YORK

- Wondercrump party with author readings by Michelle Schusterman, Tim Miller, Adam Gidwitz and Cassie Beasley
- Crafts/activities and trivia contest
- Matilda screening
- Cookies from Four and Twenty Blackbirds

Throughout September, NEW YORK

- Matilda inspired Miss Honey and Lavender's cupcake with raspberry jam, chocolate buttercream and chocolate flakes

Throughout September, NEW YORK

- Mouth-watering James and the Giant Peach inspired Peach Pie!

Throughout September, NEW YORK

- Fabulous cookies inspired by The BFG, Boy, Matilda and The Twits

Throughout September, NEW YORK

- Peach cake doughnuts with magic green crystals inspired by James and the Giant Peach!

Throughout September, BOSTON

Sept. 17, 1-4pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND

- Fantastic Frabscotille ice cream inspired by The BFG
- Wondercrump party with fabulous flavor samples, amazing activities and giveaways

Throughout September, BOSTON

- Magnificent apple and bacon fritter doughnut with a cider glaze, inspired by Fantastic Mr. Fox!

Throughout September, BOSTON

- Scrumptiously strange and marvelous mix of 'Hornets Stewed in Tar' - a chocolately creation inspired by James and the Giant Peach!

Sept. 17, 1-3pm, WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND, DENVER

- Wondercrump party with Roald Dahl-themed crafts, activities, Voodoo Doughnuts and giveaways

Throughout September, SAN FRANCISCO

- An irresistibly delicious Miss Trunchbull chocolate cake inspired by Matilda

Throughout September, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

- Portland - James and the Giant Peach-themed doughnut with peach filling and a Snozzcumber doughnut with chocolate Bavarian cream. Wondercrump party with readings from Ingrid Law (Sept. 16, 11am-4pm)
- Austin - Fantastic Mr. Fox doughnut with Bavarian cream and maple frosting. Wondercrump party with readings from Billy Taylor (Sept. 16-18, 11am-4pm)
- Eugene - The Enormous Crocodile vanilla-topped doughnut with pineapple filling
- Denver - The Witches vanilla-topped mouse doughnut with cherry filling

WONDERCRUMP WEEKEND, VARIOUS LOCATIONS

- Downtown Brooklyn - Matilda, 9/17 - 2pm
- Yonkers - The Witches, 9/18 - 2pm
- Austin - Fantastic Mr Fox, 9/17 - 10am, 9/18 - 10am
- Littleton - Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, 9/17 - 11.30am
- Visit the Alamo website for more Roald Dahl movie showings throughout September!

www.rolddahl.com/usa #rolddahl100

Figure 5:9 Splendiferous September events across the US (rolddahl.com/usa, 2018)

These fantastic programs offered ‘childlers and human beans’ fun time to explore and celebrate Dahl’s life. Participants might wonder at the extraordinary impact the writer continued to have on readers all this time, especially through the branded use of his distinctive and rebellious language. Dahl’s subversive use of language is implicitly adopted by advertising companies in the marketing of his works. Dahl celebrations are promoted in his neologisms while his wordplay and portmanteau words become his trademark. As lexicographer Susan Rennie notes, Dahl’s techniques to invent words, like Carroll’s, ‘are built firmly on the existing traditions of the English language’ (Ferguson, 2019). She argues ‘Children and grownups alike are fascinated by words that push the boundaries a little bit – and Dahl, in his language as much as in his characters and his plots, always has a twinkle in his eye’ (Ferguson, 2019). Children are encouraged to have fun playing with his naughty-sounding words and participate in these classless events. Dahl’s expletives and his experiments with words expose his pleasure in life and appeal directly to children and events managers alike. Copywriters do not have to create new slogans or straplines for these events as Dahl’s neologisms, his disruptive language and nonsense words such as ‘splendiferous’, ‘gloriumptious’ and ‘scrumdiddlyupmtious’ are sufficiently flamboyant to attract customers who may be

already familiar with those terms from when they were young. Almost unnoticed, this anarchic language for children has passed into the adult world of business and entertainment.

In Hungary, Caitlin Jones, Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Hungary, shared her experiences and thoughts about this great author on the occasion of his centenary on YouTube channel (13 September, 2016). As a child who grew up with his books, she ‘devoured’ his stories, and likes all his great 250 ‘inventive words’ such as Oompa Loompa and scrumdiddlyumptious. She believes he knew how to write a story appealing to children as he began writing when he had children of his own. His characters, Jones adds, are normally based on real people, as the name Sophie came from his granddaughter, Sophie Dahl. The film *BFG* was also shown in Hungarian cinemas during that time (UK in Hungary, 2016). Through the whole year, several websites published new material about Dahl and his works to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth. Hannah Mellin, for example, listed ‘50 scrumdiddlyumptious Roald Dahl quotes’ where the first was taken from *Matilda*: ‘A BOOK?! WHAT D’YOU WANNA FLAMING BOOK FOR?...WE’VE GOT A LOVELY TELLY WITH A 12-INCH SCREEN AND NOW YA WANNA BOOK!’. The second and third read as follows: ‘Nowadays you can go anywhere in the world in a few hours, and nothing is fabulous any more’; and ‘When you’re old enough to write a book for children, by then you’ll have become a grown up and have lost all your jokeyness. Unless you’re an undeveloped adult and still have an enormous amount of childishness in you.’ (Mellin, 2016). The author celebrates the free spirit of a child who can always enjoy the exhilaration of being able to ignore the rules or limitations of expression.

Other ways emerged during the centenary year of sharing Dahl’s talents and habits, both with adults and children. On 7 September, Steve Gardam (2016), director of the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, published on the British Council’s online website: ‘Seven lessons from Roald Dahl on how to be productive’. Dahl himself, in one speech, noted that ‘I, like many other writers I know, am always frightened of starting work each morning. The reason for this is that when you have to invent something new to write every day of your life, there is always the fear that your inventiveness will fail you and you won’t be able to think of anything at all’. Gardam discovered more of Dahl’s working habits and provided some insight into his creative process that might be helpful for others. The first and most important tip was to create

your own ‘special’ working space like Dahl’s ‘writing hut’ in the garden, to which Dahl referred as ‘my little nest...my womb’. While writing, he suggested that you should make yourself as comfortable as you can and you might have to shut yourself off from the outside world to stay focused. Dahl described the pleasant setting of his hut: ‘Through the window you can see all sorts of creatures if you sit there quietly looking out...squirrels in the big apple tree...and blue tits and bullfinches, and even a green woodpecker...and I would be happy to sit watching them all morning long and do no work. So I leave the curtains closed’. Always taking notes on what you found interesting could offer new ideas for you to further develop – keeping a notebook ready to hand to write down any fascinating things he came across was one of Dahl’s important habits. Another useful suggestion was to display a collection of objects around your workstation to help revive your memories or inspire you: some of Dahl’s most important memories were captured by objects, such as two model planes, a Wade-Dahl-Till valve, and dozens of foil chocolate wrappers, all kept inside his writing shed. The other significant lesson was to ‘be consistent and be disciplined’ as the writer went to work in the hut every day. A two-hour stint in there proved to be his most productive period. Dahl said a writer ‘should never work too long at a stretch’, a technique he learned from Ernest Hemingway, stressing ‘the importance of stopping writing at the appointed hour, especially when things are going well: it gives something to come back to’. His final lesson was the intense effort and the perseverance of the rewriting process when ‘the little seed is starting to grow in the mind, the colours are emerging in the story, a kind of momentum is slowly gathering...So the book begins’. From Dahl’s calculation, a complete book ‘would have been re-read, altered and corrected around 150 times’. Gardam thinks those writing habits of Dahl’s might provide some practical clues for writers who search for suitable methods to ‘beat the challenge’ of the blank paper and fight against the threat of writer’s block.

As part of the phenomenon, Quentin Blake (n.d.) launched ‘The Roald Dahl Centenary Portraits’ exhibitions, producing new portraits of ten of Dahl’s most famous characters. He asked visitors to imagine these characters sitting for a portrait in a more formal fashion than they appear in his books. Blake notes this group of selected characters would be ‘treated as though they were real people – which, of course, to many of us they are’. These portraits were first shown at the British Library and then at the Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library, and then toured the UK until the end of

2018. London also hosted another event, 'Dinner At The Twits', a 90-minute theatrical show produced by Les Enfants Terribles theatre company and ebp. Dahl's spiteful couple - Mr and Mrs Twit - invited audiences to witness their wedding vow renewal on the occasion of their 40th anniversary. At the dinner party all invitees were served with such 'unusual' dishes and cocktails as Mrs Twit's infamous bird pie, 'Glowing Hug Tight Glue', and potent punch prepared by London-based Bompas & Parr at The Vaults. This became the first time one of Dahl's books for children was specifically recreated for adults and it lasted for two months from September to October. As part of their Dahl celebration, *The Irish Times* also offered readers the chance to win the Twits' dinner party and a two-night stay at The Bloomsbury hotel in London, including return flights from Ireland. The concept of a wedding vow renewal party hosted by one of the ugliest couples in children's literature was perhaps the most ironic use so far of the Dahl 'brand' to vulgarise a controversial social trend for adults while drawing on a shared love of Dahl's slapstick humour.



Figure 5:10 A gruesome dinner at the Twits (Bompas & Parr, 2016)



Figure 5:11 A bird pie at the Twits
(media.timeout.com, 2016)

In short, the Dahl phenomenon and the global celebration for his centenary mirror how the author, his literary works, values, and creativity with words become embedded in the culture and even drive it, at least in his motherland.

Dahl in content marketing



Megan would like to say a huge thank you to Persil, Harriet, Roger Sidebottom, The Witch, and everyone else involved in the special Weekend + Family Sunday! I've been listening to Charlie + The Chocolate Factory + Matilda since.

Figure 5:12 Persil's My Messy Adventure project: an innovative and unique interactive activity for families to enjoy outdoor play and experience a new Roald Dahl story
(Golin, 2016)

The marking of Dahl's centenary in 2016 was not limited to the festive events and activities hosted by his fan clubs, private sectors, or public organisations. His stories and characters were also adopted by businesses in advertising campaigns directed towards a particular demographic of middle-class readers with an assumed taste for

affordable household brands. Through the lens of cultural materialism, we can perceive a link that functions between capitalism and literature, where Dahl's novels are used in commercial marketing to influence positive behavioural change in target customers. Beginning in July 2015, 'My Messy Adventures', a world-first downloadable interactive Dahl story, in collaboration with the Roald Dahl Literary Estate, for instance, became a successful marketing campaign launched by Persil, a brand of laundry detergent, under the 'Dirt Is Good' slogan. The company boosted its sales through a Dahl-inspired activity, and Quentin Blake's illustration style encouraging children to go outdoors and explore the world around them. The campaign ran for three months offering parents and children a free activity to participate in over their summer holiday. The idea was promoted both in-store, on a special neck sleeve of Persil's three million packs carrying the campaign's messages, and a free downloadable story book, and on social media platforms with the hashtag #MessyAdventure. To reinforce Persil's superior stain removal credentials, children were invited to get 'messy' by immersing themselves in a mix of outdoor adventure and Dahl's storytelling via the use of mobile technology. The two-hour interactive activity with more than fifty children and their families was filmed and subsequently released online at www.persil.co.uk/Roald-Dahl, and on Persil's interactive app. Using iPads and smart phones, children were inspired to interact with the outdoors and could be the hero of their very own Dahl narrative, where James, Matilda, or the Witches would appear in their story. In his interview with 'Let's Start With This One', a web blog sharing all things entertainment, Luke Kelly, the managing director of the Roald Dahl Literary Estate and Dahl's grandson, supports the product's inventive campaign and believes Dahl would also encourage children to spend their time outdoors exploring the wonders of nature in their own 'messy' adventures without worrying about the dirt. He adds: 'My grandfather strongly believed that children should race outside to climb trees, study insects, jump in puddles, kick a ball around or just "muck about"' (Joey, 2016).

In the same year, the website 'Ministry of Fun', one of the UK's most versatile producers of entertainment, events, and marketing activities, predicted that the Messy Adventures project would help increase the product's sales with at least a 22% volume uplift for the whole marketing project (Ministry of Fun, n.d.). Actually, the campaign, notes Stephanie Griggs, Licensing and Design Manager at the Roald Dahl Literary Estate, 'exceeded all expectations' as over 80,000 children engaged in the activity

followed by a 26 percent sales uplift for Persil. The event application was downloaded by almost 90,000 families and Persil’s website tripled the number of its usual visitors while the social media campaign reached 24 million people following the campaign. In addition, as a top accolade for Dahl’s centenary in 2016, ‘Dahl’s Messy Adventures’ was awarded the Best Licensed Marketing Communications trophy at the Licensing Awards held at London’s Grosvenor House hotel on Roald Dahl Day (Helmore, 2016).



Figure 5:13 The photographs were taken from the website golin.com and web blog ‘Mummy Be Beautiful’ as part of a brand new interactive adventure story (Shahnaz, 2015)

Following Persil’s summer adventures that year was McDonald’s ‘Happy Meal Readers Programme’, a scheme to inspire children’s passion for reading through Dahl’s book collections published by Puffin. The famous restaurant planned to distribute 14 million specially created books featuring extracts from some of Dahl’s most popular works during its six week marketing campaign starting from September 2015. Each week every purchase of a happy meal in the UK was supplemented with a small book with different titles, eight series altogether, for example, *Roald Dahl’s Extraordinary Friends* (featuring extracts from *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* and *The BFG*), *Roald Dahl’s Magical Mischief* (*George’s Marvellous Medicine* and *Matilda*), and *Roald Dahl’s Secret Plans* (*Esio Trot* and *The Twits*). Steve Hill, head of marketing at McDonald’s UK, thought it was a thrilling idea for parents to share the books they read and loved with their children. He said: ‘Dads like me grew up on the magic of Roald Dahl and his extraordinary characters. Finding time for families to have fun together is all part of a trip to McDonald’s’. Initially before the start of the program, a survey was conducted by 3,000 UK grandparents, parents and children about books and reading. Half of them answered that they wanted to encourage ‘budding readers’. Three quarters

of mothers and one in five fathers regularly read to their children. 70% of children said that funny voices were the major reason they liked being read to, while 43% enjoyed sound effects and surprising noises (Eyre, 2015). This reading project contributed to children's reading skill development as part of family fun time, since many parents who had already enjoyed the wonderful world of Dahl when they were young could share these iconic stories with their children. The key factor for McDonald's success in different countries is adaptability. The company comes up with a variety of products catering to the needs of a consumer market that is widely diverse. It offers fast and low-priced menus, basing their offerings on consumer demographics, local and economic factors. Dahl's promotion of literacy is strategically marketed in some countries where reading is culturally endorsed and shared amongst family members. He has become a brand appealing to families.

McDonald's first 'Happy Meal' was sold in June of 1977, where each meal came with a packaged toy, usually tied in with movie and TV show characters. It started its 'Happy Meal Readers programme' to inspire more children to take an interest in reading by replacing toys with books in their meals, first in Sweden in 2001. The reading scheme has continued up until now and about 450 million books have been given away to children with their happy meals since it first launched. A similar programme is ongoing in the UK, New Zealand and Malaysia. McDonald's outlets in New Zealand have participated for about a decade while in Malaysia children can choose between a toy or a book by Cressida Cowell. In August 2018 the Happy Readers programme relaunched its promotion in the UK which ran for five weeks, and included another research project on parents' attitudes to reading with their children. Thus, by complementing the Happy Meal with some extracts from Dahl's books, McDonald's Readers programme was commercially designed both to inspire children to enjoy reading, and help parents support them in this experience. In February 2019, McDonald's restaurants in New Zealand promoted its Happy Meals scheme with 800,000 free Dahl books in six series as part of the initiative 'Readers Programme' encouraging children to read more over a six-week period (Petter, 2019). Eight of his stories were adapted into a variety of interactive, educational activity books including *Fantabulous BFG*, *Amazing Matilda*, and *Brave Little Sophie*. The New Zealand trial became a replica of the successful campaign that ran in the UK. Jo Mitchell, the director of marketing at McDonald's New Zealand, told *The Independent*: 'The Roald Dahl

characters are ones that many parents will have enjoyed growing up, and it's great to play a part in introducing them to a new generation,' (Petsko, 2019).

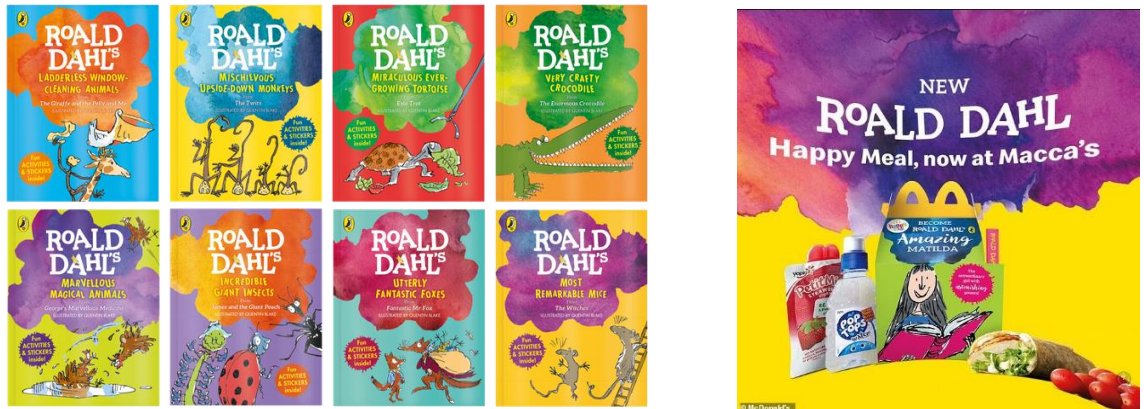


Figure 5:14 On the left: 2018 Happy Readers books in the UK
The right photograph shows McDonald's Happy Meal box advertised in New Zealand
(Douglas, 2019) and (Tanno, 2019)

In 2017, the Mr Kipling range of cakes launched a new design of packaging with Roald Dahl themes, using the iconic Quentin Blake illustrations to share their core values and to increase brand awareness. According to Marianne Spencer (2019), the packaging designer, 'With his much-loved classic children's books, the Roald Dahl brand was a perfect fit'. She claims that the partnership with the Roald Dahl Story Company over the next two years has increased sales and received a great response from customers and retailers. Similarly Mathew Bird (2019), brand director for Sweet Treats at Premier Foods, agrees that the campaign 'was incredibly successful, with the limited edition range inspired by Roald Dahl stories driving £3.6m retail sales value and attracting incremental family shoppers to the brand at a time of year when sales of ambient cake tend to slow'. The 'limited edition' tag implies its value as a 'collectible,' like a first-day cover postage stamp. All these commercial successes reveal how market research is carefully used throughout the process, with Dahl's works and their values adopted as proven marketing tools in the world of modern product promotion.



Figure 5:15 Limited-edition Roald Dahl-themed Mr Kipling range and on-pack promotion. (Wells, 2020)

Dahl in the media

Dahl’s instantly recognisable brand with its Blake illustrations is not targeted only at children or supermarket shoppers but also at educated adults and older audiences. Before his centenary, Dahl’s life and work were featured and documented by the BBC, the largest broadcaster in the world. In a BBC One Archive film from 1982 we hear the upper-class British accent of the ‘peerless’ author who, at his house in Great Missenden, talked about his daily routine, work, love of pictures, wine, eighteenth century English furniture, and snooker games. The film, which additionally targeted adult audiences, displays Dahl, in his workstation inside the writing hut’s ‘cosy nest,’ holding a cigarette whilst working on his books. He describes the writing process in more adult terms as very intense and as if he were immersing himself in the ‘dotty world of fantasy’, and says he relaxes by playing snooker (though not very good at it) with friends on a Sunday afternoon. At the end of the interview, when asked if there was any particular way in which he wanted to be remembered when he died, with a gentle smile, Dahl said he would quote Oscar Wilde’s: ‘When I’m gone, I hope it will be said: My sin was scarlet but my books were read’ (BBC Archive, 2017).⁹

In December 1984, BBC One broadcast Dahl’s interview with Terry Wogan, presenter of the *Wogan* television talk show (1982-1992). As a writer for both children and adults Dahl told Wogan that it was no ‘easy option’ to write a fine children’s book

⁹ However, the actual words were: ‘When I am dead, I hope it may be said: His sins were scarlet, but his books were read’, and they were written by Hilaire Belloc.

as writing children's stories is 'far far harder' than writing for adults. He told Wogan that he did not write horror but funny stories with, as Wogan remarked, a 'strange, quirky twist at the end', while Dahl insisted that for him 'there is such a narrow line between the macabre and the jokes, and laughter'. As the television started to replace the radio, they agreed that it was very difficult to persuade children who grew up in the television age to read books, unlike their predecessors of the radio generation (Tv Xtra, 2015). If they were still alive, both might have been perplexed by how much the fast-moving pace of technology, especially the world of internet, has made a revolutionary change in the lives of mankind at present. In 1989, there was another amusing video clip of Dahl in a variety show where he passionately talked about chocolate history. In his serious tone, he both surprised and entertained the studio audience by recalling the exact year the very first chocolate bar, the Dairy Milk Flake, was invented, along with other facts from chocolate history. He insisted everyone should know these dates and humorously asked: 'Who wants to know when the Kings of England were born?' (BBC Archive, 2018). Here, Dahl's anarchic humour has the power to entertain both adults and children with his alternative take on traditional teaching. In another interview Dahl was amazed at how extensive research was conducted by a confectionery factory to invent a new flavour of chocolate for children. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* truly reflects the author's fascination with chocolate as he believes there should be no limit to everybody's creativity.

Much later, in 2015, BBC Radio 4 produced a 'Great Lives' documentary featuring a 30- minute interview by Christine Hall with Professor Tom Solomon, a junior doctor who looked after Dahl during his last illness in a hospital in Oxford, and his authorised biographer, Donald Sturrock. Solomon shared the story through the prism of his forensic interest in discussing medicine with Dahl, while Sturrock, a young reporter who first met Dahl to film a documentary, found the writer very imaginative, sensitive but 'grotesque'. Although he was a generous man who devoted himself to many charities, Sturrock admitted that Dahl was rather a 'sod' since 'he could be very blunt and direct,' and 'if you got on the wrong side with him he was very cruel'. When asked if Dahl looked 'faded away' when Solomon saw him at very end of his life, he affirmed that Dahl was not at all 'frightened' of death. Resilient and brave as his characters, Solomon concluded that his was a truly 'great life'.

In 2016, the BBC celebrated the 100th birthday of the author with many features, documentaries, plays and readings on its website and radio. As Dahl was born and raised in Cardiff in the 1910s and 20s, the BBC Wales ‘Great Welsh Writers’, documentary series offering portraits of Wales’s greatest writers, filmed a television programme, with contributions from Dahl’s wife, Francesca Simon, and Donald Sturrock, exposing ‘the untold Roald Dahl story, of the triumph and tragedy of his own Welsh childhood’. At the end of the documentary, several young Welsh children (aged around 6-10) were asked their opinions of Dahl. Some of the answers, which genuinely reflect the true personality of the author and his books, are: ‘he opened it up and then it’s like going to a completely different world’, ‘Roald Dahl is funny ... and a bit naughty’, ‘sometimes when I’m sad, then I read them so they make me laugh’, ‘it’s really kind of inspiration’ and ‘I think Roald Dahl is wonderful’. Wales for Dahl, as Sturrock, concludes, symbolises the ‘happy, safe, and secure’ countryside, ‘where he had some of the most happy, happy memories of his childhood’ (Transparent, 2016).

In England, the BBC’s Dahl season was broadcast through the whole year. On BBC Two, the documentary ‘The Marvellous World of Roald Dahl’ (23 July 2016) retold the story of Dahl’s life through his own words collected from his letters, writings, and archive with contributions from his second wife Liccy, daughter Lucy and Donald Sturrock. The story begins ‘100 years ago, one of the world’s magical storytellers was born’. It then proceeds with his near-death experience as a fighter pilot for the Royal Air Force and how he slightly ‘exaggerated’ the crash and made it more dramatic and fantastic to write about. Included in the documentary are such interesting features as ‘Memories of Roald by Blake’, ‘The BFG’s whoopsy wiffing special language’, and ‘Roald Dahl the spy?’¹⁰ His real-life escapades seem no less ‘marvellous’ than all his creative stories. Nicolette Jones wrote in a BBC #LovetoRead program about Quentin Blake and his working with Dahl, ‘a big friendly giant’. As Blake’s drawings of Dahl’s tales became instantly recognisable, he was often invited to discuss their working partnership. In this interview, Blake offered a deeply personal insight into working with him from the first day. *The Enormous Crocodile* and *The Twits* were Blake’s first two commissions for Dahl’s books and he hardly developed any relation with him in their first encounter. It was his working for *The BFG*’s sketches that helped form a close friendship since Blake had a chance to visit Dahl and his family in Gipsy House at

¹⁰ The documentary was rerun on BBC Two in March 2019.

Great Missenden. There he noticed Dahl's special interaction with his granddaughter, Sophie, and realised the connection between Dahl and the BFG. He initially drew the BFG like 'a clown, with a comic face', then he polished him with a more human dimension, a tall and gentle grandfather 'with vicious humour' – a favourite with children. The BFG's footwear, he added, was drawn from Dahl's old sandals which were posted to him. He collaborated with Dahl on ten more novels in Dahl's lifetime including *Matilda* and *Esio Trot*, the last two books before his death, and from this he 'felt familiar enough with the spirit of his friend'. *Matilda's* face, for example, was redrawn constantly to intensify the small girl's intellectual and magical powers, while Willy Wonka was portrayed like a sprite to accommodate his sly character and the unreal and fairytale-like factory. (#LovetoRead, 2016).

Five episodes of 'The Essay' on BBC Radio Three, running from 11 to 15 July 2016, were devoted to the Dahl centenary celebration through the lens of high-profile commentators and writers who discussed different aspects of Dahl. Author and musician Jeremy Dyson, for instance, remembers, at the age of ten, seeing his mother reading *Kiss Kiss*, an adult book by Dahl, the first author he ever connected with. As a boy, he confessed: 'I like Roald Dahl, more than like, adore the mischief, the danger, the wickedness'. He enjoyed reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*, but he was hooked first by Dahl's 'horrible' adult story of 'William and Mary' and then by his *Tales of the Unexpected*, 'a perfect joke with fantastic punchline'. When he started writing his own fiction, Dahl's horror scenarios and dark comedy, he admitted, strongly influenced his worldview (Dyson, 2016). Performance poet Laura Dockrill recalls her childhood growing up with Dahl's books with their appealing Biblical qualities like 'a moral compass of right and wrong'. Such a 'beautifully-written and sincere' story as *Matilda* tells children how much they are capable of: 'they were not to be underestimated' and what the author can do well is to write about injustice (Dockrill, 2016).

The website BBC iWonder offers 'The unexpected Roald Dahl', revealing aspects of his work that might be unknown to his child fans. These include the author's first piece of dramatic writing, 'Shot Down Over Libya' in 1942; the invention of the Wade-Dahl-Till valve (1960) through the partnership with engineer Stanley Wade and neurosurgeon Kenneth Till; and *Switch Bitch*, published in *Playboy* magazine (1974), as

a collection of four twisted stories on the themes of desire, sex and deception – noticeably distinct from his children’s books.

On BBC Radio 4, Dahl’s centenary was commemorated as ‘Roald Dahl 100’ with articles, documentaries and readings relating to the author, such as Michael Rosen’s ‘Word of Mouth’ (2016) talking mainly about Dahl’s use of neologism; ‘The Many Lives of Roald Dahl’; and ‘Roald Dahl: Boy’. Rosen discusses Dahl’s language with Dr Laura Wright, from the University of Cambridge and Dr Susan Rennie, a lecturer at the University of Glasgow who compiled the first ever Roald Dahl dictionary with over 500 words that were invented by him, examples of pure Dahlism. There is also the Roald Dahl quiz: ‘How do you Dahl?’ which tests Dahl’s fans’ knowledge of his literary works. Out of nine questions players are expected to get at least seven correct answers to be named a genius like Matilda, otherwise they are recommended to read much more Dahl or they will ‘end up like Mr and Mrs Twit’. In addition, the drama section of the same station also broadcasted a short series of plays and documentaries based on Dahl’s life and work including ‘Going Solo’ (a dramatisation of Dahl’s autobiographical adventure in Africa); ‘Served with a twist’ (dramatisations of Dahl’s five classic tales famous for their surprise endings); and ‘A Gremlin In The Works’ (the cartoonist and illustrator Gerald Scarfe telling the story of Dahl’s 1943 book, *The Gremlins*, which was never made into a film) (The BBC Radio 4 Drama, 2016). Dahl is now being claimed for linguistic studies and Radio 4 discussion at a high level because of his neologisms.

On Christmas Eve last year (2020), the Sky One broadcast the one-off film: *Roald & Beatrix: The Tail of a Curious Mouse*, which tells the story of a young Roald Dahl travelling across the UK to meet Beatrix Potter. Based on a real-life meeting that took place in the 1920s, the film stars Dawn French as Potter and nine-year-old Harry Tayler as Dahl. Before his death in 1990, Dahl confided to friend Brough Girling about the meeting between himself and Potter. According to Lacey, Dahl’s wife, Dahl did travel from Wales, where he grew up, to Potter’s home in the Lake District. Girling adds: ‘His wife said it’s actually true. Roald had told her. And it’s true Beatrix Potter was quite grumpy and not fond of children. He would have been six and she would have been about 80’ (Littlejohn, 2020).

The centenary publications

In 2016, many publishers also launched a number of print books related to Dahl to mark the centenary of his birth. In February, the centenary edition of *The BFG* was released, while the film tie-in edition, featuring a new foreword by Lucy Dahl was released in mid-June. Both sold over 40,000 copies, and were listed in the Children's Top Ten in July for the first time (O'Brien, 2016). Penguin Books Ltd,¹¹ in June, published *Roald Dahl: Whizzpopping Joke Book* (Dahl, 2016), a collection of hundreds of wordplays and great jokes inspired by Dahl's work. Two book titles relating to Dahl were produced in August: *The Glorimptious Worlds of Roald Dahl*, an extension to Dahl's stories with insights into his characters by Stella Caldwell (Carlton Books), and *Wales of the Unexpected* edited by Damian Walford Davies, Professor of the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University (University of Wales Press). Through the formative Welsh lens, this collection of essays takes the reader into the new territory of Dahl's neglected texts and his Anglo-Welsh orientation, and his Welsh upbringing suggests his own uncanny imagination and development. In September the same year, Puffin books printed *Roald Dahl: A Marvellous Colouring Adventure*, featuring a range of classic scenes from Dahl's books such as the gypsy caravan from *Danny, the Champion of the World*, and Charlie's glorious golden ticket, perfect for colouring in; and the *Roald Dahl Scribble Book*, a collection of creative activities for children to draw and design their own stories through the world of Dahl. *The Bookseller's* children's previewer Fiona Noble (2016) shares a list of her favourite books published in 2016 to mark his centenary, including some of those previously discussed; a new edition of the *Roald Dahl Treasury* (first issued in 1997), and *The Roald Dahl Centenary Box Set*, containing Dahl's top ten bestselling stories such as the two Charlie Bucket tales, *Matilda*, and *The Witches* in hardback, presented in a gift box.

Apart from books associated with the Dahl centenary, there are other works written by writers whose real life encounters with the author when he was still alive revived interest in him from new perspectives such as *Love from Boy: Roald Dahl's Letters to his Mother*, edited by Donald Sturrock, Dahl's official biographer. As shown

¹¹ Well-known for his wit and humour, Dahl's own 'knock-knock' jokes were first published in 2012 by Penguin: *Roald Dahl's Marvellous Joke Book*, packed with over four hundred hilarious jokes, limericks and riddles suitable for children aged between seven and nine. The book sold 24,000 copies through the TCM (Total Consumer Market) in 2015.

earlier in this thesis, Sturrock was closely acquainted with him, and had complete access to the archives stored in the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre. His award-winning biography, *Storyteller: The Life of Roald Dahl* (2010) shines remarkable light into Dahl's complex and hidden life. In 2016, Sturrock was given exclusive access to bundles of letters Dahl sent to his mother over forty years, altogether more than six hundred of them. Sam Leith (2016) from *The Guardian* thinks Dahl's 'intimate record' shared with his mother shows that 'he wrote not to confess but to entertain,' and also that Sturrock's selection from Dahl's letters effectively 'tracks his transformation into a writer'. Leith's thought is also relevant to a BBC Arts report of 19 July 2016 entitled 'Roald and Sofie: How Dahl's letters to his mother shaped his writing'. As Sofie was Dahl's first audience, 'it was she who encouraged him to tell stories and nourished his desire to fabricate, exaggerate and entertain'. In addition, although Dahl often said that his mother was the primary influence in his life, it is Sofie's 'unique sensibility' and her tales of Norse mystery and magic that contribute to 'his unacknowledged inspiration' to become a great writer, otherwise he could have ended up working for the Shell Oil company (The BBC Arts Books, 2016). As shown in Chapter 3 their lengthy correspondence is where we witness the intimate perspective of only son and single mother explored through his creative imagination.

Published in the same centenary year was Dr Susan Rennie's compilation: *The Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary* which features a number of words coined by or associated with Dahl. It took the lexicographer five years to compile the dictionary which contains almost 8,000 real and invented words. She commented that Dahl 'didn't always explain what his words meant, but children can work them out because they often sound like a word they know, and he loved using onomatopoeia' (The BBC News, 2016b). Dahl's grandson, Luke Kelly, also said: 'Roald Dahl's inventive, playful use of language is a key element to his writing, so it is wonderful to have this dictionary compiled with such expertise, passion, and wit' (Griffiths, 2016). On the online British Council webpage, the compiler Rennie issues six lessons Dahl teaches his readers about his inventive use of language ('What do we learn from Roald Dahl's creative use of language?' 12 September 2016). One important message is trying not to take language too seriously, so you can laugh while reading his book as well as learn how language works. However, his linguistic play, as David Rudd suggests, is used as a tool to rebel against 'the language of the powerful,' while his obsession with 'the scatological and

violent becomes a way of fighting back, drawing on a tradition – often linked to the working class, to the masses’ (quoted in Alston, 2016:125). As Alston (2016) argues ‘writing for children enables Dahl to resist linguistic and thus cultural nationalist assimilation’ (125). *The BFG* emerges as Dahl’s most linguistically playful novel with over 300 invented words including phizz-whizzing and swashboggling. The BFG also represents the working class ‘in his clothing as well as in his “uncultured” speech’ (126), nevertheless, the giant needs to ‘master “proper” language in order to be able to write his story’ (126). In the end, although the BFG learns to speak ‘properly’, he ‘has not lost what the text suggests Dahl admires most – difference, individuality, idiosyncrasy’ (126).

Another lesson as noted by Rennie is to ‘create something new from everyday words’ as Dahl himself often begins with a word everyone knows, and changes or blends it with another word to make it sound funny but understandable, such as ‘wondercrump’ (wonderful) and ‘kidsnatch’ (kidnap). A further characteristic is to pun on a familiar word, mispronounce it, or coin a spoonerism to make jokes such as ‘Dahl’s Chickens’ (for Charles Dickens) and ‘jipping and skumping’ (for skipping and jumping). All his linguistic playfulness and creativity reflect both his influence as an author and his vivid and distinctive writing style, as Rennie concludes: ‘Roald Dahl’s writing can instil a love of language and wordplay that will stay with children through their lives’ (Rennie, 2016).

In 1986 a librarian at Chantry library sent a group of letters written by children who took part in her summer reading club on the BFG themes to Dahl, who replied as follows a few days later:

TELEPHONE:
GREAT MISSENDEN 2757

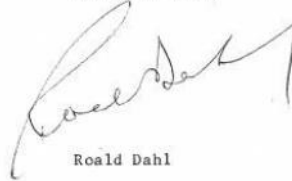
GIPEY HOUSE
GREAT MISSENDEN
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
HP16 0BP

31st July 1986

Hello gorgeous Alison and all the clever children
at THE "BFG" HOLIDAY CLUB. Thank you so much for sending
me your lovely letters.

As I grow old and just a trifle frayed,
It's nice to know that I have sometime made
You children and occasionally the staff
Stop work and have instead a little laugh.

With love from,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Roald Dahl', written in dark ink on a light-colored paper.

Roald Dahl

Figure 5:16 The letter from Roald Dahl in 1986
(Noble, 2016)

Alison Wheeler, now chief executive of Suffolk Libraries, recounts: ‘to my absolute amazement we got this letter back – he was so popular and it is wonderful that 30 years later he is just as popular’ (Noble, 2016). In 2016, the reading challenge of the club was also BFG- themed, and Alison recalled the letter. Each year the reading club encouraged 3,000-4,000 children to read as many books as possible, and for Dahl’s 100th birthday, more than 6,300 signed up to discover the magic of his fiction. The merits of reading for pleasure are best summed up by the inspirational author himself, who shared these lines in *Matilda*: ‘The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives’ (Noble, 2016).

Dahl's influence

In chapter four, the works of Charles Dickens and Hilaire Belloc are discussed as major influences on Dahl's comic fantasy world. The influence of Dahl's works, however, is discernible on writers of younger generations. Calling himself 'Roald Dahl's biggest fan', former Children's Laureate Michael Rosen, in his children's biography, *Fantastic Mr Dahl* (2012), explores Dahl's own story to discover how a young boy from a small town in Wales grew up to become 'the world's number one's storyteller'. He discovers some little known facts about Dahl and at the same time creates an emotional insight into the fantastic world of an imaginative child, an adventurous adult and a creative and inspiring writer. The book was well received by both Dahl's and Rosen's fans. On Roald Dahl Day 2012, Rosen gave an interview for *Huffpost* saying that his attraction to Dahl comes mainly from two significant factors: his 'extraordinary and amazing life,' and his books that 'are an amazing creative output'. Both his life and work reveal an element of surprise, the fantastic, tragedy and heroism. Rosen believes that although it is not important to know about an author's life to enjoy or understand his writing, he wants to offer some interesting aspects of Dahl's life to child readers. Although some aspects of Dahl's life were not exactly suitable for a young audience, his research brought him to witness 'an emotional and intellectual relationship' with his mother through his letters. Rosen believes that Dahl still resonates up until the present time and 'will resonate for a long time' since he 'played around with something that is very deep in children's minds'. The notion that children must return their parents' love since they love and care for them, for instance, is not always true of some children's experience. Dahl addresses this issue in *Matilda* and interestingly offers his readers an alternative caring character in Miss Honey. He concludes that 'adults who look after children don't always love unconditionally. It's all done in a crazy, silly way, but that's why it resonates' (Vincent, 2012). In his interview with Sabrina Sweeney (2012) for the BBC News about his authorised biography of Dahl and his personal interest in the author, Rosen relates the connection between an author and children to readers' inspiration to create their own imaginative stories – to think about how to turn what happens in their life into ideas, as Dahl did in his writing. Dahl seemed to exaggerate his negative childhood experiences at school to create 'wily and clever and cunning children' to deal with cruel adults. All tragedy in Dahl's life, Rosen points out, allows him to realise the brevity of life, which might explain why he wants his readers to cherish and make the

most of theirs. A pleasure-seeker like Dahl seems to be fascinated with rogues who scheme to trick people, and he tries to describe them in his writing with hilarious results. Like Dahl, Rosen has worked with Blake since his first book, *Mind Your Own Business* (1974), and there seems to be a measurable impact of Dahl in his own writing. Like his predecessor, Rosen emphasizes the vital importance of humorous literature for children as humour is sometimes a great way to entice more reluctant readers to pick up and read a book. He founded the ‘Roald Dahl Funny Prize’¹² in 2008 to promote laughter in children’s literature. Rosen has also created his own website to communicate with his fans and publicise his work, and presents the BBC Four Radio programme *Word of Mouth*, exploring all aspects of the spoken word.

In one of his *Word of Mouth* episodes (29 May 2017), Rosen was joined by another ‘huge’ fan of Dahl, David Walliams,¹³ a British actor, comedian, and talent show judge. The programme featured Walliams’s discussion about writing books for children, and his personal inspiration, Roald Dahl. Dubbing Dahl the ‘greatest children’s writer of all time’, Walliams acknowledged his debt to the author since childhood. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was the first book (and his favourite) he read for pleasure as a child, and he reread it many times. In addition, he felt fascinated by the diversity of Dahl’s work and his authoritative voice. In a Channel 4 documentary: ‘Chitty Flies Again, with David Walliams,’ Walliams took on the challenge of building a real-life Chitty Chitty Bang Bang car, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the iconic musical film ‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’, and to pay tribute to Dahl’s invention of the Child Catcher in this 1968 film. The documentary was broadcast on New Year’s Day 2021 (channel4.com, 2021).

Both Rosen and Walliams were intrigued by Dahl’s obsession with corporeal exaggeration, and his grotesque and comedic humour about bodily functions. Often billed ‘as the successor to Roald Dahl’ (Singh, 2018), and a ‘Roald Dahl fanatic’

¹² The prize celebrates the funniest children’s authors with the aim of boosting the profile of humorous books. The inaugural winners from two categories – Funniest Book for Children Aged Six and Under, and Funniest Book for Children Aged Seven to Fourteen – receive £2,500. The prize ran from 2008 until 2013.

¹³ From the author’s website ‘The world of David Walliams’, his books, including *The Boy in the Dress* (2008), *Gangsta Granny* (2011), and *Awful Auntie* (2018), which are all published by HarperCollins Children’s Books, have been translated into over fifty-three languages and sold over twenty-six million worldwide. He has become the biggest selling children’s author to have started writing since the year 2000, available online: <https://www.worldofdavidwalliams.com/about-david/> [Accessed 3/5/2019].

(Bevan, 2013) since the publication of his first book for children, *The Boy in the Dress*, in 2008, which was nominated for the Roald Dahl Funny Prize, Walliams has ‘always aspired to match the Cardiff-born author’s dark, absurdist heights’. According to Nathan Bevan (2013) Walliams ‘devours’ all of Dahl’s books and falls in love with them while, at the same time, ‘bemoan[ing] the fact he’ll never be quite as good as [the author]’. Although children can be ‘the toughest audience,’ ‘in Dahl’s world a grandma can be poisoned by her grandson and someone’s parents can be eaten by a rhinoceros and it’s somehow okay. It takes a true genius to pull that off’ (Bevan 2013). While readers are impressed with the unique ‘Dahlesque’ style of language and humour, some similarities in Dahl’s and Walliams’s novels can be traced. A ‘foul and smelly old man’ (5), Mr Twit prefigures Walliams’ Mr Stink whose beard smells worse. However, Mr Stink is far nicer and kinder than Mr Twit. A chubbier version of George reappears in Walliams’s *The Midnight Gang*, while television addict Sofia Sofa of *The World’s Worst Children* will remind readers of Dahl’s Mike Teavee. The book as a whole, with its ten cautionary tales, clearly references both Belloc and Dahl as immediate role-models in this tradition.

Walliams (2009) himself recounted, in *The Independent*, how he fell under the influence of Dahl, and almost gave up writing his first book for children in the belief that he could never compete with Dahl’s *Charlie* as it was ‘perfect’. When he read Dahl’s other books, he ‘realised that they were all perfect in their own way’ as ‘there was no apparent formula’. Twenty years after his death, Dahl, for him, was ‘one of the most enduringly popular children’s authors’ for many reasons. Firstly, Dahl ‘always empowers his child characters with masterful subtlety’: Charlie, for instance, is not given magical powers but ‘a golden ticket’, while George is granted a recipe to alter his abhorrent grandma’s size. As the ‘master of cruelty’, Dahl often introduces his readers into ‘a thrillingly dangerous world’, where some ill-behaved children, like ‘bad nuts’ Veruca Salt and Mike Teavee, can be physically punished. Walliams believes Dahl’s anarchic humour and narratives are also part of his writing success since nothing in his story is predictable. Finally, it is ‘the economy of Dahl’s writing’ that ‘makes his books timeless’. He hardly uses metaphor but when he does, it becomes increasingly effective (as when he compares George’s grandmother’s smile ‘to that of a snake that is just about to bite you’). He also likes Dahl’s ‘clever way of making the reader feel as though he or she is being addressed’ as when he introduces Charlie: ‘This is Charlie. How

d’you do? And how d’you do?...He is pleased to meet you’ (13). Walliams admits his adoption of Dahl’s technique into his introduction to his characters in his novel, *Mr Stink* (2009), and also ‘[steals] the idea of collaborating with Quentin’, as he notes: ‘Now it is difficult to imagine a Dahl book without Blake’s illustrations’. Blake’s brilliant drawings, he adds, ‘give a sense of what Dahl’s characters look like without defining them exactly’. Not only does he share an illustrator with Dahl, but both have had Scots editions of their titles published (translated by Matthew Fitt, a well-known Scottish writer and poet). Dahl has *Chairlie and the Chocolate Works* (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), *The Guid Freendly Giant* (*The BFG*), *Geordie’s Mingin’ Medicine* (*George’s Marvellous Medicine*), *The Sleekit Mr Tod* (*Fantastic Mr Fox*), and *The Eejits* (*The Twits*), while Walliams has *Mr Mingin* (*Mr Stink*) and *Billionaire Bairn* (*Billionaire Boy*) (O’Brien, 2016). Walliams’s closing statement provides a remarkable summary of his favourite writer: ‘the beauty of Dahl’s status as an author is that his work is regarded as populist entertainment, which places him just outside the “great literature” bracket. Future generations of children will carry on reading his books simply because they want to, not because they have to, for the pure pleasure of luxuriating in Dahl’s imagination. What more could any writer ask for?’

Apart from famous writers, there are also people who have found a special niche in Dahl’s influential writing. In his book blog ‘Growing Up with Dahl’ published in *The Guardian*, Ben Myers (2008) exposed how Dahl’s adult fiction extends way beyond his magical children’s fiction. His macabre books introduce a young adult reader like himself to black humour, which he assumes prepares him for a world of pain and misfortune. He said ‘I know I’m not alone in acknowledging the effect that Dahl’s books have had on my life. The way in which they painted the world in new colours and opened up a universe of possibility that indelibly impacted on my imagination can still be felt now, a quarter of a century after first reading them’ (Myers, 2008). Dahl’s influence can also be seen from the angle of one young adult reader, Rhys Grinstead, a nineteen year old blogger, who wrote for the website ‘medium.com’. As part of the celebration of Dahl’s centenary, he posted ‘It’s Roald Dahl Day, here’s how he influenced me,’ talking about Dahl’s great impact on his ‘creativity and curiosity’. As an autistic writer, Grinstead finds a means of self-development through various activities such as learning new languages, programming, and sports to find his strengths and weaknesses since he is aware that he should not try to become good at something

'[his] brain just isn't able to do'. Writing a web blog provides a platform for him to share his thoughts which might 'inspire' others to help 'improve the world' around them. Captivated by Dahl's books since he was six or seven, he began writing his own stories on a blank piece of paper. He found that Dahl's stories conveyed 'a much deeper meaning than at first glance' as this 'real timeless Author' was not only 'incredibly imaginative' but also 'managed to be dark and humorous'. Referring to Dahl as 'a childhood hero of mine', Grinstead (2016) wrote 'Whether [sic] it was hunters, arrogant parents or giant human eaters, I [sic] was constantly amazed by how he could pull this off over a lengthy period of time and people not getting bored at all by his style'. He ended his weblog with his admiration: 'So witty, colourful and full of great experiences, the perfect author for children's stories in my view'. In addition to his web blog in medium.com, Grinstead also writes another blog on 'Behance', a leading online platform for Adobe programme users to showcase and discover creative work. In his 'iBooks Author for iOS concept' post, he displays how to create interactive PDF and eBooks on iPad Pro, and Dahl's children's fiction was selected as the theme of his first eBook designed to showcase how 'to get the creative juices flowing' for Apple Mac users.

Finally, there is emerging evidence that Dahl's novels inspired many people during the COVID-19 pandemic when Oscar-winning film-maker Taika Waititi collaborated with the Roald Dahl Story Company to recreate Dahl's book in 10 instalments to raise funds for global health non-profit Partners in Health (PIH), which is fighting Covid-19 in the world's most vulnerable areas. Waititi will narrate *James and the Giant Peach* while twelve film stars join in, including Meryl Streep and Benedict Cumberbatch, and Cate Blanchett. In the first episode, the Hemsworth brothers play Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. James's adventure is described as a 'wacky, wonderful tale' about 'resilience in children, triumph over adversity and dealing with a sense of isolation which couldn't be more relevant today' (Flood, 2020). This year, Waititi will also write and direct two animated series for Netflix based on Dahl's children's stories: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and an original story about Oompa-Loompas that builds out their world. According to David Craig (2020), Tim Burton's adaptation 'offered some insight into how [the small workers] came to work for Wonka, but expect Waititi to go in a completely different direction'. More Dahl adaptations, specifically *Matilda*, *The BFG* and *The Twits*, will also be produced, featuring top talent. Joining

them in the world of adaptations is the second feature-length adaptation of *The Witches* launched in October 2020. The film stars Anne Hathaway, Octavia Spencer, and Stanley Tucci, and is narrated by Chris Rock. Directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Zemeckis, Kenya Barris, and Guillermo del Toro, the film received mixed reviews from critics, who deemed it inferior to Roeg's film, though Hathaway's performance received praise. The film reimagines the witches for a modern audience and the setting is located in the rural Alabama town of Demopolis, USA. The unnamed boy is starred by Jahzir Bruno and Octavia Spencer stars as his Grandma.



Figure 5:17 *The Witches* 2020 Poster. From left: Stanley Tucci, Anne Hathaway and Octavia Spencer. (HBO MAX, 2020)

In short, Dahl's style of writing, humour, moral values and his creative use of language are likely to spark lasting cultural activities and events. His brand offers a wide range of cultural products and through the lens of cultural materialism, we can see each product in a different light depending upon the values and worldviews that predominate in society.

Conference in Cardiff

Literary popularity is an unpredictable phenomenon since it can happen almost instantly as in the case of Rowling's Harry Potter series, or it can come gradually as with Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and his later successful books. This chapter reaches its final discussion of the Dahl phenomenon at a point where his popularity seems universal, in a range of media. It has never been limited to books intended only to entertain young readers, but people from all walks of life including those in academic spheres. Following the city's celebration for the writer was the 'Roald Dahl Centenary Cardiff Conference' hosted by Cardiff University's School of English, Communication and Philosophy from 16 to 18 June 2016. The three-day conference brought academics from around the world to Dahl's birthplace to share their interests and evaluations of him. Beginning with biographical memories by his doctor, Tom Solomon, and his biographer, Donald Sturrock, subsequent programs for each panel were geared towards the themes of fairy tales, gender, morality and his 'Dahlesque' adult stories. Since most of the presentations centred on his children's literature, his most popular novel, *Matilda*, dominated the discussion. One delegate from New York University Shanghai, for instance, reflected on the musical performance in 'Putting it Right: Matilda as Author in *Matilda the Musical*'. The speaker suggested that Minchin's witty lyrics and playful tunes effectively captured the lonely and rejected feeling of the little girl who stands up against bullies. More analyses of *Matilda* concerned its gender empowerment, the mythologizing of Miss Honey, and the empowering of neglected children.¹⁴ The emergence of morality in Charlie's story was also explored by a lecturer from the University of Athens. As part of the conference, all delegates also had the chance to visit the places of Dahl's youth and examine manuscripts and visual material from the archive at Great Missenden. As one of the delegates myself on the panel of 'Dahl and Morality', I had an opportunity to present my research on biographical exploration of Dahl and observed how other participants engaged with different aspects of Dahl's life and work. Even though there was some exploration of his interventions in other disciplines, from education to medicine, together with his influential legacies, it was concluded that his work was still largely neglected by modern scholars.

¹⁴ These sessions were presented by delegates from the University of Pretoria, South Africa, University of Worcester, and University of Hull respectively.

Conclusion

The exploration of Dahl's enabling and contentious involvements in various industries including the media, publications, films, and musicals proves what a 'phenomenon' Dahl truly is. His popularity is not only because of the new vast scale of global media promotion, but also because children still love his stories, which, as discussed earlier, are adaptable to so many different readers' needs and tastes. As a literary legend, his repertoire of extraordinary fiction has captured the imaginations of successive generations of children and adults alike. His children's fiction has not only withstood the test of time, but Dahl's centenary celebrations reflect just how actively engaged his readers and admirers still are with updating the ways in which fans can interact with his books. Nonetheless his work needs more serious discussion in an academic context. It is perhaps surprising that the Cardiff conference of 2016 closed with regret at his apparent critical neglect. In light of the last four years of exuberant activity across many cultural fields, it seems unlikely that the critical industry celebrating the achievements of Roald Dahl will decline any time soon. On the contrary, it looks set to flourish in ever new forms for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Repositioning ‘The World’s Number One Storyteller’

In December 2020 Norman Lebrecht advised readers of *The Jewish Chronicle* to stop reading Dahl because of his anti-Semitism, and Sky One presented a Christmas Eve drama on the child Roald’s meeting with Beatrix Potter. These two unrelated media events show not just how divisive Dahl remains in the second decade of the twenty-first century, but also how his ‘repositioning’ in the history of children’s fiction continues, albeit via an unlikely analogy between Peter Rabbit and the young Dahl in a blue coat. During the twentieth century, the sales of ‘the Famous Three’, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, and J.K. Rowling, dominated British children’s fiction (Briggs, 2008). These authors appeal directly to child readers and each appears to adopt some features from their predecessors, forming a chain of succession between them. Dahl’s path to success, as M.O. Grenby (2008) notes, contributes to his ability to seize children’s imagination and fill ‘the post-Blyton vacuum’ (17) during the 1970s and 1980s, while Peter Hollindale (2008) considers Dahl’s achievement ‘a complex phenomenon’ (271). *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) had achieved commercial success first in America three years before the UK publisher decided to print it. After this, the story of Charlie and his journey into the chocolate factory became ‘a phenomenal worldwide success’ (271). His greatest popular triumphs, which were written in the final decade of his life, *The BFG*, *The Witches* and *Matilda*, are spectacularly successful. His popularity and sales dominance during the latter half of the twentieth century were then eclipsed by the unprecedented success of Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), though there are vital signs of Dahl’s influence on her work. Charlie Bucket, for example, becomes ‘a precursor of Harry Potter’ (Briggs, 2008:247), while the appalling Dursleys remind us of James and his two wicked aunts and the Wormwoods. Dahl is, for Warren (1994) and Hollindale (2008), however, ‘sui generis’ since there is no other writer quite like Dahl for ‘a unique blend of literary and extra-literary reasons’ (276).

Publicly acclaimed as the ‘World’s Number One Storyteller’, Dahl’s creation of fanciful worlds and whimsical characters captivates the imagination of both children and adults alike. Thirty years after his death, the author seems to sustain his popularity despite the Harry Potter phenomenon. His centenary in 2016 was celebrated across the world, not least in his home, the UK. His legacy as an influential children’s author is

celebrated on September 13 every year, and this year, the website roalddahl.com invited children and his large fandom to ‘join in the jubilation dear friends’ and celebrate Roald Dahl Day 2020 with another round of online Dahl-themed activities. The official ‘Roald Dahl’ Facebook page, operated by the Roald Dahl Story Company, has accumulated 670,814 followers and gained nearly 700,000 ‘likes’ to date. The page has regularly shared news about the author and advertised events and activities such as an ‘Imaginormous Challenge’ campaign to search for the most magnificent story ideas from children across the US; and Taika Waititi and his famous friends’ fund raising campaigns for charities impacted by Covid-19, including Roald Dahl’s Marvellous Children’s Charity and Partners In Health, in ‘James and the Giant Peach, with Taika and Friends’. While in 2018 *Matilda* and *Fantastic Mr Fox* came first and second respectively among the six classic Puffin books that ‘stand the test of time’ (penguin.co.uk, 2018),¹ *Matilda*, Dahl’s genius girl, reappeared again in Puffin’s two publications of 2019: *Roald Dahl’s Matilda’s How to be a Genius: Brilliant Tricks to Bamboozle Grown-Ups* and *Matilda’s How to Be Brave*.

Considering Dahl’s importance and enduring popularity among readers, this acclaim provides the impetus for an investigation and reappraisal of Dahl’s literary works. Following their publication, Dahl’s books have been both acclaimed and condemned for their ‘inappropriate’ celebration of retributive violence, anarchic humour, and misogyny. This thesis has, therefore, argued that Dahl’s children’s books should not simply be misinterpreted as ‘tasteless’, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’, or be considered mere ‘slapstick’ comedy full of violence and vulgarity by critics and adult readers who attempt to regulate children’s behaviour around moral readings. They should instead be ‘repositioned’ in the canon as taking forward the most durable features of Belloc and Dickens, while exerting a significant influence on his successors. Updating Dickens and prefiguring Rowling they reject the values of an unequal society and applaud the underdog who stands up against merciless authorities. While some of his books interrogate family ideology, educational institutions, or even animal rights, Dahl’s neologisms and lexical creativity appeal directly to children’s imaginations to make sense of his nonsense, as children once did with Carroll, Lear and Belloc. As mentioned

¹ The other four books, which are *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, and *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, are recommended by Puffin authors, parent bloggers and those within the theatre industry.

in the previous chapters, Dahl's works were often challenged and removed from school libraries because of those unjust accusations. Nevertheless, it could be argued that few writers have had the enduring cultural influence of Dahl, who inspired not just generation after generation of loyal readers, from parents to their children, but also new writers in the field of children's literature.

Since his death in 1990, Dahl criticism has expanded significantly. The *Roald Dahl Casebook* (2012), edited by Ann Alston and Catherine Butler, for instance, brings fresh critical approaches to Dahl's writings addressing various ideological aspects of his works, such as humour, family, feminism and education. Nevertheless, as Butler (2012), points out, Dahl studies especially in academic areas, are relatively few in comparison 'with authors of comparable status' (2). This thesis set out to explore how Dahl's children's literature could be repositioned in the canon by engaging afresh with the very issues that have alienated his most critical readers, starting with his dubiously moral world where his 'semicivilized' children enjoyed poking fun at silly or grotesque adults. Central to this question was what has been seen as the unduly virulent nature of the critical backlash against his writing for children, which has disturbed many of his adult readers and critics. As Townsend notes, 'there are the Roald Dahl books, immensely popular but disliked by many commentators for an underlying unpleasantness and appeal to the less likable of childish characteristics' (quoted in Hunt, 1996:686). The thesis has accordingly examined a wide range of Dahl's children's texts to explore some of the grounds for those accusations. It then considered the morality expressed in each of his works, and the overall ethical stance of the author, although Dahl himself denies writing to serve any higher moral purpose. The thesis not only re-evaluates the moral implications of Dahl's works for children and his treatment of gender but also investigates how the author combines his defence of the underdog with comic fantasy, and whether the books might be considered capable of helping promote a more resilient and positive or philosophical frame of mind in the reader.

A life's work beyond trauma

Beginning with the problematic image of the author himself, Chapter One introduced readers to the extensive portrayal of Dahl's life through his autobiographies, and biographies of him written for adults and children, to investigate the connections between his life and work, and gain insight into the emotional aspects of his writing.

This chapter argues that Dahl's life was morally complex, and much of it difficult to convey in formats appropriate to child readers. Exposed to traumatic canings at public school, and then a dramatic air crash, Dahl lost both a sister and a daughter to childhood illness, and anguished over his son's life-changing injuries in a road accident, and his first wife Pat's gradual recovery from major strokes. Charges of antisemitism and misogyny, his divorce from Pat, and subsequent remarriage, all potentially or actually damaged Dahl's reputation, alongside the critical outrage against the alleged racism and misogyny of his books. However strategically constructed through his interviews, autobiographies, biographies, and media appearances, Dahl's public persona took some time to rebuild. Jeremy Treglown shows that the family tragedies reveal Dahl as a feisty fighter, a knowledge-seeker and determined leader of the family, who remains optimistic and never gives up. Donald Sturrock's authorised biography of Dahl attempts to mitigate his dubious status, and depicts him as a wartime hero, and a great storyteller whose positive philosophy and psychology truly exposed how he coped with all the difficulties and hardships in his life and his family. Tom Solomon examines Dahl's lifelong fascination with medicine and describes his extraordinary medical inventions which even influenced his literature. Meanwhile the Dahl of children's biography becomes a hero, a magician, an inventor, a brave fighter, and a great storyteller, even the BFG himself, while his family tragedies and undesirable love affairs are purposely omitted. This biographical chapter, therefore, establishes the critical difficulties we encounter in trying to understand both Dahl's own moral perspective, and the animosity of those detractors who find it hard to reconcile his immense popularity as a children's author with his chequered reputation as a public and private personality.

As explored in Chapter One, it is difficult to separate Dahl's public image as a popular writer from the circumstances of his private life. Since literature is regarded as a tool to transform human experience, Chapter Two, therefore, evaluated the critically neglected area of Dahl's treatment of trauma and how he explicates the emotional state of abused victims, especially children, in his fiction. My findings here are that Dahl is fully aware of the existence of trauma as he often begins his work with a catastrophic childhood scenario. Like his favourite author, Charles Dickens, the author often features orphanhood, bullying, violence, and cruel adult villains, and his child characters usually experience loss, fear, and suffering. Such violence is made bearable to the child reader, via a combination of outrageous comedy with revenge directed almost exclusively

against adult bullies for the harm they have done the child protagonist, as the most fitting method of punishment. Nevertheless, Dahl shows how truly hard it is to confront the implications of tragedy, given his own experience, and seems to focus on how each character copes with traumatic events through optimistic solutions, or simply by ignoring and dissociating themselves from those experiences. Children are portrayed not as pitiful or pathetic victims, but as brave, kind, and resilient heroes. The success of these fictional characters seems to illustrate to a child reader the ability to shun all misery and stand up to it if opportunities allow. Humour and fantasy then become key elements to mitigate the aggressive portrayal of a story and convey his overall message that life's calamities should be combated with intellect and bravery, not with overwhelming feelings of depression or anxiety, as Treglown (1994:166) confirms: '[Dahl's] optimism was both deliberate and an unavoidable part of his larger-than-life, fantasizing mentality'.

Dahl's marvellous philosophy

The one magic ingredient you can find in virtually all first-rate children's books is humor...If children find my books amusing, if they laugh while they're reading them, I feel I have succeeded. If I offend some grownups in the process, so be it. It's a price I'm willing to pay (Dahl quoted in West, 1988:76).

In his interview with Mark I. West (1988), Dahl emphasized the value of humour in his works, and through his writing career, Dahl seemed to 'pay' the full price for his view of child liberation, since several of his books have been accused of being disrespectful toward authority figures, and have attracted allegations of sexism, anarchic humour, and amorality. Chapter Three then progresses the study into Dahl's conflicting and problematic views of gender, as the author is often condemned for his alleged misogyny, and his texts for children seem to promote gender bias, especially in the context of the second-wave feminist period. The chapter shows how Dahl developed his distinctive style of humour in his forty-year correspondence with his mother, his first open-minded female reader. It also demonstrates how the author caricatures both men and women, and projects distinct ideals of masculine and feminine behaviour in his texts. However, while there is less notice taken of his male characters, his female, especially adult characters, are portrayed in much more negative and stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. His emphasis on their

disgusting physical appearance serves to express sexual distaste for women, which is further embodied in their tyrannical behaviour. However, while his boy characters seem to fit in well, and conquer their difficulties with relatively little effort, his girls, mostly presented as sensible, quiet and kind, need some extra assistance, such as magic powers, to overcome their obstacles. Nonetheless, Dahl, in his late sixties, seemed to acknowledge some gender inequalities by introducing the intellectually gifted Matilda as a great feminist role model, though only a small child. In addition, the notion of the family as a secure, organized and patriarchal unit is reconstructed, and replaced by an understanding and caring surrogate family.

If we are to offer a perspective on thirty years of his writing, Dahl's comic style and characteristics seem outrageous but unique. The focus in Chapter Four is immediately related to the vitality of his comic fantasy and his ability to incorporate fantastic adventure elements of which children can only dream: a mysterious chocolate factory and its 'Inventing Room' loaded with scrumptious sweets, a balloon peach floating up in the air with friendly creatures, a glass elevator shooting out of the earth to uplift their pure imagination, and the real and existing world where witches and giants live among human beings. This chapter discusses how the author develops from the relatively shocking, morality tale structure of four naughty children and Charlie, to the crafty Fox, the mischievous George, the eccentric BFG, and the witty Matilda. These stories too draw on great traditions of the past, such as novels or cautionary tales by Dickens, Lear, Belloc, Carroll and Nesbit, who can be seen as Dahl's precursors, and excellent sources of wordplay, neologism, comic rhymes, and preposterous ideas. In addition, he depicts societies that are ruthless and cruel, but also funny, employing humour and fantasy to mitigate the aggressive elements of a story. The anthropomorphism of animal characters, and grotesque caricatures of adults allow the poor to laugh at their superiors, and the child at adults. Meanwhile, some stories expose the threat of children being eaten or transformed into edible products. However, as the thesis has explored, Dahl is less of a child anarchist than some critics think. What is apparent in his works is his unpretentious attempt to redefine the nature of fictional writings for children: thus he projects a certain kind of moral imagination to encourage them to develop a love of books, without obviously indoctrinating them. Childhood can be a dark and intimidating time, and no one knew that better than Dahl. The stories of his comic fantasies are designed to encourage people to live in the world, not through

submission, but through cleverness and viable strategies. Such tyrannical adult characters as Miss Trunchbull, James's two aunts and the witches can help children to realise the arbitrariness and cruelty of the world, and develop the understanding that in the real world they will meet plenty of untrustworthy adults and unpleasant situations. In short, another component of Dahl's philosophy that appeals to early adolescents is the satisfactory knowledge that justice does prevail in the world, good triumphs, and evil is punished or destroyed.

Dahl's phenomenal after-life

When reflecting on Dahl's overall popularity compared with Blyton's and Rowling's, Dahl's texts as well as his biographical myths all contribute to something 'Dahlesque' with a combination of quirky sense of humour and surprising narrative threads. Chapter Five revisits Dahl and his literary 'afterlife' following his death, especially in 2016 when the author and his characters were resurrected for his centenary celebrations all over the globe, and *Matilda* in 2018 in particular. Dahl is celebrated above all for the child-centred nature of his writings, which grants adventurous children absolute independence from adult interference and constraint, despite some hostility from adults and critics. Dahl is also credited with an ability to inspire children to read willingly and enthusiastically, and for their tendency to develop a good reading habit as part of their educational development. Despite his problematic personality, Dahl somehow transcends a culture of political correctness, and continues entertaining his child audience. A Dahl-like narrative voice continually orders readers to see his characters the way he does, and his values can be viewed through his support for resilience, kindness, intelligence, and collaborative skills. Meanwhile, Dahl's characters have become regulars in merchandising campaigns, such as Persil liquids, McDonald's reading schemes, Royal Mail stamp collections, Mr Kipling's limited edition Roald Dahl-themed cakes, and several Hollywood films and musicals. The Dahl Centenary conference held in Cardiff drew together scholars with a shared interest in the author to reposition both the man and his achievements not just a hundred years after his birth, but also his critical standing in a new century.

Ultimately, there seem to me to be several reasons why Dahl's books should be recognised as contributing positive moral messages to child readers. Most obviously, as already indicated, they are popular with children who may have a resistance to reading,

and Dahl's foremost aim in his children's books, as often quoted, is not to 'indoctrinate' children, but rather guide them through his tales of fantasy and humour. Dahl's books enhance children's imagination and boost their confidence to stand up against injustice. His inventive, word-conscious writing style is seen as being a major influence on other authors who write from the browbeaten child's perspective, such as Michael Rosen and David Walliams. While both the textual and contextual can provide a compelling explanation for a text's success, the paratextual, such as the physical appearance of a book, its title, its illustrations, and the biography of the author, also account for a book's reception. Dahl's and Blake's unique partnership, as author and illustrator, creates a distinctive 'brand', which makes his stories instantly recognisable. While there remain elements of Dahl's work that will always attract controversy, and polarise critical opinion, especially in academic areas, there seems little doubt that his fictional children will remain a vital bridge between the Dickensian past and the present child-focused worlds of Rowling, Rosen and Walliams; moreover, that they will continue to capture young readers and writers of the twenty-first century.

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