

De-constructing Dahl

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This book is dedicated to my family

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron and his wife sent a box set of Roald Dahl books as a present to the newly-born Prince George.¹ The story picked up by the British press is significant considering the controversy that has always followed Dahl, or given, as critic Peter Hollindale puts it, his “dubious public status and ambivalent reception as a children’s writer” (2008: 271).

Before the arrival of the publishing phenomenon of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series at the turn of the century, the dominance of Dahl in the children’s book market was incontestable.² In 1999, the journal *Books for Keeps* sent out a questionnaire to its readers to find the very best children’s books of the century. Dahl made it as “the outstanding 20th century children’s writer” and as the first runner-up for “the most important 20th century novel” with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Stones 1999: 10-11). One year later, “over 40,000 adults and children voted Roald Dahl the country’s favourite author” (*Books for Keeps* 2000, in “Dahl Favourite”). More recently in 2009, a poll conducted by book charity *Booktrust* revealed that Harry Potter topped the list of favourite fictional characters among five and twelve-year-olds in the UK, but “Dahl was the author to collect the most mentions from children, with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*’s Charlie coming in 10th, Matilda 15th, Fantastic Mr Fox 16th and the BFG 20th” (Flood 2009). The film adaptations of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, *Matilda*, *James and the Giant Peach* and *Fantastic Mr Fox* have also contributed to increasing sales and to feeding into his popularity as a children’s writer in the UK and internationally.³

¹ See, for instance, Rowena Mason. 2013. “Prince George: what Cameron, Clegg and Miliband gave the Royal Baby.” *The Telegraph*, 1 August.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/prince-george/10216179/Prince-George-what-Cameron-Clegg-and-Miliband-gave-the-Royal-baby.html>

² For lists of the most borrowed children’s authors during 1997-2000 in which Dahl regularly appears among the most popular, see Sally Maynard and Cliff McKnight, 2002.

³ *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has been adapted for the cinema twice; first, as *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) directed by Mel Stuart and with Gene Wilder in the main title role. In 2005, Tim Burton directed the second screen version starring Johnny Depp. Anjelica Houston starred in *The Witches* (1990).

Dahl's fiction for adults seems to be equally successful, judging from the many editions of his collections of short stories, *Someone Like You* (1953) and *Kiss Kiss* (1959), and from their transfer to the small screen in Anglia Television's hit series *Tales of the Unexpected* in 1979.

However, the popularity of Dahl has run parallel with negative criticism. His children's books have received strong opposition from parents, librarians, teachers and reviewers. One of the first controversial issues appeared in 1971, with a charge of racism against *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Since then, accusations of tastelessness, misogyny, sexism, fascism, ageism, violence, vulgarity, sadism, occult overtones and promotion of criminal behaviour have followed. Objections to his work have even led to attempts to remove some of his titles from school libraries and supermarkets. In 1995, for instance, *George's Marvellous Medicine* was challenged by a group called Parents Involved for a Better Community established in Georgia, USA. The mother of a six-year-old complained that the book "details how a boy poisons his cranky grandmother and wins his parents' approval" (*American Libraries* 1995, in "Parents"). More recently, in August 2014, the supermarket chain Aldi removed *Revolting Rhymes* from its stores in Australia after some customers complained over the word "slut" featuring in Dahl's retelling of "Cinderella" (Safi 2014).

Remarkably, in spite of Dahl's commercial success and the divided opinions he generates, very little scholarly work has been produced.⁴ There are, in fact, only three full book-length studies: Alan Warren's *Roald Dahl: From the Gremlins to the Chocolate Factory* (1988), Mark I. West's *Roald Dahl* (1992) and the edited collection of essays *Roald Dahl* (2012) by Catherine Butler and Ann Alston. It is a surprising small output considering Dahl's still massive presence in the children's book industry. This lack of academic literature has been noted by Warren and Butler. In 1994, in the second revised edition of his book, Warren observed "the continuing indifference toward Dahl on the part of the critics, who tend to view him as a mere entertainer unworthy of serious consideration, a

James and the Giant Peach (1996) was a stop-motion animation film directed by Henry Selick. *Matilda* (1996) was directed by Danny DeVito who also interpreted the role of Matilda's father. *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2009) features the voices of George Clooney and Meryl Streep in a stop-motion animation film directed by Wes Anderson.

⁴ His life, however, has been the subject of two biographies by Jeremy Treglown (1994) and Donald Sturrock (2010). Dahl's days as a spy in Washington during the Second World War have been researched by Jennet Conant (2008). There are also two biographies for children by Chris Powling (1985) and Michael Rosen (2012).

raconteur rather than a writer, an anecdotalist instead of an artist” (111). Likewise, in the introduction to *Roald Dahl*, Butler pointed out that “probably the most striking thing about academic criticism of his work is that there is so little of it” (2012: 2). In fact, the main corpus of Dahl’s criticism consists of for-and-against debates spread out in children’s literature periodicals and library journals. These discussions focus on a handful of controversial aspects which, as Butler put it, “tend to collapse into binary questions about whether he is a good writer or a bad one, honest or dishonest, authoritarian or subversive, moral or immoral” (2). It is a critical approach that appears entangled in the language of appeal, suitability, identification, influence and emotional reader response that will be fully analysed in the first chapter. Alston and Butler’s *Roald Dahl* seeks “to redress this situation, and to seed what we hope will be renewed critical discussion of Dahl in the future” (2). However, although their volume covers topics little previously explored, such as Dahl’s humour or his partnership with Quentin Blake, it also claims to reform or renew prior criticism on Dahl when, in fact, it falls back to the same problems it tries to eschew. Chapter One in *De-constructing Dahl* offers the first thorough overview of the criticism and the language employed to discuss Dahl since the 70s, the difficulties that using such language entails and how it still permeates current criticism.

Another very important aspect that I shall address is Dahl’s ability to write successfully for both children and adults, and the way he has been constructed by criticism as “a kind of two-headed creature” (West 1992: 1). Analysis of his work has concentrated either on his children’s or adult fiction but rarely on both. Warren and West were the first to offer an overview of Dahl’s entire canon, but their main thesis—a sense of continuity rather than a split—is not fully pursued. West places too much emphasis on Dahl’s life and the presumed connections and influence on his fiction, whereas Warren’s examination of the children’s books is limited to comments on echoing and foreshadowing. Furthermore, both critics buttress their discussions with speculations based on affective responses replicating the critical language employed in the for-and-against debates of the articles. Chapter Two, therefore, departs from both Warren’s and West’s studies and seeks to delve into the relationship between Dahl’s two bodies of work by drawing comparisons and contrasts and exploring the common traits and patterns that bring his whole work together. Also, I aim to explore how Dahl understands “children” and “childhood” and, therefore, how he constructs his children’s books as “children’s literature” in contrast to his “adult stories.” This will involve

looking at issues such as narrators, characterization, bodily functions and conflicts of power in both his children's and adult fiction.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I will focus on the paratexts (Genette 1987); that is, everything that surrounds the text and conditions our perception, and, in consequence, the reception and consumption of Dahl. This means exploring how Dahl constructs himself as a children's writer; how his publishing house and allies contribute to mediate and sustain the Dahl public persona; the ways that marketing strategies are responsible for the identity of the books; and how editorial decisions about the age range, and therefore, the classification of a manuscript as a book for children or for adults constructs a particular idea of what "children's literature" is, and therefore, what is considered "appropriate" or "unsuitable" for children to read.

De-constructing Dahl, in short, seeks to contribute to the relatively uncharted territory of Dahl studies by moving away from the author and the reader so as to focus on the critical context, the texts and the paratexts that make up the packaging of "Dahl." The theoretical framework and perspective of my examination is supported by my reading of Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's critical study, *Children's Literature and the Fictional Child* (1994), and Jacqueline Rose's seminal work, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984). Both regard the child not in terms of biological and developmental psychology but as a sociocultural construction and, therefore, a site of complex meanings and discourses about "childhood." It should be noted that, although my examination of Dahl is mainly based on Anglo-American criticism, I have included Spanish sources and some references from French, Italian and Swedish criticism so as to provide this study with a more international flavour. The quotes have all been translated into English with the original passages provided in the footnotes.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to secure permission from the Roald Dahl Literary Estate to reproduce quotes from either Dahl's editorial correspondence or his works. I have paraphrased the former as much as possible but left blank all quotations from his children's and adult books. I have included the year of the editions and the page numbers I have used. Also, the archive reference numbers are provided for the benefit of those readers who would like to consult the editorial correspondence held at the University of Reading library and the Roald Dahl Museum. I apologize for the inconvenience this might cause.

CHAPTER ONE

DE-CONSTRUCTING DAHL THROUGH CRITICISM

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of text-based approaches to children's literature that attempted, as John Stephens put it, "to place children's literature within the context of those modern literary and cultural theories which post-date the various reader-response criticisms [...]" (2000: 12). In fact, in the last fifteen years, there has been an upsurge in studies on children's literature which employ adult literary terms and approaches such as feminism (Roberta Seelinger Trites, 1997; Christine Wilkie-Stibbs, 2002), postcolonialism (Clare Bradford, 2007), narratology (Barbara Wall, 1991; John Stephens, 1992; Robyn McCallum, 1999; Maria Nikolajeva, 2002) and comparative studies (Emer O'Sullivan, 2005), in an effort to elevate children's literature to the same level of rigorous academic research and respectability as "adult literature." In particular, the work of Jacqueline Rose (*The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, 1984) and like-minded theorists such as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (*Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, 1994) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990) as well as the work of sociologists Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout (*Childhood*, 1996; *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, 1997; *Theorizing Childhood*, 1998) stand out for being theoretically consistent in their regard of the child as a sociocultural construction, and therefore, a complex and unstable site of cultural, historical and political meanings and discourses on "childhood."¹

In contrast, the traditional approach to children's literature—deriving from librarianship, educational studies and reader-response criticism—

¹ See also, the pioneering work of the French social historian Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960/1996), on the rise of the idea of childhood and family.

centres on the child as reader and the child as “real.”² The critical terms based on such premises all refer back to this core idea, namely that there is actually a child essence that all children in the world share, despite “divisions—of class, culture and literacy” (Rose 1984: 7). For this kind of criticism, “children *are*/children *like*/children *enjoy*.” It is a world of plurals that ignores the singular. It celebrates the “universal child” and assumes absolute knowledge of and control over children. Since critics were once children themselves (memory; the child at heart) or because they work with them, or have children of their own (observation), it is therefore taken for granted that they are in a position to claim full understanding of their subjects. That is, how children are going to react when reading about certain characters (identification), how a book is going to help or harm them in their cognitive and emotional development (influence), or which books have the right features to become popular with children (appeal). In addition, emotional reader-response—that is, the critic’s own personal, subjective response to a book expressed in terms such as “vivid characters,” “powerful story,” or “tasteless book”—threads together all of these aspects and functions as an indicator of the criteria which each critic uses to judge whether a children’s book is “good” or “bad.” What is “good” or “bad” means roughly either what is educational and culturally nurturing for the child, or what is corrupting and will put the wrong ideas into the child’s head. Indeed, the belief that children will absorb the vicious and/or virtuous messages that the critic’s interpretation attaches to the text is still a very common assumption.

The division of opinion on Dahl is mainly based on this idea. Different viewpoints as to what is “good” or “bad” for children (suitable/censurable) in their learning process to become good citizens lie at the heart of the debate. Although current children’s literature criticism claims to have moved away from this traditional approach, it is still a discourse very much in use, and therefore, it is important to identify and acknowledge its difficulties. What follows, then, is an examination of the key concepts of “memory,” “observation,” “appeal,” “identification,” “influence,” and “the child at heart,” and the problems involved when assessing Dahl’s children’s books using critical language closely linked to emotions.

² See Crago and Crago 1983; Wolf and Brice Heath 1992; Watson and Styles (eds.) 1996; Arizpe and Styles 2003; Lowe 2007; Toomey 2009. For a more in-depth discussion of critics who base their work on knowing the child, see Lesnik-Obertein’s “The terms of children’s literature criticism” (1994: 100-130).

Memory

“He [Dahl] remembered with ease how a child sees the world” (Sturrock 2010: 62).

One of the most frequent arguments employed to explain a children’s writer’s popularity is his/her ability to remember what it was like to be a child. It is assumed that successful writers can resume their childhood selves and that adult readers of children’s books will undergo this same process of transformation, because either through reading or writing, these adult readers and writers are able to see “through the eyes of a child.” Hence, returning temporarily to childhood enables successful children’s writers to put on paper what children, presumably, want to read about and in a language that speaks directly to them. Critics Maureen Cleave, Jonathon Culley and Denise Dupont-Escarpit justify Dahl’s best-selling status and popularity precisely in these terms:

The difference between him and most other writers was this business of remembering what it was like to be young. By the time they’d learned how to write properly most of them had forgotten, whereas he had total recall. He could remember every detail (Cleave 1988).

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 (Culley 1991: 67).

The desires, interests, needs and amusements of childhood find a place in his books. No doubt, the main reason for his success is that he never forgot the very essence of what his childhood years were like (Dupont-Escarpit 1993: 32).³

Sturrock, Dahl’s authorized biographer, contributes to maintaining this explanation to date: “[...] he could also remember and reimagine his own childhood with astonishing sharpness” (2010: 40).⁴ Dahl has, according to these critics, a privileged memory over other perhaps less successful authors. This ability allows him to slip back with apparent ease to that previous

³ “Les désires, les intérêts, les besoins, les distractions de l’enfance se retrouvent dans ses livres. Une grande partie de son succès sans doute vient de ce qu’il n’a jamais oublié l’essence même de ce que furent ses années d’enfance.”

⁴ Significantly, Sturrock links Dahl with Edith Nesbit, and popularity with memory as a key to success: “Edith Nesbit thought that the most important quality in a good children’s writer was an ability vividly to recall their own childhood” (40).

childhood state he once inhabited and subsequently abandoned as an adult, in order to recreate the emotions involved at the time—emotions which apparently stand just for “any childhood” and which any child can “identify” with. Dahl himself fuelled this idea when he claimed that “It is no easy matter for the adult to recall totally and with absolute clarity some forty or fifty years later just what it was like to be a little boy, or a little girl. I can do it. I am certain I can” (519). Other popular children’s writers, such as J.K. Rowling, also claim to possess an exceptionally good memory: “I really can, with no difficulty at all, think myself back to 11 years old” (Lurie 2004: 113). However, as Peter Hunt has noted, there are dissenting voices among children’s writers as to whom they actually write for. With reference to writing from childhood reminiscences, Meindert DeJong points out:

You may try to go back [to childhood] by way of memory, but that memory is an adult memory, an adult conception of childhood for adults—and not for children [...] When you write for children from adult memory, you satisfy only the other adults who have also forgotten their inner childhood, and have substituted for it an adult conception of what the child needs and wants in books (Hunt 2004: 733).

This regression back into childhood through memory is indeed a fallacy; access to childhood memories, or any other memories of past experiences and feelings, is not a direct, easy and neutral process, as Dahl and his supporters sustain. No one can just stop being what they *are* and instantly become somebody who they *were* without taking into account the deceptive psychological mechanism of memory. Hence, “remembering what it was like to be young,” as Cleave puts it, is not as simple as delving into the unconscious to “collect” the memory that suits the writer’s particular purposes. There is much more than just “vividness of recall” (Culley) or “total recall” (Cleave) involved here. According to Freud, memory chooses to forget certain elements of experience, which reside in the unconscious and can only be glimpsed at through psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams, parapraxes and puns, while other elements are stored in the conscious and can be directly accessed. Freud was careful to indicate that in every person’s case, the process of memory storage would be different and that it might well happen that several people would remember the very same event quite differently. Psychoanalyst Donald Spence purports:

It was one of Freud’s signal achievements to make clear the illusory quality of memory and to show how the mechanisms of displacement and condensation apply to memory as they apply to dreams. Although the

memory has a feeling of being closer to the real experience, it was Freud's genius to show how this sense is often illusory and how both memory and dream belong to the same group of wish-determined phenomena (cited in Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 180).

Thus, memory appears not so much as a recollection of facts, but as a reconstruction of events. In that sense, it provides a story we tell ourselves and others about who we are. Memory is instrumental in the construction of egohistory. Since personal feelings, emotions and motives produce different childhood memories unique to each individual, the possibility of retrieving exactly "what it was like to be young" cannot be sustained. In addition, such an argument assumes a unique childhood that is common to all children and adults. It also presupposes that "childhood" is static and stabilised rather than a dynamic, unstable, personal process of growth and a coming to terms with political, cultural and socio-economic demands about "children" and "childhood."

Problems with the unreliability of memory appear quite clearly in Dahl's autobiographies *Boy* (1984) and *Going Solo* (1986), where memory deceives Dahl into believing that, for example, it was the future Archbishop of Canterbury who caned him, when in fact, the man had left the school well before Dahl joined it. The question of whether this is actually a memory slip or something Dahl does on purpose for narrative effect is part of Dahl's "composite myth" (Hollindale 2008: 277).

Observation

"I have a great affinity with children [...] I see their problems" (Dahl in Sykes 1991: 82).

Another common assumption to explain a children's writer's popularity is the ability to capture children on page as a result of possessing special skills of child observation that sets the writer apart from other less successful writers or simply other adults. Basically, the underlying idea is that the more you observe children—the more you see them skipping on the lawn, for example—the better you come to know them; in other words, the easier it will be for the adult observer to capture the child essence, the "true" child. The problem is that, first, not all children are the same and one cannot generalize and pretend to be writing for *all* children. As Peter Hollindale put it, we must keep in mind "the individuality of children, and differences of taste or need between children and adults or between one child or group of children and another" (1988: 21). Second, not even scientific observation of children can supply us with objective verified data about the nature of the

“child.” Biological and physiological “facts” are not going to help us explain why children are considered to be “pure,” “innocent,” “wise,” “good” or “bad.” If children have a particular “nature,” this lies not inside but outside the child. It is culture, history and social meaning that shape the identity of children, an identity imposed by adults which differs across countries and even within each country. Critics Rose and Lesnik-Oberstein and sociologists Jenks, James and Prout have argued that the child is constructed by and is subject to socio-economic and cultural conditions variable through history. As a result, children have become “‘carriers’ for a load of emotional and moral meaning” (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 10). The “literature” written for them has turned into the repository of ideas and ideals about “children” and “childhood” that adults project on them. This means that there is no such thing as a “real” child we must carefully observe until he or she reveals his or her mystery to us. As the aforementioned critics have demonstrated, children do not create their own meaning, but it is adults who create meaning for them through, for example, the way children are fed and clothed, the toys they are given, the language used to address them and the books written and bought for them. Rose was the first to formulate this approach: “Instead of asking what children want, or need, from literature, this book has asked what it is that adults, through literature, want or demand of the child” (1984: 137). Traditional criticism of children’s literature, however, firmly believes that through observation and memory, it is possible to grasp and appropriate the essential “child.” Reliance on this notion means that adults are confident both in writing books that will contain the child essence and in deciding upon the books’ value. Such criticism believes in a universal, knowable, real child who is waiting to be “discovered.” It presupposes that children are accessible, simple, and understandable. Lesnik-Oberstein has pointed out how self-other relations are trivialized in children’s literature criticism:

Because it is assumed that children can be understood, or known, the problems that adult literary criticism engages with seem simplified. To put it crudely, children’s literature criticism uses the idea that adults know how children think and feel to ‘solve’ the problems that adult literary criticism struggles with precisely because it is not sure it is easy for people to know or understand how another person thinks or feels (1994: 5-6).

Such an approach assumes, therefore, that “anyone can be an expert” on children (Hunt 1991: 144).⁵ Based on these preconceptions, critics

⁵ With this expression, Hunt refers mainly to the confidence with which “adults who are not readers” (144) approach and discuss children and children’s literature.

confidently proceed to praise or condemn Dahl according to their agreement or disagreement with his depiction of childhood. They do not question the fact that it is their own particular version of childhood that they rely on. If Dahl's books are considered to be "good" or "bad," this is not inherent to the nature of the texts themselves but to the outside current discourse on childhood and children's literature at a particular time in history and in a concrete culture. This means that the positive or negative response to a book might shift in time whereas the text will remain the same. However, these critics believe to know what is best for children through their own childhood memories and observation. Thus, if the critics' own beliefs about "children," "childhood" and "reading" correspond to Dahl's own, the writer will be complimented for his ability to know/feel for his audience. In other words, Dahl will be praised for what many critics call "the author's instinct." Critic Alasdair Campbell, for instance, remarks: "[A]ll his books are marked by [...] an instinctive understanding of the sort of themes and incidents that appeal to young readers" (1981: 108). Cedric Cullingford concurs: "Dahl captures some of the anguish and anger of childhood [...] Children's authors instinctively know that relationships between children and their parents are very important and often troubled" (1998: 163). Similarly, Catriona Nicholson suggests that "writers like Dahl, who enjoy great popularity, achieve acclaim through their instinctive awareness of the themes, incidents and language that generate complicit understanding between author and reader" (2000: 310). Dahl can communicate with children because he has managed, through his memories and observation, to strike the right chords, "which find responsive echo in their readers" (310). Sturrock has praised Dahl's work on the same grounds: "[...] what never failed him was an ability instinctively to recreate and understand the children's point of view [...] He knew he could do it and that a great many others couldn't" (2010: 40). Implicitly, the assumption lying behind this kind of discourse is that the more popular an author is, the better their instinctive understanding of children will be.⁶

However, the same confidence can be observed in the production of children's literature itself. Jack Zipes notes, for example, that adults who attend children's literature workshops "often think it is easy (or should be easy) to write or produce children's books, and they want—and there are books on this subject—to know the formula, step by step, to manufacture a successful children's book" (2001: 41).

⁶ With reference to the boy protagonist in Dahl's short story, "The Wish," included in *Someone Like You* (1953), Sturrock goes further to argue that "[...] the ease with which Dahl could enter a child's mind" (341) grew better as he grew older: "Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Roald's confidence in his ability to penetrate a

If the critics' ideas about "children" and "childhood" do not coincide with Dahl's, then negative criticism can be expected. Significantly, both positive and negative views are presented as "knowledge." That is, both positions claim to possess the true essence of the "child" and believe that position to be more correct than the other. As will be shown later, critics' arguments actually spring from different ideas about the "true" nature of childhood and children's responses to books. Also, these critics never acknowledge that there is no fixed "child" essence to refer to, although they always try to establish their own particular "child" as the point of origin. Critic Diego Gutiérrez del Valle sustains, for example, that those who write against Dahl do so due to ignorance of what children are like, thus implying that *he* knows what they *are* truly like:

When some critics suggest that he is a pernicious writer for children because of the presence of certain [misogynistic, cruel, subversive] elements in his books, it is because they do not really trust children and their ability to assimilate the messages contained in a book and also, because these critics possess *a notable lack of knowledge* about the way children behave, perceive the world and manifest an irresistible inclination towards thorny issues. (1995: 8)⁷

Similarly, West defends Dahl against David Rees' accusations about *The Twits*. In his article, "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl," Rees claimed that Dahl encouraged children to believe that "bearded people are dirty and are trying to hide their real appearance" (1988: 146). However, West notes that when he read *The Twits* aloud to his four year-old godson, the child's mother left the room finding the book "disgusting," whereas West and Jacob were "laughing so hard that we hardly noticed her departure" (1988: 115). The problem with Rees, according to West, is that he has failed to read *The Twits* properly, as a child would have:

Perhaps the reason Rees interprets Dahl's books so literally and seriously is that he cannot appreciate the humour in them [...] As Martha

child's mind became increasingly profound. As he himself aged [...] his perceptions about childhood and about how children think became ever more certain" (518).

⁷ My emphasis. "Cuando algunos críticos le señalan como un autor pernicioso para los niños por la presencia en su obra de tales elementos [misóginos, crueles, subversivos], lo hacen desde una cierta desconfianza hacia los niños y su capacidad para asimilar los mensajes contenidos en un libro y desde *un notable desconocimiento* del modo en que se comportan, perciben el mundo y manifiestan una irresistible inclinación hacia los asuntos escabrosos."

Wolfenstein points out, this is ‘because the adult and the child rarely find themselves in the same emotional situation at the same time.’ [...] She argues that the key to appreciating the humour of children is to put ourselves in their place. ‘Children,’ she writes, ‘are not so remote from us. If we cannot always laugh with them we can at times laugh like them’ (1990: 116).

Critics like Rees must learn to see “through the eyes of a child,” or at least, through the eyes that supporters of Dahl, and more particularly, West, consider to be the “right” and “correct” way of looking at children’s books. In addition, because West has apparently succeeded in laughing and reading like a child, implicitly he has become a child again, a state that clearly Rees has not achieved because he does not really *know* children.

In fact, Dahl defended himself from negative criticism stating that those critics who opposed him did not know about young readers as much as he did: “I never get any protests from children. All you get are giggles of mirth and squirms of delight. I know what children like” (Honan 1990: 3). In *Trust Your Own Children: Voices Against Censorship in Children’s Literature*, a book of interviews with popular controversial children’s writers, Dahl was asked “Why are many adults made uncomfortable by your children’s books?” to which he replied: “I think they may be unsettled because they are not quite as aware as I am that children are different from adults” (West 1988: 74). Dahl encouraged critics to believe that he had a special insight into children’s thinking and feeling because, first, he had children of his own:

I believe that I am a better judge than Mrs Cameron of what stories are good or bad for children. We have had five children. And for the last fifteen years, almost without a break, I have told a bedtime story to them (Dahl 1973: 122).

Second, he had been a child and knew what it was like to be one:

So anyway, there was *James*, and I thought I’d try to do another—*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*—having always loved chocolate. So why not a chocolate factory? Chocolate and toys. Those are surely the two things that play the biggest part in a child’s life (Wintle and Fisher 1974: 105).

And third, he, metaphorically speaking, went on all fours when he wrote:

I have a great affinity with children [...] I see their problems. If you want to remember what it’s like to live in a child’s world, you’ve got to get down on your hands and knees and live like that for a week. You’ll find you have

to look up at all these bloody giants around you who are always telling you what to do and what not to do (Sykes 1991: 82).

In short, Dahl believed that through his memories as a child and his experience and observation as a father he had the ability to understand children fully. The question is why should Dahl's vision about childhood be *the* vision? Why should Dahl understand children better than any other children's writers who have been children and parents too and are, therefore, entitled to *know* children as well as Dahl? And does this mean that writers who are not parents cannot write successfully for children because they lack the experience? And then again, if memory and observation are supposed to help us know what it is that children want to read about, how can one account for the success of texts that were not created for children in the first place? Fairy-tales and fables, for example, or novels such as *Gulliver's Travels* or *Robinson Crusoe*. Dahl had very precise ideas—that is, beliefs—about “children” and “children's literature,” but his view was one among many other writers of children's books.

The child at heart

[C]hild readers can hear Dahl's child voice speaking to and for them, making the stories literature that really is suited to children, in the sense that is ‘tailored’ to their needs (Worthington 2012: 138).

The belief in the writer as a “child at heart” assumes that the author has retained childhood attributes and, like a Peter Pan figure, has remained an eternal child. According to this view, authors have either refused to grow up or have not fully embraced the adult attributes that are believed to amount to “maturity.” They are, therefore, seen as being caught in between two subjectivities. On the one hand, children's writers appear to struggle to preserve their “childlike” qualities and vision, while, on the other, they have to confront and deal with the adult features and attitudes that are required of them in terms of age. The ability to remain a child at heart is supposed to account, as maintained by this criticism, for the popularity and success of a writer. As “big children,” these authors can easily connect with their young audience. Thus, they do not need to return momentarily to childhood because they already inhabit it; in fact, they have never left it. Critic Alison Lurie fully supports this position. In her aptly titled *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter*, she depicts the authors of children's classics as “grown-up children” (2004: x):

[...] these people may prefer the company of girls and boys to that of adults; they read children's books and play children's games and like to dress up and pretend to be someone else. They are impulsive, dreamy, imaginative, unpredictable (ix).

Dahl himself supports the notion of arrested childhood portraying himself as follows:

I believe that mentally I am a sort of overgrown child, a giggler, a chocolate-and-sweet-eater, a person with one half of him that has failed completely to grow up (Sturrock 2010: 552).

I become easily bored in the company of adults [...] I eat far too much chocolate [...] I am bad-tempered when my back is hurting. I do not always clean my fingernails (Dahl 1972: 2).

When asked how he could communicate so readily with eight-year-olds, Dahl once replied: "I am eight years old" (Powling 1982: 5). And critics take his word for it. Powling exclaims "Exactly!" (5) and critics Nuria Barrios and Hollindale fully support Dahl's claim. Barrios firmly believes that "Roald Dahl was a giant who kept a child hidden in his chest. His nearly two-metre frame camouflaged a small person who did not have very good memories of grown-ups. That was the key to his success" (1996: 16).⁸ Hollindale, drawing a parallel between J.M. Barrie's and Dahl's shrinking-growing-up themes in their books and their physiques (Barrie was very short and Dahl very tall), notes that "If you are physically deviant in mere size, [...] this routine synchronicity of mind, emotions, body is denied you, and your perspectives on both childhood and adulthood may cause states of lifelong tension" (1999: 139). In consequence, Barrie and Dahl are "grown-ups incomplete, for whom childhood is perpetual unfinished business" (138). Even Dahl's biographers support this presumed connection between his popularity and his arrested childhood. Ann Hulbert observes that "Mr. Treglown frequently portrays his subject in childlike terms. Dahl is a bad boy, a behaviour problem. He's a 'bully', a 'troublemaker'" (1995). For instance, Treglown recalls an incident between Dahl and his New York editor which ended with the latter dispatching a letter that read: "I've come to believe that you're just enjoying a prolonged tantrum and are bullying us [...] Unless you start acting civilly to us, there is no possibility of our agreeing to continue to

⁸ "Roald Dahl era un gigante que escondía en el pecho a un niño. Sus casi dos metros de altura camuflaban a un personaje pequeñito que no guardaba muy buen recuerdo de los mayores. Esa fue la clave de su éxito."

publish you” (1994: 216). Dahl’s “immaturity” also appears in relation to his increasing dependence on and indebtedness to his editors for their advice on his work. To get the best of him, he had to be led by the hand. This is an image that, according to Hulbert, corresponds to many other children’s authors’ biographies: “The writer as child in need of being curbed when it’s time to buckle down to his or her best work” (Hulbert 1995: 3). Sturrock, on his part, describes Dahl as having an “oddly Peter Pan-like psychology” (2010: 552) and, while watching the author explain the contents of his writing hut, the biographer draws a revealing analogy: “An enormous child was showing me his treasures” (6). Hulbert has underlined the general tendency among children’s literature writers’ biographers to identify the writer with a child: “Here the failure to grow up beckons as an appealing pure source of literary success, a key to the writers’ persistent power to enthral young readers” (1995: 2). Hulbert, in fact, is one of the very few Dahl critics that appear to be sceptical about claims such as “the child at heart,” especially since, as she noticed, Dahl had to endure tremendous family tragedies that “entailed plenty of grim *maturing* on his part” (1994: 26).⁹ David Galef also hesitated about this apparent straightforward correspondence between Dahl, the adult writer, and Dahl, the child, and in reference to Treglown’s biography, he noted: “Arguably, he [Dahl] never grew up [...] [T]his is what Ann Thwaite has noted about A.A. Milne, and probably what is said about most successful children’s book authors” (1996: 274).¹⁰

For the most part, critics support the belief that popular writers such as Dahl, know what children like and want to read about because these writers are actually children themselves. All they have to do to ensure that their writing will work is to test it with their “childish mind.” Dahl, for instance, claimed:

⁹ My emphasis.

¹⁰ Both Eleanor Farjeon and Enid Blyton have been described as “children at heart.” In *The Cambridge Guide to Children’s Books in English*, Farjeon is presented as a “British author who never forgot the child she once was” (Watson 2001: 255). Likewise, the divorce of Blyton’s parents when she was thirteen has led many to think that it “arrested Blyton’s emotional development, thus explaining her facility in writing for children” (91). The critic, however, doesn’t find this fully convincing since “[...] this explanation is offered of too many children’s writers. In fact, Blyton had a large amount of material rejected before her eventual success with her first book” (91). Rudyard Kipling, Louisa May Alcott and Barrie, as pointed out by Sue Walsh, are also usually presented as “in a state of arrested development” (2004: 29).

I try to capture this type of humor [bodily functions] in *The BFG* but instead of calling it farting, I call it whizzpopping. In fact, I devote a whole chapter to the subject. I put it in because it makes me, with my childish mind, laugh, and I know it makes children laugh (West 1988: 76).

Dahl's supporters regard the author as a "Big Friendly Giant" who can write for all children regardless of differences in socio-economic, religious or cultural backgrounds.¹¹ When it comes down to Dahl, he knows how to bridge such gaps and write for the "child" that all children supposedly share because he himself is the embodiment of that "child." His success on an international scale can be thus explained. Lucía-Pilar Cancelas y Ouviaña affirms that "Dahl does not write thinking of one particular child but of all children and he describes situations that can be easily transferred to any place, even if he places them in a very specific context" (1997: 25).¹²

Even positive adult-child relationships in Dahl's books (*The BFG* and *Sophie, Matilda* and *Miss Honey, Charlie and Mr Wonka*) are described and explained in terms of the "child at heart" metaphor. In other words, in Dahl's world, if an adult and a child get on well, this is because the former possesses some kind of "childish" attributes that help him/her connect with the fictional child and, implicitly, with the reading child. Nicholson, for instance, asserts: "Wonka, like Dahl, remains a child at heart declaring, 'I don't want to be a grown-up person at all. A grown-up won't listen to me; he won't learn. He will try to do things his own way and not mine'" (2000: 317). Laura Tosi, likewise, claims:

Some otherwise positive adult characters tend to display infantile characteristics, like *The BFG*, whom Sophie tries in vain to teach the rudiments of manners, or are unable to protect their children from evil, like the grandmother in *The Witches*, who incidentally reveals a very typically childish distrust for frequent baths (2001: 181).

¹¹ The image of Dahl as a child-man is very popular. See for example, Gaia Servadio's article "Ecco Dahl, Gigante Buono delle Fiabe" (1988), Cristina Ferrer's "Roald Dahl: el gigante amigo de los niños" (1989), Chris Powling's "Farewell to the Big Friendly Giant" (1991) and Nicholson's "Dahl, The Marvellous Boy" (2000).

¹² "Dahl no escribe pensando en un niño particular sino en todos los niños del mundo y describe situaciones fácilmente extrapolables a cualquier lugar, aunque él las sitúe en un contexto muy concreto."

Tosi claims a-priori knowledge of “childish” traits. But are a lack of bathing and good manners inherent features of children or is it for the text to create and tell us so?

The metaphor of the “child at heart” is, for many supporters of Dahl, “real.” But as with “memory” and “observation,” the idea of the writer being a “child at heart” poses far more problems. It is not clear how the process of childhood preservation within the adult self is achieved, why only successful writers seem to manage to maintain the child within themselves while others fail, or why those critics who oppose Dahl are not able to see the writer as a “child at heart” or his writing as showing “childlike qualities.” Other problems are raised, too. How do we define the “child” in the “child at heart”? Do we refer to an Eastern European, middle-class, white, ten-year-old boy living within the adult self? Or is this a seven-year old Afro-American girl’s childhood safeguarded within an adult black woman writer? Likewise, what kind of adult is being discussed here? For the metaphor of the adult as “a child at heart” presupposes two universal states of being with contrasting attributes. Can those attributes be defined? And what happens when a writer stops being popular? What can “the child at heart” explain? Blyton was a publishing phenomenon up till the early 1970s when she was replaced in sales terms by Dahl in the 80s and the 90s. If she was a best-seller, then she must have been “a child at heart,” too, but since her sales figures have declined, how can we account for this? Most Dahl’s supporters do not question their own terms because if they did so, their arguments would in all probability collapse.

Appeal

The vigour with which he portrays situations and characters, especially those related, in one way or another, to the world of education, has a natural appeal to those who are in the process of undergoing the educational experience (Pinset 2012: 83)

“Appeal” vaguely means qualities in a book that are attractive or pleasing to the reader. What exactly these qualities are is what constitutes the difficulty. Nevertheless, it is a term that more often than not comes up when reviewers and critics try to account for the success or failure—in terms of sales—of a certain book with children. Assuming that through “memory” and “observation” it is possible to know what children like or dislike, critics confidently claim which passages or elements of the book children will particularly enjoy, what works for children in the text and what does not and, in general, how young readers will respond to the book.

However, since these claims rest on the critic's own ideas of what "children" and "childhood" are, and in consequence, what "good" or "bad" children's literature is, critical opinions about the "appeal" of a book differ considerably. Thus, the lack of agreement and coherence among critics, not all of whom point at the same appealing elements as will be later shown, makes the presumed "visibility" of appeal problematic. In consequence, the belief that the perception of the cognitive and emotional interaction between the child and the book is a simple, straightforward matter is thwarted.

Nicholas Tucker's *The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration* (1981) is an attempt to develop a theoretical framework which would make it possible to predict how children respond, construct meaning and are affected by books at different ages. For this purpose, Tucker resorts to Jean Piaget's developmental psychological theories and Freudian psychoanalysis. But already in the introduction to his book, Tucker acknowledges the many difficulties he encounters with "appeal." Firstly, he realises that, in spite of the theories he draws on, he cannot make universal statements about appeal because "individual responses to the experience of reading are often diverse in a way that will always defeat any attempt to be over-prescriptive" (3). Secondly, he is aware that Piaget and Freud do not explain everything about how children read: "Each child will always [...] find his or her own path through books, reading them in ways that will in some sense remain mysterious" (21). This makes Tucker realise that elusive parameters such as intuition and tentativeness play a very important role in pinning down a book's appeal, which in turn leads him to conclude that "to guess at the appeal of any book to children [...] will necessitate both psychological and literary detective work, and not a little honest speculation" (2). This last assertion undermines the actual possibility of developing a reliable body of theory about appeal and shows that Tucker is somewhat hesitant about the genuine validity of his work. However, he is not at all discouraged. Tucker is convinced that although individual and cultural responses to stories may vary, there is a general pattern of literary response:

I still believe that enough is known about child development to allow for at least some generalisations about how young readers are most likely to think and feel at certain ages in various particulars, and to what extent this sometimes affects their choice of favourite literature (20).

The creation of a "science" of reading is then possible and Piaget's and Freud's theories about cognitive and emotional processes in children evidence the claims that Tucker makes about "children," "childhood" and

“reading.”¹³ Lesnik-Oberstein has observed that these theories work for traditional children’s literature critics in two ways, “to gain a priori knowledge of the ‘child’” (1994: 107) and “to ‘prove’ that the values and ideologies of liberal humanism are scientific, and therefore correct and true” (108). Tucker never actually explains *how* he applies Freudian and Piagetian theories to the children’s books he examines. Rather than make it explicit, the theoretical framework is taken for granted. As a result, the connections Tucker makes with the children’s books are not visible. Eventually, the reader is left with no other choice but to either question or agree with everything Tucker claims about “appeal” and the nature and effect of certain books on children. What Piaget’s and Freud’s theories actually do in this case is to support Tucker’s *beliefs* about “children,” “childhood” and “reading.”

The Child and the Book fails, in fact, to establish a scientifically proven method to identify what it is in a book that appeals so much to children, how children interpret texts at certain ages, and the kind of emotional and cognitive involvement that results from reading literature. If I have placed so much emphasis on Tucker, it is because his work exemplifies most of the problems that are frequently encountered in the criticism related to Dahl’s “appeal.” As will be illustrated, some of Dahl’s critics draw from psychological/psychoanalytical theories as Tucker does. My intention is to unravel *how* these theories are used by Dahl’s critics to prove their “knowledge” of “children” and their presumed ability to “read” the interactions between child readers and Dahl’s books. This traditional critical approach presupposes that communication between books and readers is relatively simple. It also presupposes that the identification of the “bits” in the text that connect with the children’s psyche is an unproblematic, transparent process that can be easily unveiled with the aid of theory. Other critics resort to emotional reader response to support their particular views of what makes Dahl so pleasing to a young audience—saying exactly what the “theoretical” critics are claiming, but without the scientific veneer. As a result, we will encounter heterogeneous and contradictory critical claims about the “appeal” of the same book. This lack of coherence ultimately responds to the critics’ conviction that reading literature can affect child readers in an “ennobling” or “debasement” manner. It is part of the liberal humanist discourse defended by F.R.

¹³ Piaget’s theories have been challenged. For further discussion, see Mary Donaldson’s *Children’s Minds* (1987) and Diane Shorrock’s article “The development of children’s thinking and understanding” (1991). Rudd also shows his reservations about Tucker’s theoretical approach (2000: 211) and Tucker himself acknowledges some of the problems and criticism on Piaget (1981: 4-5).