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Roald Dahl—"It's About Children and It's for Children"—But Is It Suitable?

Roald Dahl, who died in November 1990, was the best-selling children's author living in Britain. Born in 1916 in Wales of Norwegian parents, he was educated at Repton, and after a period abroad, he settled in England. He wrote almost twenty books for children, along with several others for adults. In early 1988 the U.S. paperback rights to his books were renewed with an advance of $1.3 million. As Brian Alderson, the children's book reviewer for *The London Times*, has observed, "The craze for Dahl has overtaken the craze for Blyton." The committee headed by Professor Brian Cox named him to the list of 227 acceptable authors for five- to eleven-year-olds in 1988. Yet, despite this success, Dahl has been heavily criticised for his books' vulgarity, fascism, violence, sexism, racism, occult overtones, promotion of criminal behavior, and literary technique. While Alisdair Campbell is quick to point out the inevitable "prejudice against best-seller status," there is also, certainly, a rational basis to the attacks, a basis from which springs "a fear that children will get stuck in the rut of reading only Dahl." In this article I shall endeavor to explain some of the fascination of Dahl's work, and I hope, in so doing, to shed some light on its nature, harmful or otherwise.

Alisdair Campbell, "Children's Writers"; Charles Sarland, "*The Secret Seven* vs. *The Twits*"

According to Eleanor Cameron, a children's author, one-time librarian, and lecturer on children's literature, Dahl's most famous work, *Charles and the Chocolate Factory*, contains "all those Clockwork-Orange qualities which are actually destroying the society children are growing up in." She accuses the book of fostering sadism in children. Anne Merrick says of the "crudely delineated" characters

Eleanor Cameron, "A Question of Taste"

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Ann Merrick, "*The Nightwatchmen* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as Books to Be Read to Children"; Catherine Itza, "Bewitching the Boys"

that "our worst instincts are appealed to, to reject them" and Catherine Itza, with special reference to *The Witches*, asserts that "womanhatred is at the core of Dahl's writing."

Certainly Dahl did dwell on the particularly nasty traits of some of his characters: ". . . and right from the beginning they started beating poor James for almost no reason at all"; "We can't go on for ever watching these two disgusting people doing disgusting things to each other."

Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

Roald Dahl, *The Twits*

Dahl's treatment of these characters nearly always follows the same pattern. First, the characters are introduced along with vivid physical descriptions. They proceed to have a successful reign of terror when their behavior reaps rewards. Finally, they come to a sticky end. These characters are not given redeeming features; they are thoroughly dislikable with a generous helping of unpleasant characteristics, of which one or two are normally especially prominent. Dahl most commonly uses selfishness, gluttony, greed for power and wealth, violent anger, and cruelty, though his characters are also often covetous, slothful, and cheating. Indeed these descriptions, as well as being obvious from the characters' actions, are explicity given in the text: "they [Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker] were selfish and lazy and cruel" (JGP); "She was a selfish grumpy old woman."

Roald Dahl, *George's Marvellous Medicine*

Is there anything dangerous in Dahl's treatment of these dislikable characters? Sarland believes there is. Dahl he sees as holding elements of society up to ridicule and then annihilating them. He worries that the children will unconsciously pick up this underlying fascist message. However, while the reader's main sympathies and attention may lie with the hero or heroine in Dahl book, the punishment of the villains is plainly evident. This "fascist theme" of Dahl's is never subtly "underlying" the main structure of the book. The cause of the violent end is never lost sight of by the reader. The child is fully aware of what he or she perceives as the characteristic(s) which deserved punishment. So does this mean that the element Sarland isolates is merely the morality play dimension of Dahl's work? If this were so, the case against Dahl would lose most of its power. What complicates the issue is not the villains' rottenness, their temporary success, or even the violence of their demise, but Dahl's handling of their physical descriptions:

> What a lot of hairy-faced men there are around nowadays . . . impossible to tell what he really looks like. . . . Perhaps . . . he'd rather you didn't know. . . . Mr Twit was one of these very hairy-faced men. . . . And how often did Mr Twit wash this bristly nail-brushy face of his? . . . NEVER . . . always hundreds of bits of old breakfasts and lunches and suppers sticking to the hairs around his face . . . a piece of maggoty

> green cheese . . . a foul and smelly old man . . . also an extremely horrid old man. (TT)

Dahl idly muses on the frequency of men with facial hair. Why do they have facial hair? Is it a cover-up? Then he introduces one almost as an example, as though this example will answer our musings. He elaborates on Mr. Twit, on his eating habits, the state of his beard, and ends with a statement of personality. There is no explicit connection. We are never told he is horrid because he is hairy. It is, however, heavily implied by the structure of the narrative. Compare this more abstract passage:

> I wonder what green boxes contain. . . . Think of all the green boxes in the world . . . they must contain something . . . something not too big and yet not too small so as not to waste space. . . . I wonder if they could contain black spheres. . . . I found a box yesterday. . . . When I examined it, it was green . . . a green box! . . . and eventually, when I opened it up, . . . inside, a black sphere.

It uses the same approach: categorization, speculation, postulation, corroboration, implication. A firm categorization is made, speculation is started about a quality of this category, a theory about this quality is postulated, this theory is found to hold for a sample of *one*, and the whole category is implicated in the quality. One is tempted to believe that all green boxes contain black spheres, just as Dahl tempts us to believe that all hairy men are horrid and foul, and capable of all the things Mr. Twit is capable of later in the book. By using vivid descriptions of villains and melding their physical characteristics with their personalities, Dahl forges an association of one with the other. Sometimes the two are already casually, if not causally, linked in most minds, child and adult, as in Augustus Gloop, who is both fat and greedy. Ugliness and hairiness, however, have no causal link with a horrid personality. Is there a genuine possibility, as I have suggested, that the two, while not synonymous, may be seen by the reader, after the book is finished, as partners? And if so, was Roald Dahl doing children a disservice?

In a questionnaire given to children between the ages of six and eleven, I asked whether any character in their favorite Roald Dahl book had come to a sticky end, and if so, whether she or she had deserved it. While most gave the expected answers concerning greed, selfishness, cruelty, and disobedience, one boy wrote: "Yes. They were ugly."

When I was talking to him about his answer, he agreed that the characters were ugly *and* horrible, and that, had they been ugly but kind-hearted, they would not have deserved the treatment they did in fact receive. However, his initial gut reaction must give some cause for

concern. The child, a young ten, was discussing *The Twits*, his favorite book by Roald Dahl. It is in this book that Dahl himself shows a little concern about the close association of physical and personal qualities. Taking the reader aside, he explains that "if a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on the face" but "you can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts . . . you will always look lovely". Here Dahl directly addresses the anxiety of association. He touches on this again in *Danny the Champion of the World* when Danny warns the reader to "watch out . . . when someone smiles at you with his mouth but the eyes stay the same. It's sure to be bogus." But in the majority of 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. This does not mean that while reading the book, ugly does not mean evil, since it generally does with Dahl. But the children have, I would argue, a familiarity with the conventions of folklore that allows them to operate two distinct schemes of reference, one within the book and one without. What possibly worries the more anxious teacher and parent are Dahl's additions to the conventional folklore scheme of reference. Dahl dislikes facial and nasal hair as we have established with *The Twits*. Captain Lancaster in *Danny* has "a little clipped moustache . . . a fiery temper [and] carrotty-coloured hairs . . . sprouting out of his nostrils and earholes. Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda* was a hammer-thrower and retains a muscular physique. Every villain is furnished with a striking physical attribute whether it be derived from traditional folklore or borrowed from a figure in Dahl's past.

Roald Dahl, *Danny the Champion of the World*

Roald Dahl, *Matilda*

To appreciate better Dahl's place in children's literature it is necessary to perceive the strength of his work's links with folklore. The two share many qualities. Both normally involve exaggerated characters with obvious good-and-evil alignment, a narrator as a sort of companion figure, the prospect of the unexpected and the fantastic happening, violence, repeated themes, vivid images, and an ending where the heroine or hero triumphs over the villain. While all of these may well be implicated in the popularity of Dahl's work, the responses to one of my questions ("What did you like best about your favorite Roald Dahl book?") suggest that it is the vivid images which are the most compelling parts of the books for their readers: "When grandma shrank"; "When the bloodbottler took a bite of the snozzcumber and Sophie went flying and got covered in snozzcumber spit"; "When Mr Twit ate some worms"; "The bit where the fat boy got stuck in a chocolate tube"; "When the little girl started to blow up like a ball and she turned purple"; "Where she put a tadpole in a jug for the headmistress."

It is clear to the reader of several books by Dahl for children that much of his style is rooted in the highly conventional tradition of folklore. Dahl himself enlarged little on his books: "I am a fantasist." Quentin Blake, however, having collaborated closely with Dahl for many years, sees the books as "fairy stories, at bottom. People who criticize him don't see that even the real people are simply ogres and witches." In Blake's description lies the essence of Dahl's defense.

Quoted in Hill, "Dahl: Pied Piper with a magic pen"

In 1968 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was greeted by a shot across the bows from *Junior Bookshelf*: "The laws of Wonderland are inflexible. The writer of fantasy . . . breaks them at his peril." What could be more ironic? The child who comes to Dahl having embraced folklore and fairy tales, or even the child who has simply felt the need for them, can recognise the books' supposed dangers easily. The violence is familiar. It is violence that is superficially horrific, yet unreal. Eleanor Cameron disagrees. She argues that "being literarily unsophisticated children can react only to . . . the level of pure story." Cameron complains of the lack of match of the books with the perceptiveness of the children, while Anne Merrick and others complain of his crudely delineated characters and general lack of technique! Dahl's characters are generally quite simple. As is true of the body of folklore, the characters lie fairly flat on the page, with exaggerated personal qualities but relatively little roundness to them. The exceptions occur when Dahl gives us access to the thoughts of the principal characters, for example, Danny, who in fact narrates his own story much as does Huckleberry Finn.

Eleanor Cameron, "McLuhan, Youth and Literature"

Dahl outlines folklore characters and knows when the addition of more detail is unnecessary. Indeed it is only by keeping the characters simple that children can follow the intricate workings not only of the often "Keystone Cops" pace, but also of the delicate moral implications Dahl frequently introduces. For instance, Joy Moss's class enjoyed a lengthy discussion of the "moral questions generated" by *Fantastic Mr Fox*. Here the children fully appreciated the moral ambiguity: "So far . . . characters are either good or bad. But Mr Fox is both! He is a good character that steals, and that's bad." They perceive the mitigating circumstances of the animals' starvation and the farmers' meanness. By "purifying" the characters into archetypes, Dahl enables the child to focus more clearly on the dilemmas involved.

Joy F. Moss, "Paperbacks in the Classroom"

Children are given by Dahl the "daydreams which they know . . . to be an essential part of their growth." Dahl's medium is, according to Campbell, simply a "moral fairytale in modern idiom, belonging to a tradition in which violence and ruthless punishments are taken for granted and where deliberate stereotyping is a valid technique." As

D. Holbrook, *English for Maturity*; Campbell, "Children's writers"

for Catherine Itza's accusation of sexism, she must realize that Dahl is simply drawing from his heritage full of conventionalized characters. Witches *are* women in folklore. She chooses to quote what in isolation might be construed as damning: "There is no such thing as a male witch"; "Real witches . . . look very much like ordinary women." She neglects sections that show this is merely Dahl's faithfulness to folklore conventions: "On the other hand, a ghoul is always a man. So indeed is a barghest" (TW). "There never was a woman giant! . . . Giants is always men!"

If one looks at other parts of Dahl's work, one can clearly discern antisexist elements. In *Matilda* Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood have two children, Matilda and Mike. Mr. Wormwood, an obnoxious, dishonest car dealer, tells Matilda that she's "too stupid" to understand his dodges but that he doesn't mind "telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day" (M). Later he tells her "No-one in the world could give the right answer just like that, especially a girl!" (M). By giving the villain bald sexist statements that the reader will be able to recognize from experience, Dahl successfully ridicules this kind of everyday sexism. Feminists committed to the attack of Dahl on this front might counter that the heroes of his books are mostly male. Admittedly, most of Dahl's main heroes are male (though *The Magic Finger, The BFG*, and *Matilda* are obvious exceptions), but then Dahl was himself a male. Much of his work addresses his own experience, and consequently this bias toward heroes should not be so surprising.

I hope that by showing how squarely Dahl lies within the field of folklore, I have absolved him of his supposed crimes of violence and sexism. It is difficult however to do the same for his alleged racism. This "weakness," while a major flaw in one of his most popular books, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, only occurs in this book and its sequel, both written early (1964 and 1973). The problem is thus restricted to Dahl's treatment of the Oompa-Loompas. Dahl himself sees no problem, as reported by Wintle and Fisher: "No complaints at all from children or teachers, only from . . . slightly kinky groups." First, let us review the little we are told of these people:

Justin Wintle and Emma Fisher, *The Pied Pipers*

> Imported directly from Loompaland. . . . Nothing but thick jungles infested by the most dangerous beasts . . . little Oompa-Loompas living in tree houses . . . living on green caterpillars . . . tasted revolting. . . . Poor little Oompa-Loompas! . . . they longed for . . . the cacao bean. . . . An Oompa-Loompa was lucky if he found three or four . . . a year. . . . You had only to mention the word "cacao" to an Oompa-Loompa and he would start dribbling at the mouth.

Willy Wonka suggested, "in Oompa-Loompish," that they come and work, and live, in his factory, where they could have all the cacao

beans they wished—he'd even pay their wages in cacao beans. The leader agrees and the whole "tribe" is smuggled over in packing cases.

> They are wonderful workers. . . . They all speak English now. They love dancing and music. . . . They like jokes. They still wear the same kind of clothes they wore in the jungle. . . . The men wear only deerskins. The women wear leaves, and the children wear nothing at all.

So far the similarities between the Oompa-Loompas and common visualizations of pygmy tribes are obvious. Dahl continues, however, with a physical description which is in many ways deliberately at odds with the accepted image of a pygmy: ". . . beautiful white teeth. His skin was rosy-white, his long hair was golden-brown and the top of his head came just above the height of Mr Wonka's knee. . . . hopping and dancing about and beating wildly upon a number of very small drums" (CCF). The Oompa-Loompas certainly are the work force of the factory, even rowing the fantastic pink boat which is Mr. Wonka's private yacht.

Cameron, "A Question of Taste"

Dahl himself worked in Africa before World War II, most notably in Tanzania. His treatment of the Oompa-Loompas reads not as "the author's revealed contempt for blacks," but as a personal insight into imperialism and traditional relations between the industrialized and Third World countries. Such an insight has relevance in the appropriate area, perhaps even with older children working on an allied topic, but surely not as a minor aspect of a children's storybook. Doubly unfortunate is the Oompa-Loompas' success with the readers, which only strengthens the critics' attack. Indeed, in answering my questions, several children, when asked what they liked most about their favorite Roald Dahl book, named the Oompa-Loompas: "And the thing best of all was the bubble gum that did not go out of flavour for a whole week and the little green people making all of the recipes"; "But best of all I liked the Oompa-Loompas." Dahl's handling of the Oompa-Loompas, especially in such sensitive times, is bound to provoke some outcry but, more importantly, is liable to be misinterpreted by the children.

Roald Dahl, *Dirty Beasts*

Before considering criticism of Dahl's technique, the other area of content that is often attacked, vulgarity, must be addressed. There is no doubt that he does mention what some think unmentionable. With his live of the sensual and the taboo, all of his books contain descriptions many adults find offensive: "I ran for home. I shouted, 'Mum!/ Behold the prickles in my bum!'"; "'Dogs' droppings!" She yelled. "Just then I got a whiff of dogs' droppings!'" (TW); "'Everyone is whizzpopping. . . . But where I come from, it is not polite to talk about it'" (BFG) "'Redunculous! . . . If everyone is making

whizzpoppers, then why not talk about it?'" (BFG) "'There's almost nothing worse to see/ Than some repulsive little bum/ Who's always chewing chewing-gum'" (CCF).

Adult reservations about these passages stem not, presumably, from an unfamiliarity on their part, but from a belief that the child should be shielded and not exposed to such content. It is part of a child's culture just as it is part of what was, or still is, the adult's culture. The child learns when it is acceptable to talk about such things, and the arrangement that normally arises is that children talk to each other and happily use "vulgar" words; adults talk among themselves and may use them, too, but in mixed company, the words are not generally permitted, and an adult can chastise a child for not respecting these rules. The peculiar arbitrariness occurs when the two *written* cultures are examined. 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*.

M. R. Marshall, *An Introduction to the World of Children's Books*

Marshall says of good writers that they "use language not only to convey literal meaning but also to stimulate a wealth of potential child perception, response and insight." Time after time writers on children's literature tell us that good books should answer the questions "What will adult life be like?", that "we read to become aware of life and the world," and that children's literature "should reveal the truths of the human condition." Dahl, as a writer of folklore, does all these things. His approach to vulgarity is a consequence of his throwing his lot in with the reader, not the critic. He acts not only as the companion/narrator, but also as a guide to the surrounding adult world, highlighting particular weaknesses and exposing its hypocrisies.

Adult hypocrisy is a hobbyhorse of Dahl's. He leaves us in no doubt that adult power is often merely an abused function of age, accident, and aggression. Sometimes the hypocrisy is on a small, domestic scale immediately relevant to the children. In *Matilda*, the Wormwood family always has supper on trays in front of the television, watching American soap operas. Matilda asks one evening if she might read in her room. Mr. Wormwood snaps that "Supper is a family gathering and no-one leaves the table till it's over!" He later rips up one of her library books on the pretext that "if it's by an American it's certain to be filth" (M). Mrs. Wormwood lectures the children that picking one's nose is disgusting but, as Matilda points out, "grown-ups do it too, mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen". In his efforts to show his readers that not only are adults human in every fallible sense of the word, but they are also commonly hypocritical, Dahl has occasionally run very close to the wind.

Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*

Roald Dahl, *Boy*

Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator is banned in a number of American public libraries because of the way it lampoons the president of the United States of America, and Dahl's open disgust at the future Archbishop of Canterbury showing "neither forgiveness nor Mercy" when dealing out corporal punishment at Repton must also have caused concern.

Adults are simply grown-up children. Mostly they are wiser, but often they retain their bad qualities, and it is with children, especially as parents and guardians, that "poor" adults often indulge these bad qualities with no other justification than age, and the power and strength that brings: "'Grown-up human beans is not famous for their kindness'" (BFG).

The overthrow of such arbitrary authority is a common basis for Dahl's plots. It most often takes the form of the underdogs standing up for themselves and correcting a dictatorial situation which would otherwise be perpetuated. Matilda opposes Miss Trunchbull, George opposes his grandmother, Mugglewump and the Roly-Poly Bird oppose the Twits, Danny and his father oppose Mr. Hazell, Sophie and the BFG oppose the giants. There is much of Dahl's own life in his writings. As Hazel Rochman observes, *Boy* often shows "the helpless and innocent trying to withstand a cruel authority." Dahl said of the incidents that he has "never been able to get them out of [his] mind." It is inevitable that he should use his writing to resolve the more unsatisfactory elements and to reexperience the happier ones. With the vividness of his recall, Dahl captured much of what it is like to be a child in the unhappy scenarios. His books were not only cathartic to him but are of use to children who are, or have been, caught up in similar situations. "Whatever a child reads, voluntarily, can be helpful to him." Books choosen by the child may "satisfy a subconscious need." One might well expect Dahl to be used by bibliotherapists exploiting his therapeutic qualities with children.

Hazel Rochman, "Young Adult Books"

Marshall, *Introduction*

Merrick, *"The Nightwatchman"*

Dahl's "idiom and vocabulary are limited and repetitive," and his "humour is fairly crude" in Anne Merrick's view. Fadiman talks of "the degradation of our wonderful language" as the most important factor working against "the writing and reading of children's good literature today." Does Dahl let his readers down? In *Matilda* Mrs. Phelps the librarian tells Matilda not to "worry about the bits you can't understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash around you, like music" (M). This open delight in the sensual quality of words prevades Dahl's books for children. He delights in onomatopoeia, the construction of onomatopoeic words, alliteration, puns, and verbal humor: "grizzly old grunion of a Grandma" (GMM) "'She will be dreaming of every single little thingalingaling . . .'" "'Dreams . . . is made of

zozimus'" (BFG) "'. . . spiders is the most tremendous natterboxes.'"(BFG) "'You are slimy and soggy and squishous!'" (CGGE) "STOREROOM NUMBER 77—ALL THE BEANS, CACAO BEANS, COFFEE BEANS, JELLY BEANS, AND HAS BEANS" (CCF). As one child put it, "I would read lots more of his books because the words make me interested in the story". An extreme example of the children's fascination with Dahl's use of language is furnished by the high proportion of children that spelled words like *frobscottle, whizzpopping*, and *snozzcumber* correctly in their answers to my questions without reference to a copy of *The BFG*.

Marshall, *Introduction*

Dahl is aware that "unusual words may create humour, impart information or indicate meaning in the context." A child need not know the meaning of an unfamiliar word (assuming there is one) to understand its role. One need only look to "Jabberwocky" to trace Dahl's ancestry here: "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves/ Did gyre and gimble in the wabe. . . ." "'Well, "slithy" means "lithe and slimy." "Lithe" is the same as "active." You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word'" (CARR). Compare *natterboxes* (a portmanteau word of *natterers* and *chatterboxes*), *kidsnatched* (*kidnapped/snatched*), and *chiddlers* (*children/tiddlers*) (BFG). One does not have to search Dahl's thoroughly to see how confidently he uses "repetition of words which give a story rhythm and a narrative quality" (Marshall).

The assumption is often made that children require conventional techniques of presentation and narrative. Dahl ignores this. He refers to pictures in the text, asking the reader to step back and view the book from outside the story. But perhaps most daringly among his narratorial techniques, he suspends the action for descriptive purposes. He demonstrates that young children can tolerate description, if the subject of the description interests them enough. By the time a child has read several books by Dahl, he or she has been introduced to most writing devices found in adult books.

Dahl was clear in his own mind about what it is that makes a good writer. His spokesperson in *Matilda*, Mrs. Phelps the librarian, explains that "a fine writer will always make you feel," as Matilda puts it, "right there on the spot watching it all happen" (M). He points out the one failing of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: "There are no funny bits" and "Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh" (M). In an interview with Justin Wintle, Dahl suggested that "by the time children are nearing their teens, they ought to be reading proper adult books, instead of a lot of rubbishy things." Implicit is a condemnation of the "teenage novel," made concrete by Mrs. Phelps's "for some reason" rejecting her first impulse to start Matilda

Wintle and Fisher, *The Pied Pipers*

off with "a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolgirls" (M). There must be, however, a place for literature addressing "contemporary themes": racism, child abuse, handicap, sexism, and so on. Dahl's books largely ignore these areas. Certainly he was not afraid to voice opinions and challenge commonly held priorities: "'Looks is more important than books'" (M), "'So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,/ Go throw your TV set away'" (CCF), "Mrs Wormwood was hooked on bingo" (M). It would have been a great contribution if Dahl, using his own highly original approach, had included more plots that touched on these areas in his books. Sometimes more damage is done by second-rate authors trying to "tell it as it is" to children, than by a complete lack of such books.

There is at present an increasing polarization between those who wish to celebrate the shortening period of childhood and those who wish to acclimatize their children to adult life. Dahl was one of the few authors for young children who could in any way bridge this widening gap. He certainly told them more of adult life than "the drug of Johns or Blyton." In 1989, in a letter to *The London Times* concerning the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, Dahl commented that "In a civilised world we all have a moral obligation to apply a modicum of censorship to our own work in order to reinforce this principle of free-speech." He was more aware of the responsibility he carried as a children's author than his critics realize: "I do have power. . . . Children are vulnerable because they don't know they are being propogandised" (quoted in Hill).

Though Dahl would doubtless still think "it's pointless and unrewarding to try to analyse someone's work like this," I feel he would be pleased with one ten year old's analysis of his work: "It's about children and it's for children."

Postscript: Dahl as Modern Mythology

Many people would, on reading the following, consider it merely a contrived exercise in self-delusion. Hence, to avoid tainting one with the other, I have separated it from the rest of the article, which stands on its own. Yet this short discussion has, I believe, considerable bearing on children's literature generally, and on Dahl's work especially, and demands inclusion somewhere.

Sarland, *"The Secret Seven* vs. *The Twits"*

Sarland notes that Dahl's work contains "elements of their own contradiction." He maintains that these are primarily included because Dahl wishes "the largest possible readership" for his books. Marshall notes that the "evidence suggests that most legends and folk and fairy tales are founded on one or more of the following themes" and then

proceeds to list a selection of binary opposites such as rich and poor. Certainly, contradictions and opposing elements recur constantly throughout Dahl's books for children. This is, I feel, the final key to his books' extreme popularity.

I have already commented on Dahl's technique and its obvious sympathy with folklore. Now I want to push this aspect one step further.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was born in 1908 and, after studying law, philosophy, and sociology, became interested in anthropology. His approach is essentially in the tradition of Sir James George Frazer, endeavoring to establish cross-cultural truths which hold good for the human mind and forms of thought, seldom concerning himself with any one society's particular organization. It is his approach to myth that is relevant to an examination of Dahl's writing. The following is an attempt to condense Lévi-Strauss on myth into an absurdly short space.

Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*

Alan Jenkins, *The Social Theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss*

First, we must appreciate that for Lévi-Strauss, any recollection of the past is an element of the thinker's present and should not be viewed simply as history. Myth, therefore, can be thought of as containing messages transmitted down the generations to the society's novices, a sort of indoctrination. The messages themselves, address the problem of "unconscious wishes which are somehow inconsistent with conscious experience"; they attempt to resolve contradictions inherent in society, paradoxes that can be explained in no other way. How do they do this? Myths can be broken down into what Lévi-Strauss calls "mythemes," "bundles of relations between mythic elements." If correctly arranged, these indicate, through their semantic ordering, a meaning which addresses a perceived contradiction in the society (Lévi-Strauss was an avowed Marxist and one can see the Hegelian thesis–antithesis–synthesis in his thinking). A contradiction, I, is treated by consideration of the solution to a similar contradiction, II. Each contradiction will occur within the myth as one of Lévi-Strauss's mythemes, for example, *a* and *b* (mytheme I) and *c* and *d* (mytheme II). By uncovering the analogy between mytheme I and mytheme II, a mediation allows the contradiction to be coped with, at least conceptually: $a : b :: c : d$, that is, *a* is to *b* as *c* is to *d*. Treatment of myths along the lines laid down by Lévi-Strauss involves the perception of pairs of categories that are in binary opposition, lying along axes implied by the text of the myth. The elegance of Lévi-Strauss's theory is that all versions of a myth will address the same perceived contradiction, irrespective of their culture.

At this point, there should ideally follow an example of the master's analysis of myth, perhaps most famously the legend of Asdiwal, but this is a postscript and space is limited. But what relevance has all this to Dahl? Dahl's books constantly use binary opposition and re-

peated themes, much as Lévi-Strauss suggests myths do. Certainly Dahl's popularity lies in his books as stories, but I can't help wondering whether his books also succeed on a subtle, unconscious level as well, as modern myths resolving contradictions that are socially felt, albeit subconsciously. In this context, I conclude a very short analysis of *Matilda.*

What is *Matilda* about? *Matilda* is the story of a small girl who is extremely advanced for her age. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, are coarse, uninterested parents, oblivious of her ability. They prefer to watch television, and what little parental encouragement they do show is directed at Mike, Matilda's brother, who is destined to follow Mr. Wormwood into his crooked secondhand car business. Matilda, meanwhile, begins secretly to visit the library while her mother plays bingo. Mrs. Phelps, the kindly librarian, oversees Matilda's reading, once Matilda has read all of the books in the children's section. Eventually Matilda escapes to school, where she amazes her young teacher, Miss Honey, not only with her reading but also with her mathematical ability. Miss Honey approaches the headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, a violent and frightening battle axe, hoping to have Matilda moved up to the top class. Miss Trunchbull refuses, and Miss Honey is forced to help Matilda as best she can. The two become good friends. The schoolchildren play a series of tricks on Miss Trunchbull, culminating in Matilda's "willing" a jug of water containing a newt to tip over the headmistress. Miss Honey invites Matilda to tea to discuss Matilda's new power. Matilda discovers that Miss Trunchbull is in fact Miss Honey's aunt and guardian, who now enjoys the house and possessions of Miss Honey's dead parents and has the great majority of Miss Honey's income diverted to her own account. Miss Honey, consequently, is living in poverty. Matilda refines her power and, in the next weekly lesson with Miss Trunchbull, "writes" on the blackboard by levitating a piece of chalk. She scribbles a threatening message from Miss Honey's dead father, and Miss Trunchbull runs off, never to be seen again. Miss Honey regains the family house and possessions. Meanwhile Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood are hurriedly preparing to flee the country to avoid legal procedures. Matilda is distraught and runs to Miss Honey, who volunteers to become Matilda's guardian. The Wormwoods are predictably indifferent, and Matilda goes to live happily ever after with Miss Honey.

First, we must isolate the "mythemes" and their analogous relationships:

Matilda	:	Wormwoods	::	child	:	adult	::
young	:	old	::	powerless	:	powerful	::
ward	:	guardian	::	Miss Honey	:	Miss Trunchbull	

These are the mythemes I have isolated; this is not to say there are not others. If these are the binary oppositions in *Matilda*, what is the contradiction, the "unconscious wishes which are somehow inconsistent with conscious experience"? As in most of Dahl's children's books, the paradox inherent in society is the oppression of the powerless by an arbitrary authority, more specifically, the tyranny of Miss Trunchbull over Miss Honey and of the Wormwoods over Matilda. Each has its own mediation. In the case of Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull, mediation is effected by a transformation of Matilda into an ambiguous character in terms of the pivotal axis of age. As Miss Honey remarks at one point, "I suppose we might call you a grown-up child" (M). Matilda changes from child to adult, powerless to powerful, and young to old. As for the tyranny of the Wormwoods over Matilda, that, too, is mediated by a transformation, but this time of Miss Honey. She, too, changes from young to old and powerless to powerful, but in addition, she exchanges the role of ward for that of guardian.

The structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss suggests that *Matilda* can be seen to have a mythical dimension. One might argue that it was always obvious that *Matilda* concerned itself with age, the power of adulthood, and so on. I would simply say that if, as I believe, Dahl *was* writing modern mythology and Lévi-Strauss was correct, then parents, teachers, and educationalists should realize that Dahl's immense popularity with children, the "novices" of our society, stems not only from a conscious appreciation but also from some unconsciously derived satisfaction.

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Books by Roald Dahl

(Code letters used for citations in the text)

JGP *James and the Giant Peach.* Allen & Unwin, 1961.

CCF *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.* : Allen & Unwin, 1964.

MF *The Magic Finger.* : Allen & Unwin, 1966.

FMF *Fantastic Mr Fox.* : Allen & Unwin, 1970.

CGGE Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator. : Allen & Unwin, 1972.

DCW *Danny the Champion of the World.* : Cape, 1975.

TT The Twits. : Cape, 1980.

GMM *George's Marvellous Medicine.* : Cape, 1981.

BFG The BFG. : Cape, 1982.

TW *The Witches.* : Cape, 1983.

BTC *Boy: Tales of Childhood.* : Cape, 1984.

DB *Dirty Beasts.* : Cape, 1984.

M *Matilda.* : Cape, 1988.