Roald Dahl: moral truth or immoral trivia?

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ROALD DAHL : MORAL TRUTH OR IMMORAL TRIVIA?

by

ELAINE SHAW, B.A.

A Master's Dissertation, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Master of Arts degree of the Loughborough University of Technology

September 1989

Supervisor: Dr Margaret Kinnell
Department of Library and Information Studies

c E.L.SHAW, 1989
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DEDICATION

To those who stood by me, and especially to my children, for their faith and forbearance.
INTRODUCTION

To defend an author and his work naturally presupposes that the author's work is under attack; an obvious statement perhaps, but one which most definitely needs to be articulated in this particular case, as the author in question is one of the most popular writers of children's fiction today. Why then, is he under attack when children all over the Western world avidly read and eagerly await each new production? The answer is found via another question - from whom is Dahl under attack? Certainly not from his intended audience but from the guardians of the young, who tend to fall into two broad groups - those who make highly academic claims for children's books and those who highlight irrelevant issues. Of course, the young do need guidance - they are the most vulnerable members of society (often too, the most resilient) and highly susceptible to outside influence and it is valid to assess their literature within a sociological and psychological framework but with a firm sense of proportion. The author then, has a particular responsibility to this type of audience as well as to himself, his art and to the moral system of the society within which he writes. The claims made against Dahl's fiction for children are threefold: firstly, that it is immoral, secondly that it is "pulp" fiction and has no lasting value or worth on the ladder of literary quality and thirdly, there is a rather darker, more sinister indictment which smacks of intellectual elitism, implied by the unspoken assumption that anything popular cannot be of any value. It is the aim of this dissertation to relate the work of Roald Dahl to notions of children's fiction as a means of imparting pedagogical principles - from the perspective of literary and moral expectations within contemporary society. This will be done through close textual analysis centring on specific thematic patterns within the novels.

An initial literature search has revealed very little "in depth" literary criticism of the author, material being mainly confined to short reviews of new publications. Much is said in anger against some of Dahl's novels but with little attempt at substantiation or justification. There is a tendency today to want to categorise children's literature according to its usefulness - to be able to prescribe books to suit certain situations, to value those that have therapeutic qualities. Janet Hill calls this "the mania for bibliotherapy"(1) and soundly condemns such intensity and narrowing
of purpose. Over-emphasis of any one aspect of children's fiction is a dangerously limiting preoccupation and can lead to a warped view of an author's overall aim; therefore, although the chapters which follow are divided into thematic overviews, they also seek to assess the whole novel.

Chapter one seeks to highlight the placing of the "moral novel" genre within literary tradition and, in doing so, point to the difficulties faced by the contemporary author who is writing within a time of flux and uncertainty. The second part of the chapter debates the desirability of using children's fiction as a doctrinal instrument, looking at the question of fiction's "purpose".

The second chapter looks at some of the ways in which the author's own childhood has shaped and coloured his view of adults, of children and of society in general. Examples taken from Dahl's own childhood also help to clarify the issue of a learned versus an innate morality.

Following on from these two broader perspectives, the angle is narrowed to look at particular moral themes encompassed within Dahl's novels. The first explores the notion of heroes and villains as they pertain to cultural and historical mores. The psychological impact on the reader of various character-types is discussed in relation to Dahl's own characters, as is the function of heroes and villains within his novels.

The second theme is that of revenge and the potentially damaging effect on the young reader of its apparent justification in print. Notions of moral justice are defined in relation to moral development and, as in each chapter, the need to refer to the aims of the whole novel is expressed.

The final theme of vulgarity is included in order to look at the susceptibility of children to "undesirable" influences. Overall authorial intent in relation to individual novels is looked at as a way of avoiding sensationalist criticism.

Janet Hill's beliefs that "Children are people. Their infinite variety is something for which to be thankful"\(^{(2)}\) is a commitment
firmly stressed in this dissertation. It is not always easy when examining the worth of a particular children's novel, to leave aside certain adult judgmental criteria which may have no relevance to those for whom the novel was written, but critics ought always to be alert to the possible injustice of their own preconceptions.
INTRODUCTION - REFERENCES

(1) JANET HILL, Children are People, (Hamish Hamilton, 1973), p.131

(2) ibid., p.130
CHAPTER ONE

LITERARY IDEOLOGY

1.1 The Historical Perspective

Looking at an author's work entails placing him within an historical perspective of literary tradition in order to ascertain norms and expectations, to see the evolutionary nature of the discipline itself and simply, to remind the reader that authors do not work in a vacuum. Society, historical inheritance, politics and economics impose themselves upon everyone's daily lives directly or indirectly, with positive or negative effects, so that the question of "pleasing" an audience or reader begs historical as well as psychological questions. No novel, whether written specifically for adult or child or even said to have no particular intended audience, is written in an environmental void. Books written for children were, in the first instance, instructional in nature - either religious, moral tracts or educationally instructive, but always didactic. Unfortunately this element, for whatever reason, has become so deeply ingrained in adult expectations of children's fiction, that it is still seen today as an important criteria when assessing a novel's worth. John Newberry, who is hailed as the founder of books written specifically for the delight of children in 1744, included instruction in the form of the alphabet in his Pretty Little Pocket Book as well as overt moral teaching. Newberry could not shake the moralist tradition and until the nineteenth century attitudes were extremely slow to change. During the nineteenth century however, aims in novel writing generally widened from the purely moral to include such objectives as enquiries into the "condition of England," telling an exciting story, fiction written entirely for commercial purposes (e.g. the "silver fork" romances produced for high society) and so on. Just as Newberry was shaped by the society he lived in, critical of it though he may have been, so outside pressures exerted themselves on all novelists, colouring and shaping the way they viewed life and hence, the content of their work. Today's sociological and political pressures have, for instance, forced Dahl to change the colour of the Oompa-Loompas in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, forced Enid Blyton's Famous Five novels off the shelves in many schools and public libraries because of their sexist and class bias; racism and sexism may be
relatively new areas of sensitivity but political and moral issues have always been matters for concern or censorship. It is of the utmost importance that we be continually aware of the overall trends of the culture within which a novelist operates. As the scope of novel content broadened outwards from the purely didactic so problems began to emerge about attitudes - attitudes towards the art itself and towards the reader. Responsibility became an issue that had hitherto been cushioned by the genre available.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the advent of the value and virtue of the individual consciousness as well as the need for a fixed, unified moral code. The imagination gradually became accepted as a possible vehicle for virtue rather than moral subversion but the dichotomy within that century between man the religious and social being and man the individual was slow to reconciliation. Society's needs and roles do not always conflate with the individual's needs and desires. Even today, when the decline of religious faith has taken away from many the pressure to conform to a fixed and rigid moral system, man clearly still feels the need for a specific set of values by which to measure moral goodness, otherwise this argument about Dahl's "immorality" would not exist. Because of the rise in the value of individual consciousness and, alongside it, the birth of childhood as a state worthy of recognition, man has created rather than solved problems for himself. Baelz in his book Ethics and Belief says "there are now as many moralities as there are human beings."(1) In some ways this is a good thing; it avoids, for example, the complacency which characterises the more unthinking attitude towards morality which, when it amounts to blind belief, can be dangerous; it raises self-awareness and hopefully, tolerance of other views and it avoids the danger of oversimplification which has characterised the search for a single morality (take the nineteenth century doctrine of utilitarianism, for example). In other ways it has created dilemmas, particularly in the area of child guidance. It is relatively easy, with the hindsight of one hundred years, to criticise the pedagogic uniformity inflicted upon the young through fearsome tales of gruesome but divine retribution should they stray from the "right" way, but what does the twentieth century offer as an alternative? Ought it, in fact, given that children are now regarded as people in their own right with their own feelings, needs and ideas, to stipulate any kind of moral teaching at all? Clearly it ought.
There are still standards, closely related to Christian teaching, which serve as a 'core' morality, which may prevent total free-will but which hold together the structure of society. This is the public or corporate morality which has to be learned; it answers the question "How do we want to bring our children up?" It does not answer the other question - "What kind of people do we want our children to be?" Concepts such as conscience and guilt come into this area, the private morality which often defies logical or scientific explanation. There is still a great deal, however, that can be learned in the child's development of a private morality. "Putting oneself in another person's shoes" is one way adults solve moral dilemmas; this involves an imaginative process and what better way to let children explore this phenomenon for themselves than via fiction which has the power to provide both escape and the power to extend reality.

The best children's fiction today merits its accolade because it has kept pace with the ever-evolving perceptions of both childhood and morality. The moral messages are no longer overt but they are still there, extending the child's understanding of the world, helping him to clarify and make sense without direct preaching. Sometimes, and this is where Dahl's work fits into the pattern or trend, what an author has to say may be disagreeable. Huckleberry Finn was scorned as morally subversive when it first appeared in 1884; what upset the status quo then is today rightly regarded as a classic. One problem with morality has always been, for adults, the possibility of masking a personal immorality behind the facade of an upright public morality. It is this hypocrisy which Dahl very clearly deprecates in his novels and the fact that he does so through the eyes of his child protagonists makes it harder for some adults to accept. "Grown-ups" have always "known best" - in this respect the status of childhood is a travesty of itself - Dahl launders their faults in public. The iconoclastic author in the children's market is still as rare as Mark Twain or Kipling but what needs to be seen is that, given time, the process of social and literary evolution will ensure that the contemporary Twain is valued as much as his predecessor. T.S. Eliot, in an essay on Religion and Literature said "moral judgments of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation, whether it lives according to that code or not."(2) It is a sad but common fact that some of the
best writers have been scorned simply because in being ahead of their
time in social, political or moral outlook, they were misunderstood.
"What is objectionable in literature is merely what the present
generation is not used to. It is commonplace that what shocks one
generation is accepted quite calmly by the next."(3)

Dahl then, as any other twentieth century author, has inherited
a legacy of freedom from constraints of form, style, narrative
discourse and genre but he is still not a "free agent." Working
within children's fiction brings its own singular restrictions and
carries greater responsibility to its audience. The sphere of such
fiction provides an illuminating insight into society's views of
moral 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'bad' and whether it reveals
tokenism or radicalism will depend on authorial stance. Sartre
argued that "one must write for one's age. To write for one's age is
not to reflect it passively."(4) This is an argument for the
positive energy or force which is surely indicative of good
literature, that quality which does not satisfy but enlarges our view
of the world. It is equally as relevant to children's as to adult
fiction but because provision for the young is a more sensitive area,
the need to be more alert is greater. George Eliot succinctly sums
up the role fiction has to play in moral development when she says
"If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing
morally."(5)
1.2 Contemporary Trends

The opening paragraph of the Introduction stressed three charges against Dahl, and it is the intention here to look at the second two, that elusive quality of 'value' in children's fiction which changes in line with sociological trends and during Dahl's career as a writer has emphasised the psychological effects of fiction on children. The fact that children's books are still seen as a teaching aid, a supportive educational prop, has already been shown but what is disturbing about it today is the degree of emphasis still placed on this factor. Books for children are still very much regarded as needing medicinal qualities - the power to do good is placed well before the power to please. Children however, cannot be forced to read and it cannot be too strongly emphasised that a child will gain nothing, however good the book, if disappointment or boredom set in within the first few pages. The counter-argument is that the child, rather than the book, is at fault. Given that the novel in front of him is not making impossible intellectual demands (high or low) then this argument is irrelevant. Once the book has been rejected it is too late. Once we ask a child to 'persevere,' once we try to 'persuade,' the element of force feeding returns and rejection is again likely.

If a child's natural curiosity cannot be maintained then reading becomes a chore and the novel is seen in the same light as the school reading scheme book - an exercise imposed by adults for "your own good." A child's first experience of reading for itself is often through such a reading scheme and although great strides have been made in producing more exciting schemes, the sheer reinforcement repetition needed for teaching reading skills, deadens much of the pleasure for the child. For reading to be other than a necessary task it has to offer immediate satisfaction and to do this it must give pleasure, be enjoyable. Young children, roughly up to the age of seven to eight, are extremely egocentric, they cannot see future, long-term benefits. Why should reading be medicinal, anyway? Why should children not "play" books just as they play trains?

Brough Girling gave an excellent lecture on this subject, entitled Children's Books - Medicine or Toys? in which he began by saying "We want to create children who lust after books". This
surely echoes a view commonly shared by those who show concern about children and their relationship with literature. He then went on to question why, on the whole, they do not do this. Poor school reading schemes were mentioned as one reason and adults as another. Children are not like adults in their reading tastes - they read solely for pleasure without any concept of self-development or self-improvement. As has already been said, adult over-concern can be damaging even whilst it is well-meaning. Children, he stated, treat books as a "simple recreational option," reading does not have a particular worth. The question "Why don't you read something better?" is, he argues, an adult question put from an adult perspective, irrelevant to the child. As adults we are over concerned with quality and, because we regard books as "wholesome food or medicine," we prescribe them in order to make "better" children. The joy of reading is not high enough on our list of criteria for giving a child a book. We ought, Girling maintains, to keep it a secret from children that good books are good for them. He does not dispute the fact that some books have more literary value than others, but unlike adults, children are perfectly at ease with double standards. They have no guilty feelings about reading Enid Blyton or Alan Garner, The Hardy Boys or The Secret Garden. The only discrimination we should make is in not giving boring books to children; "giving children boring books is.....child abuse." Books, he continues, should "send children off on an adventure, an exploration into the fabulous world of language."

At least one major reason for children not lusting after books is the degree of status which adults accord to reading. Of course, reading is of paramount importance but to surround it with an aura of mystical reverence can frighten children away. Peter Mayer from Penguins' Puffin group, said "We must remove the specialness from books, so that reading is every bit as normal and natural and attractive as all the other things children occupy themselves with."(7)

Undoubtedly, Roald Dahl gives much pleasure to children; he has been popular for at least a decade (James and the Giant Peach was first published in New York in 1961). His popularity is more with children than adults but from what has been said, this is to his credit. His appeal lies in the immediacy of his fast-moving plots (an essential component of young children's books - the adventure
element Girling advocated - the pleasure from each novel's humour and, as Dorothy Butler puts it, in the pleasure given to children who are "over-trained, over-clean and over-organised."(8) He appeals to a subversive element in children, not a dangerous one at all (perhaps "coarseness" is a better word) but a natural earthiness which adults seek to eradicate. If we wish (and it would appear that we do) children to grow up retaining the moral standards of an ideal society, that is one which produces conscientious, thoughtful, compassionate human beings who are both serious and humorous, then we do not thank an author who shows his reader characters who prosper and are happy whilst displaying none of the above-mentioned virtues. If, on the other hand, we expect all the "goodies" to have no flaws whatsoever in their make-up, then the child will recognise hypocrisy when he reads it and begin to distrust us. The chapters which follow seek to show that Dahl's work is a major force in the world of children's reading, that it does contain beneficial cathartic qualities and that those who decry his lack of morality are under informed in their knowledge of children and over-refined in their approach. Reading for pleasure is an important theme here because Dahl's books are, in academic circles, relegated to the "popular" level, a genre generally lacking in meaningful, timeless qualities. The last word is left to Dahl's own defence of popular children's fiction:

The emphasis put by numbers of educational psychologists upon the psychological effects of popular books upon children is, to my mind, vastly over-emphasised. Good, exciting, amusing children's books have virtually one, to my mind, psychological effect which is this..... They cause them to believe that reading can be fun. It causes them to love books. They teach them how to write well and therefore my conclusion is that good children's books have nothing but a salutary effect on the reader: upon children. (9)
CHAPTER ONE - REFERENCES

(1) PETER BAEZ, Ethics and Belief, (Sheldon Press, 1977), p.9

(2) T.S. ELIOT, Selected Essays, (Faber and Faber, 1969)

(3) ibid.

(4) JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, What is literature?, translated by B. Frechtman, (Philosophical Library, 1948)


(6) BROUGH GIRLING, Woodfield Lecture XII, (Loughborough University, 1989)

(7) PETER MAYER, from a report on the conference organised by the Children's Book Circle and the Children's Bookselling Group of the Bookseller's Association, held 14th February, 1984, (Bookseller, 3rd March, 1984), p.920

(8) DOROTHY BUTLER, Five to Eight, (Bodley Head, 1985), p.34.

Experience Tells

Roald Dahl has published both for children and adults but the majority of his work has been for children and the impact he has made has possibly been greater on the younger readership. Very little however, has actually been written in the way of literary criticism even though he has been one of the most popular children's authors since the sixties. Whatever is said, is confined mainly to short reviews of his new publications and is often highly subjective (whether reviews can be any other is debatable) and often without any attempt at substantiation. "Deeply nasty" was the phrase used by the Times Educational Supplement to describe George's Marvellous Medicine\(^1\) with no further explanation as to what was nasty, why or where in the novel.

Dahl has won no major prestigious award in the field of children's literature apart from the Whitbread Award 1983 for The Witches which raises questions about the criteria for judging and suggests that the values, standards and attitudes of adults take far greater precedence in the judgment arena than the opinions of those for whom the books were written - namely children.

The whole question of morality in children's fiction is a highly charged one and not one that Dahl shies away from or to which he pays passing lip-service. He often speaks from the heart of personal experience, especially on matters of adult cruelty to children. There are many instances of autobiographical note in the novels and in Quentin Blake's illustrations for The BFG there is no doubt from the sketches that Dahl is the Big Friendly Giant.

If Dahl sees, or would like to imagine, himself possessing the qualities of humane kindness which make the BFG one of his most likeable, attractive and sincere characters, then surely there is nothing for the young reading public or their over-protective moral guardians to fear. There is far more to fear from those literary critics who painstakingly go to great lengths to drag out symbolism in fairy stories such as Little Red Riding Hood and Jack and the Beanstalk. Children read mainly the novels however, seldom
PHOTOGRAPH OF ROALD DAHL and SKETCH OF THE BIG FRIENDLY GIANT
the critics. 'Witch-hunting' seems to be a popular form of literary criticism, with those authors who are clearly giving so much pleasure to their readers the most ardently hunted. Critics too often ignore the good points and concentrate on the bad. All too often, the office of literary critic can become a mutually exclusive "club." The respectability accorded to critics as those who "know best" might be somewhat diminished if the opinions of an immature, inexperienced mind were allowed a degree of credibility. This attitude is unfortunately not uncommon, and a general symptom of the treatment of children as inferiors. To take an example from the world of education itself, there is still more status given to those who teach the sixth-former than those who teach the six year old. Anna Collins has written an excellent article entitled "Tell me: Are Children Critics?" (2) in which she details the responses of children to certain novels. What comes across from the responses is the degree of profundity from a ten year old in such remarks as "I thought the first page and a half boring and then I realised why it had to be." (3) Given the stimulus and being asked questions more searching than "did you like the book?" children can build up their own framework for critical appreciation, based initially upon their naturally inquisitive nature.

There is no need to go into much biographical detail on Dahl as he does this admirably in both of his autobiographies Boy and Going Solo but a close look at some of the episodes related in Boy go a long way to explaining the author's outlook on life and hence, the values he evinces in his novels and his own personal perspective on childhood. By nature of the genre, both of these books are written with seasoned adult hindsight but the simplicity of style, the directness of the language and more directly, the brief but pointedly assertive remarks which constitute a foreword make it plain to the reader that this is not a conventional autobiography. It is not meant to be a history of his life, which type he says are "usually full of all sorts of boring details." (4) It is a collection of moments which have remained "seared" (his own word) on Dahl's memory. The incidents in both books are dealt with in chronological order but are so selective and dramatically conveyed that they stand equally well alone as together. "A life is made up of a great number of small incidents and a small number of great ones" (5) - Dahl is extremely conscious of the delicate balance which distinguishes a
meaningful biographical work from a sentimental, personal account of mundane life. Some of the memories are funny, some painful, others unpleasant he warns, but all are true. There is an honesty revealed in the two forewords which gain the reader's respect and in some of the more incredible moments these forewords act as a reminder that not so very long ago (fifty to sixty years) certain social atrocities were very much alive. He very clearly seeks to offer an historic and sociological insight.

It is worth looking at some of these incidents for the light they throw on the novels. "Seared on my memory"(6) is a powerful expression of implied pain and the physical pain he endured from the cruelty of school beatings has remained a mental torture which spills over into such characters as Miss Trunchbull in *Matilda*. The sweet-shop owner, Mrs Pratchett, in *Boy* was a "small skinny old hag"(7) who never smiled, was disgustingly unclean, mean and malicious towards children. Dahl goes into graphic detail over her character description in order that the reader be firmly on his side when "The Great Mouse Plot" is put into action. If however, the reader is not convinced as to the moral rectitude of putting a dead mouse into a jar of gobstoppers and tends to take Mrs Pratchett's side or even to think it wrong of the young Dahl to be so obviously proud of his idea ("Truth is more important than modesty. I must tell you, therefore, that it was I and I alone who had the idea for the great and daring Mouse Plot. We all have our moments of brilliance and glory, and this was mine"(8) - the tongue-in-cheek irony seems aimed more at an adult reader than a child), then what follows as her revenge surely absolves the child's prank. Now another villain enters the scene, in the form of "a giant, a tweed-suited giant"(9) or - the headmaster. Edward Blishen, in a review of *Boy* points to the caning episodes as indicating the origin of much of Dahl's fiction in which "the cruel reap a harvest of cruelty."(10) Mrs Pratchett's sadistic delight in witnessing the canings is even more gruesome than the actual physical violence inflicted on the boys. She becomes almost hysterical in her perverted pleasure, a truly grotesque, Dickensian figure. It is not surprising that Dahl's nightmarish memories of school days translate themselves into his fiction. What is perhaps surprising, and refreshingly optimistic is that he is able to retain a sense of humour, without which some of his rapport with children would falter.
A review of *Boy* in *Horn Book Magazine* \(^{(11)}\) questions whether the book was written for children and argues that the recollections represent an adult and judgmental view of schools. As already stated, the biographical nature of the work makes the retrospective adult view inevitable, but whether or not it was written for children or adults hardly seems to matter. Dahl is never condescending towards his young reader and *Boy* is something of a lesson in the history of English public schools for the young, but he does occasionally like to shock his older readers out of what might be their own complacent attitude. He does this to great effect in the chapter entitled "Captain Hardcastle;" the latter is a master at Dahl's boarding school, "a grown-up man with flaming orange hair and a violent temper\(^{(12)}\) who shows neither mercy nor intelligence. He is surely addressing an adult reader when he says "It is worth reminding the reader once again of my age. I was not a self-possessed lad of fourteen. Nor was I twelve or even ten years old."\(^{(13)}\) It is an attack, muted but nonetheless barbed, on the adult world that treats the defenceless with contempt, whilst living a life of hypocritical virtue. No-one could accuse Dahl of trying to shelter the young for he takes care to include in *Boy* such episodes as the lancing of young Ellis' boil and the removal, without anaesthetic, of his own adenoids in order to show the real bravery of children. The degree of permanent psychological damage done to the author by the experiences of the physical violence of caning is succinctly put in the words "I couldn't get over it. I never have got over it."\(^{(14)}\) Again he reinforces his own attitude when he says that naughty boys need "a few sharp tickles on the rump"\(^{(15)}\) but reiterates the sadistic pleasure gained by the head at Repton whose method of caning was to give a lecture on evil and wrongdoing whilst lighting his pipe between strokes, making the procedure as protracted an affair as possible. Another statement, eloquent and more sharply felt for its simplicity ends this description: "If this person, I kept telling myself, was one of God's chosen salesmen on earth, then there must be something very wrong about the whole business."\(^{(16)}\) It also aptly concludes this chapter as an insight into an author who, despite some horrifying personal experiences of that glorious time called childhood, still manages to write some of the most humorous, entertaining novels available to children today. Gerald Haigh in a review of *Boy* described Dahl as having an "endearing penchant for the revolting."\(^{(17)}\) This might just be arguable in the case of his
fiction but when the episodes related are fact rather than fantasy, it is not the author who suffers from a "penchant for the revolting" but surely the society which tolerated such child abuse. The reader has only to listen for the change of tone from hyperbole to almost understatement to detect the shift in authorial stance from comic entertainer to serious commentator upon contemporary social or moral issues.

One of a number of ongoing ethical debates is the issue of a learned versus innate morality, questioning to what extent a child's moral development is pure imitation of those from whom he wishes to gain approval and on the other hand, how far we are born with a sense of 'right' and 'wrong.' It is not the intention, within the confines of this dissertation, to enquire into such a huge philosophical dilemma but because Dahl himself, as a child in Boy was the product of a learned public moral system it is necessary to address the debate. Even as a child he was obviously aware that the theoretical moral rules made by adults did not equate with their practice of them. Michael Wood, in an article for New Society said of the author "Dahl is at his best when he reveals the horrible thinness of much of our responsibility."(18) No-one today doubts that moral development does take place, the work of Piaget, Freud, Kohlberg and others in the field of educational psychology and psychoanalysis having confirmed it, and Dahl by colourful experiential insights into his childhood days, shows this learning process in action. According to Piaget's stages of moral development, Dahl had at nine, reached middle childhood and therefore was able to make judgments on the basis of "equality justice," that is, able to show a mutual respect within a social group.(19) Evidence of this occurs in the chapter of Boy entitled "The Matron." The experiences here are not those of a single individual; Dahl constantly includes his fellows as part of a group with a common cause - "to us a grown-up was a grown-up and all grown-ups were dangerous creatures at this school."(20) Matron especially, was to be feared as an unpredictable, menacing creature that prowled in the night and against whom the boys solidly "closed ranks" without really understanding why. They were not able at that age, to base their moral judgment of her on anything but an instinctive feeling for injustice. Dahl says that he did not realise until much later in life "that Matron disliked small boys very much
This instinctive understanding of the child for justice is a theme which runs throughout Dahl's novels and is a quality which the author clearly admires in children. Even Charlie Bucket in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, although somewhat sentimentalised and insipid in character, has his finer insights when for instance, as the spoiled, pampered Veruca Salt finds her golden ticket because her father has been busy using his financial position to buy up all the chocolate bars he could find, Charlie quietly remarks "I don't think the girl's father played it quite fair, Grandpa, do you?" What Dahl offers his readers is an opportunity for self-knowledge, a realisation that their instinct for the good and the just is often right and that the adults who purport to be morally superior are often wrong. Gaining confidence in one's own judgments is a necessary step towards being able to base moral judgments on a reasoned assessment of the motives in each situation. Dahl's clear admiration for the wisdom and honesty of children, coupled with his personal experiences of the foolishness and deceit of some adults, allows children an opening which few other authors achieve with quite such success.
CHAPTER TWO - REFERENCES

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CHAPTER THREE

3.1 Heroes and Heroines

Throughout the following chapters reference will constantly be made to "the reader." No attempt has been made to ascertain the average age of Dahl's readers, but many children do come to his stories through classroom story-time in the upper infant school and lower junior stages. As for the child reading them for himself, this is obviously dependent upon personal reading ability and taste. Some of Dahl's novels are still read by lower age secondary children purely, one assumes, for entertainment sake. A hard and fast age group is impossible to predict but in the debate over the tenuous morality displayed in some of the novels, it is helpful to bear an age in mind and as the youngest readers are supposedly the more susceptible they should serve as the principal for any judgment. It is also necessary to remind oneself that what one person gains from or retains of a novel, how it affects that person, will not always be the same for all. No interpretation of any novel is ever the ultimate interpretation.

Neither will every reader form the same opinion of a character but in the case of heroes, heroines and villains, history and particularly the fairy story, has left a stereotyped legacy of reference which has virtually remained unaltered and intact. The very words "hero," "heroine," "villain" conjure up a ready-made picture in the youngest child's mind providing that he has listened to even a few classic fairy tales. The qualities associated with the hero are all given moral superiority within the plot through the attainment of reward, so that the prince wins the princess, the simple-minded but well-meaning youngest son becomes rich, or the ill-treated, poverty-stricken child sees her dreams come true; all live happily-ever-after having come through some form of adversity. Striving against seemingly unsurmountable odds, the epitome of fearless bravery, whilst remaining humane, wise, honest and sincere are the marks of a hero or heroine. Reward for such moral uprightness is usually given in material terms and it is this materialism which leads to the happy-ever-after syndrome at the end of the story. Happiness is not seen as its own reward and for the young egocentric five or six year old this might prove an
incomprehensible concept anyway, but it should be noted that from a very early age we encourage children to see the rewards of moral goodness in an immoral, or at least, selfish way. If this seems a slightly pedantic stance then it is deliberately so in order to shake a little the perhaps complacent secure faith which puts the classic fairy tales on such a high pedestal.

To come to a definition of the "villain" in a fairy story: he is the exact opposite of the hero, both physically as well as mentally. He is often larger than life (a giant or a dragon, for instance), often described as ugly, can be male or female and is always morally unscrupulous. He is prone to physical violence and sadism, he is ruthless and cunning; but there has to be a flaw in this otherwise immaculate, Miltonian personification of evil. Justice has to be dealt to the villain in proportion to his faults, otherwise the child's "black and white" view of morality cannot be satisfied. After all, when the child does something wrong, he expects the parent's punishment. The conventions of form in fairy tales create expectations which then go on to reinforce a safe, secure, ideal moral system. These edifices however, are built only to be knocked down again and replaced with confusion later when the child learns that the hero in real life does not always win and the villain often gets away "scot free." In accordance with Piaget's stages of moral development however, we must accept the need for the fundamentally incorrect version we offer to children in order to accommodate their low level of intellectual development, and in the end, is not this fantasy world of just retribution only another name for moral utopia?

Tales of fantasy make another, more covert contribution to the inculcation of moral values in that they act as a safety valve. There is from time to time a great deal of latent aggression in children which psychoanalysis has, notably through Freud and Jung, tried to interpret. What matters is not only adult understanding of this but that the child has some harmless means of coping with the darker side of his nature.

Where then, do Dahl's heroes, heroines and villains fit into this traditional, well-worn pattern? Do his heroes and heroines deserve the high moral accolade normally conferred upon their predecessors? Leaving aside for a moment the three novels Fantastic
Mr Fox, The Twits and The Magic Finger, the main body of Dahl's work has for its heroes and heroines young children, most only loosely defined in terms of age as "a small boy" (used to describe James in James and the Giant Peach, George in George's Marvellous Medicine and Charlie in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory) so that immediately the reader can attach his own desired age onto the character who is to become the hero and perhaps thereby associate at a more personal level with him. Dahl's heroes are not adults - this is a very important feature of his novels - they are children facing adversity, and that adversity is more often than not an adult. From the outset, Dahl invites his young reader to look upon the main character as a peer not, initially at least, as someone with superhuman powers or abilities but as someone you would like to befriend. Later on, in each novel the hero or heroine does develop fantastic abilities but by then the bond between reader and hero is already formed and as Russell Hoban says "A hero no better than the reader ... will scarcely last a lifetime."(1)

Just as Dahl addresses his reader directly in order to create a wonderful feeling of shared experience and camaraderie, so his heroes have to "live" within the reader's contemporary world. Normally, Dahl does slightly distance his heroes by narrating their part in the third person, allowing us to see them indirectly from his, the author's viewpoint but even so, the reader soon learns that Mr Dahl is an ally, "one of us" rather than an adult or "one of them." However, in Danny, The Champion of the World(2) we have a slightly different kind of hero. This is evident from the beginning as Dahl goes to greater trouble than usual to give Danny a very concrete existence. The first striking feature is the photograph of a baby on the first page to show "how I looked at the time,"(3) the time being when Danny's mother died and the close bond between father and son began to develop. Over the page the illustrations return to Jill Bennett's black and white line drawings and Danny on his fifth birthday "was now a scruffy little boy as you can see." The use of this one photograph is obviously significant in establishing Danny as a 'real' person as is the indirect aside, in fusing the same bond between hero and reader as there is between Danny and his father. Throughout the novel this bond with the reader is developed by Danny's direct addresses to the reader in such phrases as "You probably think ..." and "Don't forget that ..." and "can you blame my
"constantly inviting agreement and building up a sense (that children love) of shared complicity in something slightly naughty. A review of the novel in Horn Book describes "the aspect of the story" as "the mutual devotion of father and son."(4) Dahl does create in the father one of his finest adult portraits and one of his few adult heroes, proof that the many portrayals of vicious, uncaring, cruel adults are not the creation of a warped mentality. There is no sentimentality attached to the father's description as unfortunately, there often is in the over-worked, exaggeratedly drawn descriptions of, for instance, Charlie's abject poverty, in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Neither is the father's description kept at an insular, family-centred level stressing only the importance to children of secure family relationships; Dahl uses the father to make a moral point:

I was glad my father was an eye-smiler. It meant he never gave me a fake smile because it's impossible to make your eyes twinkle if you aren't feeling twinkly yourself. A mouth-smile is different. You can fake a mouth-smile any time you want, simply by moving your lips. I've also learned that a real mouth-smile always has an eye-smile to go with it, so watch out, I say, when someone smiles at you with his mouth but the eyes stay the same. It's sure to be bogus.(5)

Dahl does not simply create characters who fit into conservative moulds; he uses his characters to make strikingly uncomfortable comments about the adult world. Hypocrisy often hides behind a facade of public upright moral conduct. In allowing the innocence of childhood to see through this lie, Dahl creates a superior morality peopled by minors.

Danny's father is a hero not because he engages in the illegal activity of poaching, but because he is "the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had."(6) Those critics who condemn the dubious morality of the novel miss the point. Junior Bookshelf questions the ethics, saying "Is poaching just a game, legitimate because it provides a thrill?"(7) This question, not to be avoided will be taken up later; the exploits undertaken by father and son are not meant to be 'swallowed whole' as literal truth but rather provide the swash-buckling, daredevil adventuring for which Dahl is famous. The serious note is highlighted and given added poignancy by its
inclusion within this fantasy setting. Children need heroes and many hero-worship their fathers; this, according to Dahl is not only natural but necessary and if the reader has not come to that conclusion by the end of the novel, then the "Message" or afterword confirms it:

A MESSAGE

to Children Who Have Read This Book

When you grow up
and have children of your own
do please remember something important

a stodgy parent is no fun at all

What a child wants
and deserves
is a parent who is

SPARKY
Danny, The Champion of the World is something of an exception when compared to Dahl's other novels (hence the amount of space devoted to it) because the reader is asked, often through direct authorial discourse, to care for and to sympathise with Danny and his father whereas, in novels like Matilda, James and the Giant Peach and George's Marvellous Medicine we indirectly gain respect for the heroes through utter contempt for the villains. Dahl's child protagonists are always solitary, independent, tenacious, intelligent and resourceful people and these are characteristics which children have learned, through fairy tales, to equate with heroes. They are usually 'Cinderella' types too, orphaned or neglected or living in poverty, and always oppressed, but their lives are those of contemporary twentieth century children and because their problems are those common to many children today, a sense of empathy is almost immediate. It does not matter to the young child that his hero can perform superhuman feats such as talking to insects (James and the Giant Peach), invent medicines that cause "complaining, grousing, grumbling"(8) grandmothers (George's Marvellous Medicine) to shrink into oblivion or execute revenge on a sadistic, spiteful headmistress (Matilda); a hero by definition has to be better than the mortal reader and children have a healthy and flexible attitude to fantasy which enables them to adjust easily between the two states of reality and fantasy when necessary. In 1983 Manchester Council banned The Witches from schools and libraries on the grounds that it was harmfully sexist, encouraging a derogatory opinion of all women. A nine-year old boy gave his reaction to the ban by saying "I think it is an insult to think that boys and girls are so stupid as to think that all women are witches after reading the book."(9)

The most important point about Dahl's child heroes is that, by responding to them on their own terms, children gain a sense of belonging, a sense of their own worth in a world dominated by domineering adults. No-one in the position of disciplinarian likes to have his authority undermined and ultimately it is in the hands of the individual to decide whether Dahl's novels will have a psychologically damaging effect on those in their care. Dahl's opinion on the matter is as follows:

It is important to remember and most adults forget this:
that an eight year old child is a semi-civilised being.
(S)he is half way through the process of becoming civilised, and who are the civilisers? - They are the adults surrounding the child, they are the parents, the teachers, policemen etc. and all the other adults with whom the children come into contact with. It follows from this that the adult is basically the enemy of the child. The child may think (s)he loves the parents but subconsciously they are the enemies, and the enforcers of discipline, and the civilisers: so are the teachers. I would emphasise that there is a subconscious feeling in the child, but the first rate writer of children's books is aware of this subconscious feeling and will therefore often write stories that show up the adult as the enemy and disciplinarian - this pleases the child reader who agrees with it.\(^{(10)}\)

In *The Witches* Dahl brings home the point that "man's inhumanity to man" is recognised by the young who see through their double standards. The protagonist, now turned into a mouse, consoles himself with the words "When mice grow up, they don't ever have to go to war and fight against other mice. Mice, I felt pretty certain, all like each other. People don't."\(^{(11)}\) In *The BFG* the same point is looked at in more depth and it is worth quoting the whole of the passage to show that "The human beans is making rules to suit thernselves."\(^{(12)}\)

Do not forget,' the BFG said, 'that human beans is disappearing everywhere all the time even without the giants is guzzling them up. Human beans is killing each other much quicker than the giants is doing it.' 'But they don't eat each other,' Sophie said. 'Giants isn't eating each other either,' the BFG said. 'Nor is giants killing each other. Giants is not very lovely, but they is not killing each other. Nor is crockadowndillies killing other crockadowndillies. Nor is pussy-cats killing pussy-cats.' 'They kill mice,' Sophie said. 'Ah, but they is not killing their own kind,' the BFG said, 'Human beans is the only animals that is killing their own kind.' 'Don't poisonous snakes kill each other?' Sophie asked. She was searching desperately for another creature that behaved as badly as the human.
'Even poisnose snakes is never killing each other,' the BFG said. 'Nor is the most fearsome creatures like tigers and rhinostossterisses. None of them is ever killing their own kind. Has you ever thought about that?'

Sophie kept silent.

'I is not understanding human beans at all,' the BFG said. 'You is a human bean and you is saying it is grizzling and horrigust for giants to be eating human beans. Right or left?'

'Right,' Sophie said.

'But human beans is squishing each other all the time,' the BFG said. 'They is shootling guns and going up in aeroplanes to drop their bombs on each other's heads every week. Human beans is always killing other human beans.'

He was right. Of course he was right and Sophie knew it. She was beginning to wonder whether humans were actually any better than giants. (13)

The adult heroes and heroines in Dahl's novels have one very simple virtue in common - they are kind; everywhere in his books, we see that children respect genuine kindness above all else. Children in their early stages of moral development need absolutes in order to grow up in a secure environment, but as Dahl points out, they are able to see through hypocrisy. When someone such as the grandmother in The Witches exhorts her grandson's obedience by saying "it is important to respect the wishes of the parents" (14) the reader knows for certain that no irony is intended. The children in his novels unconsciously recognise the moral quality of altruism and this is passed on to the reader in simple, highly personal conversational dialogues. Towards the end of The Witches the tone becomes quite poignant:

"I would never want to live longer than you," I said.

"I couldn't stand being looked after by anybody else"....

"How old are you, Grandmamma?" I asked

"I'm eighty six," she said

"Will you live another eight or nine years?"

"I might ... With a bit of luck"

"You've got to ," I said. "Because by then I'll be a very old mouse and you'll be a very old grandmother and
soon after that we'll both die together."
"That would be perfect," she said. (15)

A little further on she asks,
"are you sure you don't mind being a mouse for the rest of your life?"
"I don't mind at all," I said. It doesn't matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you." (16)

It is easy to jump upon fashionable 'bandwagons' and condemn this book for sexism as Manchester Council did but one ought not to forget the old-fashioned values of loyalty, trust and respect. Dahl neither forgets nor omits them. There are indeed 'witches' in the contemporary world but the point Dahl is trying to make is not that they cause children to disappear, not that women in general have disturbed psyches (Grandmamma is female, after all) but that some people can appear other than they are. The simplest way to convey this to a child reader is by the use of fairy-tale stereotypes who, on the whole, provide the child with balanced proportions of fear and security. The witches are total exaggeration, their physical appearance giving rise to mirth mingled with revulsion. They have their place in pure fantasy alongside the witch in Hansel and Gretel or Sleeping Beauty but because they 'inhabit' a contemporary physical world of hotels rather than wooden cottages in forests it is perhaps easier for the adult consciousness to become offended by bringing contemporary social assumptions such as sexist bias. Again, to concentrate solely on the sexism issue in this novel denies it its more important message to young readers - that adults in general are not always to be trusted, that one has to reach maturity and the ability to make moral judgments often via uncomfortable experiences. New stages of development, cognitive and moral, develop as a result of interaction between the child and his environment; if used wisely, The Witches can be used as a basis for discussing issues of loyalty and obedience which often come into conflict as the child begins to question and modify his opinions.
CHAPTER THREE

3.2 Villains

It has been argued of The Witches that its villains, the witches themselves, deliberately encourage distrust in children. Edward Blishen argues "I am no more squeamish or over-delicate than the next man; but the story does seem the product of a need to express, and to evoke in the reader, quite disturbing orders of disgust and distrust." (17) Mr Blishen does not comment on the personality of the grandmother, nor her close relationship with the grandson. It is wrong to isolate characters or incidents within a novel if one is not prepared to develop one's argument in terms of the whole book. Inter-relationship and inter-action are a vital part of the formal structure if a novel is to come together as a coherent whole. A review in Horn Book magazine describes "an appealing, fanciful tale of devotion." (18) Strikingly opposed views it would seem, but neither do the novel any credit; one isolates the villains, the other the heroes. In this second half of the chapter therefore, the villains will be examined as individual characters and in respect of their plot function.

What then, if anything, do Dahl's villains have in common with the more traditional ones mentioned at the start of this chapter? Nicholas Tucker characterises the type by saying "For children, a good villain is something you can really hate without feeling guilty." (19) This aptly characterises all Dahl's villains if one bears in mind the word "something" to include human and non-human types, but otherwise the author's characters are formed and developed according to the requirements of each story. Some are mere puppets - Mr Victor Hazell in Danny, The Champion of the World, for instance, is the archetypal modern-day villain whose wealth gives him the 'right' to rudeness and the power to treat others as social inferiors. It only takes one short but visually effective incident to damn the man completely:

'No' my father said, 'I do not like Mr Victor Hazell one little bit. I haven't forgotten the way he spoke to you last year when he came in for a fill-up.'

I hadn't forgotten it either. Mr Hazell pulled up alongside the pumps in his glistening gleaming
Rolls-Royce and had said to me, 'Fill her up and look sharp about it.' I was eight years old at the time. He didn't get out of the car, he just handed me the key to the cap of the petrol tank and as he did so, he barked out, 'And keep your filthy little hands to your self, d'you understand?' I didn't understand at all, so I said, 'What do you mean, sir?'

There was a leather riding-crop on the seat beside him. He picked it up and pointed it at me like a pistol. 'If you make any dirty finger-marks on my paintwork', he said, 'I'll step right out of this car and give you a good hiding.'

My father was out of the workshop almost before Mr Hazell had finished speaking. He strode up to the window of the car and placed his hands on the sill and leaned in. 'I don't like you speaking to my son like that,' he said. His voice was dangerously soft. Mr Hazell did not look at him. He sat quite still in the seat of his Rolls-Royce, his tiny piggy eyes staring straight ahead. There was a smug superior little smile around the corners of his mouth.

'You had no reason to threaten him,' my father went on. 'He had done nothing wrong.'

Mr Hazell continued to act as though my father wasn't there.

'Next time you threaten someone with a good hiding I suggest you pick on a person your own size,' my father said. 'Like me, for instance,' Mr Hazell did not move.

'Now go away, please,' my father said. 'We do not wish to serve you.' He took the key from my hand and tossed it through the window. The Rolls-Royce drove away fast in a cloud of dust.(20)

Economy of style is typical of Dahl and extremely apt for the young reader who might soon be bored by in-depth psycho-analytic character depiction. Aidan Chambers describes Dahl's narrative style in Danny as "naive in its emotional pitch"(21) but goes on to justify this type of clear, unobtrusive style as appropriate to the author's
implied reader. It is clear, from Dahl's style, that he assumes an audience of a certain linguistic ability but it is never an inferior audience; Dahl respects his readers whilst at the same time remaining in control. Chambers describes his tone as one of "drawing-room politeness" to mark the stylistic quality achieved by Dahl but this seems to denote distancing and much of Dahl's success is due to his intimate rapport with his reader. Mr Hazell's financial 'muscle' leads him to cause Danny's father constant investigation by local official bodies, "so all in all, you can see why it gave my father a certain pleasure to poach Mr Victor Hazell's pheasants." (22) The point of view is focused through the child's eyes and as other incidents show, it is a point of view shared by the author. If Dahl had wanted to question the morality of poaching, he could certainly have used his authorial viewpoint to do so, but the plot and the comic genre would have suffered. If the critics are to question the morality of poaching in this story, they must also look at such legends as Robin Hood and Jack, who climbed the beanstalk to steal repeatedly from the giant. Surely, this analogy would put the whole issue into perspective! The chapter entitled "Goodbye Mr Hazell" gives a pantomime finale to the demise of the great landowner; one can almost see the child applauding. Those who read Danny are at this point too busy enjoying a modern-day fairy-story to even begin to contemplate social injustices or poaching. Dahl is not asking his reader to stand back from the narrative and contemplate such wider issues but this does not mean that he wants to avoid having any kind of influence over his reader. As already noted, the last word is on a more serious, but never solemn, note and it is quite clearly this memory which the author wishes his audience to retain, that of the love between father and son.

Other pantomime or purely entertaining villains are Boggis, Bunce and Bean in Fantastic Mr Fox. Once again these people personify greed; they are rich, nasty and repulsive and memorably visual. In a very short novel (six or seven thousand words) Dahl offers a fast-moving plot, tingling suspense and villains memorable for their stupidity. From slap-stick villains to real-life moral issues in The Magic Finger; this short novel is a clear indication of its author's versatility and although by no means his best in terms of plot (the ending particularly is a little flat) it is nevertheless proof of Dahl's concern for moral issues written in an
uncondescendingly simple form. The idea of role reversal is nothing new in fiction but it very simply allows even very young children to begin to consider complex issues such as guilt and conscience. As usual, Dahl begins by engaging the reader's sympathy for the child protagonist and her love of animals by creating obnoxious villains and having secured it, he allows the reader to explore the difficult concepts of empathy, justice and selfishness in a stylistically simple manner. One of the features common to Dahl's style is that he places his reader in a safe fantasy world, thus allowing the child to feel at ease whilst contemplating moral dilemmas which for him, may never before have been contentious. It is argued that a child's moral development closely follows his cognitive development and that each recognised stage is sequentially related to age. Those reading The Magic Finger will recognise the girl protagonist (Dahl does not name her) as having attained level five of Kohlberg's model. At this level a child begins to develop personal values which may come into conflict with those previously adhered to at a lower level. These will include an unquestioning sense of responsibility towards maintaining social order, respecting authority and abiding by society's laws. The girl in the story is never happy in defiance but the symbolic use of the magic finger acts as a humorous means of controlling her aggression. The reader will be able to identify with the sense of frustration felt at having reached a stage in his moral development where his personal views oblige him to assert opinions which are often disregarded as inferior by the adult world. The transition from one stage to the next, the necessity as we develop, to modify our perspectives creates disequilibrium but it is a necessary conflict if we are to progress to higher levels of moral reasoning. Dahl offers through this novel, a safe environment from which to understand and come to terms with, such conflicts.

A similar moral issue, that of animal rights is taken up in the short story "The Boy who Talked with Animals" in which an adult crowd is humbled by a small boy. The morality of "big business" is expressed for its ruthless, insensitive greed with touching effect. "Something had happened. Something strange had come fluttering across the beach" are the words used to express the contrition felt by those who had seen a giant turtle only in terms of its carcass value. The author's point of view is as usual, expressed
through the child and the tone of language as the passage continues:

The two hooded black eyes of the turtle peered up at the boy. The eyes were bright and lively, full of the wisdom of great age. The boy looked back at the turtle, and this time when he spoke, his voice was soft and intimate. 'Good-bye, old man,' he said. 'Go far away this time.' The black eyes remained resting on the boy for a few seconds more. Nobody moved. Then, with great dignity, the massive beast turned away and began waddling towards the edge of the ocean. He didn't hurry. He moved sedately over the sandy beach, the big shell rocking gently from side to side as he went.

Tone as usual, is the chief indication of authorial viewpoint and one soon learns that the quiet, humble pitch and poetic simplicity of language is a mark of serious sincerity.

On the whole, Dahl adheres to the traditional stereotype portrayal of the ruthless, fearsome villain in order to entertain rather than to instruct but also to allow his readers the necessary sharply defined contrast between hero and villain. Children, especially of the lower age reading group for his novels, do not have a sufficiently developed intellect to cope even with slight deviations from a rigid norm. Dahl creates moral absolutes and until well into the twentieth century such dualism would have been quite acceptable. It still is so when one considers the ongoing popularity of folk-tales such as "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." Trolls, ogres, witches, giants, monsters of any kind serve a definite purpose for children in offering imaginative fear, in realising fear and thus overcoming it. Ernest Jones (25) a psychoanalyst, has said that even without the influence of such stories, children will create for themselves private fantasy villains. It would seem that evil externalised in this way, is a necessary part of a child's development. Our liberal ideology may condemn such historical trends as excessively violent, biased against certain sections of society and so on, but to try to prematurely by-pass areas of sequential development will confuse and frustrate a child. It is difficult to go into in-depth character analysis of Dahl's villains simply because their role in the plot is specifically designed to avoid confusion on the reader's part. When this is understood and one views them at the
intended level, then their visual and narrative quality can be fully appreciated. The texture of imaginative experience is so carefully woven by Dahl that his young readers can feel secure even in the presence of a possible witch who "might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment." (26) The intimate complicity between reader and author is skilfully and gradually developed throughout The Witches so that the child will enjoy the vicarious thrill of being part of the danger.

Intimacy is a key factor in Dahl's relationship with his reader and because of his success with the young, this intimacy is rightly viewed with caution by some adults. There is however, a point at which caution becomes paranoid; the modern concern with constantly calling into question an author's motives, could eventually be so stifling to creative output that we see the demise of originality and are left with only the blandly pacific. Dahl does not attempt to create villains with a conscience - moral self-examination is not the stamp of the traditional villain. Such self-analysis is left to characters such as Kenneth Graham's The Reluctant Dragon and Ottfried Preussler's The Little Witch. The moral issue of Dahl's use of old women to represent the villain in some stories - The Witches and George's Marvellous Medicine in particular - is a valid one up to a point, but respect for the old is discussed in The Witches, and in George's Marvellous Medicine where Dahl writes "Most grandmothers are lovely, kind, helpful old ladies." (27) This one however, was "a miserable old grouch" who never once smiled at George or played games with him, who "didn't seem to care about other people, only herself." She too, is a "witchy woman," described with gloriously exaggerated language to show her totally evil nature but also to eliminate in her any possible realistic qualities. No-one is surely meant to regard this "grumpy old cow" (28) as anything but symbolic. What is at fault in George's Marvellous Medicine is its omission of a convincing hero to counteract the grandmother. The Times Literary Supplement's review of the book could not quite decide whether to condone or condemn; it describes "What could seem like a blue-print for a new type of granny-bashing turns into outright fantasy" only to go on to say "a slightly nasty taste does persist after consumption, despite much else in the tale that is both fast and funny." (29) The fact that George is only sketchily characterised is a fault which probably
accounts for the "nasty taste" and one which makes the narrative less stimulating than other novels. There is not the obvious thematic motif of "good versus evil" in this novel and one is left wondering as to the author's motives. Evil is defeated but not, one feels, by a specific Good. Unfortunately then, this novel has no positive moral justification and the accusation of "granny bashing" is understandable within this text.

Dahl's characterisation is very much by role, the positive moral good represented by his child heroes and the negative immoral evil symbolised by adult villains. The young reader has many of his basic assumptions satisfied from the traditional fairy-tale or fantasy denouement of plot - good triumphs over evil after a hard-fought struggle in which suspense and fear both entertain and excite, and the reader is able to identify with the hero. A child's aspirations, hopes and desires are all satisfied in an entertaining, undemanding manner. Dahl's methodology may seem reductionist, over-simplifying and pandering to a child's wish-fulfillment but in order to sustain a child's attention Dahl is a master of intuition. He is aware of the cognitive, experiential and linguistic limitations of his audience and writes accordingly. The intimately shared humour which permeates all his work is an indication to the child that here is a mediator who uncondescendingly understands childhood.
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Chapter Four

Revenge is Sweet

Adult expectations and attitudes are important in any child's moral development and, as already shown in the research of Piaget and Kohlberg, a necessary point of reference without which further moral development cannot take place. Donald Biskin and Kenneth Hoskisson develop an interesting argument in their article "Moral Development through Children's Literature" in which they discuss the possibilities of a systematic literary program to advance moral reasoning in children. However, if society ultimately wants the child to make its own mature moral judgments based on motivational considerations rather than rigid utilitarian principles, then at some time those concerned with that maturation process will have to allow a groping, questioning awareness from the child, even if this means having one's own authority scrutinised and questioned. In order to come to self-knowledge, the child needs to experiment; within the authoritarian and institutional structure of school however, this is virtually impossible, and at home too, the parent is often torn between a too-rigid sense of his own authoritarianism on the one hand, and a need to feel that he is not abdicating his responsibility by allowing too much freedom on the other. The adult dilemma appears to be one of degree rather than of absolutes, the dilemma being not of absolute choice but of proportion. A degree of freedom is more likely to lead to mutual respect than a dogmatic, inflexible approach, and mutual respect must be the aim of a liberal society committed to an individual moral system. In an article entitled "Mastering Ourselves and our Environment" the need for adult authority is sanctioned - "Without adult authority there is no security, no guarantee of justice, and justice is most dearly sought by children." According to Kohlberg, children both assume that their own immoral or anti-social actions will be punished and require that justice be meted out to others. This lasts until the final sixth stage of moral development when behaviour becomes governed by universal principles of moral right. There is then, a clear delineation in the child's mind, according with his conceptual limitations, between right and wrong and the punishment must always "fit the crime." This chapter looks at the issue of such punishment in Dahl's novels and the extent to which he might be accused of a
sadistic delight in the retributive punishment of his villains.

'Justice' and 'revenge' are emotive words, prone to value judgment and subjectivity; the difference between them is often a semantic one blurred by the misuse of a lack of common definition. The two words are typical of those for which everyone knows what he means but everyone means something slightly different. For the purposes of this chapter therefore, and to clarify the polarity of their meanings, a definition will be adhered to. Justice is characterised by the exercise of authority in the maintenance of right, the socially accepted laws which allocate the reward of virtue and punishment of vice; it is based upon equality. Revenge then, can be characterised as an anti-social act, outside of any legal retributive measures. It usually connotes emotional, psychological or physically vindictive violence and is exercised as personal retaliation. Unfortunately, even these definitions leave much that is open to individual interpretation - what, for instance, is "right," "virtue," or "vice?" - but generally speaking, justice can be seen as socially recommendable and objective, whilst revenge is an individual, subjective, anti-social act or desire. The question then, in Dahl's novels, is to what extent, if any, does the author foster vindictive feelings of sadistic delight in his readers? To answer this, it is necessary to look closely at the characterisation of those who police the punishments. In Matilda, Dahl introduces the heroine as "sensitive and brilliant," with extraordinary intellectual ability that has not made her vain or conceited but, due to her totally inadequate parents, she lives in a loveless environment which makes her a sad, sympathetic figure.

"She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this, but she was finding it very hard not to do so. All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her, she
would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy."(6)

Dahl explores frankly the plight of many children - that of feeling misunderstood by their parents but because Matilda's genius removes her somewhat from the common experiences of most children, she is very much a fictional character and her revenge is therefore also fictional. Later in the novel, when Matilda discovers her magical powers she becomes even further removed into fantasy. The detailed incident of putting superglue inside her father's hat was "all in all ... a most satisfactory exercise,"(7) and certainly vengeful but it, like all such incidents in Dahl's novels, needs to be seen in terms of authorial intent. The father and mother are so highly exaggerated in their own insensitivity and nastiness that for "the punishment to fit the crime" Matilda's revenge has to be equally exaggerated. Dahl himself said

I make my points by exaggerating wildly. That's the only way to get through to children: they're not subtle. If a couple of parents ever existed as bad as those in Matilda, she would be right to run away. But quite a lot of parents are, say, 10% bad. If they read the story they might get a little shock.(8)

The idea behind Matilda it would seem, is to raise awareness rather than advocate revenge. One is left feeling that although it may be morally wrong, the child's only recourse to justice is via revenge. Matilda offers the reader a secure moral universe "in which children are given inventive powers to bounce back and revenge themselves humorously against their aggression."(9) What to one man is revenge will always be justice to another; what Dahl does, is ably convince his readers, through exaggerated characterisation, that this is justice.

Revenge incorporates sadistic delight and one of the major criticisms of Dahl is that he encourages this cruel streak within children. No-one now rebukes Hans Christian Anderson for allowing the soldier in "The Tinderbox" to cut off the head of the witch(10) and nothing ill is thought of children hearing or seeing that the wolf in "The Three Little Pigs" was boiled alive and Grimm is not admonished when he wrote of Rumpelstiltskin after his discovery that he had been tricked, that he "seized his [own] left leg with both
hands, and tore himself asunder in the middle."(11) History, folk-lore and the passing of time have all placed these stories firmly within a safe traditional framework. It is as though they have been granted immunity from adverse criticism by these three considerations. Walt Disney films and television cartoons confirm their welcome into the twentieth century. That such fairy tales as Cinderella were hounded in the nineteenth century for advocating anti-social emotions seems laughable in contemporary society but it could be argued that Dahl's novels suffer the same misrepresentation today. George's Marvellous Medicine is criticised for fostering a lack of mutual respect between child and adult (this point has already been discussed in the previous chapter) and for its cruelty but although George does wreak deliberate revenge on grandma, his motive is not one of sadistic gratification but stems rather from a sense of his own unjust treatment - "And that's why he wanted suddenly to explode her away. Well ... not quite away. But he did want to shake the old woman up a bit."(12) The retreat of the last sentence clearly proves the point that George is not in any way a 'bad' boy. Tolkien said of children reading fiction that "they are much less likely to ask whether or not it is true than who is the goodie and who is the baddie, to get people into their proper moral stations."(13) Whether or not the adult literary critic of children's fiction views Dahl's heroes and heroines as vengeful sadists will depend heavily upon how much adult insight into the complexity of human nature he or she chooses to bring to the novel. It should never be forgotten though, that the children reading the novels do not share this insight, that at a particular stage, they see and need to see, the moral world in black and white.

It is true that many of Dahl's novels statically equate with the child's need for reciprocal justice and do not attempt to take the reader on towards the next stage which takes into account character reform and restitution. Nicholas Tucker(14) argues that the better writers do this but even within the 'static' novels there is room for the reader to inter-act, to respond and to evaluate, and surely, there is a place for this kind of novel, anyway. In his article "Where have all the Witches Gone,"(15) Tucker somewhat contradicts his own argument when he writes at length expressing regret at the demise of the traditional 'villain' who was always guaranteed a "sticky end." He speaks of the modern trend towards "character
analysis at the expense of the plot" and the tendency to explain rather than condemn evil which he says could strangle the traditional fairy story and leave "a strong oral tradition ... more at the whim of publisher, parent and latest trend than ever before." Contemporary concern for the psychological welfare of children has to contain a measure of proportion if we are to avoid a sterile emotional existence and a poorer literary heritage.

The way in which Dahl achieves a sense of proportion in his stories must be through humour. When asked by Miss Honey in Matilda if all children's books "ought to have funny bits in them?" Matilda replies "I do ... Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh."(16) The child's criteria for good books are shared by the author and adhered to in every one of his novels. Humour has the power to defuse potentially explosive situations and prevent us becoming overly serious. Unfortunately, some critics condemn Dahl for getting laughs at the expense of others. Eleanor Cameron, in her article "A Question of Taste"(17) accuses Dahl of "getting laughs through violent punishment" and says "Dahl caters to the streak of sadism in children which they don't even realise is there because they are not fully self-aware and are not experienced enough to understand what sadism is." Once again, it seems, the adult experiential view dominates. Very few critics see the modifying aspect of the humour, the diluting quality which controls the violence. Both Cameron and Anne Merrick (whose article "The Nightwatchmen and Charlie and The Chocolate Factory as books to read to children."(18) Cameron is replying to) dislike Charlie and the Chocolate Factory but Anne Merrick is much more able to perceive the book in terms of the child's cognitive response. She believes that the reader "can cheerfully and guiltlessly condemn the other child characters" because "they delight in the basic human feeling for moral righteousness"(19) whereas Cameron perceives the novel as "a book that diminishes the human spirit" due to its "callousness, lack of any emotion but the hyped-up one of getting kicks out of the pain and misfortune of others."(20) The vast difference in the attitudes of these two critics is clearly due to differing referential standpoints and as a result, the former is able to see the character's punishments as justice and the latter only as revenge.

The victories won by Dahl's heroes and heroines are always those
of an oppressed group, which fact surely exonerates them to some extent; the victims of the punishments are all obnoxious stereotypes personifying greed or selfishness - moral criminals, in fact (another extenuating factor); if the reader is in any doubt about the justice of such violent punishments, then the humour surely serves to reveal the comic nature of the situations and the fact that we are not meant to see the punishments as literal physical tortures. It is undoubtedly true that over-exposure to scenes of physical violence, from whatever media source, can have an unconscious, damaging effect on children, but it is equally possible that some degree of justice "seen to be done" can have a reparative effect on a child's consciousness. In order to maintain or to reaffirm an essentially optimistic view of life, children need to feel that justice exists in a concrete form, even for them. Because we no longer generally teach, as our Victorian counterparts did, that punishments are meted out at the Day of Judgment (an incomprehensible concept for a child, anyway), we have to offer the young, morally immature child some satisfactory knowledge that justice does prevail in the world and good does triumph over evil. It is only much later in a child's moral development that this simple cause and effect patterning of behaviour will be redefined. The punishments which Matilda inflicts upon Miss Trunchbull have a cathartic effect upon both the character and the reader. Dahl's novels are simple beneficial recommendations of moral goodness aimed at the lower stages of cognitive and moral development. The principles of justice are clearly vindicated in his work.

The anomaly of our modern age would appear to lie in its liberal ideology on the one side advocating, from as early an age as possible, a belief in the morally free, self-determining individual and on the other, the desire to retain control through a more traditionalist moral system which expects docility and obedience in its young. We desire on the one hand to shake free the restrictiveness of religious moral systems and yet cling to the restricting historical symbol of the home as the centre of moral organisation - of love, security and virtue. Revenge is generally considered an anti-social, psychological act of aggression; justice is considered as social retribution. A major problem today then, is to balance individual desire and freedom against social laws and needs. In his novels Dahl successfully makes available to his
readers a secure moral universe from which to venture out as individuals and to which a safe return is guaranteed. Just how much children's reading affects their values and attitudes can perhaps be answered by the fact that, given the right material at the right time, children will continue to develop - they will move on. They will only be able to move on however, if they are allowed to pass through each stage sequentially.
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CHAPTER FIVE

Crudity Versus Prudity

Then suddenly, one awful day,
She heard the Magic Mirror say,
'From now on, Queen, you're Number Two.
Snow-White is prettier than you!'
The Queen went absolutely wild.
She yelled, 'I'm going to scrag that child!
I'll cook her flaming goose! I'll skin 'er!
I'll have her rotten guts for dinner!'
She called the Huntsman to her study.
She shouted at him, 'Listen buddy!
You drag that filthy girl outside,
And see you take her for a ride!
Thereafter slit her ribs apart
And bring me back her bleeding heart!'(1)

One of the most common criticisms levelled against Dahl's fiction for children is its crudity. In a review by The Times Literary Supplement, Revolting Rhymes (from which the above quotation is taken) is described as "not a title to seduce the more pernickety of parents who police their children's cultural intake."(2) Those who condemn Dahl in this way do so, no doubt, on aesthetic grounds, their own linguistic sensibilities offended by the coarse language and the mockery of traditional story-telling conventions. In language certainly, Dahl is no traditionalist; he is a modern writer writing for media conscious, 'street-wise' children but this does not prevent him from upholding any values which are worthy of retention. It is the aim of this chapter therefore, to try to put the whole issue of the crudity argument into perspective. It has been the constant contention of this dissertation that Dahl requires to be read not only with a "willing suspension of disbelief" but also with greater note to overall intent and to its intended audience.

There is no doubt that one of the common threads in Dahl's novels is coarse humour but to equate this as a cause of possible decline in moral standards is misleading. There are those who would argue that the increase in divorce rate is a measure of public ethics
without taking into account the fact that the process of divorce itself has simply been made easier, the economic possibility of a woman living alone with children is easier, and so on, the counter-argument being that society is more caring, not less. To accept a deviation from Standard Received English in children's literature and to acknowledge that children enjoy lavatorial, earthy humour does not signal a rotting morality, but rather the reverse as it indicates greater tolerance of personal freedom, individuality and greater honesty. Decorum in any form of media communication has waned over the past thirty years or so, but rather than sound a note of pessimism, it could be said to hail a freer, more mature morality. If it is indecorous of Dahl to get laughs from references to bodily functions it is because we are still in the grips of a suppressive morality which chooses to class as 'wrong' any situation it finds embarrassing. It is a healthy mocking tone that underlines the following passage from The BFG in which Sophie and the BFG debate the rights and wrongs of burps and flatulence caused by Sophie's fizzy drink Coke and the giant's version, frobscottle.

"But what's wrong with a little burp now and again? It's sort of fun."
"Burping is filthsome," the BFG said, "Us giants is never doing it."
"But with your drink," Sophie said, "what was it you called it?"
"Frobscottle," said the BFG.
"With frobscottle," Sopphie said, "the bubbles in your tummy will be going downwards and that could have a far nastier result."
"Why nasty?" asked the BFG, frowning.
"Because," Sophie said, blushing a little, "if they go down instead of up, they'll be coming out somewhere else with an even louder and ruder noise."
"A whizzpopper!" cried the BFG, beaming at her. "Us giants is making whizzpoppers all the time! Whizzpopping is a sign of happiness. It is music in our ears! You surely is not telling me that a little whizzpopping is forbidden among human beans?"
"It is considered extremely rude," Sophie said.
"But you is whizzpopping, is you not, now and again?"
'Everyone is whizzpopping, if that's what you call it,' Sophie said. 'Kings and Queens are whizzpopping. Presidents are whizzpopping. Glamorous film stars are whizzpopping. Little babies are whizzpopping. But where I come from, it is not polite to talk about it.'

'Redundulous!' said the BFG. 'If everyone is making whizzpoppers, then why not talk about it? We is now having a swiggle of this delicious frobscottle and you will see the happy result.'

Change in moral values should hardly be classed as immoral simply because it is not to our taste at the time. To be able to laugh at our own inadequacies and our over-refined sense of propriety teaches children a sense of proportion rather than corrupting them.

Many of the words in The BFG sound vaguely rude and appeal to children through this mild subversiveness - Horn Book said of the novel that it would "undoubtedly provoke unseemly gales of merriment."(4) Laughter is a virtue worth fostering if it is not derisory; as most of Dahl's humour is associated with exaggeration, absurdity and slapstick it is harmless. Nicholas Tucker succinctly sums up successful comedy when he says:

'to be successful comic characters for the young must, at least to some extent, work within the broader forms of humour and social stereotypes that children can easily recognise. It is unrealistic, therefore, to expect children's literature always to avoid any reflection of its audience's immaturity even when such reflections may sometimes seem crude and perhaps unfeeling.'(5)

Once again, we come back to the danger of imposing adult sensibilities upon literature written for children; to remember this helps to put the whole issue into perspective. The over-riding impression of The BFG is not its crudity but its gentleness. The friendship which develops between the tiny Sophie and the huge but warm and generous giant is a lesson in cross-cultural relationships. The two could not be more physically different but both find, through
discussion, that they share a common humanity and justice - as the BFG says "One right is not making two lefts."(6) His endearing mis-use of language, his sensitivity towards plants and animals, his "sad winsome look"(7) and his almost naive honesty - "I is a very mixed up Giant ... But I does do my best"(8) make this character one of Dahl's classics. This Big Friendly Giant surely exonerates Dahl from any accusation of being only able to create repulsive, nasty characters of role. The integrity of the novel far outweighs its crude humour.

Most of Dahl's comedy is benign good humour just as Raymond Briggs' or Dick King-Smith's but because humour is largely a question of individual taste, opinions will always vary. The novelist of crude humour, whilst honest for bringing into the open what children often only whisper in corners, needs to remain responsible to wider values. The crudity must not become the object or subject of the novel. Unfortunately today, this is happening in another genre - that of the radical teenage realist novel. Robert Cormier's novels The Chocolate War and I am the Cheese(10) for instance, are too real in that any imaginative experience for the reader is blunted by the total realism of the social cynicism. The reader becomes a casualty of adult empiricism yet again. If we want children to grow up to be certain types of people whose choice of moral action follows from their character rather than sole reliance on moral obligation or social necessity, then we need children who share an optimistic view of life. Cynicism and pessimism may come, with experience, later but to enforce it as Cormier does by offering no way forward is itself a kind of crude brutality. Dahl himself said that "You can get at greediness and selfishness by making them look ridiculous."(11) Many of his characters are self-seeking types ruthlessly intent on economic gain but because they are caricatured children are not depressed by their realism. Dahl is able to convey a message without destroying innocent faith. The BFG could be said to symbolise optimism for he is "a dream-blowing giant"(12) bringing happiness.

There are certain characters however, whose repulsiveness, both physical and spiritual, border on the offensive. The Twits is a revolting novel. Mr Twit's dirty beard is graphically described to make him a ridiculous figure of fun. Dahl contrasts him with the reader - "You and I can ..." and so on, the direct discourse creating
a common bond against a common enemy. The same treatment is given to Mrs Twit but through her, Dahl makes a general point which is central to the modern definition of morality, namely what sort of people we ought to be. Throughout his novels Dahl's own philosophy, that of a belief in an individual morality being more important than a social morality, is clearly established. It is done so in a non-patronising, non-preaching way which wins the young reader's chosen consent. This kind of morality does not exclude social concern but rather implies that social concern must follow from one's character. Clearly, moral issues are more complicated than being matters of simple choice between right and wrong, but at a basic learning level (which is surely what Dahl is aiming at) concepts need to be uncluttered in order to be understood. Mrs Twit is described as ugly and one might, from a social standpoint, argue that Dahl is morally wrong to invite notions of ugliness into a child's mind as this encourages social disharmony and prejudice, but Dahl makes it clear that

Mrs Twit wasn't born ugly. She'd had quite a nice face when she was young. The ugliness had grown upon her year by year as she got older.
Why would that happen? I'll tell you why.
If a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on the face. And when that person has ugly thoughts every day, every week, every year, the face gets uglier and uglier until it gets so ugly you can hardly bear to look at it.
A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly. You can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts they will shine out of your face like sunshine and you will always look lovely.
Nothing shone out of Mrs Twit's face. (13)

Dahl cannot be accused of immorality; this passage (and the one quoted earlier from Danny, The Champion of the World) speaks for itself. The ugliness of the Twits is due to their total lack of sensitivity. It is the author's imaginative skill which makes such an intangible concept comprehensible to its readers. Put in very simple terms, Dahl provides the groundwork for a moral system based
on the sensitive evaluation of individual situations. The complexities of such a system are manifold but without basic footings nothing solid can be built.

The crudity issue can be summarised by saying that Dahl does not use vulgar humour as a particular model for behaviour but to expose the hypocrisy and shallowness of those for whom outward appearance matters more than spiritual qualities. The incredibility of characters like Mr and Mrs Twit and plots where the 'baddies' get "The dreaded shrinks" and finally dematerialise cannot be interpreted as setting out to corrupt society's moral framework. What they do is to reflect humorously children's unsocialised, unsophisticated feelings. Vulgarity is very much a man-made phenomenon teaching self-consciousness and repressing spontaneity. D. H. Lawrence believed that man is guilty of creating a self-glorifying, idealised humanity which is contrary to his natural instincts. His advice on educating children was: "First rule, leave him alone. Second rule, leave him alone. Third rule, leave him alone."(14) Primitive, basal feelings do not have to signify a primitive intellect and shallow spirituality, and to deny children their natural instincts because we fear a precipitative decline in their intellectual and spiritual growth is at least, short-sighted. Vulgar language is crude when it intends to insult, vulgar acts are offensive when they intend to cause harm to another. What is vulgar and crude is not necessarily the act but the intention.
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(6) The BFG, p.79

(7) ibid., p.52

(8) ibid., p.29

(9) ROBERT CORMIER, The Chocolate War, (Gollancz, 1975)

(10) ROBERT CORMIER, I am the Cheese, (Gollancz, 1977)

(11) GEORGE HILL, Dahl - Pied Piper with a Magic Pen, The Times (April 21, 1988)

(12) The BFG, p.41

(13) ROALD DAHL, The Twits, (Puffin, 1982), pp. 14-16

CONCLUSION

Moral freedom has always been possible (in theory, at least) but the twentieth century has seen such a marked movement away from authoritarian and religious ideals towards a more liberal ideology that greater emphasis is now placed upon the individual's own sense of right and wrong. Coupled with the fact that research has argued for a part of our moral sense being learned, we are perhaps even more aware of the degree of our responsibility to the young than were our Victorian forefathers, who simply fell back upon the fear of religious damnation as a means of "teaching" morality to the young. Throughout this dissertation I have been conscious of the need for another sense - that of proportion. Some of the criticisms levelled against Dahl's novels are, I believe, due to an over-zealous desire to protect the young, a fear perhaps, that standards are in decline now that moral freedom of choice is greater. There has to be a balance between this undoubtedly well-intentioned wish and the other extreme - amorality. It has been shown that though Dahl may take children off on radical, defiant adventures into seemingly amoral worlds, his novels always offer the guarantee of endings which affirm a secure morality closely linked to traditional values.

Close analysis of Dahl's novels, rather than superficial overviews, has revealed that the author does, in many respects, reflect conventional moral values - family loyalty, (Danny, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The Witches), integrity (Matilda, Danny, The Magic Finger) and above all, the condemnation of hypocrisy. It is perhaps a 'sign of the times' that journal and newspaper reviewers omit the very obvious qualities and moral values evinced in the novels and seek to concentrate on sensationalist issues which they know will sell copy. That literary critics are suspicious of 'popular' novels and best-selling authors is a cause for concern also, and should be borne in mind when assessing their views. Most people bring their own cluttered prejudices to bear upon any novel reading and adult preoccupations can very easily obscure evaluative judgments. However, the worst fault which has come to light as a result of this dissertation is that of omitting (for whatever reason) intended-audience perspective.

Dahl's novels are very much child-centred in form, in style and
in plot; the author himself never loses sight of his audience and, although it may cause an uncomfortable feeling, the adult reader never loses sight of Dahl's quite obvious preference for the honesty of children as opposed to the dishonesty of adults. The level at which he pitches his writing may not be a highly intellectual one inviting in-depth thought on any given moral dilemma, but his deep understanding of childhood has won him the respect of thousands of children. Having gained this respect he is in a powerful position to influence the morally immature reader. Kenneth Hoskisson said of moral development that it "is not changing one's point of view on a particular issue, but transforming one's way of reasoning by expanding perspective to include criteria for judging that were not previously considered."(1) Dahl opens up for children the possibility of using their own judgmental criteria when confronted with moral dilemmas; he gives children self-respect and the confidence to question adult didacticism. Their way of reasoning is expanded and his novels do take children forward. *Matilda* is an excellent example of the way in which a child may be morally superior to certain adults but still emotionally dependent, needing a safe moral universe in which to trust. Dahl allows his readers and his characters to move towards independence one step at a time, atuned to the vulnerability of the young. He never tries to turn his characters, or his readers, into miniature adults.

The sheer fun of his novels indicates Dahl's commitment to childhood as a time to be savoured and enjoyed and if the laughter is at the expense of adults, then it is because those adults do not deserve respect. Dahl clearly believes that children should be happy - that is why his child characters triumph - and if they are not, it is usually the fault of those in authority over them. Inglis, in his book *The Promise of Happiness* states that authors have a moral duty to create happiness.(2) If this is the case, Dahl is surely one of the most moral writers of contemporary children's fiction. Happiness however, is much easier to measure in children than the other affective qualities of literature. The best we can safely say (and no apology is made here for repetition) is that "Children are people" and "their infinite variety is something for which to be thankful."(3) It is a human failing to seek to 'package' even literary response into airtight containers with sealed solutions. The dangers of over-simplification are blinding to any true
understanding of the diverse nature of children and an insult to their individuality. If we desire to foster empathy and mutual respect in children we must surely provide for and encourage their points of view.

A superficial glance at Dahl's novels will only reveal their obvious entertainment qualities; a more detailed and serious study throws into focus much more that is capable of enlarging a child's sympathies.
CONCLUSION - REFERENCES

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