

*The Invention of Children's Literature: The Case of the Mischievous Roald*

*Dahl*

by

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Childhood: A Definition .....	5
2.1 Philippe Ariès.....	5
2.2 Childhood as a Construct.....	7
2.3 Types of Childhood.....	9
3. Literature for Children .....	14
3.1 The History of Children’s Literature .....	14
3.2 What is Children’s Literature?.....	23
4. The Problem of Children’s Literature.....	27
4.1 The Role of Psychoanalysis .....	30
4.2 Freud .....	31
4.3 Bettelheim.....	32
4.4 Controlling Children’s Literature .....	34
5. The Case of Roald Dahl.....	37
5.1 Violence .....	39
5.2 Whizpopping and other Bodily Functions .....	41
5.3 Language.....	43
5.4 Siding with Children.....	45
5.5 Other Issues.....	46
5.6 Dahl’s Point of View .....	50
6. Conclusion .....	52
Works Cited .....	55

## 1. Introduction

Most people have a favourite book that they enjoyed reading over and over again while they were children. In some cases these people might still go back to reading their beloved children's story when they feel in need of comfort from their hectic adult reality. However, if you ask these people what their most well-loved book is, you will get varied responses. Some favourites might be picture books, children's classics like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, teen fiction, while others may prefer fantasy novels, gothic stories or one of the many popular vampire series which seem to feature so prominently in today's book market. The genre of children's literature is comprised of an extremely wide variety of themes and subjects for a child to choose from. In some cases, though, one might respond that their favourite book as a child was not actually a children's book, but a book that is usually considered to be part of adult literature therefore outside the limits of suitable reading material for children, as some might argue. This is one of the issues that arises when one is discussing children's literature and is one of the problems that I examine closely in this paper. What exactly is children's literature and can it be defined in a clear and distinct manner from other forms of literature?

Another issue that surfaces when surveying fiction for younger readers is whether children's literature is something worth studying and researching. When discussing children's literature with various people of all kinds of backgrounds and explaining to them my interest in the subject, I often come across puzzled expressions and comments disregarding children's literature as a genre, such as "But it's for kids, how much is there to say about the whole subject?" or "So that can't be *that* difficult to do". Despite progress being made concerning the introduction of courses on children's literature in universities and the growing acceptance of fiction for young readers as a legitimate genre, there is still a section of people who

consider it to be unworthy of serious scholarly research. This perspective has consequently affected the way critical theory deals with children's literature, with it having to gradually overcome the stereotypes and adapt itself to the literature for children. Today there are literary critics who have done a great deal of work on children's literature, each from their own field of interest and expertise – be it narratology, structuralism, feminism or even psychoanalysis – and have been able to give it the attention it deserves. It would appear though that regardless of the sophisticated work done by various researchers and literary critics, there is still an overriding belief that an interest in this particular field is somewhat trivial and as such one needs to begin any inquiry into children's literature by arguing that it is indeed a legitimate body of work that requires (and deserves) close attention.

However, what is intriguing is the contradiction that exists concerning the importance of critically engaging with the genre of children's literature. While on the one hand many people consider children's literature to be something merely entertaining for children and not serious enough to be considered a valid field of study and research, on the other hand, there is also the perception that children's literature is such a strong influence on children that it may negatively affect their development, behaviour and psychology. In other words it is simultaneously thought of as a field that does not warrant a great deal of attention – other than providing readers with enjoyment and an outlet for pleasure – but conversely, children's books are also perceived as being so influential that they have the potential to function as a corruptive force for children. Some children's books have even been banned from libraries and schools because they were considered to be potentially dangerous to children. There is a particular interest invested in removing books from the reach of children which are perceived as promoting moral corruption, tarnishing the innocence of childhood by depicting scenes of violence and brutality or exploring sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual) and raising questions about the nature of life, death and religion.

The question of what is appropriate for children to read and what is not and the respective justifications provided regarding the suitability of material for children's fiction is one aspect of what I plan to explore in this paper. The problem of violence, horror, vulgar vocabulary, dysfunctional relationships and taboo topics within works of children's literature, are some of the areas of my interest. By looking into the way the notion of childhood has evolved through the centuries it becomes clear that the development of children's literature follows a similar path. My focus is on what has prevailed as the idea of childhood today, which is that of the child in need of protection from whatever harm, and this image of children needing to be shielded from any potential emotional or physical pain has increasingly shaped the manner in which fiction for young readers has been labelled. That is to say that on occasion, narratives which deviate from viewing children as defenceless and incapable of dealing with problems or sometimes even perpetuating violence or inappropriate behaviour themselves are marked as children's books that are dangerous or demoralizing for the real children reading them.

The basis for this argument is that literature plays a very important role in children's futures (Grenby 4) and bestows upon literature and books an extreme power over children. Dieter Petzold summarises it by astutely stating that "convinced that every book a child reads will leave some lasting impression on the child's mind", adults fear that some books will be harmful to children and "put quite wrong ideas into children's heads" (185). Therefore the solution to avoid this threat is to restrict children's access to such literature which leads to censorship and banning. Chris Jenks refers to this process as "scapegoating", arguing that blaming literature and other forms of the media and technology for children's bad, and in some cases extremely deviant behaviour, is a form of "containment" of children's knowledge and not dealing with the main core of the problem which is "if we don't know what children are, then we don't know what they need, and if we don't know what they need then...?"

What?" (132-133). This viewpoint will be further discussed in the first chapter in connection to the formation of the notion of childhood.

One of the authors that has been attacked for his children's books is Roald Dahl. While he is adored by millions of readers with his books remaining rather high in sales, he has also been heavily criticized by a great number of parents, teachers and critics. In most cases the arguments against him are that his books are inappropriate for children due to their content, which is sometimes seen as repulsive, vulgar and promoting immoral behaviour in children. Having loved all his books as a child and not being able to grasp what it is that is considered harmful in them, I attempt to investigate the accusations against him and to provide a different perspective. By employing the psychoanalytical theory of both Sigmund Freud and Bruno Bettelheim I seek to show that children are not as vulnerable and easily manipulated by literature as some people postulate and children's ability to distinguish pleasure, fantasy from reality is quite remarkable. By analyzing some of Dahl's work it becomes clear that it is not dangerous or corruptive for children. On the contrary, through his books children can truly enjoy themselves by experiencing the pleasure that Dahl's wonderful stories afford young readers and fully experience the fantastic worlds created by one of the most skilled children's writers of our times.

## 2. Childhood: A Definition

When it comes to thinking about childhood most people go back to their memories of being young children, the period of time they lived before becoming adults and taking on new responsibilities. Some might consider childhood to be a sacred period of time in one's life, a time when children are brought up and have instilled in them the moral principles and character traits that will remain with them throughout their entire adult life. In this sense, childhood, or the idea of childhood more importantly, gains great significance and is viewed as something that has to be cherished, taken care of and protected from any possible contamination. However, has this always been the case throughout human history? Has childhood always been so highly regarded and what exactly is childhood? Does it have boundaries or is it something open to discussion? Does it apply to children throughout the world of different class, race and religion or is it more limited in definition? These are some of the questions and issues I intend to explore.

### 2.1 Philippe Ariès

It is often believed that today's notion of childhood is a modern invention, something that did not necessarily exist in previous centuries. One of the main proponents of this idea was Philippe Ariès, whose book *Centuries of Childhood* has played a pivotal role in the study of the history of childhood. By studying mainly portraits and paintings of the Middle Ages, Ariès came to the conclusion that during the Middle Ages "there was no place for childhood" and that "[i]n mediaeval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (33,128). What Ariès was trying to illustrate was the fact that during that period of time the notion of childhood as something completely separate from adulthood was simply nonexistent (128). Diana Gittins

elaborates on this by noting that in the paintings Ariès studied “[c]hildren [...] were painted as little adults” and did not constitute a “distinct social group set apart from adults” (40). It was not until the late sixteenth and seventeenth century that “children *did* begin to be differentiated from adults in paintings” (Gittins 40). Along with this there came a change in people’s attitudes towards children and therefore the development of the idea of childhood. According to Ariès, this occurred when the role of the child shifted to the centre of the family and thus “became a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult” (129). This, of course, does not mean that people and families all of a sudden began to notice children and their playful nature but that “people would no longer hesitate to recognize the pleasure they got from watching children’s antics and ‘coddling’ them” (Ariès 130). In other words, people began to show their affection towards children, something that was formerly “part of the huge domain of unexpressed feelings” that people of the time had (Ariès 130).

Nonetheless, the shift in families’ attitudes towards their children was not the only thing that altered during the seventeenth century. Ariès interestingly points out that during this century a number of moralists and writers interested in instilling children with the correct manners and conduct disagreed with viewing the child as “amusing or agreeable” and viewed the age of childhood as an illness to be cured and children themselves “as fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed” (132-133). The reason for this development, as John Clarke points out, is “the development of formal schooling” during this period, beginning with the children of the upper classes and eventually extended to all children (5). As Clarke mentions, the time of schooling “creates a [...] period of transition or quarantine [...] for children between infancy and adult life” and has therefore created “the basis for defining a new idea of childhood” (5). The notion of childhood therefore is not something natural but actually a construct that depending on the historical period we are referring to may take on new and different meanings.

At this point it is necessary to mention some of the issues that have arisen concerning the work of Philippe Ariès. First of all, as we have earlier indicated, his work was mostly based on medieval art, and it can be argued that paintings and images of a specific period of time are not necessarily representative of the actual era in that they may portray reality in a distorted way only to appear attractive and appealing. Additionally, it has to be noted that since artists were usually commissioned by specific families to paint their portraits it is probable that the paintings were primarily of people belonging to the upper classes and aristocracy of the time hence not actually depicting an inclusive and objective image of children. In his article John Clarke refers to the historian Linda Pollock who is critical of Ariès' methods of research in that they are not always accurate, relying on secondary sources, whereas she opts for using "diaries, autobiographies and other first-hand accounts" in her own research on the period (7). As Clarke though correctly specifies "such sources may give us a biased picture of childhood in past times", as has been the criticism of Ariès, since these types of texts were most likely to belong to the wealthy and higher class (7). Another thing that we must take into account is that Ariès' perspective on childhood is a Eurocentric one since it refers to children living within France in the Middle Ages and thus can be problematic when referring to children coming from different cultural and racial backgrounds.

## 2.2 Childhood as a Construct

In spite of the criticism of Ariès, his work does actually provide us with a basis for the concept of childhood as something considered completely distinct from adulthood and also reveals that childhood, or as Richard Mills finely puts it, "childhoods, are social constructions, cultural components inextricably linked to variables of race, class, culture, gender and time" (9). So what exactly does it mean when we say childhood is a construct?

Undeniably, being a child is something that everyone experiences, it is a reality. However, the way we decide to look upon the period of childhood, and the meaning we give to it is partly what constitutes it as a construct. As LuAnn Walther accurately states: “Childhood, the invention of adults, reflects adult needs and adult fears quite as much as it signifies the absence of adulthood. In the course of history children have been glorified, patronized, ignored, or held in contempt, depending upon the cultural assumptions of adults” (qtd. in Gittins 36). Diana Gittins suggests that there is a difference between “the concept of ‘child’” and “the notion of ‘childhood’”, explaining that the first “concerns an embodied individual defined as non-adult” whereas the latter “is a more general and abstract term used to refer to the status ascribed by adults to those who are defined as not adult” (37). For Gittins the word ‘child’ “defines not just physiological immaturity but also connotes dependency, powerlessness and inferiority” (37).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, ‘childhood’ is more closely related to “the general state of being a child” and is associated with the notion of there being “a distinct, separate and fundamentally different social group or category” that comes in total opposition to the idea of adulthood (Gittins 37). Gittins continues by insightfully arguing that childhood is “a fiction interwoven with personal memories: cultural representations that serve to disguise difference between children – whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, class or physical ability. It hides power relationships and inequality” (37). In other words, the concept of childhood needs to always be considered in relation to adulthood but also “in relation to ideas about what children should be and have meant to adults over time, and why such ideas and beliefs have changed” (Gittins 38).

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<sup>1</sup> The word ‘child’ has been used throughout history in multiple contexts. Gittins reminds us of the fact that it “has also served to define social groups perceived as inferior: colonized people, slaves, women” (37). For instance, in his books *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon elaborates on the issue of the black man and the colonized who are often equated with children or characterized as ‘childlike’ and ‘childish’.

### 2.3 Types of Childhood

There are multiple types of childhood that exist today; some deriving from old views and beliefs while others are part of a more modern conception of what childhood is and may refer to. Moving on from the seventeenth century that Ariès marked as the beginning of childhood, we notice a development and evolution of the concept of childhood and the beliefs surrounding it. Also occurring in the seventeenth century was what Clarke refers to as the “emergence and the spread of a *middle-class model* or *ideology of the family*” seen as the impact Protestantism, and more specifically Puritanism, had on the family (8-9). In accordance with Puritan belief “[c]hildren were seen as inherently sinful and in need of guidance” (Clarke 9) leading of course to an “emphasis on correct behaviour” and ultimately resulting in parents competing in a “struggle to save the souls of their children” (Gittins 42). This is one aspect of the form of childhood that relates to the “[c]hild as theological construct”, in other words in need of guidance and education in order to be corrected (Mills 10).

The concept of the child as innocent has been around since biblical times. However, it was with the Enlightenment and Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* that it was further developed and supported. In his book Rousseau states what was to become the ideal behind the Romantic view of childhood: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (37). In this sense, children are seen to be naturally innocent and good and with the correct education and care they develop into good people (Rousseau 37-38). This comes in total contradiction to the Puritan view of the child mentioned above. Whereas the Puritan belief was that the child had to be tamed or “broken” in order for it to develop into a submissive and obedient person, the Romantic view was that the child had to be “encouraged, enabled and facilitated” so as to fulfill his/her entire potential as a human being (Jenks 63,65). Reality did not always reflect the Romantic

conviction and especially during the Industrial Revolution “[t]here was a clash between a Romantic idealized view of childhood rooted in eighteenth century Enlightenment and the brutal reality of most children’s lives” (Clarke 9). Only towards the end of the nineteenth century and the introduction of compulsory schooling was the Romantic idea of childhood more widely established in practice (Clarke 10-11).

What all three versions of childhood mentioned above have in common, is the idea that childhood is just a phase that children need to go through in order to reach their final destination which is to become adults. Shirley J Pressler elaborates on this by noting that “childhood [is positioned] as ‘a time of becoming’” (20). This is quite clear when one thinks of the vocabulary used when referring to childhood. Chris Jenks lists just a few of what he calls “‘growth’ metaphors” used when speaking of childhood: “a ‘becoming’; tabula rasa; laying down the foundations; shaping the individual; taking on; growing up; preparation; inadequacy; inexperience; immaturity” (8). What all these metaphors essentially do is place childhood in a space of in-between, not infancy and also not yet adult, but with the potential and aim of finally becoming “a civilized rational being” (Pressler 22).

Therefore, childhood is the period of time when the child acquires all the necessary knowledge and tools he/she will need in order to fulfill his/her ultimate mission which is to enter adulthood. Mills refers to this procedure as “the gradual acquiring of secret knowledge” (12). It is a time when there is “a slow, incremental build-up of knowledge and experience, passed from adult to child”, a process which happens over a span of years and ends when it is considered that the child is properly equipped so that he/she can then be considered an adult (Mills 12). The presumption beneath this, nevertheless, is that adulthood “is a benevolent and coherent totality” that accepts the child, “invites him to cast off the qualities that ensure his differences” and “will [finally] guarantee his corporate identity” (Jenks 8).

A logical question emerges at this point. What controls this movement from childhood to adulthood? Is there an exact point where childhood comes to an end and adulthood begins? Take for example the various ages when people are permitted to get a driver's license, be served alcohol and vote throughout the world. Why are people in the USA considered qualified to drive at the age of sixteen but not legally allowed to vote until eighteen or be served alcohol until twenty-one, whereas in Greece the age of 'becoming' an adult is eighteen? Referring to the imposition of specific age limits, Pressler maintains that "they are often decided on an arbitrary basis" and also brings up issues concerning the inclusion or exclusion of children from various public spheres, thus connecting them once again to the notion of children being in need of protection (16). The conclusion that we can come to is that as with childhood, adulthood "is itself socially constructed" (Woodhead 24). Consequently, the shift from childhood to adulthood is dependent upon specific cultures and societies, while in some contexts there may be an overlapping of the two.

In relation to the above attitudes towards how children, and subsequently childhood, is and has been viewed, it is interesting to mention some more viewpoints that reflect the way in which children and childhood are conceived. Most of these are closely connected to the two basic ideas, the Puritan view and the Romantic view, but could be considered as separate and more specific.

To begin with, looking back to the Romantic notion of children as being innately innocent and full of potential, it is a reasonable assumption that "children are somehow a force for good in the world" (Mills 17). What is meant by this is that children are often thought of as being the future of the world, the ones who bring hope to existing reality and ultimately change the world for the better. In this sense, it seems that children are being placed in an extremely powerful position where they are worshipped "for their potential as human resources" (Mills 18).

Other viewpoints concerning children are those which tend to stress children's individuality and their position within society. More and more frequently, especially with developments in educational procedures, children are beginning to be thought of as individuals with their own personal attributes and uniqueness. Mills names this category: "Children as persons in their own right" (21). Essentially the idea is that all children are in the process of becoming adults and therefore are equal to them while at the same time having their own specific behaviours. This becomes clear when Frances Waksler states that "[c]hildren can be viewed as fully social beings, capable of acting in the social world and of creating and sustaining their own culture" (qtd in Mills 21).<sup>2</sup> As well as being considered individuals though, children are often perceived as a mysterious group of people. Mills touches upon this when suggesting that "[g]iven the ultimate unknowability of the reality of childhood, there is something attractive in the notion that children are members of a group which [...] is different from the group inhabited by adults" (23). Not being children any more, adults are not "let into" this private group and so cannot exactly know what is going on there. This is where interest and research into children's behaviour and everyday lives' enters the picture as the adults' attempt to uncover the secrets that childhood keeps (Mills 23-24).

In addition to being considered as innocent, the child is often thought of as "being in need of protection" (Mills 12). What this actually refers to is the idea that there are some matters and issues that are not yet appropriate for children to learn about and they are thus protected and shielded from anything that might harm their innocence. This concept of childhood prevails even in today's society and is a subject of much discussion. A basic element of this viewpoint is that children are conceived of as being vulnerable and are thus in

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<sup>2</sup> The first time children were distinguished from adults officially in terms of their rights was in 1924 when the League of Nations adopted the Geneva Declaration which recognized and affirmed for the first time the existence of rights specific to children and the responsibility of adults towards children (Unicef 4). Some thirty years later the United Nations adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Children in 1959 "aiming to safeguard and protect children" (Unicef 5). While it took another thirty years, on 20 November 1989, for the Convention on the Rights of the Child to be adopted by the UN General Assembly (Unicef 5).

danger, whether this be physical danger – bodily harm – or an emotional threat that exposes them to inappropriate and possibly traumatizing knowledge. In our modern society the threats towards children seem to have multiplied in the sense that “the big ‘outside’ is conceived as a dangerous place to be” for children due to the “hyperbole of rapists, perverts, murderers and the mundanity of traffic” (Jenks 88). The image of parents warning their children not to go outside on their own or explaining to them the various dangers they might encounter outdoors is quite common, especially in big cities. This idea has inevitably led children indoors where they are considered to be better shielded from possible danger. Nevertheless, the risk of children being exposed to unsuitable knowledge remains, whether it is through their parents, friends, television, computer games and - our specific interest – literature.

### 3. Literature for Children

Once the notion of childhood had been developed and had come into being, it was only natural for parents and educators to begin looking deeper into the upbringing and education of children. It was during this period that the idea of a literature specifically for children arose. The evolution of children's literature resembles that of the notion of childhood and it could be said that the two concepts are extremely dependent upon each other. Had it not been for the increasing interest in childhood after the medieval period and the shift in the attitudes people had towards them, children's literature may not have developed into what we consider it today. However, just like the notion of childhood, the concept and category of children's literature is not something that can be easily described or defined. At this point I will attempt to provide a brief history of the development of children's literature and ultimately try to give a definition of what it is.

#### 3.1 The History of Children's Literature

Throughout the history of humankind stories have been told to children, whether they were in the form of tales, songs, myths etc. These tales, as Fiona McCulloch points out, "were heard by young and old alike and were often bawdy and erotic in content" (29). During the late fifteenth century folk tales were appropriated "to fulfill contemporaneous social ideological needs" and thus "the fairy tale emerged as a distinctive genre" (McCulloch 30). However it should be stressed that these fairy tales were not intended solely for children but for the whole of society. Seth Lerer also notes that "courtesy and conduct manuals [which]

instructed children in proper behaviour and speech” were also available for children’s education while primers containing mainly prayers remained quite popular too (57, 60).<sup>3</sup>

As we witnessed earlier, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were quite pivotal regarding the concept of childhood. Religion became a large factor in English people’s lives and more specifically Protestantism caused a shift in the perception of childhood since children began to fill in a different social role. This way of thinking affected the literature that was produced at the time and led to it becoming “heavily moralizing” while children were advised to read the Bible and books promoting the Puritan ethos (McCulloch 31). Therefore moralizing books and tales rose in popularity during this time, while various versions of Aesop’s Fables were especially popular since they contained morals and lessons considered appropriate for children to learn.

In the late seventeenth century, a French author, Charles Perrault, published his book *Histoires, ou contes du temps passé, avec des Moralitez* (1697), translated into English as *Histories, or Tales of Past Times* by Robert Samber, which contained eight fairy tales. These fairy tales were initially intended for amusement and were extremely popular within French society, however, once they were translated into English they were “simplified and shortened [...] and adapted to include morals for children” (McCulloch 33). Thus, they “were adopted as children’s texts” and even today are known as *The Tales of Mother Goose* or *Mother Gooses’s Tales* (Susina 181). It is important here to point out that when Perrault was translated into English in 1729 the influence of Puritanism was at its peak and the Puritans were not very fond of fairy tales since they contained magical elements and they were afraid that “their fanciful content might encourage children to tell lies, and thus be ungodly”

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<sup>3</sup> According to Lerer the primer “seems unique to England” and developed from just being a book containing prayers to also including “basic alphabetic education” (60). In most primers there were “lists of letters [...] followed by simple prayers” whereas some also included “psalms and scriptural readings” (Lerer 60). Whatever form they had they were considered to be “the basic tool for teaching children how to read” (Lerer 60). The *New England Primer* that most likely came out in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century included a number of moral tales, poetry and also stressed the “child’s place in the family, society and creation”, enacting thus as a type of “guide to life” (Lerer 87-89).

(McCulloch 33-34). Nevertheless, the fact that the adapted fairy tales, as McCulloch puts it, “were heavily didactic” and generally adhered to the patriarchal society of the time and perpetuated ideologies that were in being at the time, allowed for them to be used by the Puritans for their own teachings (34).

Coinciding with the Puritans’ interest in books was the introduction of a new concept of education, the school system, which also created a need for books written specifically for children in order to aid their learning (Shavit 29). Thus the books that were printed were closely connected to the school system and as Zohar Shavit highlights “it was the new system of education that determined the nature of texts for children” (29). The two major theorists who played a highly influential role in the development of the education system but also affected children’s literature were John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke “likened the child to a *tabula rasa* (blank tablet or slate)” meaning that children are born without any innate ideas or principles (Grenby 13). Only through contact with their surroundings are they able to learn new things while “pictures, toys, and models can assist in teaching words and concepts” (Lerer 104). Therefore Locke maintained, as Lerer explains, that “the goal of education should be both instruction and delight”, an idea that continues to prevail even in today’s educational systems (104). In this sense, Locke was an avid supporter of fables because, as Jan Susina mentions, unlike fairy tales, fables “were coupled with a moral” and therefore provided both the entertainment children needed but also the lesson that had to be learnt (179).

Rousseau, though he was affected by the writings of Locke, formed his own vision of what education ought to be. As we have previously mentioned, in writing *Emile* Rousseau “rejected the Puritan concept of original sin and maintained that children were born innocent but later corrupted by society” (Susina 180). Moreover, Rousseau was not a big fan of theoretical education, having actually stated “I hate books. They only teach one to talk about

what one does not know” and arguing that it is not necessary for a child to learn how to read until the age of twelve (184, 116). In fact, for Rousseau the only book a child should read is Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, despite it not being initially written for children, since according to him “it provides the most felicitous treatise on natural education” (184). Seth Lerer attempts to clarify this by explaining that “Defoe’s novel teaches self-sufficiency” and “offers a model for particular experience, and in experience lies education” (130). While this seems quite close to Locke’s vision of education, Lerer correctly picks up on it and emphasizes that for Rousseau “the measure of a child is not so much in moral growth or rational behaviour, but in terms of feeling”; Rousseau seems to favour “sincerity and authenticity” as the most important aspects of a person’s happiness (130). Of course, Rousseau’s ideas on *Robinson Crusoe* turned it into a classic, with many “abridgements and imitations that gave rise to the so-called Robinsonade tradition” (Lerer 131).

Numerous other stories with similar adventures became quite popular during this period especially in the form of chapbooks. A chapbook was usually “a short, cheaply made pamphlet [...] designed to offer literary culture to those who could often least afford it” (Lerer 134). They usually contained modified versions of popular books and although they were initially intended for adults they became extremely popular with children especially during the eighteenth century (Lerer 134). However, the increasing popularity of chapbooks began to worry those who were involved in the education of children, and more specifically the “religious establishment” as Shavit points out, since chapbooks were not considered appropriate reading material that would promote children’s education (31). Therefore a period began when books specially made for children’s education were published on the basis of Locke and Rousseau’s theories and children’s books started to acquire a new importance since they were seen as the “vehicles” children had in order to fulfill their potentials (Shavit 32-33).

As could be anticipated, this expanding interest in books for children caught the eye of the publishers of that time. These publishers noticed “the commercial potential of the children’s market” and began to publish their own books for children, keeping in line though with “the values of official books for children” (Shavit 33). So in 1744 commercial publisher John Newbery published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* which is often considered to be “the first modern children’s book” (McCulloch 36). Newbery was an excellent businessman since he managed to be popular with both children and their parents and educators by providing the children with entertaining, yet educational books, and also following the principles the adults were in favour of (Shavit 33). Indeed he was so innovative that he often included “balls, pincushions, counting stones, and polygons for sale along with his books” in order to attract the attention of the younger ones (Lerer 107). By the end of the eighteenth century, there were a number of publishers focused entirely on children’s books while, as McCulloch observes, bookstores that specialized in books for children had begun to open (36-37). It is necessary, however, to emphasize that all this progress concerning education and children’s books primarily affected the children of the upper classes whose families could afford to buy them the books. Children that were less fortunate did not have the same access to education and often remained illiterate or only read the cheap chapbooks that were available to them (McCulloch 37).

The Victorian period is often considered to be the Golden Age of children’s literature. With the increasing amount of children’s books that were being published and the influence of Romantic thinking on society it could be argued that children’s literature close to what we know today was born. Fiona McCulloch indicates that the books being published “tended to be more child-centred, insofar as the child is the protagonist and often teaches the adults” something that had roots in the Romantic notion of the child as innocent (38). During this period there was also a separation between the books written for girls and boys, with the

stories written for girls focusing on the home and family life whereas the stories for boys were more adventurous (Susina 182). Such examples are Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) whose readers were usually girls and young women while Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) had a substantially male audience. Jan Susina interestingly indicates the different ideologies of the period concerning girls and boys and comments that "[w]hile Victorian children's literature developed the character of the good and bad boy, female characters were allowed less flexibility" in that they remained contained within the domestic sphere (182). As Peter Hunt states in his article "Children's Literature and Childhood", "if girls were portrayed or defined as demure, studious and benevolent, boys were *different*" (58).

In spite of the distinction between the two sexes concerning the books written for them, it is fascinating to mention that quite a large number of the authors of children's literature of the nineteenth century were women. This occurred because children's literature, as Susina specifies, "has been considered less significant than adult literature and because publishers have regarded women as more capable of teaching and raising children" (183). Another point worth mentioning is the fact that during the nineteenth century there was also a division of children's literature according to social class (Susina 183). Cheaper publications in the form of "penny dreadfuls or dime novels, were produced for the working class" (Susina 183). These books were cheaper than the other books and usually contained "stories full of Gothic terror and page-turning sensationalism" and were extremely popular with the lower classes (McCulloch 40).

The years prior to World War I reshaped the notion of childhood and provided children's literature with some of its most famous authors and works.<sup>4</sup> Lerer points out that

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<sup>4</sup> It was during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that works such as Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), J.M Barrie's play *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904), Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908)

there was a sense of “playfulness to life” with the introduction of new technologies into life such as the aeroplane and the car (254). Scientific disciplines such as sociology and psychology were beginning to make their mark and have their own impact on society while there was also “a new concern, on both sides of the Atlantic, with child welfare” and “a fascination with children and children’s books” (Lerer 254-255). All these developments contributed in producing the “modern children’s book” with its “rich embossed covers of adventure books, the evocative line drawings that adorned the texts, the etchings and photographs that brought far off places and events into the child’s room”, most characteristics of which remain in today’s children’s literature (Lerer 257). After World War I there was a shift in the issues concerning children’s literature, with some writers “[taking] refuge in pastoral retreats” like A.A. Milne and his *Pooh* books while others focused on the home and the domestic landscape, expressing in this way a fear for “the safety of home” (McCulloch 41).

The twentieth century also witnessed a wave of “diversity in both characters and authors” (Susina 184). Characters and authors were no longer necessarily white or upper class and many African-American and Asian-American writers began to make their mark on children’s literature.<sup>5</sup> Another change that occurred during the twentieth century was the division of children’s literature according to the age of the readers (Susina 184). Picture books and pop-up books were introduced for infants and toddlers while the 1960s saw the emergence of “teenage or young adult fiction” (McCulloch 41) or in Susina’s words

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and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), were published and went on to become classic works of literature for children.

<sup>5</sup> African-American authors Arna Bontemps, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D. Taylor and John Steptoe and Asian-American authors Laurence Yep, Allen Say and Minfong Ho, just to name a few, are all successful, critically acclaimed and award-winning authors of children’s literature. For more information on the ethnic diversity of children’s literature see Giselle Liza Anatol’s article “Children’s and Young Adult Literatures” provides a brief introduction into African-American children’s books; Neal A. Lester’s book *Once Upon a Time in a Different World: Issues and Ideas in African American Children’s Literature* deals with the various issues that it comes up against and Botelho and Rudman’s *Critical Multicultural Analysis of Children’s Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors*.

“adolescent literature” (184). An additional category of children’s literature, surfacing in the nineteenth century, but becoming even more widespread in the twentieth, is that of the “series books [...] that follow the same set of characters or repeat an established formula” (Susina 184).

Apart from the introduction of new writers and categories of children’s literature, something that characterizes the literature produced for children during the twentieth century is the move to a multiplicity of themes. For instance, the teenage fiction that became popular often employed fantasy in its stories, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* being such examples, while other authors showed a preference for “neo-realism” (McCulloch 41). “What is evident in such works”, as McCulloch points out, “is a tension between the adult world of conservatism, with its pastoral tropes and the child’s world of modernity, corruption and danger” (41). The protagonists of these books, largely children and teenagers, are brought to face all sorts of situations and circumstances, either in a realistic or fantasy world, and their role is to “negotiate with modern society and its rapid changes” (McCulloch 41-42). Issues concerning sexuality and personal relationships became more frequent in the 1970s and many of the novels printed around this time were rather progressive in the sense that they were “more open-ended” with “less neatly tied up closures” (McCulloch 42). The depiction of family structure and relationships also faced a change. In contrast to the stable families portrayed in works of previous eras, twentieth century children’s literature contains many unreliable adults and parents and father figures who are often non-existent, thus forcing the child character to “navigate its own way through the dangers that unfold, including good versus evil, and the anxieties of growing up” (McCulloch 42). What is noteworthy though, and as McCulloch specifies, is that the Romantic notion of childhood is still very much at work since even though “these novels often carry the weight of the world on their young protagonist’s shoulders, [...] there is still a desire for the maintaining of childhood

innocence” and this is proven through the “reassuring endings” they often provide which do present the reader with a sense of closure and hope (42).

Finally we come to today’s children’s literature which could be viewed as “a new golden age of children’s fiction” (McCulloch 42). Contemporary children’s literature, in a way, seems to be a mixture of most of the characteristics that have already been mentioned. An increasingly popular trend, though, is that of “crossover fiction”, a relatively new category of children’s literature which is not necessarily exclusive to child readers (McCulloch 42). Many adults have begun to read books that were initially written for an audience of children, thus “blurring the boundaries between children’s and adults texts” (Susina 185). For example, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books seem as popular with adults as they are with children. Additionally, some authors of adult literature have entered the scene of children’s books while there is also an ongoing expansion of the publishing market of children’s books seeing that it has been, and continues to be, so lucrative.

Jan Susina maintains that “[c]ontemporary children’s literature continues to be a highly innovative and challenging field” (185), however I am not so sure this is the actual case with innovation. McCulloch questions whether “we are in the heyday of children’s literature in its coming of age or, rather, is there a flood of what Peter Hunt refers to as ‘neo-conservative’ [...] productions that all offer pretty much the same outlook” (43). Essentially she seems to be questioning whether there is anything truly original and subversive or if there is a “return to the didactic moralizing of books reflecting and supporting the dominant social ideologies of contemporary society” (McCulloch 43). Unfortunately this question cannot be answered easily if one takes into account the amount of books being published and the profits that are made from them, since it is logical for publishers to “[play] it safe” regarding the themes and topics of their books, in order to maintain their customers and profits (McCulloch 43). Apart from some exceptions therefore, children’s literature continues to employ literary

models that have been successful in the past with “the quest or journey motif” being just one of them; however, McCulloch is right to point out that “there is an altogether more mature outlook” (43). Fantasy still plays an important role when it comes to contemporary children’s literature but there are also works that deal with the reality and issues of everyday modern life without always giving a clear ending to their stories (McCulloch 43).

### 3.2 What is Children’s Literature?

Things have obviously become more complicated when it comes to children’s literature since on the one hand it does seem to adhere to the basic “romantic notions of childhood innocence” but at the same time “there are greater challenges and uncertainties facing the child protagonists that cannot be easily resolved with happy endings” (McCulloch 44). Even after looking at the development of children’s literature through the centuries it is still not quite clear what exactly children’s literature is. Is it every book that has been written with children in mind? Is it everything that has a child protagonist? Are both educational books and books read for pleasure part of children’s literature? And these are just a few of the questions that arise. While it may seem a rather straightforward subject to define, it is actually rather troubling to provide a clear definition of children’s literature even though there have been many who have attempted to.

To begin with, in their book *Essentials of Children’s Literature* Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl Tomlinson define children’s literature as “good-quality trade books for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children of those ages through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction” (2). They define the content of children’s books stating that they “are about the experiences of childhood, both good and bad” (2). This opinion is one that you come across very often if you ask someone to describe what she understands children’s literature to be. But what exactly do they mean when they say “good-

quality trade books”? Are there other books of not so “good-quality” with the same contents that do not belong in the category of children’s literature? That is just one issue that arises within the definition of children’s literature. Another definition of children’s literature is the one that Jan Susina gives: “Children’s literature comprises those texts that have been written specifically for children and those that children have selected to read on their own, and the boundaries between children’s literature and adult literature are surprisingly fluid” (178). This definition may not go into the subject of quality but something that comes into question is the child’s choice of reading material. For instance if a child decides to read Nick Hornby’s *A Long Way Down* does that automatically include it in the realm of children’s literature even though it belongs in the adult section? Also, what about the case of literature that has been written for children but is finally not read by children? Susina mentions this dilemma when he refers to the literature written for children in previous centuries that was successful in its time and is “considered historical children’s literature today” but “is read almost exclusively by adult scholars of children’s literature”; is that still thought of as belonging to the genre (178)?

What distinguishes children’s literature from other forms of literature is that it is usually, if not always, defined in terms of its readers, as Susina says “it is the intended audience rather than the producers of the texts that define the field” (178). The great majority of authors of children’s literature are adults who are writing about subjects that they consider interesting for children or at least are connected with childhood. The problem that arises here though is how capable adults are of knowing what interests children and what appeals to them. The result is then, as Perry Nodelman argues, that “it is adult *ideas* about childhood that shape the literature and provide it with its characteristic features” (148). Consequently, children’s literature is constructed according to the time it is produced and “embodies that period’s assumptions about children and appropriate behaviour”, without necessarily having

anything to do with the real children of that period or with the topics that they may be interested in reading themselves (Susina 178).

It is important to note though that apart from the adult writers of children's literature it is also primarily adults that purchase it and decide what children are supposed to read (Susina 178). Therefore children's literature can also be defined as "only and exclusively that literature that parents consider suitable for their children" (Nodelman 137). The issue of what is appropriate for children to read will be further analysed in the following chapters; however, it is necessary to indicate that "adult views of what is acceptable for children to read" are also closely connected to the definition of children's literature (Nodelman 149). So as Michael Steig rightly states children's literature is a "category whose content is determined by those who make professional use of it, rather than the children who supposedly read it" (36) although I will add that it applies to all adults and not just the ones who have a professional relationship with children's literature. It is thus a genre that is characterized by exclusion in the sense that by defining children's literature one is actually trying to sort out what works belong in children's literature and which ones do not, in other words being able to define children's literature also means "knowing *what* to exclude" from it (Nodelman 152).

Jacqueline Rose even goes so far as to argue that children's literature is "impossible because the readers implied in books written by adults for children will always be constructed out of adult wishes and desires" (qtd in Nodelman 161). This viewpoint stems from the idea that since adults are the ones producing literature for children they are actually perpetuating the images they have of childhood and children which are not necessarily close to reality, therefore the characters created are constructed according to the writers' ideology. Consequently there is no such thing as children's fiction but only an adult creation of "child characters for readers to identify with, in order to satisfy adults wants and needs in regards to children" (Nodelman 161).

So is it really possible to define children's literature and be sure about what one is stating? The conclusion that I have reached is in agreement with Perry Nodelman's point of view:

[T]he term children's literature creates confusion because children's literature as a genre is confusing – richly and complicatedly so. The confusions make the genre seem impossible only with the assumption that the differing definitions must be mutually exclusive and that one must be right in ways that make the others wrong, which makes them all mutually defeating. But what if all the differing definitions suggest some part of the more complex truth? What if the contradictions of the definitions are suggestive of contradictions – or, possibly paradoxes – inherent in the genre itself? What if children's literature as a genre represents the complex field of shifting position-takings of the field that engenders it? (137)

Maybe then children's literature is a combination of all the definitions explained earlier, and ones that were not mentioned, and each one has its own significance and refers to specific elements of children's literature. It is just up to us to decide what points of the definitions are useful in each case.

#### 4. The Problem of Children's Literature

At this point it seems quite clear that there is a very close relationship between childhood, or at least the notion of childhood, with children's literature. The two seem to be dependent upon each other in the sense that according to the way the notion of childhood develops and evolves throughout time, children's literature also changes. However, it is not only children's literature as a genre that changes, but also the ideas of what is considered appropriate literature for children and what might be a possible threat or danger towards children if they read or come into contact with it.

It has already been mentioned that initially the books produced for children were aimed at their education and teaching them the morals they needed in order to become respectable adults. The issue was though, that these books often provided little, if any, entertainment for children making them turn to other forms of literature that had become available to them, for instance in the form of chapbooks, much to the fear of their parents and educators. Shavit recognizes this stating that "it became impossible to control their [the children's] reading material and to determine what they should read, and more significantly, what they should not read" (30). Thus began the debate concerning appropriate literature for children that continues even today.

In his "Introduction" to his book *Understanding Children's Literature* Peter Hunt refers to the use of children's literature saying that "the books may be pleasant, yes, but essentially they have to be *useful*" (10). He goes on to explain what he means: "Books are not just 'good', but 'good for'. Children's books are used for different purposes at different times [...]. Some are 'good' time-fillers; others 'good' for acquiring literacy; others 'good' for expanding the imagination or 'good' for inculcating general (or specific) social attitudes"

(“Introduction” 10). Therefore, according to Hunt, children’s literature always has to follow a specific function and often does several things at once (“Introduction” 10). Something that has to be stressed though is that children’s literature may be addressed to children but it is not always the children who get to choose what they read. Jan Susina notes that “it is more accurate to view such texts as having dual audiences of children and adults” and specifies that “[a]dults, particularly parents, teachers, and librarians, often function as gatekeepers who identify appropriate texts for children” (178). If they decide that a book is not appropriate for children to read then that book might be criticized, censored or even banned. As Hunt argues “adults can and do control the production of children’s literature – however subversive the child’s reading may be” (“Introduction” 5).

What is it that may cause a book to be considered inappropriate material for children? One issue is that of religious and moral beliefs. I have previously mentioned the influence the Puritans had on children’s literature and their aim at instilling moral and religious values into children. This aspect is one that continues to permeate contemporary children’s literature and is often the basis for the criticism of many children’s books. Apart from that there are also other issues that cause problems in the reception of children’s literature. The rather recent book *Essentials of Children’s Literature* (1993) contains a list of rules that demonstrate what a “proper” book for children should contain and also what form it should take. The authors Carol Lynch-Brown and Carl M. Tomlinson maintain that “[c]hildhood stories told in a forthright, humourous, or suspenseful manner are appropriate for young readers” whereas “stories about childhood told in nostalgic or overly sentimental terms are inappropriate” (2).

Some of the subjects that cause controversy in children’s literature are those of sex and sexuality, death and violence. It is often considered that the depiction of these issues is

inappropriate for children readers.<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Heins suggests that “[c]ontemporary concerns about shielding children and adolescents from corrupting sexual ideas are traceable directly to Victorian-era fears that libidinous thoughts would lead to the ‘secret vice’ of masturbation” (8). While this way of thinking may be considered dated in our contemporary world, Heins provides proof that even in the relatively recent 1990s the idea of shielding children and adolescents from such material existed, with some schools in the United States removing even classics, such as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, from their curriculum “because it ‘has the effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative’” (134). However, as Heins finely highlights “protecting youthful psyches” was not just about the “fear of sex” but also referred to the threat of violence (134). Concerning violence, Mark West cites the view of the psychiatrist Fredrick Wertham, a supporter of censorship regarding children’s literature in the 1940s, who “argued that reading about violence and crime could lead children to engage in violent or antisocial behavior” while additionally asserting “that comic books were responsible for turning otherwise normal children into sadists and homosexuals” (“Censorship” 495). Even today the effect violence may have on children, whether in the form of literature, the media or video games, is still an issue that causes much debate.

More views have been expressed in relation to how children perceive the world around them and whether or not they are able to grasp certain ideas and issues if they come across them in their readings. Children’s literature critic Nicholas Tucker supports that “children when young tend to see the universe as an essentially moral construction, imbued with a sense of ‘inherent justice’ so that somehow, in the long run, good will always be rewarded and evil eventually punished”, and in the case that a book fails to meet to this

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<sup>6</sup> It is important here for me to point out that I am referring to the effect literature may have on well-adjusted children since it could be the case that a child with a specific psychological disorder or with personality issues may react in a completely different way, my interest is on the average child reader.

standard the child might not be able to understand it or find it confusing (“Introduction” *Suitable for Children?* 20). In *The Child and the Book* Tucker argues that children find it difficult to grasp satire or irony and stating that “they are, anyhow, naturally susceptible to sarcasm, becoming easily confused over the way that the surface meanings of words can also convey a contrary interpretation” (11). Therefore a text including such tropes would ultimately be unsuccessful with children readers (Tucker, *The Child and the Book* 12).

What many of these viewpoints fail to take into consideration is the fact that none of these fears or arguments concerning the harm such themes in literature may cause, have been proven or even depicted. In relation to the media, Heins stresses that “we really know very little about how sexual, violent, or other media content will affect any individual young person” something that can be applied to children’s literature as well (10). She even makes us aware of the extremely interesting situation:

When people are asked what harm they think flows from violent, sexual, or other controversial art or entertainment, their answers range from the broadly moral (kids should not be ‘robbed of their innocence’) to the developmental and psychological (fear, nightmares, anxiety, oversexualized behavior), to the specifically imitative (they will mimic violence or sexual activity that they see on TV). (10)

So it seems that there is no direct way of knowing what kind of influence such subjects within children’s literature may have on children.

#### 4.1 The Role of Psychoanalysis

When it comes to children’s literature and its influence on children I believe that the field of psychoanalysis provides an extremely helpful tool in order to examine children’s literature. In her article “Psychoanalytical Criticism” Hamida Bosmajian points out the complicated situation children’s literature finds itself in when it comes to its readers,

identifying that there is a “double reader”, that of both the adult and the child (129). This distinction between the two readers makes children’s literature a complex field in the sense that the distinction basically implies that the adult reader is capable of understanding and interpreting the material she is reading whereas the child reader is “highly unreliable and, therefore, most easily ‘taken in’” (Bosmajian 129). This is what allows adults to control literature for children, since it is their “responsibility” to shield youngsters from anything they consider to be inappropriate or impossible for children to understand. However, taking a closer look at the theories of psychoanalysts and theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Bruno Bettelheim may provide us with a different idea of the possible effects of children’s literature.

#### 4.2 Freud

Throughout his theories Freud placed a great deal of importance on the child, viewing children’s experiences as the basis for their future adult lives. Our focus here then will be mainly on Freud’s theory of socialization which is basically “the acquisition of a language by children” and also “learning about gender roles and about sexuality generally” (Bocock 17). In contrast to what the Romantics believed about childhood innocence Freud argued that “childhood fantasies formed a continuum with sexual desires, and that all children had an innate curiosity about sex and their own origins” (Thurschwell 43). From the time of infancy until the age of around five infants seem to be interested in sexuality and their own genitals however this early childhood period “inevitably falls victim to infantile amnesia” which is Freud’s term for “a universal forgetting of everything that happened in our childhood, often up to the ages of six or seven” (Thurschwell 54). The whole point of infantile amnesia, according to Freud, is to “[conceal] from him [the child] the beginning of his own sexual life” (Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*). Therefore the child may not necessarily have any memory of its encounters with sexuality; however, those memories have been

repressed in order to “cover up sexual knowledge” (Thurschwell 54). It thus seems that the knowledge that adults are so afraid children might discover through literature is in a sense already known by the children even if it is in a repressed state.

Freud was also interested in literature and more specifically fairy tales and their importance in people’s lives. In his paper “The Occurrence in Dreams of Materials from Fairy Tales” Freud refers to how important they are to the development of children’s mental lives and mentions that for some people “fairy tales [take] the place of memories of their own childhood; they have made the fairy tales into screen memories” (101). Another significant element of Freud’s theories was that of catharsis. As Heins explains “Freud identified catharsis as a crucial element of artistic creation, of psychotherapy, and of the fantasies of children at play” and believed that it is essential for everyone to “relieve themselves of painful emotions through creative expression, fantasy, humor, and daydreams” (230). Fiction for Freud in other words is both a source of pleasure and a form of escape from reality and is vital for each human’s wellbeing.

#### 4.3 Bettelheim

Bruno Bettelheim employed much of Freud’s theories when he wrote his very influential book *The Uses of Enchantment* which dealt with the analysis of popular fairy tales in connection to the development of children’s psyches and sexuality. According to Bettelheim children need fairy tales in order to be able to deal with their inner emotions and to enable them to “create order in [their lives]” since the fairy tales provide them with “a moral education” (5). Through the child’s encounter with fairy tales it becomes easier for him/her to “understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious” (Bettelheim 7). Bettelheim explains that “the unconscious is a powerful determinant of behaviour” and its constant repression can lead to

serious issues relating to one's conscious mind and personality (7). However, if these unconscious desires were to be "worked through in imagination" then their "potential for causing harm [...] is much reduced", which is where fairy tales fit in to the picture (Bettelheim 7).

Nevertheless Bettelheim does not ignore the fact that many parents believe "that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies"; on the contrary, he differentiates himself from them by stating that stories that only present "conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images" are incapable of fully "nourish[ing] the mind" (7). He goes on to critique many adults' "refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures" since all that eventually does is confuse children more about the world they live in and their own personal anxieties (7). For Bettelheim fairy tales provide a means through which children are able to come to terms with their own fears and to deal with their often frightening desires. Keeping children away from stories that adults often consider dangerous for their children's development has its own more severe consequences. As Bettelheim demonstrates "[b]y denying access to stories which implicitly tell the child that others have the same fantasies, he is left to feel that he is the only one who imagines such things" something that "makes his fantasies really scary" and makes him/her feel even more isolated (122). However, "learning that others have the same or similar fantasies makes us feel that we are part of humanity, and allays our fear that having such destructive ideas has put us beyond the common pale" (Bettelheim 122).

Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein employed myths and fairy tales as a form of treatment for her patients. Bosmajian elaborates on Klein's idea stating that "[i]t is through the structure of fantasy that the child acts out not only real or imagined damage, but also the desire for reparation", while she also viewed "the monsters and menacing figures of myths and fairy

tales as parent displacements” allowing children to confront them and therefore overcome their issues (134). Although Bettelheim and Klein may be referring specifically to fairy tales, I believe that the core of their theories is applicable to children’s literature as a whole. Through the literature they read, whether it is in the form of books, fairy tales or comics, realistic or fantasy, children are provided with characters and issues they are able to identify with or situations which they can escape to in order to be able to cope with their own realities.

#### 4.4 Controlling Children’s Literature

Despite these theories maintaining that fairy tales – and by extension children’s literature – are a necessity for children’s healthy development, there is still a large amount of controversy regarding the appropriate material children should be reading and what “good” children’s literature is. This has led to the development of two initially contrasting sides, one being the adults who consider themselves in charge of deciding what is fitting for children to read and the other of those who believe that there is no room or voice for children in children’s literature since it seems to be controlled by adults, both of which I find to be ultimately connected.

To begin with, the first group can be compared to the Romantics in relation to the way they view children. For them children are seen as innocent and unable to cope with what they consider to be problematic issues once they encounter them in their readings. In order to “help” children stay on the right track and develop into proper adults they often end up censoring children’s literature or adapting it to their own preferences and beliefs. In fact the adoption of censorship itself, as Peter Hunt outlines, “tends to characterize children as impressionable and simple-minded, unable to take a balanced view of, for example, sexual or racial issues, unless the balance is explicitly stated” (“Introduction” 6). This way of thinking

has resulted in a different form of censorship, not just erasing segments or banning books, but replacing possible controversial elements altogether with more appropriate “politically correct” versions. The modifications made are not necessarily incorrect; however, they do once again question a child’s ability to assess what he or she is reading and his or her capacity to “read against’ the text” (Hunt, “Introduction” 6).

The other group, on the other hand, comes in to support children and their rights, considering them to be voiceless within society because of adults’ control over them (Rudd 17). This “voicelessness” is extended to the realm of children’s literature on account of the fact that “their literature [is] being created for them” instead of the children themselves “creating their own” (Rudd 19). The problem with this perspective though, is that “it actually helps construct the child as a helpless, powerless being” instead of leading towards a different path (Rudd 17). While attempting to show that children are able to be constructive in their thinking it actually reverts back to the viewpoint of the first group insisting on the impressionability of children. An additional question concerns the point of view regarding children’s literature. Arguing that children have no voice in their literature since it is not produced by them seems to advocate the opinion that it is only possible for children to write true children’s literature, something that I find to be quite problematic; I agree with Rudd who states that “language cannot ground authenticity, language itself being a construction or, in a Lacanian version of development, a misrepresentation” (19). Children do create their own literature whether on their own or as a “collaborative effort” and it comes “in a variety of forms: rhymes, jokes, songs, incantations, tall tales, plays, stories and more”, but they rarely have the opportunity to be published and are usually ignored (Rudd 19). Considering that “only commercially published work is seen to count” it is logical for there to be the sense that children’s literature is only produced by adults (Rudd 19).

The common ground these two sides stand on is that either way they “share a romantic view about the power of books” (West, “Censorship” 499). For them “books are such a major influence in the formation of children’s values and attitudes” (West, “Censorship” 499) that the proponents of censorship feel it their duty to control what children read whereas the supporters of children view children’s literature in a suspicious way considering it to be silencing children and remodelling them according to its own standards. Therefore there is no one-sided conclusion. According to Tucker, books “remain suitable for children or not according to different adult views on the nature of childhood itself” (*The Child and the Book* 122). Reading children’s literature in whatever form may “act as a valuable preparatory stage for later action or decisions in the actual world” (Tucker, *The Child and the Book* 122), or as Bettelheim proposed, help children deal with their personal realities and fears (7). What forms of censorship or advocates of children’s voices ultimately end up doing is only to “[address] adult anxieties” (Heins 257) and focus most of their attention on the books and the possible harm they may cause rather than the actual child readers who are mainly reading for pure entertainment. As Bettelheim specifies when discussing fairy tales: “no sane child ever believes that these tales describe the world realistically” (117) – thus it could also be argued that no sane child is so easily affected by the contents of what he or she reads.

## 5. The Case of Roald Dahl

Even today, almost 25 years since his death, Roald Dahl is considered to be one of the most successful and widely-read authors of children's literature. While not exclusively a writer of children's literature, since he did produce numerous short stories and collections for adults<sup>7</sup>, he is mostly known for his humorous and, in some cases, controversial works for children. His popularity with children remains high, despite a recent small decline<sup>8</sup>, and many adults continue to read his stories to their children. However, despite his popularity there are still many people who are critical towards his works considering them to be inappropriate and providing children with negative role models and messages.

What is it though that makes him a favourite author of countless children while at the same time detested by many adults? Cedric Cullingford suggests that Dahl's "stories combine some of the essentials of popular children's fiction – narrative drive, excitement held in check by security, and the sense of the world of children being self-contained and self-concerned", all of which explain his appeal (153). Nevertheless Dahl adds to these elements his own very personal style, part of which is "relish in the discomfort of adults and the pleasure of schoolchild humour" (Cullingford 153). As Cullingford points out, some of the adults which are depicted in Dahl's books "are not just observed with bewilderment or disdain but as objects which are absurd and often disgusting" (153) thus providing entertainment for the young readers while simultaneously giving an explanation as to why some adults are not so

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<sup>7</sup> Three of Dahl's most well-known collections of short stories for adults are: *Switch Bitch* (1976) containing four stories filled with black humour and sexual themes; *Ah, The Sweet Mystery of Life: The Country stories of Roald Dahl* (1990) which refer to the often grotesque experiences of living in the countryside; and *Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying* (1973) with stories deeply influenced by his experience in the RAF.

<sup>8</sup> *The Independent* published an article in February 2013 stating that there has been a decrease in children's interest for Roald Dahl's books and questions the reasons for this happening (Cooper).

fond of him. Perhaps the fact that he is “delighted in embracing gloomy, ill-tempered, and cynical views of life” (Beck 27) leads adults, who are concerned in maintaining their children’s innocence and presenting them with only the sunny side of life, to criticize him and deem his work unacceptable as it fails to conform to their expectations of suitable reading material for young individuals.

Critics of children’s literature have also expressed their distaste towards Dahl. Eleanor Cameron in her article “McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part I” stirred up a great deal of controversy when she described Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as “one of the most tasteless books ever written for children” while not forgetting to comment upon “the ugliness of the illustrations” (no page).<sup>9</sup> David Rees is in agreement with Cameron’s point of view and expresses his own objections concerning the confusing “moral universe” Dahl’s stories portray and the violence within them which he considers to be possibly threatening for children (143,144). However, I find that the largest concern critics and parents have concerning Dahl’s literary works is, as Dieter Petzold argues, “Dahl’s radical siding with children against adults” (185). This siding results in adults’ fear of children adopting the behavior they read about. As A.R.Hoffman puts it “if the character should find it pleasant and rewarding to make immoral choices, won’t this teach children to enjoy misbehaving?” (243). Therefore the fear that children are directly influenced by what they read and are driven to copy the characters’ deeds is ultimately what adults find disturbing and basically what feeds their antipathy towards Dahl.

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, Cameron’s criticism of Dahl provoked the author’s response and led to a very public controversy between the two. Many readers also took part in the debate, either siding with Cameron or Dahl. The website of *The Horn Book Archive* includes all the articles and responses published by both sides and provides an interesting read.

## 5.1 Violence

One of the issues that cause controversy in Dahl's books is that of violence and punishment. David Rees accuses Dahl of employing "a great deal of gratuitous violence" within his works and maintains that Dahl "enjoys writing about violence" (144). While a number of Dahl's books do contain violent scenes it is important to point out the context within which this violence occurs. For example, some people consider the punishment the four children undergo in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as quite aggressive and cruel, however, it does not happen out of the blue, it is a result of the children's misbehaving and is also done in a humorous way. Jonathon Culley, wondering whether such violence could affect a child reader, insists that "[t]he child is fully aware of what he or she perceives as the characteristic(s) which deserved punishment" and thus is not so easily influenced by what he or she has read (60). This theme of being punished for doing something wrong stems from fairy tales and folklore and as Culley argues children already have "a familiarity with the conventions of folklore" thus are aware of the possible consequences of doing something wrong (62). According to Bettelheim, the punishment that is given to someone who has done something cruel "reassures the child" and "[satisfies] the child's deep need for justice to prevail" (141,144).

In some cases though, violence is not a result of someone's having misbehaved or gone against the rules. In *Matilda*, for instance, there is a scene where the horrible headmistress Miss Trunchbull picks up a girl by her pigtails and throws her across the schoolyard. Young Amanda's only mistake was that she was wearing her hair in pigtails, much to the dislike of her headmistress (106-110). While this may seem like a very violent scene, Dahl describes it in such a way that it is rather funny to read. Earlier on Miss Trunchbull has been portrayed as the enemy; all the students are in a war against her and they all have to "try to support each other" (103). Whereas right after having being thrown across

the yard Amanda “landed on the grass and bounced three times” before finally getting “on her feet again and tottering back towards the playground” (110). Following this seemingly severe and physically aggressive distribution of punishment, the readers are thus assured of Amanda’s safety and everything is restored to its normal state.

When asked by Mark West in an interview published in 1997 about his use of violence in his stories, Dahl replied: “I do include some violence in my books, but I always undercut it with humor. It’s never straight violence, and it’s never meant to horrify. I include it because it makes children laugh” (113). Admittedly the humour evident in Dahl’s depictions of physical hostility and violent retributions could be viewed as Dahl advocating violence (not only as a means of getting even with one’s adversaries) but also as a means of providing entertainment for young individuals. While concerned adults are right to question the suitability of providing children with narrative representations of violence, particularly if the perceived cruelty and violence evident in the text is specifically meant to elicit pleasure and entertainment, one should not overlook that the expression and exploration of aggression within the safety of a narrative medium may prove to be beneficial for readers, as the imaginary cosmos created by Dahl perhaps allows children the opportunity to deal with violence within the confines of a fantasy world. Interestingly Dahl reminds us of Bettelheim by stating that “[c]hildren know that the violence in my stories is only make-believe” and just like in fairy tales they are aware that it is not real (113). “When violence is tied to fantasy and humor” as Dahl explains “children find it more amusing than threatening” (113). Whether Dahl had read Bettelheim’s work on fairy tales is not known but it seems that they both maintained similar views when it comes to the effect of stories on children.

## 5.2 Whizzopping and Other Bodily Functions

Dahl has also been criticized for his vulgarity and use of bodily functions in his stories. In his book *The BFG* he extensively refers to “whizzopping” which the giant describes as “a sign of happiness” whereas Sophie explains to him that it is a subject that “is not polite to talk about” among humans (59). In spite of this Dahl does talk about it and the giant himself concludes that that is “Redunculous! [...] If everyone is making whizzoppers, then why not talk about it?” (59). In *The Witches* there are a few references to “dogs’ droppings” since that is what children smell like according to the witches and that is why they have to be destroyed. The Grand High Witch thinks that “They are vurse than dogs’ drrroppings! [...] Dogs’ drrroppings is smelling like violets and prrrimroses compared with children!” while later on she gets “a whiff of dogs’ droppings” and begins her search for the child (71,103).

As Culley indicates, these instances for some adults are thought to be “unmentionable” in children’s literature while some may even be offended by such descriptions (65). This happens because of the “belief that the child should be shielded and not exposed to such content” in the sense that such vocabulary and subjects are only to be discussed between adults and children are often punished for using them even though they are a great part of their own reality (66). It is here that Culley highlights a contradiction stating that: “Adult literature is unrestrained but children’s literature, when it reflects much of children’s culture in its use of vulgarity, is found offensive by adults” (66). What should be stressed though is that children actually find the mentioning of such subjects and the use of relative vocabulary as quite funny and that is the main reason why Dahl employs them. According to a statement Dahl made in an interview published in 1997:

Children regard bodily functions as being both mysterious and funny, and that’s why they often joke about these things. Bodily functions also serve to humanize adults.

There is nothing that makes a child laugh more than an adult suddenly farting in a room. [...] I put it in because it makes me with my childish mind, laugh, and I know it makes children laugh. (Interview, 113-114)

Children, thus, have a “fascination with bodily functions” (Cullingford 164) and by presenting them with humour they become something that children can relate to.

Therefore humour plays a big role in all of Dahl’s works, not only in alleviating the violent scenes but also in connection to the vulgarity he has been accused of. In *The Twits* Dahl may not use the same kind of vocabulary or the subject of bodily functions but the humour he does use “has scatological connotations” with there still being “a façade of respectability” (West, “The Grotesque” 115). In fact as Maria Lypp identifies “[t]he grotesque exaggeration of the physis, the dramatization of the corporeal, is a recurrent theme in humourous children’s literature” (185). This is more evident when the Twits are both described as being disgusting with Mr Twit having a beard that “if you looked closely (not that you’d ever want to) you would see tiny little specks of dried-up scrambled eggs stuck to the hairs, and spinach and tomato ketchup [...] and all the other disgusting things Mr Twit liked to eat” (4). The couple enjoys playing awful tricks on each other and in one case Mrs Twit gives her husband some “squishy” worms to eat and pretends they are spaghetti (16-17). Both these descriptions may be quite repulsive but they do “[strike] a chord with many children” especially because of the fact that the people being described here are adults (West, “The Grotesque” 115). As West insightfully contends, through his use of humour “Dahl employs essentially the same technique that children learn to use when expressing feelings of hostility” (“The Grotesque” 116). So by employing the “same kinds of humour that children use themselves” and also “sympathizing with children in their conflict with adults” Dahl manages to provide pleasure to his children readers (West, “The Grotesque” 116). Many adults, on the other hand, do not share this point of view and it could be argued that this aversion to the physical body and

bodily functions is reflective of societal conventions which seek to maintain an image of the child as pure which perpetuates a kind of nostalgia for the way we would like our children to behave in a prim and proper and not crude manner.

### 5.3 Language

Before moving on to the significant issue of Dahl's general siding with children I want to focus on the language and techniques that Dahl makes use of. According to Anne Merrick Dahl's "[i]diom and vocabulary are limited and repetitive" while she also argues that "Dahl's use of language degenerates into carelessness and even coarseness" (27-28). She bases this on the language used in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* noting that "such hyperbolic words as fantastic, enormous, terrific, extremely, and colossal recur again and again throughout the book" without forgetting to mention the "cruel" chants of the Oompa-Loompas (27). However, I find her criticism to be rather harsh and tend to agree with Culley who points out that the "open delight in the sensual quality of words pervades Dahl's books for children" (67). Dahl's use of "onomatopoeia, the construction of onomatopoeic words, alliteration, puns and verbal humour" are the elements that distinguish and characterize him (Culley 67). Dahl's creativity with words is unlimited and results in the production of words such as "fizzwiggler", "snozzcumber", "humplecrimp" (*The BFG* 31,40) and in phrases which play with words like "ALL THE BEANS, CACAO BEANS, COFFEE BEANS, JELLY BEANS, AND HAS BEANS" or "square sweets that look round" (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* 112, 135).<sup>10</sup> It seems that "Dahl is aware that 'unusual words may create humour, impart information or indicate meaning in the context'" and he takes full advantage of it (Culley 68). It could even be argued that he expresses his own personal opinion through

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<sup>10</sup> The element of onomatopoeia is very clever and useful, particularly in children's books, which are meant to be read out loud. Dahl's language becomes even more delightful because it lends itself to performance which children especially love when they are being read to.

the words of Mrs Phelps the librarian in *Matilda* who says “don’t worry about the bits you can’t understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around like music” (13). Therefore meaning appears to be set aside and the enjoyment of reading the words put forward.

An additional characteristic that Dahl has is his unique use of narrative techniques. He does not abide by storytelling rules and often “refers to pictures in the text, asking the reader to step back and view the book from outside the story” (Culley 68). An example of this can be observed in *The Twits* where there is a drawing of Mr Twit’s beard showing all the bits and pieces stuck in it and the writer warns the readers “hold your noses, ladies and gentlemen” as if they are actually in close contact with Mr Twit’s beard (5) (Fig. 1).

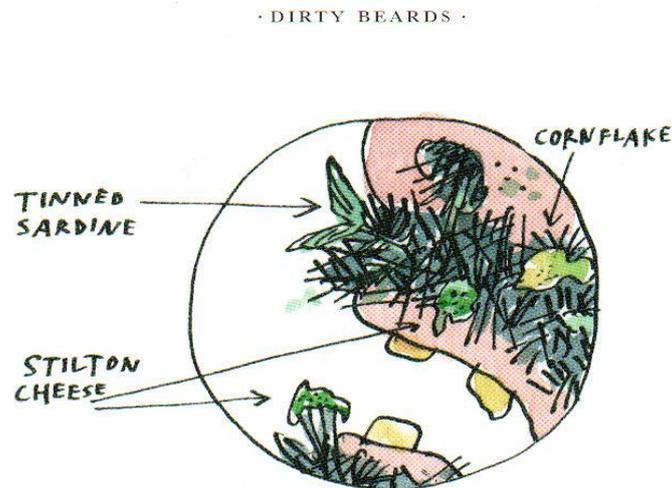


Fig. 1. The illustration of Mr Twit’s beard that readers are warned about (5).

However, what Culley argues is the “most daring” part of Dahl’s work is that “he suspends the action for descriptive purposes” therefore proving that “young children can tolerate description, if the subject of the description interests them enough” (68). In *Matilda* Dahl devotes three whole paragraphs to describing Miss Trunchbull (76-77) and some pages further along he describes Miss Honey’s cottage with so many details that it can easily be

imagined (183-184). By doing this children are very slowly introduced to the kind of literature they will be reading once they grow older.

#### 5.4 Siding with the Children

I previously mentioned that one of the reasons many adults seem to dislike Dahl is that he tends to take the side of the child and present adults as the enemy, a fact that also elevates his popularity with children. David Rees disagrees with “the way he uses adults” stating that “he manipulates them to fit into a child’s world” and they are most often mistreated (154). In a number of his books the child protagonist is up against an evil adult, James from *James and the Giant Peach* is trying to escape from his cruel aunts, Matilda has uncaring parents and has to deal with an extremely strict headmistress while the boy in *The Witches* has to face the evil witches and reveal them for who they really are. Thus “the unmitigated triumph of the child over the unpleasant adults is [...] part of the appeal” and creates “a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’” (Cullingford 157). Dieter Petzold elaborates on this by noting that by siding with the child Dahl “seems to undermine authority and to pander on children’s natural rebelliousness” (191) something that might lead critics to fear that by reading one of his books children would be encouraged to disobey their parents and any other authority figure. Petzold though provides an interesting viewpoint and interprets Dahl’s writing as trying to show children “how to avoid growing into the kind of adults we see around us daily” (191).

While Dahl does “[ally] himself with the child reader against the world of adults” and is then seen as “subversive” he does not get rid of adults altogether (Knowles and Malmkjaer 125). In *The Witches* there is still the grandmother there to stand by her grandson; in *Matilda* Miss Honey is the one who finally takes care of Matilda and in the cases of *Danny the Champion of the World* and *The BFG* the children take on the enemy with the help of adults.

Through his stories “Dahl captured much of what it is like to be a child in the unhappy scenarios” and as Culley believes these stories “are of use to children who are, or have been, caught up in similar situations” (67). Consequently we return to the ideas of psychoanalysis discussed in the previous chapter and the idea that through such stories children find an outlet for their own personal issues and a way to express themselves. As Dahl himself put it in one of his interviews with Mark West that was later published in 1997:

I generally write for children between the ages of seven and nine. At these ages, children are only semicivilized. They are in the process of becoming civilized, and the people who are doing the civilizing are the adults around them, specifically their parents and their teachers. Because of this, children are inclined, at least subconsciously, to regard grown-ups as the enemy. I see this as natural, and I often work it into my children’s books. That’s why the grown-ups in my books are sometimes silly or grotesque. I like to poke fun at grown-ups, especially the pretentious and the grouchy ones. (Interview 112-113)

## 5.5 Other Issues

In addition to the previous criticism aimed at Dahl he has also been accused of promoting sexism and racism, producing stereotypical characters and also projecting his own personal issues in his books. To begin with, Rees attacks *The Witches* accusing the book of being “sexist and gratuitously frightening” and elaborates on his opinion stating that “[i]f you wanted to give children nightmares and thoroughly confuse them about adult behaviour – the behaviour of women in particular – then *The Witches* could well do a first-class job” (147). Rees justifies his attack by quoting an extract from *The Witches*: “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” (3). However, Rees fails to mention the

sentence that immediately follows: “On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male” (3) while a statement that comes a few pages later is even more revealing stating that “witches are not actually women at all. They look like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals” (23-24). These extracts, I consider, dismiss any sexism from the part of Dahl, it just so happened that this specific story is about witches, if it were about ghouls then things could have been quite different. Rees fears for the readers who will not “see this for the nonsense it’s meant to be” and “may well be bewildered and frightened” although he is not totally against frightening children since “it would be ridiculously overprotective” (148). His disagreement is that the fear produced by *The Witches* is “a very untherapeutic kind [...] because what it says is irresponsible, is there for no good reason” (148). Culley points out that “[i]f one looks at other parts of Dahl’s work, one can clearly discern antisexist elements” and refers to *Matilda* as his basic example (64).<sup>11</sup> He argues that by including “bald sexist statements that the reader will be able to recognize from experience, Dahl successfully ridicules this kind of everyday sexism” (64).<sup>12</sup> I think Mark West is correct when he refers to the fact that “a literal reading”, just like Rees is doing here, “is one that most children do not share” (“The Grotesque” 116).

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has been charged with being racist considering Dahl’s use of the Oompa-Loompas. The description Dahl gives of these creatures is that they were

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<sup>11</sup> Another interesting example would be a poem Dahl once wrote titled “Where art thou, Mother Christmas?” in which he questions the status of Father Christmas: “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 swine / Pretends he’s done it all” (*The Roald Dahl Treasury* 422). It could be argued that here Dahl is attempting to give voice to a female who is usually completely ignored and forgotten about.

<sup>12</sup> Kirsten Guest in her article “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Resistance and Complicity in *Matilda*” discusses the role of women within *Matilda*, arguing that there are varying representations of women which problematise their roles and characterizations, making them rather fluid and difficult to pinpoint.

Imported direct from Loompaland [...] a terrible country [...] Nothing but thick jungles infested by the most dangerous beasts [...] the little Oompa-Loompas living in tree houses [...] living on green caterpillars [...] Poor little Oompa-Loompas! The one food they longed for more than any other was the cacao bean. But they couldn't get it. (93-94)

Feeling sorry for them, Willy Wonka, suggested that they go to live and work in his factory in return for all the cacao beans they wanted and they made an agreement (95-96).

They are wonderful workers. They all speak English now. They love dancing and music. They are always making up songs. [...] They still wear the same kind of clothes they wore in the jungle. [...] The men [...] only wear deerskins. The women wear leaves, and the children wear nothing at all. (96)

At first sight this description does highlight “the similarities between the Oompa-Loompas and common visualizations of pygmy tribes” (Culley 65). It is true that in the first edition of the book that came out in 1964 the Oompa-Loompas were described as being black leading Cameron to state that “the author’s revealed contempt for the blacks” is obvious through his description and use of the Oompa-Loompas (“A Question of Taste” 60). However, in the revised edition, which is the one that is still available today, Dahl took into account the criticism and gave the Oompa-Loompas “rosy-white” skin and “long [...] golden-brown hair” (101-102). In an interview that was brought out in 1997 Dahl emphasizes that he “saw them as charming creatures” and had “unwittingly” described them in such a way (Interview 110). Nevertheless his treatment of the Oompa-Loompas throughout the book can be viewed positively in the sense that Wonka makes sure his workers are comfortable, “I have to keep it warm inside the factory because of the workers! My workers are used to an *extremely* hot climate! They can’t stand the cold!” (83) and he even has a part of his factory for them to live

in: “A village of Oompa-Loompas, with tiny houses and streets and hundreds of Oompa-Loompa children” (154).

In addition, Rees accuses Dahl of another form of discrimination against both overweight and ugly people. Referring to the description of Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: “Great flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body, and his face was like a monstrous ball of dough with two small currant eyes peering out upon the world” (36), Rees insists that “[w]e are being asked to dislike this child because he is fat, and therefore sanction a prejudice that exists in every school playground” (145). Whereas he also finds fault in *The Twits* because of Dahl’s portrayal of the couple (147). When the narrator in *The Twits* claims that “[i]f a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on the face. And when that person has ugly thoughts every day, every week, every year, the face gets uglier and uglier until it gets so ugly you can hardly bear to look at it. A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly” (7-8), Rees warns that children readers may “take such statements seriously” leading to the belief “that all physically attractive people are virtuous” (147). Once again, though Rees ignores the following sentence which states: “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 sunbeam and you will always look lovely” (8). In disagreement with Rees, Culley emphasizes that “in the majority of the cases Dahl is preaching to the initiated. Most children, through experience, realize that a variety of personalities can be found within a variety of external appearances” (62). In other words, children are capable of distinguishing between the reality of what they read and the reality they actually live in (Culley 62). Perspectives like Rees’ seem to underestimate children’s ability to understand humorous statements and are dismissing Dahl’s claims “that children are different from adults. [...] They have a coarser sense of humour. [...] So often, [...]

adults judge a children's book by their own standards rather than by the child's standards"

(Interview by Mark West 112).

In some of his stories it is thought that Dahl tries to project his own personal dislikes into what he writes, thus trying to convey them to the children readers (Rees 144). This can be observed in books such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda* where Dahl seems extremely critical of the nasty children's habits and ends up punishing them while he is also negative towards Matilda's parents. However, it seems to me that Dahl's stories could be described as a form of modern fairytales that are in one way or another attempting to provide some kind of moral lesson at the close of the narrative. Despite Dahl insisting that he is "not trying to indoctrinate" children through his writings he is aware of the power he has as is evident in the following statement where he claims that "[c]hildren are vulnerable because they don't know they are being propagandized" (qtd in Culley 69).

#### 5.6 Dahl's Point of View

Following the criticism directed at his work, Dahl reiterated the notion that his work does not need to comply with arbitrary standards set by adults but rather tends to the preferences of his intended audience, which is to say young readers. Questioned about the purpose of his children's books, in West's collection *Trust Your Children: Voices Against Censorship in Children's Literature*, Dahl answered that his

only purpose for writing books for children is to encourage them to develop a love for books. [...] I'm trying to entertain them. If I can get a young person into the habit of reading and thinking that books are fun, then, with a bit of luck, that habit will continue through life. [...] Life becomes richer if you have the whole world of books around you, and I'll go to practically any length to bring this world to children.

(Interview 111-112)

As Dahl told West in an interview printed in 1990, “a good children’s book does much more than just entertain. It teaches children the use of words, the joy of playing with language” a task in which Dahl is a skilful expert (“Interview with Roald Dahl” 65). His only goal is to satisfy children and he expresses this clearly in his discussion with West published in 1997, by stating that “[i]f 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” (Interview 114).

Ultimately, as Hunt supports, all of Dahl’s books are moral tales (“Children’s Literature and Childhood” 66). Dahl “acts not only as the companion/narrator, but also as a guide to the surrounding adult world, highlighting particular weaknesses and exposing its hypocrisies” while simultaneously entertaining children readers (Culley 66). As Cullingford specifies, the “message that Dahl is conveying is a kind of encouragement for the reader to have fun. It is not meant to be taken earnestly” (163-164). The aim of his writing is to provide children with something intriguing to read; the focus is “in the act of reading, in not thinking about other things” (Cullingford 24). What makes Dahl stand out is that “the manic behaviour of [his] characters all connect with the experience of their readers, as with something recognized”, they do not come as a surprise to the readers but are actually rather familiar and like Cullingford underlines, “[i]t is fantasy made safe” (26). By reading Dahl’s stories children come up against situations they may have faced themselves or experience things that are only part of their dreams and fantasies. As for the possible effects Dahl’s subject choices might have on children, Tucker finely illustrates that it is “comparatively rare to find specific, antisocial behaviour that can be traced back directly to the influence of particular reading matter” and emphasizes that “there are always other social and personality factors also at work in the making of a juvenile delinquent” (*The Child and the Book* 203).

## 6. Conclusion

Having attempted to cover as much ground as possible concerning the notion of childhood and children's literature, it cannot be denied that the field in question is so vast and complex that it would be impossible to explore every facet of interest and all potential areas of importance. However, there are a few conclusions we can come to.

First of all, the way we view children's literature is very closely connected to our view of children. This is obvious when one observes the development of children's literature which initially began as an entirely educational artefact and was easily identified by its didactic nature to its subsequent role as a purveyor of entertainment for young individuals. Today there is a wide variety of literature, educational and entertaining, available aimed at children readers. Nevertheless even today our view of children has not changed a great deal compared to a few centuries ago. Jenks describes it perfectly when he maintains that "contemporary childhood remains an essentially protectionist experience" (122). The child is viewed as an ignorant, defenceless being that is in dire need of protection from external dangers, whether these dangers are bodily or psychologically manifested in the narrative. Thus, in adherence to this model of assumed innocence and complete defencelessness, young readers have to be shielded from knowledge or experiences that are considered to be inappropriate for their age.

Therefore, Roald Dahl and perhaps by extension, literature on the whole, can be seen to undermine the values which some insist form the cornerstone of childhood innocence and morality. Indeed, it could be argued that for some Dahl is a kind of enemy against propriety and decorum, and that his work dissuades children from adhering to socially accepted codes of morality, leaving them more likely to engage in actions of misbehaviour and vulnerable to

psychological damage. By giving children access to all sorts of knowledge, experiences and fantasies through his books, Dahl is thought of by some as a manipulator of children, teaching them the “wrong” lessons and encouraging them to disobey and disregard adults. His use of violence and naughty words is often what generates many complaints while his habitual portrayal of adults as the evil characters provokes the most criticism.

By looking at the issue through a psychoanalytical perspective though, it becomes clear that children are not so easily duped by their reading material. In some cases literature provides safe outlets for children’s inner desires and allows them to understand and deal with the emotions they are experiencing. Children are able to recognize what is real and to distinguish between the fantasy that they are reading about and their own realities, and their reading something violent will not necessarily mean that they will feel the need to copy that behaviour. Richard Mills notes that “children, as all people, only absorb information that makes sense to them, information that they can understand and that fits in within their world view and experience” (14). In this sense even if children do come across something possibly “dangerous” in their reading they will most likely not be able to process it, let alone allow it affect them since their “ignorance acts as a protective barrier to unpalatable knowledge” (14).

It seems that by viewing children as these fragile beings adults are underestimating and ignoring their abilities. Victor Watson emphasizes the “inventive and joyous” experience children get from reading (45) while Hoffman also indicates that “child readers may circumvent the reality/fantasy dichotomy entirely by finding pleasure in aesthetics rather than in the act of imagination, or the act of learning” (246). Ann Fine is aware of the complex nature of children and states “I don’t underestimate children, especially those who read a lot. [...] They are more sophisticated and advanced in their thinking even though they may not be able to articulate these ideas. Just because they can’t reproduce ideas at an adult level is no reason to think they can’t take them on board” (qtd in Hunt “What the authors” 196-197).

It thus appears that there is quite a good reason that Roald Dahl is so well-loved by young readers. His ability to relate to children and to treat them with respect as readers by not talking down to them or underestimating their abilities is what distinguishes him from other authors of children's literature. While his stories may contain images, words and issues that some may consider inappropriate, his style of writing and his use of humour make him unique. Dahl himself mentioned, in an interview published in 1990, that he was extremely fearful of boring children in his books and although his great desire to entertain young readers could be misconstrued as offering children pure escapism from reality, it should be stressed that his foremost desire was to acquaint children with reading and show them "not to be frightened of books. Once they can get through a book and enjoy it, they realize that books are something they can cope with. [...] If my books can help children become readers, then I feel I have accomplished something important" ("Interview with Roald Dahl" 65-66).

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Roald Dahl. MATILDA. Illustrations by Quentin Blake.Â Mrs Phelps was concerned about the child's safety on the walk through the fairly busy village High Street and the crossing of the road, but she decided not to interfere. 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.