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Strange Characters and Wondrous Wordplay

Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnival-Grotesque in Roald Dahl's Work for
Children

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List of Abbreviations

In order to avoid having to type the whole title when referring to a book, I have used the following abbreviations. Full publication details can be found in the bibliography.

BFG	<i>The BFG</i> [Dahl]
CCF	<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> [Dahl]
JGP	<i>James and the Giant Peach</i> [Dahl]
M	<i>Matilda</i> [Dahl]
NODE	<i>The New Oxford Dictionary of English</i>
RHW	<i>Rabelais and His World</i> [Bakhtin]
W	<i>The Witches</i> [Dahl]

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Introduction

“Do you know that you are a writer?” These words were uttered many years ago by the novelist C.S. Forester. He had contacted the RAF pilot Roald Dahl and had promised him a meal in a good restaurant in exchange for Dahl’s war stories. Dahl, however, found it easier to write something down himself. Forester immediately saw Dahl’s potential as a writer – he had the story published in one of America’s magazines –, but he could hardly have foreseen that this soldier was to become one of the most talked about children’s authors of his time.

In the first stage of his writing career, Dahl became well-known as a master storyteller for adults. But when he started to write children’s books, he was immediately surrounded with an air of controversy. Critics disapproved of his style, which they found anarchistic and inferior to what they saw as ‘lasting children’s literature’. Dahl was either not to be mentioned, or heavily criticised. Adults were mainly against him, children just adored his books. Despite the heavy criticism, parents could not stop their children from reading Dahl’s stories, so that at his death, he was one of the most popular children’s writers ever.

But how should we read and interpret his stories? Many critics present us with interesting theories and points of view as to how they think Dahl’s work should be interpreted. Some of them are very intriguing, such as Jonathon Culley, who sees Dahl’s tales as modern fairy-tales and argues that they should be understood accordingly. Others compare Dahl to great literature from the past. Dahl has been accused of racism and anti-feminism. Parents mainly complained about the way authority figures were treated. None of them was fully able to convince me of their value, though.

And then, with a little help, I stumbled across Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Bakhtin wrote the following about Rabelais:

“Many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him. The vast majority, however, simply do not understand him. In fact, many of his images remain an enigma.” (RHW, 3)

I believe the same can be said about Roald Dahl. In this dissertation, I will try to apply Bakhtin’s work to Dahl’s most famous children’s books: *Matilda*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*.

I will start by summarising Bakhtin’s theory. Then I will closely examine the five books mentioned above. Rather than taking one book at a time as starting points in my discussion, I will focus my exposition on what various critics have written about Dahl’s work. They have criticised his humour, his use of taboo words, his language, and his treatment of authority figures in the books. It is my belief that much of the criticism will not hold out when I apply Bakhtin’s theory to Dahl’s books. Furthermore I will investigate how and where the film versions of these books differ from the original stories.

In chapter 2, I will at times define Dahl’s stories as fantasies (or even compare them to dreams). I see a very strong resemblance to the medieval carnival-grotesque world and the fantasies or dreams. After all, they (can) all have a sort of reversed world-order, a topsy-turvy reality; they are all used to control and deal with fears, frustrations, and desires you encounter in everyday life – albeit in a somewhat different fashion. And all of them have the power to help us create a new reality, in which laughter is one of the key elements.

1 Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque

Introduction

“Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated. And yet, of all the great creators of European literature Rabelais occupies one of the first places” (RHW, 1). These are the introductory sentences to *Rabelais and His World*, in which Mikhail Bakhtin introduces his notion of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, by discussing the most important work of the sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais (ca. 1493 – 1553), i.e. *(The Histories of) Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Bakhtin argues that Rabelais was the last to write in “the forgotten tradition of ‘popular humour’” (Vice, 149). Since then, carnival and the carnivalesque as manifestations of the folk culture – as opposed to the high culture of the ruling classes – gradually lost their importance.

What does the term ‘carnival’ mean today? What was its original meaning, and did this change in due course? Bakhtin associates the ‘carnavalesque’ both with the historical phenomenon of the carnival and its literary counterpart, “the carnivalization of literature” (Vice, 150). In her chapter on “Carnival and the grotesque body” (in *Introducing Bakhtin*, 1997), Sue Vice sees “Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival as an element of popular history which has become textualized” (149). She provides us with the following literary definition:

Carnival is, as Julia Kristeva puts it, ‘a signifier, but also a signified’: it can be the subject or the means of representation in a text, or both. The carnivalesque may be detected in textual images, plot, or language itself. As carnival ‘is a spectacle, but without a stage’, in which the participant is ‘both actor and spectator’, its textualization is not a straightforward matter, because the

change of form at once introduces the equivalent of a stage, and a sharp distinction between actor (character and narrator) and spectator (reader). (149)

That the carnivalesque may indeed ‘be detected in textual images, plot and language itself’, I will try to verify this by using various examples from Roald Dahl’s books in the next chapters. Before I come to that, the rest of the definition will be thoroughly examined in this chapter. First of all, a brief discussion on the origin and significance of ‘carnival’ is in order, before moving on to examine Rabelais and Bakhtin’s theory on the sixteenth-century author in *Rabelais and His World*.

Origin and significance of the historical ‘carnival’

The New Oxford Dictionary of English describes carnival as follows: “a period of public revelry at a regular time each year, typically during the week before Lent in Roman Catholic countries, involving processions, music, dancing, and the use of masquerade” (277).

Nowadays, the most famous carnivals in the world are the Brazilian carnivals, the Mexican Day of the Dead, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, or the Notting Hill Carnival in London. Whereas the origin of the name “carnival” dates back to the mid 16th century, and comes “from Latin carnevale, carnovale, from medieval Latin carnelevamen, carnelevarium [which means] ‘Shrovetide’, [and] from Latin caro, carn- ‘flesh’ + levare ‘put away’” (NODE, 277), the ritual itself has been part of various cultures around the world. Usually some sort of change in time was celebrated. This alteration in time (mostly centred around the transformation from the Old in the New Year) brought forward a belief that, since time changed, the world itself was ‘outside time’, so “the ordinary customs and laws held no longer”¹. During the Roman Saturnalias, master became slave and slave became master.

This topsy-turvy approach to life at certain periods during the year remained important throughout history until the beginning of the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages already, a shift occurred in the behaviour of the authority towards carnival and the carnivalesque. Where Roman masters joined in the festivities, the attitude of authority in the Middle Ages changed, from not participating any more in (but still tolerating) what they began to see as a feast of the lower classes, to a downright denunciation of the carnival. Especially from the seventeenth century onwards, ‘refinement’ became the vogue word: all things refined were good and

¹ <http://www.theholidayspot.com/mardigras/origin.htm> [July 11, 2005]

should be strived after, everything else was very often seen as vulgar and consequently being treated as a taboo.

Rabelais, laughter, and the body

Whatever happens in real life, has its reflection in literature one way or another, and ‘great literature’ was and is measured by similar cultural standards of suitability. Every written piece of literature has to pass the censors of their time: nowadays, the church still opposes books (think of the recent criticism against the Harry Potter books) and highly influential critics can make or break a book. In the case of children’s literature, adults decide what they want (their) children to read, as we shall see later in the criticism against Roald Dahl’s work.

Rabelais himself was not spared from criticism: enlightened thinkers such as Voltaire regarded him as a coarse and decadent author, whereas the Romantics saw him as a humanist, who, like Erasmus, confronts the world with a *Praise of Folly*². Bakhtin sees him as a writer, who “cannot be approached along the wide beaten roads followed by bourgeois Europe’s literary creation and ideology during the four hundred years separating him from us” (RHW, 3). Many have tried to analyse his work, but all “were incapable of capturing his essence” (RHW, 3). Bert Roest discusses Rabelais’ humour, and he focuses explicitly on laughter. Both Bakhtin and Roest acknowledge “Rabelais’ images are completely at home within the thousand-year-old development of popular culture” (RHW, 3). The giants Pantagruel and Gargantua “were included in popular culture long before Rabelais made them his protagonists” (Roest). Roald Dahl uses similar elements of popular culture in his books (giants, witches, cannibals, little people, a man-eating crocodile, etc). By using giants as his protagonists, Rabelais already uses characters larger than ‘ordinary’ human beings. At the same time, using such characters enables him to magnify certain human characteristics – not unlike Jonathan Swift in his *Gulliver’s Travels*, where being big, symbolises open-mindedness and having character, small on the other hand signifies the opposite.

Roest argues that Rabelais’ use of laughter “very often evolves around drinking, eating and sexuality”, and bodily functions related to eating and drinking draw quite a lot of attention”. All main characters eat and drink excessively, a subject matter which was typically used in late medieval folk literature, and “had to do with the fact that during parts of the year [especially during winter], the food situation was precarious for large parts of the population” (Roest). The theme is perhaps best known to us through famous paintings of the Flemish

² Roest, Bert. *De middeleeuwen uit als bron van vermaak: Over de humor in het werk van Rabelais*. Online: <<http://users.bart.nl/~roestb/franciscan/MEvermaak.html#Inleiding>> [July 18, 2005]

primitives, such as the *Peasant Fair*, the *Peasant Wedding*, or the *Fight Between Carnival and Lent* by Pieter Breughel the Elder.

There is not only excessive drinking and eating, but also excessive violence:

Rabelais' pranks and jokes sometimes testify to an absurd cruelty and find enjoyment in bloody and anatomical details. [...] Most adversaries of the protagonists are mercilessly done away with or literally fall victim to horrid practical jokes, sometimes with a lethal outcome. (Roest)

Rabelais' texts are more than just a succession of jokes and violence, they are also dead serious from time to time. In accordance with the saying "Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia."³, meaning "The letter teaches the events, allegory what you should believe, moral sense what you should do, anagogical is where you are going to". This line, taken from medieval biblical theory, shows that there are several layers of interpretation to each text. Roest believes that Rabelais knew his hermeneutic concepts very well, and as such, the medieval author was able to adapt these concepts to his liking, and that he expected his readers to look beyond the jokes and silliness.

The use of humour goes beyond mere mockery. Roest mentions "how medieval authors made use of witty compositions to achieve their 'serious' and educational goals". By making important whatever the dominant culture finds weak or even repulsive, repression of the 'lower classes' is being exposed. This hierarchy between the dominant ruling classes who determine what is taboo and what is not, fits into the cultural model of Yuri Lotman, who claims that every culture has its own semiotic order, according to Roest. Everything has its place, "as it was determined by God" himself – trying to change the way things are would therefore be sinful. During carnival time, however, "all prevailing standards are reversed to accentuate and intensify the proportions of the 'normal' world" (Roest). The jester or clown in William Shakespeare's plays, for instance, has a same kind of reflective function: Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a figure rooted in folk tradition, just like giants, witches, leprechauns, or dwarfs are. Contrary to Jacques, the clown in *As You Like It*, who only reflects upon the world in his speech, Puck is just as knavish in his speech as in his actions. The famous line "Lord, what fools these mortals be!"⁴ expresses not only his view on mankind, but also – in view of what happens next – how he enjoys 'fooling' people. In this aspect, Mr

³ Text taken from <http://www2.latech.edu/~bmagee/201/bunyan/pilgrims_progress_notes.html> [July 21, 2005]; free translation after Roest and the before mentioned website.

⁴ *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. – Act 2, Scene 2

Willy Wonka, the somewhat eccentric chocolate factory owner from Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, is not very different from our "knavish lad" Puck. But more about Willy Wonka in the next chapters.

As mentioned above, "everything which does not fit into the dominant semiotic order, is experienced as weird and threatening [...] and has to be dealt with in one way or another" (Roest), which very often means that the "weird" or "threatening" is being repressed. In children's literature, Dr Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* and Wilhelm Busch' *Bildergeschichten* are two examples of how a very dominant middle-class society punished whomever or whatever did not want to abide by society's rules. "The comic," Roest exclaims, "is a continuous criticism on and a challenging of the dominant semiotic order, an order, in which the appropriate behaviour and the appropriate speech are clearly defined".

Medieval theoreticians believed that, "if used appropriately, language could express the ultimate divine reality. But since human language is never adequate to express this ultimate reality [...], the monastic culture required pure silence, only to be interrupted by the rites and by the reading of the Scriptures" (Roest). In this respect, laughter was seen as "a sign of frivolity and pride" and considered to be "a manifestation of the demonic" (Roest). At the same time however, the comic was not completely excluded from religion. "Some criticism on the prevailing semiotic order was possible and even necessary to enlarge the ability of catharsis" (Roest).

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, a different perspective on human nature brought about an increase in the role of laughter. From the twelfth century onwards, laughter was seen as inherently human, and, as a result, it was no longer seen as sinful. "The question on the appropriateness of laughter still remained, however" (Roest). Francis of Assisi and his followers went even one step further and suggested, that "both the negative and the positive sides of a physical existence should be taken into account" (Roest), which led to the revaluation of the body and its functions. "The body became an ambivalent – yet very useful – symbol, referring on the one hand to the sublime [the mind, the heart; the body as created after God's image], and on the other hand to a more earthly meaning of life [the body and its connotations of sin, death and decay]" (Roest).

The ambivalence with which the body and its functions were surrounded exists until today. As we shall see later on, adults took offence against Roald Dahl's jokes which involved bodily functions such as burping (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG*) and breaking

wind (*The BFG* – “whizzpopping”). Before continuing with a discussion of Dahl’s work, let us consider Bakhtin’s view on the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin and Rabelais

As already mentioned above, Bakhtin saw Rabelais as one of the most important writers of the European literary history. In his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin continually stresses the key role Rabelais’ work plays in the exploration and analysis of folk humour, although he admits the difficulties we may stumble upon while reading *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

Rabelais is the most difficult classical author of world literature. To be understood he requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts. Above all, he requires an exploration in depth of a sphere as yet little and superficially studied, the tradition of folk humor. Rabelais is difficult. But his work, correctly understood, casts a retrospective light on this thousand-year-old development of the folk culture of humor, which has found in his works its greatest literary expression. (RHW, 3-4)

Bakhtin claims he has found the key to unlock the “immense treasury of folk humor” (RHW, 4). For a better understanding of Rabelais’ works, and – in our case – for a different understanding of Roald Dahl’s most famous children’s books, it is essential to “take possession of this key” (RHW, 4) and explain what this key signifies. According to Bakhtin,

[a] boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor. (RHW, 4)

Bakhtin distinguishes between three different manifestations of the popular culture (RWH, 5):

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.

Sue Vice provides us with some “further characteristics of carnival, some of its literary form only, some of both this and its street form” (Vice, 152), taken from Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (PDP):

4. Carnival is a ‘pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators’ (PDP 122), as its participants do not watch but ‘live in it’, with its suspension of ‘hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it’.
5. Carnival allows ‘free and familiar contact between people’ who would usually be separated hierarchically, and allows for ‘mass action’ (PDO 123).
6. Carnival *mésalliances* allow for unusual combinations: ‘the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid’.
7. Carnival profanation consists of ‘a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth’, to the level of the body, particularly in the case of parodies of sacred texts.
8. Death and renewal are central to carnival, represented most often by the carnival act of ‘the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king’ (PDP 124); the two states are inseparable in the carnival view: crowning entails decrowning (PDP 125).
9. Carnival laughter is directed at exalted objects, and forces them to renew themselves; thus its debasing results in new life, and it is ‘ambivalent’ (PDP 126): ‘[m]uch was permitted in the form of laughter that was impermissible in serious form’ (PDP 127).
10. Carnival parody survives in attenuated form in the ‘narrowly formal literary’ parody of modern times (PDP 128); in the original kind, ‘[e]verything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death’.
11. Carnival in contemporary literature does survive generically, although its influence is usually limited to the work’s content (PDP 132); its traces may be detected, for instance in representations of legends and unofficial history (Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, for instance), and certain kinds of laughter (PDP 165: Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*), image system (Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*), parody; within the individual character’s ‘ambivalent passions’ (PDP 159; Bakhtin cites as examples George Sand’s and Victor Hugo’s novels).
12. A local carnival feature is its ‘sense of a great city’, such as St Petersburg (Dostoevsky), Paris (Balzac) (PDP 160) or London (Dickens).

Any list of carnival features should also include a thirteenth category, that of carnival time, which is characterized, as Bakhtin says, by ‘[m]oments of death and revival, of change and renewal [which] always led to a festive perception of the world’.

(Vice, 152-3)

Carnival time is not linear, but cyclical, and the “combination of cyclical time with the other significant carnivalesque movement, the ‘logic of the “inside out”, [...] of the “turnabout”, of a continual shifting from top to bottom’, leads naturally to parody, as the carnivalesque was a parody of official life” (Bakhtin, as quoted in Vice, 154). But, Vice writes, “carnivalesque parody and travesty are quite different from ‘the negative and formal parody of modern times’, which only denies without renewing” (Bakhtin, as quoted in Vice, 154-5).

Carnival and “carnival festivities [...] had an important place in the life of medieval man” (RHW, 5), writes Bakhtin. As mentioned above (characteristics of carnival 4), all the people live in the carnival and participate. Combining this with the characteristic of carnival time, Bakhtin argues, that

[w]hile carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (RHW, 7)

Thus carnival caused the creation of “a second world and a second life outside of officialdom” (RHW, 6), a second world in which rules and logic of the official order lost their meaning. Next to the carnival, there was also the official feast, which “asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions” (RHW, 9). Such a feast “betrayed and distorted” the “true nature of human festivity”, for “the element of laughter was alien to it” (RHW, 9).

Bakhtin traces this duality of the world back to the “earliest stages of cultural development” (RHW, 6). But, he argues, “at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally ‘official’ ” (RHW, 6). Elements of this similarity can be found in the Roman Saturnalias and in the medieval carnivals, where, in both cases, laughter plays an important role.

The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for

anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church's cult. [...] They belong to an entirely different sphere. (RHW, 7)

The carnival laughter is in the first place “a festive laughter”; it is “the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope. [...] The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (RHW, 11-2).

Carnival laughter entails “comic verbal compositions”. This ‘laughter in language’ consisted in the medieval folk humour mostly of verbal puns or parodies in Latin or in the (local) dialect. In its own way, the third Bakhtinian category of the carnivalesque also belongs to ‘laughter in language’: “certain specific manifestations and genres of medieval and Renaissance familiar speech in the marketplace” (RHW, 15). Just as the official laws no longer controlled the people during carnival time, also the (verbal) etiquette was “relaxed and indecent words and expressions [could] be used” (RHW, 16).

It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb. (RHW, 16)

Bakhtin concludes, that “[t]his is why we can speak of abusive language as of a special genre of billingsgate” (RHW, 16).

All of these forms of the carnivalesque have been studied by scholars, according to Bakhtin, but “these influences have been examined separately, completely severed from their maternal womb – from the carnival, ritual, and spectacle” (RHW, 17). As a result, the various manifestations of the folk culture have not been “measured [...] within their own dimensions”, which caused them to be “subject to a false evaluation” (RHW, 18).

One of the principles Bakhtin describes is the “material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, [...] offered [...] in an extremely exaggerated form” (RHW, 18). The images of the “material bodily principle” form the main element in the works of Rabelais, defined by Bakhtin as “the concept of grotesque realism” (RHW, 18). He describes this literary genre “as one opposed to all forms of high art and literature” (Vice, 155). The bodily principle is “deeply positive” (RHW, 19) in grotesque

realism; it is “a triumphant, festive principle, [...] a ‘banquet for all the world’” (RHW, 19). The “essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation”, which is “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (RHW, 19-20). Grotesque realism “includes parody and any other form of discourse which ‘bring[s] down to earth’ [...], a task achieved principally through mockery” (Vice, 155): “[t]he people’s laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes” (RHW, 20). In grotesque realism, degradation “[does] not have a formal and relative character”:

“Upward” and “downward” have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. “Downward” is earth, “upward” is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of “upward” and “downward” in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly and the buttocks. (RHW, 21)

Degradation is closely linked to transformation and metamorphosis. Another important characteristic of grotesque realism is ambivalence. “For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis” (RHW, 24). Interwoven in all these features is the perception of time. As was the case with carnival time, we again have to make a distinction between linear (historic) and cyclical (natural, biological) time. Later on in the development of the grotesque, “[t]he sense of time and of change was broadened and deepened, drawing into its cycle social and historic phenomena. The cyclical character is superseded by the sense of historic time” (RHW, 25). Although the grotesque images developed over thousands of years, they have still “preserve[d] their peculiar nature” (RHW, 25) in Rabelais’ works:

They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of “classic” aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed. The new historic sense that penetrates them gives these images a new meaning but keeps intact their traditional contents: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment. All these in their direct material aspect are the main element in the system of

grotesque images. They are contrary to the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development. (RHW, 25)

The grotesque body is an unfinished unit; it “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (RHW, 26). The entire body is taken into account, but the emphasis is “on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (RHW, 26). Important in this respect are “the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (RHW, 26). Bakhtin first describes the grotesque body in the world, before he moves on to literature:

In the literary sphere the entire medieval parody is based on the grotesque concept of the body. It is this concept that also forms the body images in the immense mass of legends and literary works connected with the “Indian Wonders,” as well as with the Western miracles of the Celtic sea. It also forms the body images of ghostly visions and of the legends of giants. [...] Finally the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses. The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque. (RHW, 27)

The perception of the body changed towards the end of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance took over the aesthetics of the “literary and artistic canon of antiquity” (RHW, 28), according to which the “body of grotesque realism was hideous and formless” (RHW, 29). Renaissance aesthetics saw the body “first of all [as] a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore, it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed” (RHW, 29).

The literary genre of grotesque realism underwent some changes too: “[t]here was a formalization of carnival-grotesque images, which permitted them to be used in many different ways and for various purposes” (RHW, 34). Bakhtin mentions a few manifestations of the carnival-grotesque in the sixteenth and seventeenth century: in the *commedia dell’arte*, in Molières comedies, and in the works of Voltaire, Diderot, Swift and others.

In all these writings, in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view from the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. (RHW, 34)

Bakhtin concludes, that “[t]his carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (RHW, 34).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a “literary controversy broke out in Germany around the character of Harlequin”, who appeared “in all dramatic performances of that time” (RHW, 35). Central to the discussion was the question, whether Harlequin – and with him the grotesque – could be considered art. At the same time, “Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism witnessed a revival of the grotesque genre but with a radically transformed meaning. It became the expression of subjective, individualistic world outlook very different from the carnival folk concept of previous ages, although still containing some carnival elements” (RHW, 36). Examples of the “new subjective grotesque” are Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and the Gothic or black novel.

In Germany this subjective form had perhaps the most powerful and original development: the *Sturm und Drang* dramatics and early Romanticism [...], the novels of Hippel and Jean Paul, and finally the works of Hoffmann, who strongly influenced the development of the new grotesque in the next period of world literature. (RHW, 37)

The Romantic concept of the grotesque varied strongly from the medieval carnival-grotesque principle. In the first place, it was a reaction against the previous period, that of the Enlightenment. The Romantic grotesque “was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism” (RHW, 37). An important element of the new grotesque was laughter, which had undergone a major transformation.

This element of course remained, since no grotesque, even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It

ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum. (RHW, 38)

The loss of this positive power had some very important consequences: terror and anxiety used to be “turned into something gay and comic” (RHW, 39). As this is no longer the case, only the negative feelings remain, leading to a sense of alienation from the world. “All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure” (RHW, 39). The disappearance of laughter as a positive power has other consequences. Closely linked to laughter is the concept of madness, which is now seen as something tragic:

[T]he theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by “normal”, that is by commonplace ideas and judgments. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official “truth”. It is a “festive” madness. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation. (RHW, 39)

Bakhtin proceeds by touching upon the important theme of the mask. I will skip this for now, as it will be mainly dealt with in connection to Roald Dahl’s book *The Witches*. Before moving on to the twentieth-century view on the grotesque, however, the theories of Jean Paul in connection to the grotesque and especially in connection to laughter have to be examined.

In his “Introduction to Aesthetics [*Vorschule der Ästhetik*]” Jean Paul sees the (Romantic) grotesque as “destructive humor” (RHW, 41). In his theory, the term *Weltverlachung* (“deriding of the entire world” – RHW, 42) occurs with regard to “the [Shakespearean] “melancholy clowns” and Hamlet” (RHW, 42).

Jean Paul understands perfectly well the universal character of laughter. “Destructive humor” is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all reality, against the finite world as a whole. All that is finite is per se destroyed by humor. [...] Through [humour], the entire world is turned into something alien, something terrifying and unjustified. The ground slips from under our feet, and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us. Jean Paul sees a similar universalism and radicalism of destruction of all moral and social stability in the comic ritual and spectacle of the Middle Ages. (RHW, 42)

Jean Paul understands that “without the principle of laughter this genre [i.e. the grotesque] would be impossible” (RHW, 42). Nevertheless, he is only concerned “with a reduced form of laughter, a cold humor deprived of positive regenerating power” (RHW, 42).

After the Romantic period, the grotesque was mainly forgotten, until the beginning of the twentieth century. Bakhtin briefly mentions “two main lines of development”:

The first line is the modernist form (Alfred Jarry), connected in various degrees with the Romantic tradition and evolved under the influence of existentialism. The second line is the realist grotesque (Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, Pablo Neruda, and others). It is related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms, as in the works of Neruda. (RHW, 46)

Bakhtin does not analyse the twentieth-century concept of the grotesque any further. In the rest of his book, he discusses and examines Rabelais’ work more thoroughly.

We will turn to Roald Dahl and his best-selling children’s books, however. The basic outline of Bakhtin’s view on the carnival-grotesque which I have given above, will help us in discussing Dahl’s stories. As I strive to connect Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival-grotesque to concrete examples out of Dahl’s work, I have split Sue Vice’s definition on carnival (see page 7) into three parts. Each part will be the subject of one of the following chapters. I will start by discussing the carnival-grotesque in Dahl’s textual images, followed by an analysis of Dahl’s plots, and concluded by a thorough examination of Dahl’s language.

2 The Carnival-Grotesque in Dahl's Textual Images

Introduction

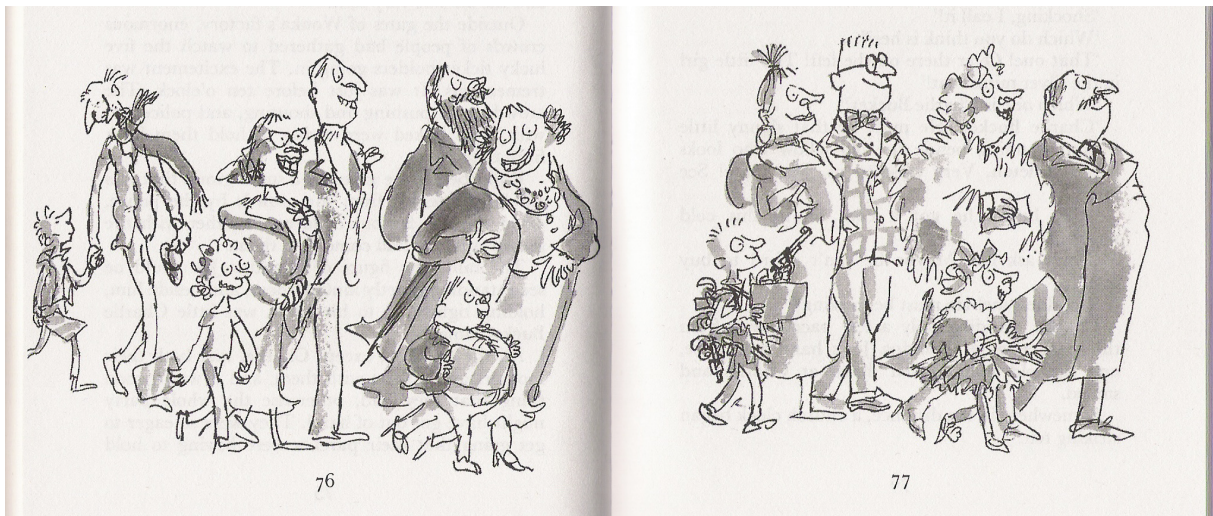
In Roald Dahl's books, the first aspect of the carnival-grotesque is very much present. His second book for children, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, is – in my opinion – the best example of carnival-grotesque in modern children's literature. This is also due to the stunning illustrations by Quentin Blake. In this chapter, I will discuss the textual images, meaning: how are the various characters depicted? Which ritual or semi-ritual spectacles occur in the books? Which characters are taken from popular culture?

Ritual spectacles

The first obvious example of the carnival-grotesque can be found in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. All characters are introduced as “types” in the text. A sort of carnival pageant is formed when the five ‘lucky winners’ and their parents (or, in Charlie Bucket's case, his grandfather) enter and leave the factory. Quentin Blake's illustrations beautifully provide the reader with a visual pageant (see below). In the first illustration – “The Big Day Arrives” –, the ‘winners’ are really parading, with the spoiled Veruca Salt and her parents in front. As the text suggests, Charlie is in a way not part of the group:

All the children, except Charlie, had both their mothers and fathers with them, and it was a good thing that they had, otherwise the whole party might have got out of hand. They were so eager to get going that their parents were having to hold them back by force to prevent them from climbing over the gates. ‘Be patient!’ cried the fathers. ‘Be still! It’s not *time* yet! It’s not ten o’clock!’ (CCF, 75-6)

The fact that Charlie ‘stands out’ is quite literally shown in the illustration: he seems to fall off the page:



“The Big Day Arrives” (CCF, 76-7)

In the second drawing, there is also a kind of parade, however slightly less triumphant than the first one:



“The Other Children Go Home” (CCF, 182-3)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one aspect of the carnival-grotesque is transformation or metamorphosis. It is my belief that upon entering the factory, the children (and their family) enter a carnivalesque world, where rules and logic do not hold. The participants of the last “pageant” are (in the drawing, at least) all those who have been ‘punished’ according to the rules of the other world: Augustus Gloop, who was “altered quite a bit” (CCF, 105); Violet Beauregarde, whose skin will be forever purple; Veruca Salt, “the little brute” (CCF, 147), and “her loving parents”, who “turned her into such a brat” (CCF, 148); and finally Mike Teavee, who has shrunk because of the “nauseating, foul, unclean, repulsive television screen” (CCF, 174).

The drawing suggests that the culprits have learned their lesson. The children do not look very happy in the illustration and this fact, combined with the lyrics of the Oompa-Loompa songs, make us hope for the better. In the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*-film, the five “Golden Ticket holders” (CCF, 71) all march towards the entrance of the factory as though they are about to race. Director Tim Burton has chosen to reveal at the beginning of the film that there will be a special prize for one of the children, and both Veruca and Violet seem to be taking the competition very serious. At the end, when the other children leave the factory, they do form a line, but not all children have been altered: Augustus is still a heavy-weight, this time instead of eating a chocolate bar, licking the chocolate of his arms and fingers; Violet has turned violet, but she enjoys her newfound flexibility; Veruca is “covered with rubbish” (CCF, 183), but she is still demanding her father should give her something (“Daddy! I want a flying glass elevator! Get me a flying glass elevator!”⁵); and Mike is simply stretched. In fact, the only persons who seem to have changed for the better, are the parents. They are not the proud parents anymore, who think that their children are wonderful, “[e]ven when their [...] child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine” (M, 1). It seems that they will no longer accept whatever their children do – which still is a good thing, as it means that a certain transformation has taken place, but since the children themselves have not transformed mentally, it feels as though the carnivalesque world did not have the effects it should have had.

A totally different thing happens in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, the 1971-film starring Gene Wilder as the famous factory owner. In this version, the children do approach the factory gates one by one, followed by one member of their family. Veruca wants to be the first to reach Mr Wonka and the others quickly follow, leaving Charlie and his grandfather to

⁵ Taken from *The Internet Movie Database* – “Memorable Quotes from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)”; Online: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367594/quotes>> [06-08-2005]

come last. At the end of the film, however, the glass elevator – or the “Wonkavator” as it is called in the film – simply goes through the roof and the end titles appear with the elevator flying in the sky. Indirectly, we do find out what happened to the other children; when Charlie asks Mr Wonka about their fates, he gets the following reply⁶:

“My dear boy... I promise you they’ll be quite all right. When they leave here they’ll be completely restored to their normal, terrible old selves. But maybe they’ll be a little bit wiser for the wear.”

We never get to see the children more or less transfigured into their former shapes. A certain hope is expressed, but unfortunately, this utterance is all we are left with.

Another important manifestation of the ritual spectacle – and of the carnival-grotesque in general – is the use of masks. Bakhtin sees the mask as “the most complex theme of folk culture” (RHW, 39). In popular culture,

[t]he mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. Of course it would be impossible to exhaust the intricate multiform symbolism of the mask. Let us point out that such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are per se derived from the mask. It reveals the essence of the grotesque.

In its Romantic form the mask is torn away from the oneness of the folk carnival concept. It is stripped of its original richness and acquires other meanings alien to its primitive nature; now the mask hides something, keeps a secret, deceives. Such a meaning would not be possible as long as the mask functioned within folk culture’s organic whole. The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it. [...] But an inexhaustible and many-colored life can always be described behind the mask of folk grotesque.

However, the Romantic mask still retains something of its popular carnival nature. Even in modern life it is enveloped in a peculiar atmosphere and is seen as a particle of some other world. The mask never becomes just an object among other objects.” (RHW, 39-40)

⁶ Excerpt from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

The Romantic form of the mask comes back in *The Witches*. Already from the beginning, the narrator's grandmother warns him for witches, who "dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women" (W, 1). Witches have to disguise themselves in order not to draw too much attention to themselves: they wear gloves to hide the fact that they do not have fingernails and wigs to hide their baldness, for instance. At first, our unnamed narrator is a bit reluctant in believing what his grandmother tells him about witches, and that is when she tells him this:

'You don't seem to understand that witches are not actually women at all. They *look* like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals. They are demons in human shape. That is why they have claws and bald heads and queer noses and peculiar eyes, all of which they have to conceal as best they can from the rest of the world.' (W, 23-4)

Bakhtin wrote that the Romantic mask "deceives, hides something". A bit further, he states, that "[a] terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind [the mask]". Never in Dahl's work is this statement more present than in the middle chapters to *The Witches*, when our narrator has his first encounter with the Grand High Witch. Before he realizes who she really is, he describes her as being "very pretty" (W, 59). This is what happens next:

Very slowly, the young lady on the platform raised her hands to her face. I saw her gloved fingers unhooking something behind her ears, and then ... then she caught hold of her cheeks and lifted her face clean away! The whole of that pretty face came away in her hands!

It was a mask!

As she took off the mask, she turned sideways and placed it carefully upon a small table near by, and when she turned round again and faced us, I very nearly screamed out loud.

That face of hers was the most frightful and frightening thing I have ever seen. Just looking at it gave me the shakes all over. It was so crumpled and wizened, so shrunken and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. It was a fearsome and ghastly sight. There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there. (W, 60)

Behind the pretty mask of the seemingly young woman, there lies the face of a deceased creature – as Dahl himself describes it. Although this “terrible nothingness” that lies behind the mask is an element of the Romantic form, the ambivalence between the pretty young face of the mask and the decayed face of the witch is a typical element of the grotesque realism (see chapter 1, p.16). Quentin Blake has again produced the accompanying illustrations:



Grand High Witch with mask (W, 59)



Grand High Witch without mask (W, 61)

A last aspect of the carnivalesque ritual spectacle in Dahl's work is the use of music and dancing. This is the case in both *James and the Giant Peach* and in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In *James and the Giant Peach*, it is the Centipede who regularly "burst[s] into song" (JGP, 71), sometimes accompanied by dancing. Inside Mr Wonka's Factory, the Oompa-Loompas "love dancing and music. They are always making up songs" (CCF, 96). The lyrics of these songs will be discussed later on in the Chapter on language.

The singing and dancing is very much present in the film versions of the books: Tim Burton used the lyrics of the Oompa-Loompa songs printed in the book and he added one extra song. In this song, Willy Wonka is introduced to the five ticket holders. However, the dolls suddenly burst into flames and melt while singing and dancing (as it appears, the fireworks in the grand finale was not such a good idea). I believe this song was inserted to show that Wonka really is out of touch with reality. This whole performance is pretty grotesque: the tone of voice and the whole act is rather amusing, but there is a sort of dark undertone as the whole set melts down – combined with Wonka's strange reaction to it: "I thought the middle part was getting a little bit dodgy, but that finale... Wow!"⁷. The other film version, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, is more of a musical, with characters regularly starting to sing and dance. In my opinion, there is too much song and dance in this

⁷ Taken from *The Internet Movie Database* – "Memorable Quotes from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)"; Online: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367594/quotes>> [07-08-2005]

version, which sort of kills the original atmosphere of the book. The film version of *James and the Giant Peach* – like the book – has lots of songs incorporated in it, as could be expected of a Disney production. Unfortunately, in the animated film version of *The BFG* – where once again characters cannot resist the urge to sing –, the singing rather breaks the rhythm of the film.

But let us now turn to a next important aspect of the textual images, and take a closer look at how various characters are being described.

Portrayal of various characters

In 1972, Eleanor Cameron published an article in *The Horn Book Magazine*, in which she compares *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to a TV show, where characters are superficial types, quiz-mastered by Willy Wonka, “the perfect type of TV showman” (“McLuhan, youth and literature[: Part I]”, 439). She has a right to think this – even Johnny Depp supposedly based the way Willy Wonka speaks to children on how TV showmen talked to their young audience a couple of decades ago⁸.

When you analyse the book as a manifestation of the carnival-grotesque, Cameron’s criticism becomes redundant. The characters may indeed be types, but since the factory symbolizes a topsy-turvy world – as I believe it does –, it is only normal that they *are* types. Certain human characteristics have been put under the microscope, and the text presents us with what the narrator saw when he looked through the lens. Inside the factory, only the children and their family seem out of place. The Oompa-Loompas are little people, but contrary to Jonathan Swift’s inhabitants of Lilliput, they do not symbolize small-mindedness. In this case, they form the moral conscience of the book through their songs.

Willy Wonka is another such character. Although he is not as small as the Oompa-Loompas, he is not a grown-up in the strict sense of the word either. He seems to be stuck somewhere between childhood and adulthood. He is described as follows:

[W]hat an extraordinary little man he was!
He had a black top hat on his head.
He wore a tail coat made of a beautiful plum-coloured velvet.
His trousers were bottle green.
His gloves were pearly grey.

⁸ Said in an interview for *MTV – Making the Movie: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

And in one hand he carried a fine gold-topped walking cane.

Covering his chin, there was a small, neat, pointed black beard – a goatee. And his eyes – his eyes were most marvellously bright. They seemed to be sparkling and twinkling at you all the time. The whole face, in fact, was alight with fun and laughter.

And oh, how clever he looked! How quick and sharp and full of life! He kept making quick jerky little movements with his head, cocking it this way and that, and taking everything in with those bright twinkling eyes. He was like a squirrel in the quickness of his movements, like a quick clever old squirrel from the park.

[...] His voice was high and flutey [*sic*]. (CCF, 80-1)

And this is how Quentin Blake pictured him:



Willy Wonka compared to the other adults (CCF, 144)

This shortness of posture not only symbolises the fact that Wonka threads on the borderline between adult- and childhood, but – together with the rather peculiar outfit – it also makes him look like the clowns or jesters of the medieval carnival. Bakhtin sees them as a part of the carnival spirit, which is present throughout the year:

Clowns and fools [...] are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. [...] they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, [...] but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of

life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were. (RHW, 8)

Willy Wonka is such a “vague” figure, “real and ideal at the same time”. He has the reflective function mentioned in the previous chapter (p.10): Wonka exposes the children’s (and in Veruca’s case also the parents) bad characteristics, and punishes them for it.

In *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, the owner of a sweetshop compares Wonka to the Candy man, a popular figure in modern folk culture. He is just as mythical as Santa Claus, or the Sandman. And although the ending of the book – and that of both films – indicates that he is human after all (he asks Charlie to be his heir), Wonka seems to be ageless. Nobody knows how old he might be, and he is still “quick and sharp and full of life” (CCF, 80). The only reference to his age is made when the narrator compares him to “a quick clever *old* [*my stress*] squirrel from the park” (CCF, 80).

Tim Burton, who directed the most recent film version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, claims he stayed closer to the original book version than his predecessor, but he did add a little something: his Willy Wonka is just another human being with a childhood trauma, thereby allowing him to justify Wonka’s strange behaviour to his audience. He should not have done so, for this little adaptation de-mystifies the character of Willy Wonka. In the book he remains a character larger than life (like in Dr Heinrich Hoffmann’s Struwwelpeter, the St Nikolaus and Schneider – mystical figures, who punish the bad children), Tim Burton has brought him down to earth.

In his article, “It’s about children and it’s for children”, followed by the question: “But is it suitable?”, Jonathon Culley discusses among other accusations, the criticism of two female critics, who object to the way characters – especially adults and women in *The Witches* – are represented.

Dahl, says Culley, always follows the same pattern in this respect: “First, the characters are introduced along with vivid physical descriptions. They proceed to have a successful reign of terror when their behavior [*sic*] reaps rewards. Finally, they come to a sticky end” (60). Are children influenced by such treatment of characters? “By using vivid descriptions of villains and melding their physical characteristics with their personalities, Dahl forges an association of one with the other”, although he never explicitly writes that one necessarily implies the other (61).

But [...] children haven, I would argue, a familiarity with the conventions of folklore that allows them to operate two distinct schemes of reference, one within the book and one without. What possibly worries the more anxious teacher and parent are Dahl's additions to the conventional folklore scheme of reference. [...] Every villain is furnished with a striking physical attribute whether it be derived from traditional folklore or borrowed from a figure in Dahl's past. (Culley, 62)

Indeed, Dahl's stories do read like fairytales, as Quentin Blake later on suggested: "People who criticize him [*Dahl*] don't see that even real people are simply ogres and witches" (as quoted in Culley, 63). As such, "the characters lie flat on the page, with exaggerated personal qualities but relatively little roundness to them", following the rules of folklore. "By "purifying" the characters into archetypes, Dahl enables the child to focus more clearly on the dilemmas involved" (63).

Both [*Dahl's work and folklore*] normally involve exaggerated characters with obvious good-and-evil alignment, a narrator as a sort of companion figure, the prospect of the unexpected and the fantastic happening, violence, repeated themes, vivid images, and an ending where the heroine or hero triumphs over the villain.

Placing Dahl's work in the tradition of folklore, easily eliminates some of the criticism directed against his stories. Accusations of sexism or anti-feminism in *The Witches* are easily disposed of: "Witches *are* [his stress] women in folklore" (64). Claims of violence do not hold either; the most cruel things happen to folklore characters.

Dieter Petzhold, is another critic, who touches on the anti-feministic image of women presented in *The Witches*. Petzhold reminds those critics, who accuse Dahl of harbouring anti-feminist feelings in his story, that they forget the enormous counterweight the boy's grandmother represents. Through the ironical style of writing, the reader is constantly reminded, however, that he is 'only' reading a work of fiction.

The accusations of anti-feminism in *The Witches* can indeed be disposed of, and not simply by arguing that there are counterweights – such as the grandmother or Miss Honey – to the evil 'women'. Personally, I find it remarkable, that no critic opposed to the way Miss Trunchbull, Aunt Sponge, or Aunt Spiker are being portrayed. No (male) critic ever objected the fact that the Giants are all and only male, either. In the tradition of folklore, the use of witches is not anti-feministic at all. Dahl specifically wrote that witches *are* female creatures:

A witch is always a woman.

I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches *are* women. There is no such thing as a male witch.

On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male. So indeed is a barghest. (W, 3)

Nevertheless, witches only *look* like ordinary women, they “are not actually women at all”, but “demons in human shape” (W, 23-4 – see also above, p.25). In the same tradition, all giants are masculine:

‘Whoever heard of a *woman* giant!’ shouted the BFG [...]. ‘There never was a woman giant! And there never will be one. Giants is always men!’ (BFG, 42)

The use of witches, giants and other folkloristic characters larger than life (such as the Oompa-Loompas) allow Dahl and his readers to transfigure the dominant order. The whole book becomes a topsy-turvy world, subject only to its own laws.

Dahl constantly plays with sizes and its meaning, according to Peter Hollindale because Dahl himself suffered from his height:

Dahl’s size probably accounts for all the stretching and shrinking jokes in the stories and perhaps also the ageing and youthening ones too [*George’s Marvellous Medicine, Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator, The Witches*]. [...] We underestimate too easily the tyranny of norms – the way we measure psychological maturity by physical maturity, and blend them in a stereotype which contains our expectations. (Hollindale, 139)

Due to this, Dahl identifies or chooses sides with precisely those who are – in his view – being repressed: the children: “Dahl is speaking to the child [...] He is on the child’s side, at child’s eye view, but with superior knowledge of grown-ups” (Hollindale, 138).

This play with sizes not only happens in *The BFG*, where giants appear. To children, most adults look like giants. In the case of the BFG, he is larger than most adults, but he is a lot smaller than the man-eating giants. Catriona Nicholson compares the ‘fight’ between Matilda and Miss Trunchbull to the biblical fight between David and Goliath. Miss Trunchbull is indeed described as being “gigantic” (M, 135), and “enormous” (M, 210); other descriptions

are among the same line: “this mighty female giant” (M, 155), “like some giant of doom, the enormous Trunchbull strode into the room” (M, 210).

She was above all a most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete, and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. You could see them in the bull-neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. (M, 76-7)

Her opponent, Matilda, is a “tiny girl” (M, 6 & 64), who could never physically overthrow such a powerful giantess. So she has to use her brain (quite literally in this case, as it turns out) to get rid of the oppressor.

Contrary to the physically dominant Trunchbull, the Grand High Witch is a tiny creature: “[s]he was tiny, probably no more than four and a half feet tall” (W, 59). And yet, all other witches fear her, because the tiny witch has great powers (she fries one witch with her eyes). And still, an ever tinier creature – a mouse-boy – manages to concoct a plan to get rid off all the witches of England once and for all.

In *The BFG*, the other giants are great brutes, who could crush every human in the world if they wanted to. And our BFG himself could also be crushed, as he is much smaller than any of his fellow giants. Normally giants do not kill each other (BFG, 70), but when Sophie asks the BFG whether the other giants would “ever really hurt” him, the BFG has to admit that he does not trust them (BFG, 68). But in the end, brains win over physique – as is also the case in *James and the Giant Peach*, where little James Henry Trotter has to endure the hard work his two aunts (Spiker and Sponge) make him do, until the Giant Peach crunches them and leaves them on the grass, “as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book” (JGP, 57).

Murray Knowles (*Language and Control in Children’s Literature*) is another critic, who discusses the controversy that surrounded Dahl’s work regarding the portrayal of adults, especially since the publication of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in 1964. The grandparents are the most important adults in the protagonist’s life – especially Grandpa Joe. Although the “representation of Charlie’s grandparents is a key aspect of Dahl’s work”, it is probably also the reason “why some adults have been so intensely critical of him” (125). There are some adults who are accepted as good beings by Dahl, “but only when such

characters are themselves delinquent or in general set against the rest of society” (N. Tucker, as quoted in Knowles, 126). Danny’s father in *Danny the Champion of the World* is one such example, Miss Honey in *Matilda* another.

Again I believe that Dahl is merely mocking the way society expects adults to behave. But Tucker’s comment that only delinquent characters or characters set against the rest of society are accepted as good beings has some flaws in it. True, Danny’s father is a poacher, and Miss Honey does live very secluded and does not seem to have much contact with the rest of the teaching staff. What about Mrs Phelps, though? She introduces little Matilda to the world of books and gives her advice on which books she should read – thereby allowing Dahl to tell the reader which books he likes by giving us “a formidable list” (M, 12). She is neither a delinquent nor is she set against the rest of society. She might not be a major character, but she still remains an important one.

Cedric Cullingford explains the portrayal of adults in a slightly different way. He defines Dahl’s work as “essentially nursery stories, without any connection with the realities of the world” (154).

The stories combine some of the essentials of popular children’s fiction – narrative drive, excitement held in check by security, and the sense of the world of children being self-contained and self-concerned. They also add some ingredients of their own, like the relish in the discomfort of adults and the pleasure of schoolchild humour. (153)

Although I believe that Dahl – true to the carnival-grotesque – essentially portrays a reversed reality, this would fit the “relish in the discomfort of adults”, especially authority figures, since they are in most cases representatives of the dominant semiotic order.

Cullingford goes on describing what the key-ingredients of Dahl’s work are; by doing this, he tries at the same time to explain why children adore the books. The key-word in Dahl’s work is fantasy. Dahl constantly plays with the very thin line between imagination, fantasy and reality. “The sense of the one-liner or remark that destroys the opposition, and which children either wish they could think of or wish they had thought of at the time, is also much used” (156). Adults are, of course, practically always depicted as the worst kinds of being in the world – and the smart protagonist always triumphs in the end. But Dahl did not invent this. Think of fairy tales like Snow White or Cinderella. They both have an evil stepmother and both end up marrying their Prince Charming; still, when you examine both young ladies

more closely, you cannot help but notice that they are shallow – despite their protagonist-status.

According to Cullingford, Dahl adapted the parents-are-bad stories in two ways:

Parents are often expunged and their place taken for bad or good by others [...] the children are surrounded by lots of *very* [his stress] old people as well as very weird ones. And, at the same time, the heroes in Dahl's books tend to be by themselves rather than in a pair or a group. Other children do appear, but [...] they tend to be caricatures of nasty habits. (Cullingford, 157)

Sharon E. Royer also discusses Dahl's portrayal of adults, which, according to some critics, is bound to have a negative effect on children. Bruno Bettelheim (as quoted in Royer) points out the limitations of such view:

There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own nature -- the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be.

These lines reflect the Romantic image of children as completely innocent beings, and the bourgeois image of the child and its need to protect them by controlling the child completely. They did this by only letting them play in a controlled environment, like the nursery room, or the man-made garden, and by controlling their thoughts (only letting them hear and read what they 'should' hear or read).

In his article "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children" Mark I. West also speaks about adults controlling children. He starts by looking at the difference between children and adults when it comes to the perception of the humour and jokes Dahl uses in his children's books: "[adults] often deplore as tasteless many of the stories, situations, and jokes that children find humorous. This conflict, however, involves more than taste; it also involves differences in the psychology of children and adults" (West & Rollin, 92). Dahl is quoted at the end of the article, saying that children's humour is uncivilized, or "semicivilized [sic]".

They are in the process of becoming civilized, and the people who are doing the civilizing are the adults around them, specifically their parents and their teachers. Because of this, children are inclined, at least subconsciously, to regard grown-ups as the enemy.” (Roald Dahl, as quoted in West & Rollin, 94-5)

This kind of humour is not accepted by adults, who want to keep their children under control at all times. But children do not want to be puppets on strings, no more than adults do. And just like adults, children try to relieve this anxious tension through humour. West uses the theory of Paul E. McGhee, a child psychologist, who wrote a book about the origin and development of humour:

For very young children, this form of humor is expressed without a hint of subtlety. [...] “It becomes boring simply to say taboo words, so more complicated and interesting ways of expressing “toilettness” are created. This pattern continues throughout the child’s development; that is, new ways of joking about the sources of tension are developed as new intellectual capacities evolve. The underlying conflict may be the same, but children generally prefer intellectually challenging ways of joking about conflicts” (McGhee, as quoted in West & Rollin, 93)

Dahl’s humour used in his children’s writings is not revolting at all – as David Rees believes it is – but is perfectly natural and normal. Adults are used to their “civilized” humour and every deviation from the norm is brutally attacked. They cannot expect children to have the same refined taste. Dahl understands this and is extremely popular as a children’s author, precisely because he uses “the same kinds of humor [sic] that children use themselves”, and because he sympathizes “with children in their conflicts with adults” (West & Rollin, 94).

3 The Carnival-Grotesque in Dahl's Plots

Introduction

In this Chapter, I will discuss the violent deaths and punishments that befall some of the characters, as well as the alleged accusations of racism. Both subjects have been the topic of heated discussions, and critics would often conclude that Dahl's plots were too violent to be suited for children. As I have done in the last section of the previous chapter, I will first give you a summary of the various critics, and then I will demonstrate by using examples from the books, that at least some of the criticism becomes invalid when you apply the carnival-grotesque theory to the books.

The chocolate factory: a “gastronomic utopia”?

Eleanor Cameron's article in *The Horn Book Magazine* caused quite a stir in 1972: it was the source of a very heated discussion for almost a year. She argues that “writers for children, librarians, and particularly parents and elementary school teachers *must* [her stress] involve the child with literature from the moment he can be read to” (“McLuhan, youth and literature [: Part I]”, 435). Basically she seems to be blaming every adult involved in the education of (a) child(ren), that they do not know enough about the ‘good literature’ circulating for children in the world; according to Cameron, that is why children are being introduced to popular writers, who in her opinion don't always know how to write a good story (she means a “decent” story). In her days, children were introduced to the worlds of *Charlotte's Web*, *Little Women*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe* and other books that are still popular after many decades. But now, she complains, adults read their children only the popular authors of the moment. Before she goes on praising the jewels of her childhood in the next two parts of her article, she briefly mentions one such popular

author, Roald Dahl. His *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is criticised as “on the one hand, one of the most tasteless books ever written for children; and on the other, one of the best” (“McLuhan, youth and literature [: Part I]”, 438).

Before she turns to Dahl’s humour in relation to violence and punishments, Cameron starts by criticising the fact that the book “gives us the ideal world as one in which a child would be forever concerned with candy and its manufacture, with the chance to live in it and on it and by it” (ibid., 439). Almost thirty years later, Maria Nikolajeva describes the book in a similar way; she sees *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as a modern “Schlaraffenland” variation – a “gastronomic utopia” (Nikolajeva 2000, 55). She concludes that “Dahl manages to squeeze in the usual morals about healthy and unhealthy food in his story. Since it is Charlie’s passion for chocolate that makes him the master of the factory, the moral is quite ambiguous” (Nikolajeva 2000, 56).

In the tradition of the carnival-grotesque, however, it is perfectly normal that the characters are put in a place where an excess of food is available to them. Especially since our protagonist is a young boy who never gets enough to eat:

There wasn’t even enough money to buy proper food for [the whole family]. The only meals they could afford were bread and margarine for breakfast, boiled potatoes and cabbage for lunch, and cabbage soup for supper. Sundays were a bit better. They all looked forward to Sundays because then, although they had exactly the same, everyone was allowed a second helping.

The Buckets, of course, didn’t starve, but every one of them [...] went about from morning till night with a horrible empty feeling in their tummies. (CCF, 15-6)

And then winter comes, and Mr Bucket loses his job, so that there is even less food for the family. The “precarious food situation” especially during winter has a long tradition, and is one of the reasons for the excessive eating and drinking during the carnival period (see also chapter 1 – p.9). In Charlie’s case, he enters the carnival realm upon entering the chocolate factory. Nevertheless, the only characters who behave excessively are the other four ticket holders. One by one, they are being punished for their conduct. It is Augustus, who takes “a big handful” of the candy grass “made of a new kind of soft, minty sugar” (CCF, 90), while all the others only pick one blade of grass. Augustus is the one who drinks from the chocolate river, although Wonka begs him to stop (CCF, 96-7). Violet eats the special gum – although Wonka repeatedly warns her that this new invention of his still has some flaws (CCF, 122-3).

Charlie drinks one large mug of “warm creamy chocolate” (CCF, 109) – which the others do not get to drink – but it is handed to him by Wonka himself. Ironically enough, his modesty is rewarded in the end and gets him the chocolate factory. So I think, that even though Charlie will be living inside the factory from now on, he has passed the various tests as it were.

As for Nikolajeva’s comment on the ambiguous moral in the story, I do not believe it is quite valid. As I have repeatedly pointed out, the chocolate factory is first and foremost a reversed reality, where normal laws do not apply. Secondly, Augustus is not punished because he eats candy, but because he is greedy and eats too much. The same holds for Violet: gum itself is not repulsive – Wonka has just invented a new kind of gum, but *too much* gum is. The Oompa-Loompa song is very clear about this:

There’s almost nothing worse to see
Than some repulsive little bum
Who’s *always* [*my stress*] chewing chewing-gum. (CCF, 127)

The rest of the song tells us about a lady, who could not stop chewing all day long – and hence she becomes dumb. The other two children, Veruca and Mike, are also punished for their excessive behaviour. It may not be food related, but Veruca is too spoiled, and Mike is too obsessed with television.

Violence, sadistic punishments, and sticky ends

Cameron’s next point of critique is Dahl’s humour – and related to it, the violent deaths and punishments. She asks herself whether reading about such violent and sadistic punishments might harm children, and she has to admit she does not know (a fact which Dahl in his reply mentions as one of the flaws in her critique – see below):

What I object to in *Charlie* is its phony presentation of poverty and its phony humor, which is based on punishment with overtones of sadism; its hypocrisy which is epitomized in its moral stuck like a marshmallow in a lump of fudge – that TV is horrible and hateful and time-wasting and that children should read good books instead, when in fact the book itself is like nothing so much as one of the more specious television shows.[...] If I ask myself whether children are harmed by reading *Charlie* or having it read to them, I can only say I don’t know. (Cameron; “McLuhan, youth and literature [: Part I]”, 440)

In the second part of her article, she briefly comes back to *Charlie*, when she expresses her regret that “considerable sums, taken out of tight library budgets, should be expended on sometimes as many as ten copies of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Knopf) and that hard-won classroom time should be given over to the reading aloud of a book without quality or lasting content” (Cameron; “McLuhan, youth and literature: Part II”). Before I move on, I would like to comment that, although Cameron has elaborately expressed her abhorrence of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, she fails to explain why she regards the book at the same as one of the best children’s books ever written.

Nevertheless, her heavy criticism of contemporary children’s literature was unfortunately directed against Roald Dahl alone. Although Cameron most likely had other books and authors in mind, Dahl took her criticism personal and wrote a letter to *The Horn Book Magazine*, resenting

the patronizing attitude she adopts toward the teachers of America. She says, “*Charlie* ... is probably the book most read aloud by those teachers who have no idea, apparently, what other books they might read to the children.” [“McLuhan, youth and literature [: Part I]”, 438] [...] It is an enormous conceit for Mrs. Cameron to think that her knowledge is greater than theirs or her taste more perfect. Mrs. Cameron finally asks herself whether children are harmed by reading *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*. She isn’t quite sure, but she is clearly inclined to think that they are. (Dahl, “Charlie ...”: A Reply)

Cameron in her turn tried to explain herself, by arguing that Dahl took words out of their context:

I said that I wished more teachers had a real working knowledge of children’s books which they could use to rich advantage in their classes. Mr. Dahl’s exaggeration of these two statements into “insinuating nasty things ... about the school teachers of America” is incredible. [...] popularity and the literary value of a book are so often confused. Popularity in itself does not prove anything about a book’s essential worth; there are all sorts of poor and mediocre creations which are enormously popular simply because they are wish-fulfilling. (Cameron; A Reply to Roald Dahl)

The next couple of months, a lot of readers reacted, and their letters were published in the “Letters to the Editors”. The different reactions can be divided in a contra-*Charlie* and a pro-*Charlie* side. Some are very much against *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – especially

with regard to the “violent sides” of the story; the famous writer Ursula K. Le Guin even complains about her daughter becoming possessed by the book:

That Mr. Dahl’s books have a very powerful effect on children is evident. Kids between 8 and 11 seem to be truly fascinated by them; one of mine used to finish *Charlie* and then start it right over from the beginning [...]. She was like one possessed while reading it, and for a while after reading she was, for a usually amiable child, quite nasty. (“Letters to the Editor”, April 1973)

As she searches for an explanation for her daughter’s behaviour, she concludes that “[a]pparently the books, with their wish-fulfillment [*sic*], their slam-bang action, and their ethical crassness, provide a genuine escape experience, a tiny psychological fugue, very like that provided by comic books” (ibid.). She admits that everyone needs “an escape vent now and then”, and that “kids are very tough”. Still, she “boggle[s] at the thought of [...] actually sitting down to read such a book to children” (ibid.).

Others, mostly librarians and teachers, are happy that Dahl is such a popular author, because it makes children read – a lot like the Harry Potter-books nowadays. Or they point out that the book is a modern fairy tale (see also below), and as such,

it should not be exhorted to weigh itself down with the woes of the real world. It bears no responsibility for in-depth character development, any more than *The Phantom Tollbooth* or *Alice in Wonderland* do. [...] We need not spend any more time agonizing over the exploitation of the Oompa-Loompas than we do over that of the poor peasantry in fairy tales. (“Letters to the Editor”, June 1973)

And – what is probably the most important comment – we have to let children choose for themselves what they would like to read, since

[children] themselves are not devoid of taste and judgment and to assume so is to do them a great disservice. Yet, when they embrace a book we do not fully appreciate ourselves, we merely point to that as further evidence of their own inability to select wisely. We hate to admit it, until many years later, that they might have uncovered a gem we passed over. By no means are children incapable of making strong literary judgments. They do it all the time and it’s about time we began to listen to them. They have chosen *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and, like it or not, they will keep him no matter what adult literary arbiters have to say. (“Letters to the Editor”, June 1973)

Cedric Cullingford discusses the hate and anger contained in the books. Cullingford makes the same observations Ursula Le Guin makes about her daughter behaving nasty after reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (“Letters to the Editor”, April 1973 – see above). “The anger [...] is a sign of spleen against objects, people and habits, a pleasure in taking umbrage, a joy in exaggerated and wilful prejudice” (Cullingford, 159). But he does not condemn this hate as being bad for children, on the contrary. Children connect with the stories, because they can vent their own anger through the books. They recognize personal experiences in the adventures of the protagonists. And most importantly, they offer a temporary escape from the authoritarian adult world.

Is Dahl trying to make children reassess their own parents? This is what it sounds like, but the fact is that children are doing this already. [...] The kind of message that Dahl is conveying is a kind of encouragement for the reader to have fun. (Cullingford, 163-4)

Another critic, Sharon E. Royer, comes up with more or less the same conclusion. “Each of the protagonists in Dahl’s books for intermediate readers [i.e. *The BFG*, *The Witches*, and *Matilda*] illustrates the capacity of young people to accomplish great things, and to exhibit an independent spirit” (Royer). Dahl has a positive impact on adolescent readers, not only because his views are similar to those of adolescents; they do in fact often feel alone, isolated, or oppressed by adults. Moreover, “good triumphs, and evil is punished or destroyed” (Royer). But the most important thing about Matilda, Sophie, and the mouse-boy is, that they know how to handle things, they are “not intimidated by authority figures” (West, as quoted in Royer).

When children are spoiled brats, however, Dahl punishes them in the worst ways possible – think of the four other contestants in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, who figuratively come to a very sticky end (see also chapter 2). After the Bucket family has read the interviews of the first four Golden Ticket winners, Grandma Georgina asks:

‘Do *all* children behave like this nowadays – like these brats we’ve been hearing about?’

‘Of course not,’ said Mr Bucket, smiling at the old lady in the bed. ‘Some do, of course. In fact, quite a lot of them do. But not *all*.’ (CCF, 51)

Dahl seems to be asking his readers to evaluate themselves. Before we have really entered the chocolate factory, he already looks at the world through a magnifying glass. The children’s

parents are not spared either: they are responsible for their children's upbringing, and should therefore also be punished when they do something wrong. When it comes to parents, Dahl distinguishes between two types of parents. In the opening paragraphs of *Matilda*, he tells his readers about them:

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

Some parents go further. They become so blinded by adoration they manage to convince themselves their child has qualities of genius.

Well, there is nothing very wrong with all this. It's the way of the world. It is only when the parents begin telling *us* about the brilliance of their own revolting off-spring, that we start shouting, 'Bring us a basin! We're going to be sick!'

[...]

Occasionally one comes across parents who take the opposite line, who show no interest at all in their children, and these of course are far worse than the doting ones. (M, 1-4)

We encounter both types of parents in Dahl's work: the doting ones appear in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and the uninterested parents are Matilda's own parents, Mr and Mrs Wormwood. As both types of parents cause harm to their children, both are punished. Look at what the Oompa-Loompas sing, when Veruca Salt falls down the garbage chute:

But now my dears, we think you might
Be wondering – is it really right
That every single bit of blame
And all the scolding and the shame
Should fall upon Veruca Salt?
Is she the only one at fault?
For though she's spoiled, and dreadfully so,
A girl can't spoil herself, you know.
Who spoiled her, then? Ah, who indeed?
Who pandered to her every need?
Who turned her into such a brat?
Who are the culprits? *Who* did that?
Alas! You needn't look so far
To find out who these sinners are.
They are (and this is very sad)

Her loving parents, MUM and DAD.
And that is why we're glad they fell
Into the rubbish chute as well. (CCF, 148)

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the “bad” parents are punished by the carnivalesque world they entered. In *Matilda*, she is the one who punished her parents – especially her father – for their misbehaviour:

Most children in Matilda's place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn't do this. She sat there very still and white and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked is, as Napoleon once said, to counter-attack. Matilda's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising yet another suitable punishment for the poisonous parent. (M, 35)

She makes her father glue his hat to his head; she makes her parents believe that there is a ghost in the house; she makes her father dye his hair blond; etc. Nevertheless, her parents never change. In the end, it is even the mother who ultimately pushes Matilda away – after the little girl has found herself a better mother.

‘Come on, Harry,’ the mother said, pushing a suitcase into the back seat. ‘Why don't we let her go if that's what she wants. It'll be one less to look after.’

‘I'm in a hurry,’ the father said. ‘I've got a plain to catch. If she wants to stay, let her stay. It's fine with me.’

Matilda leapt into Miss Honey's arms and hugged her, and Miss Honey hugged her back, and then the mother and father and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tyres screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window, but the other two didn't even look back. (M, 232)

In the film version, Matilda's parents sign her off, so that Miss Honey can legally adopt her, but not without her mother sharing a brief moment with her daughter expressing regret that they never understood one another. She even waves her daughter goodbye as the Wormwoods drive off to the airport. The parents seem a little bit more human – as though a touch of humanity was needed to make this film.

A lot of Dahl's heroes and heroines (ultimately) find happiness in a (surrogate) one-parent family: Danny and his father, Matilda and Miss Honey, Sophie and the BFG, the boy in *The Witches* and his grandmother. But this is not the original situation. To achieve this happy 'family', "[some] parents are (in narrative terms) hygienically disposed of. James's are consumed by a rhinoceros, and the boy in *The Witches* loses his in a car crash" (Hollindale, 141). The theme of parentless protagonists is not something Dahl came up with. He may get rid of the parents in a rather unconventional matter, but a lot of protagonists from world famous books have lost their parents: Frodo in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*; Harry Potter; the children in the *Chronicles of Narnia* (C.S. Lewis); Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*; the Baudelaire children from the *Lemony Snicket* series; Mary Lennox in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*; Johanna Spyri's Heidi; etc.

Whatever relationships the characters in Dahl's book may end up with, Hollindale concludes, "*none* [his stress] of them is about a conventional love between parent and child – at any rate not without some major element of role-reversal" (143).

The BFG is one such surrogate parent. Hollindale uses the character of the BFG to answer his key question: is Dahl an anarchist – a label given to him by many adults – or is he conservative?

The BFG is anarchic and subversive in its comic disrespect for conventional authority. This is at its most blatantly Dahl-esque on the question of bodily functions [...] Is this anarchic, or conservative? Anarchic, most people might say: encouraging children to vulgarity. And yet, it might be argued, how can it be vulgar to acknowledge our universal nature? Somewhere behind Dahl's work is an implicit model of adult sanity, coupled with ceaseless misanthropic anger at humankind's perpetual betrayal of it (144).

A few pages later, however, Hollindale makes up his mind and concludes that the "social order is conservative, the morality certainly is not" (148). But before he comes to this conclusion, Hollindale returns to the subject of Dahl's view on the human being, adults in particular; need it be mentioned again that, "with the odd exception, the adults are a poor lot" (148)? Should you accuse Dahl of being subversive and anarchistic,

Dahl's answer to such an accusation might well have been that he *meant* to be 'subversive', and that the purpose of children's books is to teach their readers not what it really means to be an

adult, but how to avoid growing into the kind of adults we see around us daily. (Dieter Petzhold, 191; as quoted in Hollindale, 148)

Hollindale ends his article by comparing Dahl to yet another great English writer, Jonathan Swift, whose *Gulliver's Travels* caused a lot of controversy in their times: "Dahl is Swift for modern children: conservative and subversive" (150). Dahl uses the same technique Swift used: "all you do is to change the perspective, take a magnifying glass to ordinary adult humankind, disrupt the norms of size and distance, move the visual goalposts, and this is what you see" (Hollindale, 149) – as you would do in a carnivalesque world.

Fairy tales, folklore, violent fantasies, and Struwwelpeter

Jonathon Culley questions the suitability of Dahl's children's books: "Dahl has been heavily criticised for his books' vulgarity, fascism, violence, sexism, racism, occult overtones, promotion of criminal behavior [*sic*], and literary technique" (Jonathon Culley, 59). And yet, Culley argues, there is "a rational basis to the attacks, a basis from which springs 'a fear that children will get stuck in the rut of reading only Dahl'" (Charles Sarland, as quoted in Culley, 59). Like some of the other critics, Culley explains most attacks, by asserting that the stories make elaborate use of folklore, or by saying that the stories are modern fairy tales. Culley's answer to the allegations of sexism were already explained in the previous chapter. Claims of violence do not hold either, Culley says, since the most cruel things happen to folklore characters.

Rabelais also made use of excessive violence (see chapter 1, p.10): "Most adversaries of the protagonists are mercilessly done away with or literally fall victim to horrid practical jokes, sometimes with a lethal outcome" (Roest). And yet, we have to look beyond this violence to find the deeper layers in the text. If this is true for Rabelais' work, then why would it not be true for Dahl's work?

Mark I. West is a critic who tries to find these deeper layers of interpretation in Dahl's books (in: Lucy Rollin and Mark West – *Psychoanalytic Responses to Children's Literature*). He realises that "many of the criticisms of Dahl's fantasies are based on superficial readings" (West & Rollin, 17). In the words of Charles Sarland, West argues – and I agree with him here – that Dahl's work "is a good deal more complex than many commentators would have had us believe" (quoted in West & Rollin, 17). West continues his defence of Dahl's stories with a psychoanalytic reading of *James and the Giant Peach*.

Dahl's stories are not just 'adults-bad, children-good'-tales, West says, but they explore the child's psyche and give possible ways of dealing with the reality that surrounds them continually, because "children often engage in regressive fantasies when faced with ego threatening problems and anxieties" (18) – as all human beings do. West wrote the next sentence with *James and the Giant Peach* in mind, but any of the other tales follows more or less the same pattern: "[in] an unobtrusive way, Dahl's tale deals with a common theme of children's fantasies: the urge to regress psychologically. Dahl recognizes this urge and provides children with a framework to work through their own fantasies about regression" (West & Rollin, 18). The only thing Dahl does, is erasing the border between reality and fantasy. When James' adventure starts, he just ran out of the house after his two aunts mistreated him. He found a quiet place in the garden; a real child would at this time reflect about what just happened, and most likely fantasies about revenging himself – without ever doing it in real life. Dahl simply lets these fantasies become part of reality.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, James's entering the peach, could be seen as him returning to the womb: he has to crawl through a tunnel before he enters the core of the peach. There he encounters four bugs, which "can be seen as separate aspects of James's own psychological makeup" (West & Rollin, 19). The adventures he then encounters are all part of the process of his psychological healing, and at the end of the story, he is ready to be re-born again; "he is ready to re-enter society [...] he learns how to cope with the demands of both his internal world and the external environment" (West & Rollin, 21). When Dahl's story can indeed be seen as a tale of regression, the arguments of unsuitability are rendered meaningless:

"regression in the service of the ego ... has a definite beginning and end, is completely reversible, and is a function of successful adaptation to stress or change." James' regression meets all of these criteria, and this may explain why many children find the story so satisfying. (Michael J. Miller as quoted in West & Rollin, 22)

Catriona Nicholson uses a quotation uttered by Freud in his "Creative Writers and Day-dreaming", which describes the "traditional storyteller" as follows:

One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these storytellers: each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by

every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special providence ... All the characters in the story are sharply divided into good or bad in defiance of the variety of human characters that are to be observed in real life. The “good” ones are the helpers while the “bad” ones are the enemies and rivals of the ego which has become the hero of the story. (As quoted in Nicholson, 313)

As psychologists will confirm, “the retreat to a fantasy world is common amongst those who cannot control their environment ... fantasising becomes a necessary stepping-stone to try to cope with real situations” (Landau, as quoted in Nicholson, 314). “Those” are above all children, like James, like Matilda, like Sophie, like Charlie, like the mouse-boy, and all the other protagonists in Dahl’s stories.

The following quotation shows that Nicholson is aware of at least some aspects of the carnival-grotesque in Dahl’s work – she may not define it as the carnival-grotesque, but certain elements are present, i.e. transformation (what she calls “transmutation”) and the positive regenerating power of laughter (there is ‘horror’ and suffering, but true to the spirit of the carnival laughter, you conquer this ‘horror’ and suffering by laughing):

repeating patterns of transmutation [...] seen in the physically weak triumphing over the strong [...]; the innocent and vulnerable gaining ascendancy over the venal and grotesque [...]; the humble and meek over the prosperous and domineering [...]. This theme of regeneration through endurance and suffering is a persistent motif in mythology, traditional tale, and legend. [...] Such trials or tests of endurance represent a struggle, a confrontation with inner confusions, terrors, and painful experiences [...] messages of hope for the powerless and downtrodden in any culture and to the poor and ordinary growing up in any generation [...] Dahl extends, enlarges and obsessively repeats the model and achieves his phenomenal success as a writer primarily through his ability to align himself with the child in an adult world. (314-5)

Nicholson explains why she sees Dahl’s stories as (modern) fairy tales. She does not see the tales as merely written-down fantasies, on the contrary, they can be seen as “rites of passage: separation-initiation-return”; “the hero journey from adversity to fulfilment or resolution must be undertaken without symbolic parental representation, for parents belong to the world of reality” (Nicholson, 316). As such, Dahl, as an author, tries to guide his readers and shows them which path they should take.

Dieter Petzhold is another critic, who sees Dahl's stories as fantasies of aggression, in which children can vent their real-life desires and frustrations. He believes that *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was written in the tradition of the educational children's books of the early nineteenth century. Petzhold compares the punishments that befall the unfortunate four rich, spoiled children to Dr Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* (1845), or Francis E. Paget's *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, published in 1844. "In [*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*] treffen wir auf diesselbe Aggressivität gegenüber Kindern, die das Pech haben, ungezogen zu sein. Nur notdürftig kaschiert phantastische Komik diese Aggressivität" (in Ewers, 158-9). The only difference is that none of the children dies, although the Oompa-Loompa songs predict a possible sticky end. This is where Dahl turns cynical, according to Petzhold: when Augustus Gloop gets stuck in a chocolate pipe, the Oompa-Loompa's song tells us what is going to happen to him. They seem to try to reassure us, nothings going to happen to Augustus:

But don't, dear children, be alarmed;
Augustus Gloop will not be harmed,

But then they gleefully add:

Although, of course, we must admit
He will be altered quite a bit.
He'll be quite changed from what he's been,
When he goes through the fudge machine:
Slowly, the wheels go round and round,
The cogs begin to grind and pound;
A hundred knives go slice, slice, slice;
We add some sugar, cream, and spice;
We boil him for a minute more,
[...]
This boy, who only just before
Was loathed by men from shore to shore,
This greedy brute, this louse's ear,
Is loved by people everywhere!
For who could hate or bear a grudge
Against a luscious bit of fudge? (CCF, 105)

The song reminds us a bit of the song the Grand High Witch sings⁹ after she has told the witches of England of her great plan to get rid of all the English children:

Down with children! Do them in!
Boil their bones and fry their skin!
Bish them, sqvish them, bash them, mash them!
Brrreak them, shake them, slash them, smash them!
[...]
And all at vunce, all in a trrrrice,
There are no children! Only MICE! (W, 79)

When the Oompa-Loompas have stopped singing, Willy Wonka assures the remaining children that they “mustn’t believe a word they said. It’s all nonsense, every bit of it!” (CCF, 105). Grandpa Joe expresses some doubt right away (CCF, 105), and when he comes out at the end of the book, we see he has changed – but for the good.

Still, not all critics agree with a positive reading of the stories. David Rees claims that it “is difficult to avoid the feeling that Dahl [...] enjoys writing about violence, while at the same time condemning it” (as quoted in Petzhold-Ewers, 160). Another critic comments that “[these four appalling creatures] appeal to the worst in children, the cruel tendency to ostracize those who are different or odd” (Merrick, as quoted in Petzhold-Ewers, 160 – note 12). A third critic sees precisely in the ambiguity of the tale, its success: “Children respond gleefully to [*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*] [...] not only because it is a luxurious food fantasy, but also because it is a fantasy of aggression” (Bosmajian, as quoted in Petzhold-Ewers, 161).

But Dahl’s aggression and anger is not only directed against children, as we have seen. “Nicht weniger schockierend ist die Aggression gegen Ältere Menschen, zumal wenn es sich um nahe Verwandte handelt” (Petzhold in Ewers, 161), like in *George’s Marvellous Medicine*. George is sick of his wicked Grandma, and gives her ‘a dose of his own special brew’¹⁰.

Als sie daraufhin zu einem Nichts zusammenschrumpft und verschwindet, ist die ganze Familie erleichtert. Selbst die Mutter tröstet sich schnell mit den Worten: “Ah well, I suppose it’s all for the best, really. She was a bit of a nuisance round the house, wasn’t she?” [George, 104] (Petzhold in Ewers, 162)

⁹ The full text of this song can be found in *The Witches*, p.79-81.

¹⁰ *George’s Marvellous Medicine*. Back flap.

Rees is one of those adults who expect children's books to have a moral; he considers *George* the "most repellent of all Dahl's books for the young" (as quoted in Petzhold-Ewers, 162). Should there indeed be a moral to be drawn, his quote would be correct. But Dahl is simply expressing feelings of hate and disgust, which children experience in real life. "Im Gegensatz zu vielen anderen Kinderbuchautoren versucht Dahl nicht, solche Gefühle zu leugnen oder zu verurteilen und damit zu verdrängen; sein humorvolles Ausspinnen daraus resultierender Aggressionsfantasien *übertreibt* [my stress] sie vielmehr, *um sie durch Lachen abführbar zu machen* [my stress]" (Petzhold in Ewers, 162). Petzhold compares George's reaction to Grandma's death to the joy Hansel and Gretel experience when the wicked witch is burnt in her own oven. Yet he warns the reader that Dahl's story is much closer to reality than the abstract fairytale. "Entsprechend größer ist das Moment der Tabuverletzung und, daraus resultierend, das verunsicherte Schwanken zwischen lustvoller Aggressionsabfuhr und vagen Schuldgefühlen wegen eben dieser Rebellion gegen das Über-Ich" (in Ewers, 162).

Through the ironical style of writing, the reader is constantly reminded, however, that he is 'only' reading a work of fiction. And yet, Petzhold believes, that when reading *The Witches*, no total catharsis can take place, since there is no happy ending:

Im übrigen ist dies in erster Linie eine spannende Abenteuer- und Gruselgeschichte. Dergleichen Geschichten fordern von ihrer Struktur her ein happy ending; die Gewißheit des guten Ausgangs ist wohl die wichtigste Voraussetzung dafür, daß der Leser die Evokation von Angst als vergnüglich empfinden kann. In dieser Hinsicht bleibt Dahl auf halbem Weg stehen. (Petzhold in Ewers, 167)

Many other critics have also objected to the ending of *The Witches*; there is still some widespread belief that children's literature is supposed to have a happy ending. As Hollindale remarks, "[o]ne of the controversial things about the end of *The Witches* has always been that the little boy remains a mouse, with its short life-span, instead of being magically restored to boyhood" (142). And yet, he argues, this "means that his death will more or less be synchronised with Grandmamma's, and that is the consolation. But the true consolation rests in love itself" (142).

In the film version, one witch suddenly becomes a good witch – fortunately, she was not turned into a mouse – and she changes the boy back into his old human shape. Roald Dahl was not too pleased with this alteration; in his book, there *is* a happy ending, though: all the

witches of England and the Grand High Witch herself are defeated, and although the boy remains a mouse, he is quite content with his fate:

‘Well,’ I said. ‘How long *do* we live, us mice?’ [...] ‘I’m afraid a mouse doesn’t live for a very long time.’ [...] ‘A mouse-person will almost certainly live for three times as long as an ordinary mouse,’ my grandmother said. ‘About nine years.’

‘Good!’ I cried. ‘That’s great! It’s the best news I’ve ever had!’

‘Why do you say that?’ she asked, surprised.

‘Because I would never want to live longer than you,’ I said. ‘I couldn’t stand being looked after by anybody else.’ [...]

‘Will you live another eight or nine years?’

‘I might,’ she said. ‘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.

I had a little doze after that. I just shut my eyes and thought of nothing and felt at peace with the world. [...]

‘My darling,’ she said at last, ‘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.’ (W, 188-90)

This conversation takes places at the end of the book; however, right after the mouse-boy’s metamorphosis, he is already happy with his new shape. At the same time, he explains his feeling not depressed to the readers:

You are probably wondering why I wasn’t depressed at all. I found myself thinking, *What’s so wonderful about being a little boy anyway? Why is that necessarily any better than being a mouse? I know that mice get hunted and they sometimes get poisoned or caught in traps. But little boys sometimes get killed, too. Little boys can be run over by motor-cars or they can die of some awful illness. Little boys have to go to school. Mice don’t. Mice don’t have to pass exams. Mice don’t have to worry about money. Mice, as far as I can see, have only two enemies, humans and cats. My grandmother is a human, but I know for certain that she will always love me whoever I am. And she never, thank goodness, keeps a cat. 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.*

Yes, I told myself, *I don't think it is at all a bad thing to be a mouse.* (W, 112-3)

He gets even more excited about being a mouse when he discovers he can do all sorts of acrobatic tricks. But the most important thing is, that in his mouse-boy shape, he will be able to enter the houses of all the witches in the world and drop some of the Mouse-Maker Formula into the witches' food to finally and completely exterminate all of them. As a boy, he could never do this, for the witches would smell him from miles away. When he and his grandmother have finished this mission, they both will be very old, and they can die together (she is the only family he has left) – or maybe then he can leave the carnivalesque world.

The film version of *Matilda* has also changed the ending: in the film version, she can still move things with her mind and eyes, but she hardly ever uses her power anymore. In the book, the carnivalesque world begins when she gets upset over Miss Trunchbull's attitude towards children. Only then she begins to develop powers, and when Miss Trunchbull has been punished, Matilda loses her power:

'Something strange has happened to me, Miss Honey.'

'Tell me about it,' Miss Honey said.

'This morning,' Matilda said, 'just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I couldn't do it. Nothing moved. I didn't even feel the hotness building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I've lost it completely.' (M, 223)

And although Miss Honey comes up with an explanation (she has been placed in the top form at school, and her brain now has to "struggle and strive" (M, 223)), Matilda simply does not need her powers anymore. It is a bit like the BFG's bottled dreams: when Sophie is reading the labels on the bottled dreams, the children in those dreams can do the most amazing things, until they wake up – still feeling happy when they have had a good dream; but their (dream)powers have gone.

The film version of *James and the Giant Peach* has also been adapted: where James' horrible aunts become like "paper dolls cut out of a picture book" (JGP, 57) in Dahl's original story, in the film version they manage to save their lives by getting into a car. The car gets crushed with the aunts in it, but they somehow survive, and come back again at the end of the film. James then finally manages to shake them loose and the two women are locked up in prison. I believe the ending was altered for two reasons: first of all, and most importantly, the

violent death of the aunts is now no longer an issue (they still get punished, but in a less violent way than in Dahl's version). Secondly, the sudden reappearance of the aunts brings a new challenge for James. He has to convince the people that he is the one telling the truth, not his aunts. He only truly succeeds at this, when his new insect-friends rejoin him (they had gone lost during the landing) and show themselves to the mass of people.

Personally, I would have preferred the film version staying closer to Dahl's original tale, but what I do like about the alteration is, that it allows James to finally speak up to his aunts in the final confrontation. He shows them that he is no longer the weak little boy, who will do whatever he is told without complaining.

Racism

The last point of criticism I would like to discuss are the accusations of racism in Dahl's story-outlines. Cameron objects to "the using of the Oompa-Loompas" ("McLuhan, youth and literature [: Part I]", 440). Lois Kalb Bouchard accuses Dahl forthright of being a racist. But, Bouchard writes in a preliminary note, "[it] is significant to note that in response to criticism, the author and publisher have felt it necessary to make certain revisions in this book. [...] the Oompa-Loompas are no longer Black and no longer from Africa" (19). This change may reduce somewhat the impact of the charges, but part of the arguments remain valid:

Although the Black characters are treated in an approving manner, whereas several of the white characters are treated harshly, racism persists in the time-dishonored stereotypes, in the childishness and the dependency upon whites, of the Black characters. (Bouchard, 19)

This dependency is mostly highlighted in Mr Willy Wonka's relating to his visitors, that he found the little people "incompetent in jungle living" (19), whereas Mr Wonka presents himself as their 'Saviour', argues Bouchard. The name "Oompa-Loompa" furthermore suggests a mocking of African language sounds: "an offensive name since it tries to make fun of African language sounds" (19). Bouchard largely elaborates on how the Oompa-Loompas are presented. Although they represent the morals in this story through their songs, they are unable to lose the air of savagery surrounding them, he says: "they make music, and moral music at that, but with the touch of the savage. Besides, after the songs, the Black characters recede again into childishness, dependency and dehumanisation" (20). Apart from that, the Oompa-Loompas voluntarily serve as guinea pigs – as long as you provide them with cacao

beans – and when something happens to one of them, the others do not dwell up on his fate. “The Oompa-Loompas are still laughing” (21). The last thing Bouchard takes offence at is the fact that no “Black child is a contender [to take over Mr Wonka’s chocolate factory], although there are 3,000 Black people, many of them children, inside his factory. [...] It may be argued that the Oompa-Loompas are ruled out as heirs because of their size, not because of their color, but this is not what comes across in the context of the story” (21).

Culley, on the other hand, reduces the accusations of racism to an unfortunate attempt to describe the exploitation of and in the former colonies:

His treatment of the Oompa-Loompas reads not as “the author’s revealed contempt for blacks,”¹¹ but as a personal insight into imperialism and traditional relations between the industrialized and Third World countries. Such an insight has relevance in the appropriate area, perhaps even with older children working on an allied topic, but surely not as a minor aspect of a children’s storybook. [...] Dahl’s handling of the Oompa-Loompas [...] is liable to be misinterpreted by the children. (Culley, 65)

In the first film version (*Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*), the Oompa-Loompas appear as strange looking creatures (their skin is green and their hair is orange). Tim Burton’s Oompa-Loompas all have the same features (they are all played by one man, which is in itself quite funny when you encounter a ‘female’ Oompa-Loompa). The hair is no longer orange, but black, and the skin is rather dark, but with the bone structure of Native Americans. However, Burton emphasises Wonka’s professional dependency of the Oompa-Loompas: without them, the factory could not function. The Oompa-Loompas take care of everything, they are cleaners, secretaries, doctors, nurses, and accountants. But Wonka depends on them personally as well: the Oompa-Loompas are his cook, his barber and his psychiatrist (that particular scene is rather amusing), among other things, so that theoretically, he never has to leave the factory.

As I have mentioned before, I believe that the Oompa-Loompas’ purpose is to magnify the flaws of the four children – what Bouchard calls the “moral songs”. There are hints in the book itself, that the factory represents – if not a carnivalesque – at least an other world: first when the children and their family members enter the factory: “Then, as the gates closed with a clang, *all sight of the outside world disappeared [my stress]*” (CCF, 83). The factory itself

¹¹ Cameron, as quoted in Culley, 65

resembles “a gigantic rabbit warren, with passages leading this way and that in every direction”:

‘Notice how all these passages are sloping downwards!’ called out Mr Wonka. ‘We are now going underground! *All* the most important rooms in my factory are deep down below the surface!’

‘Why is that?’ somebody asked.

‘There wouldn’t be *nearly* enough space for them up on top!’ answered Mr Wonka. ‘These rooms we are going to see are *enormous*! They’re larger than football fields! No building in the *world* would be big enough to house them! But down here, underneath the ground, I’ve got *all* the space I want. There’s no limit – so long as I hollow it out.’ (CCF, 85)

Since the factory is itself a world outside the ‘normal, outside world’, then why would the Oompa-Loompas simply represent exploited ‘migrant’ workers and not have a higher purpose. Their wages may be paid in cacao beans, but only because they wanted this: the Oompa-Loompas already got “cacao beans for every meal” (CCF, 95), and Wonka was prepared to pay them normal wages, but they chose to be paid in cacao beans.

As I look further, I believe the Oompa-Loompas’ main purpose is to serve as sort of jesters or clowns, both very powerful figures. They are never afraid of speaking the truth and they represent a purer insight in society.

4 The Carnival-Grotesque in Dahl's Language

Introduction

In this last chapter, the focus will be on Dahl's use of language: how he plays with words. How he inserts "taboo words" into the text (some critics refer to "Dahl's vulgarity"). His use of (black) humour through language, and what he himself thinks a writer should be. As in the previous chapters, various critics will be discussed and examples from the books will be used.

Taboo words and toilet humour

Dahl's elaborate use of taboo words and ditto situations, says Jonathon Culley, are considered vulgar by adults, who believe "that the child should be shielded and not exposed to such content" (66). Why is that? he wonders. "It is part of a child's culture, just as it is part of what was, or still is, the adult's culture" (66). Therefore, it should not be banned from children's literature, just because adults are offended by it. The accusation of vulgarity is one of the hypocrisies Dahl denounces; "He leaves us in no doubt that adult power is often merely an abused function of age, accident, and aggression [...] Adults are simply grown-up children" (Culley, 66-7).

Catriona Nicholson feels the same way. Dahl does make elaborate use of "risqué humour and juvenile reference to bodily functions" (323), but children love this, it is what sets him apart from other writers. He is an adult making fun of and openly speaking about breaking wind, a subject that most adults find highly repulsive. And yet, *The BFG* – where it is called whizzpopping – is probably Dahl's most popular book.

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Dahl has added a short burping scene: with only three children left, the whole group passes doors behind which Wonka's sweets are being made. One of those doors says "FIZZY LIFTING DRINKS":

‘Oh, those are fabulous!’ cried Mr Wonka. ‘They fill you with bubbles, and the bubbles are full of a special kind of gas, and this gas is so terrifically *lifting* that it lifts you right off the ground just like a balloon, and up you go until your head hits the ceiling – and there you stay.’

‘But how do you come down again?’ asked little Charlie.

‘You do a burp, of course,’ said Mr Wonka. ‘You do a great big long rude burp, and *up* comes the gas and down comes [*sic*] you! But don’t drink it outdoors! There’s no knowing how high up you’ll be carried if you do that. I gave some to an old Oompa-Loompa once out in the back yard and he went up and up and disappeared out of sight! It was very sad. I never saw him again.’

‘He should have burped,’ Charlie said.

‘Of course he should have burped,’ said Mr Wonka. ‘I stood there shouting, “Burp, you silly ass, burp, or you’ll never come down again!” But he didn’t or couldn’t or wouldn’t, I don’t know which. Maybe he was too polite. He must be on the moon by now.’ (CCF, 133-4)

In this situation, burping is even required to save your life. In the first film version (*Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*), this short scene was altered and expanded. The group passes the door, and Wonka tells them of his special brew and he informs the children that they cannot taste it, because it is not quite all right yet. When the others move on, Grandpa Joe and Charlie stay behind and Grandpa Joe convinces Charlie of tasting the fizzy drinks. They have fun at first floating through the air, when all of a sudden they realise they have gone too high. If they do not find a way of getting down again (Wonka did not mention this), they will get caught in the ventilating system (and probably die). In all the excitement, Grandpa Joe suddenly burps, and that way he knows how to get down again. What follows is a burping scene – with Charlie and Grandpa Joe enjoying themselves once more.

The opposite happens in *The BFG*: the first time it comes up, it leads to a funny situation, where the child (Sophie) tells her surrogate father (the BFG) that burping is fun, but breaking wind is rude – the BFG does not agree, however:

‘But look! It’s fizzing the *wrong way*!’ Sophie cried. And indeed it was. The bubbles, instead of travelling upwards and bursting on the surface, were shooting downwards and bursting at the bottom. A pale green frothy fizz was forming at the bottom of the bottle.

‘What on earth is you meaning *the wrong way*?’ asked the BFG.

‘In our fizzy drinks,’ Sophie said, ‘the bubbles always go up and burst at the top.’

‘*Upwards* is the *wrong way*!’ cried the BFG. ‘You mustn’t ever be having the bubbles going upwards! That the most flushbunking rubbish I ever is hearing!’

‘Why do you say that?’ Sophie asked.

‘You is asking me *why*?’ cried the BFG, waving the enormous bottle around as though he were conducting an orchestra. ‘You is actually meaning to tell me you cannot see *why* it is a scrotty mistake to have the bubbles flying up instead of down?’

[...]

‘Why shouldn’t the bubbles go upward?’ Sophie asked.

[...]

‘If you will listen carefully I will try to explain,’ said the BFG. ‘But your brain is so full of bugwhiffles, I doubt you will ever understand.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ Sophie said patiently.

‘Very well, then. When you is drinking this cokey drink of yours,’ said the BFG, ‘it is going straight down into your tummy. Is that right? Or is it left?’

‘It’s right,’ Sophie said.

‘And the *bubbles* is going also into your tummy. Right or left?’

‘Right again,’ Sophie said.

‘And the bubbles is fizzing upwards?’

‘Of course,’ Sophie said.

‘Which means,’ said the BFG, ‘that they will all come swishwiffing up your throat and out of your mouth and make a frousome belchy burp!’

‘That is often true,’ Sophie said. ‘But what’s wrong with a little burp now and again? It’s sort of fun.’

‘Burping is filthy,’ the BFG said. ‘Us giants is never doing it.’

‘But with *your* drink,’ Sophie said, ‘what was it you called it?’

‘Froboscottle,’ said the BFG.

‘With froboscottle,’ Sophie 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?’ asked the BFG.

‘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.’

‘Redunculous!’ said the BFG. ‘If everyone is making whizzpoppers, then why not talk about it?’ (BFG, 56-9)

With these last words from the BFG, the narrator argues that talking about breaking wind and burping is perfectly normal. As we have seen in chapter 1 (p.15-6), using “indecent words and expressions” (RHW, 16) is allowed during carnival time. In the spirit of the carnival-grotesque, what is more degrading than burping or breaking wind? And it is also extremely funny, for even the Queen cannot help but smile. The following scene takes place when Sophie and the BFG are having breakfast with the Queen of England to tell her about the man-eating giants:

Sophie kept a very straight face. ‘BFG,’ she said, ‘there is no frobscottle here and whizzpopping is strictly forbidden!’

‘What!’ cried the BFG. ‘No frobscottle? No whizzpopping? No glumptious music? No boom-boom-boom?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Sophie told him firmly.

‘If he wants to sing, please don’t stop him,’ the Queen said.

‘He doesn’t want to sing,’ Sophie said.

‘He said he wants to make music,’ the Queen went on. ‘Shall I send for a violin?’

‘No, Your Majesty,’ Sophie said. ‘He’s only joking.’

A sly little smile crossed the BFG’s face. ‘Listen,’ he said, peering down at Sophie, ‘if they isn’t having any frobscottle here in the Palace, I can still go whizzpopping perfectly well without it if I am trying hard enough.’

‘No!’ cried Sophie. ‘Don’t! You’re not to! I beg you!’

‘Music is very good for the digestion,’ the Queen said. ‘When I’m up in Scotland, they play the bagpipes outside the window while I’m eating. Do play something.’

‘I has Her Majester’s permission!’ cried the BFG, and all at once he let fly with a whizzpopper that sounded as though a bomb had exploded in the room.

The Queen jumped.

‘Whoopee!’ shouted the BFG. ‘That is better than bagglepipes, is it not, Majester?’

It took the Queen a few seconds to get over the shock. ‘I prefer the bagpipes,’ she said. But she couldn’t stop herself smiling. (BFG, 163-4)

Dahl’s technique: wondrous wordplay

Not only Dahl’s use of taboo words was criticised, but also his technique. Anne Merrick wrote that Dahl’s “idiom and vocabulary are limited and repetitive,” and “his humour is fairly crude” (as quoted in Culley, 67). Jonathon Culley counters these and similar accusations; an

“open delight in the sensual quality of words pervades Dahl’s books for children. He delights in onomatopoeia, the construction of onomatopoeic words, alliteration, puns and verbal humour” (67). Such wordplay was also not invented by Dahl, argues Culley. “One need only look to “Jabberwocky” to trace Dahl’s ancestry here” (68). Moreover, Dahl introduces children to different narrative techniques: “perhaps most daringly among his narratorial [*sic*] techniques, he suspends the action for descriptive purposes. He demonstrates that children can tolerate description, if the subject of the description interests them enough” (Culley,68).

Murray Knowles combines his discussion of Dahl’s writing technique with another question that keeps popping up among critics: Is Dahl an anarchist?

The descriptive focus, particularly of size, shape and colour, of the main characters is typically Dahl. He is an authorial voice [...] “It is, in fact, the tone of a friendly adult story-teller who knows how to entertain children while at the same time keeping them in their place” (Chambers, as quoted in Knowles, 133).

This quote is in a way contradictory to his earlier utterance “Ready obedience is out; anarchy is in” (125); anarchy is indeed “in” when Dahl rejects adult authority, but his conservative side emerges while “keeping [children] in their place”. This is shown at its best in *Matilda*, where “the characterisation of Matilda’s family acquaints the reader with some of the most thoroughly unpleasant personalities in children’s fiction” (Knowles, 133). Matilda is clearly a child-heroine who rejects her family, and this rejection is legitimised, because the little girl and the rest of the family are only genetically connected. This is most obvious in Dahl’s references to Matilda’s father: the narrator only speaks of ‘the father’, “and the avoidance of the possessive determiner has the effect of removing any hint of affection or familial solidarity”. (Knowles, 134-5).

In *Matilda* the father never uses his daughter’s name to address her. This is in sharp contrast to Matilda’s frequent use of *daddy* to address her father, a term with strong connotations of familiar affection. There is a particular irony in this form of address as Matilda often uses it to criticise her father either overtly [...] or to goad him when she begins to exact her revenge. (Knowles, 136)

The following scene takes place at the beginning of the book when Mr Wormwood is introduced. Two different narrative techniques have been used in this scene. First of all, the

“avoidance of the possessive determiner” (Knowles, 134) when referring to Matilda’s father. I have put all the narrator’s references to ‘the father’ and Matilda’s use of the word ‘daddy’ in italics. The same technique is also used to refer to the other family members: in the last sentence of this scene, there is a reference to ‘the son’ (again, my stress). The second narrative technique is the suspension of “the action for descriptive purposes”, as Culley mentioned (68). At a certain point during the conversation, the narrator inserts a description of Mr Wormwood’s appearance before he lets the dialogue go on.

His speech was never very delicate but Matilda was used to it. She also knew that he liked to boast and she would egg him on shamelessly.

‘You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing,’ she said. ‘I wish I could do it.’

‘You couldn’t,’ *the father* said. ‘You’re too stupid. But I don’t mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he’ll be joining me in the business one day.’ Ignoring Matilda, he turned to his son and said, ‘I’m always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gears so badly they’re all worn out and rattle like mad. I get it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot of sawdust with the oil in the gear-box and it runs as sweet as a nut.’

‘How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?’ Matilda asked him.

‘Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away,’ *the father* said, grinning. ‘About a hundred miles.’

‘But that’s dishonest, *Daddy*,’ Matilda said. ‘It’s cheating.’

‘No one ever got rich being honest,’ *the father* said. ‘Customers are there to be diddled.’

Mr Wormwood was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache. He liked to wear jackets with large brightly coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. ‘Now take a mileage for instance,’ he went on. ‘Anyone who’s buying a second-hand car, the first thing he wants to know is how many miles it’s done. Right?’

‘Right,’ *the son* said. (M, 16-17)

In the next scene, Matilda has just successfully punished her father again, by mixing his hair lotion with her mothers “Platinum Blonde Hair-Dye Extra Strong” (M, 53). The result is that “Mr Wormwood’s fine crop of black hair now [is] a dirty silver” (M, 56). Again, the family is being referred to as ‘the father’, ‘the mother’, and ‘the son’. What is remarkable about this scene, though, is that Mr and Mrs Wormwood obviously do not share that strong a bond either – proven by the reference to ‘the husband’.

‘You mean I’m going to lose all my hair?’ the husband yelled.

‘I think you will,’ the mother said. ‘Peroxide is a very powerful chemical. It’s what they put down the lavatory to disinfect the pan, only they give it another name.’

‘What are you saying!’ the husband cried? ‘I’m not a lavatory pan! I don’t want to be disinfected!’

‘Even diluted like I use it,’ the mother told him, ‘it makes a good deal of *my* hair fall out, so goodness knows what’s going to happen to you. I’m surprised it didn’t take the whole of the top of your head off!’

‘What shall I do?’ wailed the father. ‘Tell me quick what to do before it starts falling out!’

Matilda said, ‘I’d give it a good wash, Dad, if I were you, with soap and water. But you’ll have to hurry.’

‘Will that change the colour back?’ the father asked anxiously.

‘Of course it won’t, you twit,’ the mother said.

‘Then what do I do? I can’t go around looking like this forever?’

‘You’ll have to have it dyed black,’ the mother said. ‘But wash it first or there won’t be any there to dye.’

[...]

‘He does do some pretty silly things now and again, doesn’t he, Mummy?’ Matilda said.

The mother [...] said, ‘I’m afraid men are not always quite as clever as they think they are. You will learn that when you get a bit older, my girl.’ (M, 58-9)

Mrs Wormwood’s last line is important in two ways: first of all, it is ironical that she should say this to Matilda, as Matilda already knows she’s smarter than her father. And secondly, this is the only place in the book where the mother shows a bond with her daughter (by addressing her with the words “my girl”).

Another important aspect of Dahl’s narrative technique is wordplay: alliteration, comic verbal compositions (one of the three manifestations of the popular culture, according to Bakhtin – see chapter 1, p.12), verbal puns, and the construction of new words are all applied to achieve verbal humour. In *James and the Giant Peach*, for instance, there is a scene towards the end of the book, when the Cloud-Men try to bring the peach down. Dahl’s wordplay is a real treat for the reader:

Three seconds later, the whole underneath of the cloud seemed to split and burst open like a paper bag, and then – *out* came the water! They saw it coming. It was quite easy to see because it wasn't just raindrops. It wasn't raindrops at all. It was a great solid mass of water that might have been a lake or a whole ocean dropping out of the sky on top of them, and down it came, down and down and down, crashing first on to the seagulls and then on to the peach itself, while the poor travellers shrieked with fear and groped around frantically for something to catch hold of – the peach stem, the silk strings, anything they could find – and all the time the water came pouring and roaring down upon them, bouncing and smashing and sloshing and slashing and swashing and swirling and surging and whirling and gurgling and gushing and rushing and rushing, and it was like being pinned down underneath the biggest waterfall in the world and not being able to get out. They couldn't speak. They couldn't see. They couldn't breathe. And James Henry Trotter, holding on madly to one of the silk strings above the peach stem, told himself that this must surely be the end of everything at last. (JGP, 126-8)

The other books also show a lot of wordplay, but *the* book in which wordplay is omnipresent, is *The BFG*. The BFG's speaks a funny kind of "langwitch" (BFG, 36): sometimes the humour lies in the misspelling of certain words, like "human beans" (BFG, 17); sometimes Dahl gives a new meaning to certain words, or invents new words, as in the following conversation about how people from various countries all over the world taste quite differently:

'Bonecrunching Giant only gobbles human beans from Turkey,' the Giant said. 'Every night Bonecruncher is galloping off to Turkey to gobble Turks.'

Sophie's sense of patriotism was suddenly so bruised by this remark that she became quite angry. 'Why Turks?' she blurted out. 'What's wrong with the English?'

'Bonecrunching Giant says Turks is tasting oh ever so much juicier and more scrumdiddlyumptious! Bonecruncher says Turkish human beans has a glamourly flavour. He says Turks from Turkey is tasting of turkey.'

'I suppose they would,' Sophie said.

'Of course they would!' the Giant shouted. 'Every human bean is diddly and different. Some is scrumdiddlyumptious and some is uckyslush. Greeks is all full of uckyslush. No giant is eating Greeks, ever.'

'Why not?' Sophie asked.

'Greeks from Greece is all tasting greasy,' the Giant said.

[...]

‘The human bean,’ the Giant went on, ‘is coming in dillions of different flavours. For instance, human beans from Wales is tasting very whooshey of fish. There is something very fishy about Wales.’

‘You mean whales,’ Sophie said. ‘Wales is something quite different.’

‘Wales is *whales*,’ the Giant said. ‘Don’t gobblefunk around with words. I will now give you another example. Human beans from Jersey has a most disgusting woolly tickle on the tongue,’ the Giant said. ‘Human beans from Jersey is tasting of cardigans.’ (BFG, 17-20)

Another really funny scene in which language is important is the one where Sophie and the BFG go to Dream Country to go dream-catching. The scene is actually rather tragic, since the BFG has just captured a really bad dream. However, the words he uses and the overdramatic tone of his voice make it one of the most hilarious scenes in the book:

‘Oh *no!*’ he cried. ‘Oh mince my maggots! Oh swipe my swoggles!’

‘What’s the matter?’ Sophie asked.

‘It’s a trogglehumper!’ he shouted. His voice was filled with fury and anguish. ‘Oh, save our solos!’ he cried. ‘Deliver us from weasels! The devil is dancing on my dibbler!’

‘What *are* you talking about? Sophie said. The BFG was getting more distressed every moment.

‘Oh, bash my eyebones!’ he cried, waving the jar in the air. ‘I come all this way to get lovely golden dreams and what is I catching?’

‘What *are* you catching?’ Sophie said.

‘I is catching a frightsome trogglehumper!’ he cried. ‘This is a *bad bad dream!* It is worse than a bad dream! It is a nightmare!’

[...]

‘Nightmares are horrible,’ Sophie said. ‘I had one once and I woke up sweating all over.’

‘With this one you would be waking up *screaming* all over!’ the BFG said. ‘This one would make your teeth stand on end! If this one got into you, your blood would be freezing to icicles and your skin would go creeping across the floor!’ (BFG, 74-6)

When Sophie wants to know how the BFG has taught himself how to write, he shows her a book by one of the most famous writers in English history:

The BFG crossed the cave and opened a tiny secret door in the wall. He took out a book, very old and tattered. By human standards, it was an ordinary sized book, but it looked like a postage stamp in his huge hand.

‘One night,’ he said, ‘I is blowing a dream through a window and I sees this book lying on the little boy’s bedroom table. I wanted it so very badly, you understand. But I is refusing to steal it. I would never do that.’

‘So how did you get it?’ Sophie asked.

‘I *borrowed* it,’ the BFG said, smiling a little. ‘Just for a short time I borrowed it.’

‘How long have you had it?’ Sophie asked.

‘Perhaps only about eighty years,’ the BFG said. ‘Soon I shall be putting it back.’

‘And that’s how you taught yourself to write?’ Sophie asked him.

‘I is reading it hundreds of times,’ the BFG said. ‘And I is still reading it and teaching new words to myself and how to write them. It is the most scumdidlyumptious story.’

Sophie took the book out of his hand. ‘*Nicholas Nickleby*,’ she read aloud.

‘By Dahl’s Chickens,’ the BFG said.

‘By *who*?’ Sophie said. (BFG, 104-5)

The reversal of Charles Dickens’ name could be interpreted in various different ways. First of all, it is a way for Dahl to insert his own name into the story. At the same time, he could have done it to mock Charles Dickens – of course, it is only funny when you already know that Charles Dickens wrote *Nicholas Nickleby*. For those children who do not know, at the end of the book it says: “He [the BFG] read all of Charles Dickens (whom he no longer called Dahl’s Chickens)” (BFG, 198). Before I discuss Dahl’s use of Dickens and Nicholas Nickleby, I shall first briefly turn to Dahl’s wordplay in naming his characters.

The characters’ names often reflect their personalities. Miss Honey is a sweet and gentle person, the man-eating giants have appropriate names (the Bonecruncher, the Childchewer, the Meatdripper, the Maidmasher, the Fleshlumpeater, the Manhugger, the Gizzardgulper, the Bloodbotler, the Butcher Boy, and the Big Friendly Giant), and the aunts in *James and the Giant Peach* really do look like a spike (Aunt Spiker) and a sponge (Aunt Sponge).

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the names of the four children already predicts more or less their fate. Let us start with Augustus Gloop: Augustus was a Roman emperor who changed his name; so the boy’s name already refers to a change – albeit that the change in this case will be a bit more drastic than just a change of name. Augustus’ last name is Gloop; if you look “gloop” up in the dictionary, it says: “[*mass noun*] *informal* sloppy or sticky semi-fluid matter, typically something unpleasant” (NODE, 776). It is rather ironic that the “sticky semi-fluid matter” is chocolate in Augustus’ case. After all, he was gulping the warm melted chocolate. Of course, it must be highly unpleasant if you fall into the chocolate river, while you are unable to swim – as in Augustus’ case.

The same is true for Violet Beauregarde: her last name has French components and could be translated as “beautiful to look at”. Again, the irony lies in this last name, for the association between Violet’s first name and her bluish-purple fate is quite obvious.

Veruca Salt is the next child to be punished. When she introduces herself to Mr Wonka, he makes a rather interesting remark:

‘My name,’ said the next child to go forward, ‘is Veruca Salt.’

‘My *dear* Veruca! How *do* you do? What a pleasure this is! You *do* have an interesting name, don’t you? I always thought that a veruca was a sort of wart that you got on the sole of your foot! But I must be wrong, mustn’t I?’ (CCF, 81)

Actually, Wonka is not too far off: Veruca, with just one ‘r’ has no real meaning, but a verruca is “a contagious and usually painful wart on the sole of the foot” (NODE, 2055). As there is probably no difference in pronunciation, the association is there. I could not really find a proper explanation for Veruca’s last name. The best thing I managed to come up with is, that Dahl indicates to his readers that we should take Veruca and her behaviour with a grain of salt – as Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas do; they are not intimidated by her greedy demands.

As far as Mike Teavee’s last name goes, I think the association is pretty obvious. He does not do anything but watch TV – and he is punished for it when he sends himself into the TV screen. But what does ‘Mike’ mean? Since Dahl has given all of his other characters a meaningful name in some way or another, surely he must have come up with some sort of association. I found one in the dictionary, and though it seems a bit farfetched, I believe it suits Mike’s personality rather well: “mike” is an informal British word (now dated), and can be either a verb, meaning to “idle away one’s time”, or a noun, in which case it indicates “a period of idleness” (NODE, 1172). Dahl did not like television all that much – in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Mike is punished for watching too much TV; the BFG calls the TV a “telly-telly bunkum box” (BFG, 24), which does not seem to have a very positive connotation; and in *Matilda*, the TV is associated with our heroine’s awful parents (see also below). So I suppose it is safe to say, that Mike is ‘idling away his time’ in front of the TV.

Let us now turn to Dahl’s view on books and literature (as opposed to television).

Dahl's view on literature

When Dahl refers to Dickens and Dickens' famous novel *Nicholas Nickleby* in *The BFG*, I do not believe he is mocking Dickens. After all, there are two references to *Nicholas Nickleby* in *Matilda*, which was written six years after *The BFG*. At the very beginning of the book, Matilda goes to the library and asks Mrs Phelps to help her pick out a new book when she has finished all the children's books: "I would like a really good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I don't know any names" (M, 9). Mrs Phelps gives her Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. When Matilda has finished reading this book, the narrator provides us with a list of books Matilda read next:

Nicholas Nickleby by Charles Dickens
Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen
Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
Gone with the Wind by Mary Webb
Kim by Rudyard Kipling
The Invisible Man by H.G. Wells
The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
The Good Companion by J.B. Priestly
Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
Animal Farm by George Orwell
(M, 12)

The narrator mentions that this is quite a "formidable list" (M, 12). I believe Mrs Phelps to be a literary guide to both young Matilda and Dahl's readers. She is Dahl's voice as it were, telling us which books are good and, consequently, which books we ought to read at least once. So I suppose Dahl thinks *Nicholas Nickleby* is a rather good book. There is more to say about Mrs Phelps' role in the book, but I will first discuss the second time *Nicholas Nickleby* is mentioned in *Matilda*.

At that point, Matilda is already at school and Miss Trunchbull is teaching Matilda's class for a few hours:

‘When you have been teaching for as long as I have you’ll realize that it’s no good at all being kind to children. Read *Nicholas Nickleby*, Miss Honey, by Mr Dickens. Read about Mr Wackford Squeers, the admirable headmaster of Dotheboys Hall. *He* knew how to handle the little brutes, didn’t he! He knew how to use the birch, didn’t he! He kept their backsides so warm you could have fried eggs and bacon on them! A fine book, that. But I don’t suppose this bunch of morons we’ve got here will ever read it because by the look of them they are never going to learn to read any thing!’ (M, 150)

Miss Trunchbull’s reference of the book and especially her praise of the incredibly cruel and wicked Mr Squeers is quite ironical: as she clearly indicates that she has read the book, she must also know how it is going to end. There are certain similarities between herself and Mr Squeers: they both mistreat their pupils and Miss Trunchbull probably also only became a headmistress for the money. Or was it just to torture and control Miss Honey some more? There are no real similarities between Nicholas and Miss Honey; the only thing they have in common is the fact that both teach under a brutal tyrant, and that they both care for one of the children at school (Smike may not be a real pupil, but he is at the school nevertheless). Instead of getting her comeuppance by Miss Honey, Miss Trunchbull gets ‘a sound trashing’ – figuratively speaking – from Matilda. At any rate, children or adults who have read *Nicholas Nickleby* will probably remember the fate of Mr Wackford Squeers. In that case, Dahl has provided his readers with a marvellous intertextual reference.

But let us now turn back to Mrs Phelps. As I said before, she guides both Matilda and the readers in their literary quest. Seeing how Matilda did not know anything about literature, I believe it was Mrs Phelps who gave the little girl the other books on the list. So the kind librarian tells us which books are worth reading. At the same time, she discusses what good literature should be like with Matilda:

‘I feel I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.’

‘A fine writer will always make you feel like that,’ Mrs Phelps said. ‘And don’t worry about the bits you can’t understand. Sit back and allow the words to wash round you, like music.’ (M, 13)

A few pages later, the narrator takes over this function. The reader gets to experience Matilda’s delight in reading books:

The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She travelled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. (M, 15)

Later on in the book, when Matilda goes to school for the first time, Miss Honey discovers Matilda's ability to read and she asks the little girl whether she has read any books already. What follows after her answer is a brief statement, it would seem, of what children's literature should be like:

'And have you read any books all by yourself, any children's books, I mean?'

'I've read all the ones that are in the public library in the High Street, Miss Honey.'

'And did you like them?'

'I liked some of them very much indeed,' Matilda said, 'but I thought others were fairly dull.'

'Tell me one that you liked.'

'I liked *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,' Matilda said. 'I think Mr C.S. Lewis is a very good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.'

'You are right there,' Miss Honey said.

'There aren't many funny bits in Mr Tolkien either,' Matilda said.

'Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?' Miss Honey asked.

'I do,' Matilda said. 'Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.'

Miss Honey was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. (M, 74-5)

As passionately the narrator seems to be promoting reading books, he is just as violently condemning TV. Since Matilda's parents are not exactly role models, Dahl let them be addicted to the screen. Already on one of the very first pages in the book, Mr Wormwood's expresses his view on literature, when his daughter is asking for a book (before she decides to go to the library):

'Daddy,' she said, 'do you think you could buy me a book?'

'A *book*?' he said. 'What d'you want a flaming book for?'

'To read, Daddy.'

'What's wrong with the telly, for heaven's sake? We've got a lovely telly with a twelve-inch screen and now you come asking for a book! You're getting spoiled, my girl!' (M, 6)

A bit further in the book, Miss Honey visits Matilda's parents because she wants to talk to them about "their daughter's remarkable talents" (M, 85). Not only do they express their dislike of books, but they more or less give a reason for their dislike as well:

'I am Matilda's teacher at school and it is important I have a word with you and your wife.'

'Got into trouble already, has she?' Mr Wormwood said, blocking the doorway. 'Well, she's your responsibility from now on. You'll have to deal with her.'

'She is in no trouble at all,' Miss Honey said. 'I have come with good news about her. Quite startling news, Mr Wormwood. Do you think I might come in for a few minutes and talk to you about Matilda?'

'We are right in the middle of watching one of our favourite programmes,' Mr Wormwood said. 'This is most inconvenient. Why don't you come back some other time.'

Miss Honey began to lose patience. 'Mr Wormwood,' she said, 'if you think some rotten TV programme is more important than your daughter's future, then you ought not to be a parent! Why don't you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!'

[... *Miss Honey steps inside, introduces herself to a very offended Mrs Wormwood – she misses her show –, and starts explaining the reason of her visit ...*]

'This child has already read an astonishing number of books,' Miss Honey said. 'I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.'

'We don't hold with book-reading,' Mr Wormwood said. 'You can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading story-books. We don't keep them in the house.'

[...]

'But does it not intrigue you,' Miss Honey said, 'that a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn't that make you jump up and down with excitement?'

'Not particularly,' the mother said. 'I'm not in favour of blue-stocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books, Miss Hunky...'

'The name is Honey,' Miss Honey said.

'Now look at *me*,' Mrs Wormwood said. 'Then look at *you*. You chose books. I chose looks.'

Miss Honey looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room. 'What did you say?' she asked.

‘I said you chose books and I chose looks,’ Mrs Wormwood said. ‘And who’s finished up the better off? Me, of course. I’m sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman and you’re left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.’ (M, 86-92)

In this scene, Matilda’s parents are first of all accused openly of not being good parents when their addiction to the screen is more important to them than Matilda’s well-being. At this point, Miss Honey is very assertive in facing two hostile television addicts. As far as I can tell, this scene may have been inserted for two main purposes: first of all, it could be a sort of moral message, giving the parents one last chance to change. At the same time, it shows the readers that Matilda’s parents are incapable of transformation.

Secondly, Mrs Wormwood’s comment is rather ironic, since – as far as the descriptions and the accompanying illustrations tell us – she is not really a very attractive person. The narrator made it sound really grotesque when Mrs Wormwood tells Miss Honey, “You chose books. I chose looks” (M, 92). Another reason why this scene is ironic is the fact that Mrs Wormwood with her good looks will have to flee the country and leave everything behind – which probably will not be such a huge problem, since her life evolved around the television screen and playing bingo. Her regarding her husband as “a successful businessman” is, even at this point in the book, very amusing – we all know what a crook he is.

(Black) Humour

With regard to Dahl’s often ironic humour, Dieter Petzold asked himself the following question: is Roald Dahl’s work funny? The horrible fates of the four ‘spoiled’ children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; George, who blew up his Grandma with his *Marvellous Medicine*; the boy in *The Witches*, who will be a mouse for the rest of his days? “[Dass] sie komisch wirken sollen, ist kaum zu bezweifeln. Nun gut: komisch vielleicht, aber geschmackvoll? Und pädagogisch unbedenklich? Kein Wunder, daß manche Eltern und Erzieher die Kinderbücher Roald Dahls mit einigem Unbehagen betrachten” (Petzhold in Ewers, 151).

Nevertheless, at the time of his death, Dahl was the most popular children’s author in Great Britain. He was also quite popular in Germany, and according to Petzhold, Dahl’s type of humour was better accepted there: “[es gab] nur ganz wenige dezidiert ablehnende Stimmen. Diese beziehen sich überraschenderweise nicht auf Dahls Darstellung von Gewalt und anderen Abscheulichkeiten, sondern polemisieren bemerkenswert humorlos gegen Dahls

spielerischen Umgang mit der Sprache und gegen sein frauenfeindliches Hexenbild¹²” (Petzhold in Ewers, 152). You cannot only label Dahl ‘anti-authoritarian’, however, as many German speaking critics have done. “Tabuverletzungen dieser Art bewirken nicht nur Befreiung, sondern auch Verunsicherung, in weit höherem Maße als wir dies bei Kinderbüchern gewohnt sind” (Petzhold in Ewers, 154). Petzhold opts to call Dahl’s humour “schwarzer Humor” – black humour, which he defines as follows:

Kennzeichnend ist in jedem Fall ein tiefgreifender Widerspruch zwischen dem Gegenstand und seiner Darstellung. Schwarzer Humor liegt insbesondere dann vor, wenn geeignete rhetorische Mittel bewirken, daß Schreckliches oder auch Ekelerregendes in einem komischen Licht erscheint. Die Folge dieser komischen Darstellungsweise ist stets eine zwiespältige Reaktion des Lesers, da die vom Autor suggerierte komische Sichtweise des Gegenstandes im Widerstreit liegt mit konventionellen und auch natürlichen Reaktionen wie Furcht, Abscheu, Mitleid oder Entsetzen. (in Ewers, 155-6)

A sense of black humour is not something exclusive for adults, Petzhold argues. “Daß auch Kinder Sinn für Schwarzen Humor besitzen können, widerspricht dem noch heute verbreiteten romantischen Kindheitsbild, nicht aber der Erfahrung. Die Witze, die sich Kinder untereinander erzählen, sprechen da eine deutliche Sprache” (Petzhold in Ewers, 157).

Petzhold concludes his article the way he began: with a question – is Dahl’s black humour suitable for children? Is black humour in general suitable for children? How children experience a story, depends on many individual and socio-psychological factors, presumes Petzhold. In any case, “[der] Erfolg Dahls belegt jedenfalls, daß es Kinder gibt, denen Dahls Humor nicht zu schwarz ist” (in Ewers, 170).

Examples of Dahl’s black humour can be found in all of his stories. One such scene comes from *The Witches*: the witches of England and the Grand High Witch are having their annual meeting, and one of the witches has just been “[f]rrrizzled like a frrritter” (W, 70). What follows next is a sort of topsy-turvy church gathering: normally, the congregation would respond to the preacher in front of them, but in this case, the Grand High Witch represents the preacher – and she is not really preaching peace and forgiveness. I can imagine that the contents are rather violent and frightening for children (since the witches speak about destroying all children), but the way the message is presented to the readers is quite funny.

¹² For a discussion regarding the accusations of antifeminism in *The Witches*, see chapter 2.

This together with the imperfect language of the Grand High Witch makes it a truly amazing scene:

‘Children are rrrree-volting!’ screamed The Grand High Witch. ‘Vee vill vipe them all away! Vee vill scrrrub them off the face of the earth! Vee vill flush them down the drain!’

‘Yes, yes!’ chanted the audience. ‘Wipe them away! Scrub them off the earth! Flush them down the drain!’

‘Children are foul and filthy!’ thundered The Grand High Witch.

‘They are! They are!’ chorused the English witches. ‘They are foul and filthy!’

‘Children are dirty and stinky!’ screamed The Grand High Witch.

‘Dirty and stinky!’ cried the audience, getting more and more worked up.

‘Children are smelling of *dogs’ drrroppings!*’ screeched The Grand High Witch.

‘Pooooooo!’ cried the audience. ‘Pooooooo! Pooooooo! Pooooooo!’

‘They are vurse than dogs’ drrroppings!’ screeched The Grand High Witch. ‘Dogs’ drrroppings is smelling like violets and prrimroses compared with children!’

‘Violets and primroses!’ chanted the audience. They were clapping and cheering almost every word spoken from the platform. The speaker seemed to have them completely under her spell.

‘To talk about children is making me sick!’ screamed The Grand High Witch. ‘I am feeling sick even *thinking* about them! Fetch me a basin!’

The Grand High Witch paused and glared at the mass of eager faces in the audience. They waited, wanting more.

‘So now!’ barked The Grand High Witch. ‘So now I am having a plan! I am having a gigantic plan for getting rrrid of every single child in the whole of Inkland!’

The witches gasped. They gaped. They turned and gave each other ghoulish grins of excitement.

‘Yes!’ thundered The Grand High Witch. ‘Vee shall svish them and svollop them and vee shall make to disappear every single smelly little brrrat in Inkland in vun strroke!’

‘Whoopee!’ cried the witches, clapping their hands. ‘You are brilliant, O Your Grandness! You are fantabulous!’

‘Shut up and listen!’ snapped The Grand High Witch. ‘Listen very carefully and let us not be having any muck-ups!’ (W, 71-2)

At this point, the Grand High Witch starts explaining what she has in store for the English children. At the end, when the climax is almost reached, she starts singing her witches song

(just like the congregation and the priest would at that point start singing a psalm or another religious song in church).

I would like to end this discussion with two final scenes. In the first one, the BFG is telling Sophie how the other giants catch their meals. A number of elements, which I have discussed above, are combined in the scene: it is again a scene with quite a frightening content, but the BFG's funny way of speaking and the wordplay he uses to describe everything, have as a result, that instead of trembling in horror, you are probably smiling – if you are not laughing out loud, that is. And in the middle of the scene, there is a suspension of the action.

‘How do they actually catch the humans they eat?’ Sophie asked.

‘They is usually just sticking an arm in through the bedroom window and snitching them from their beds,’ the BFG said.

‘Like you did to me.’

‘Ah, but I isn’t eating you,’ the BFG said.

‘How else do they catch them?’ Sophie asked.

‘Sometimes,’ the BFG said, ‘they is swimmeling in from the sea like fishies with only their heads showing above the water, and then out comes a big hairy hand and grabbles someone off the beach.’

‘Children as well?’

‘Often chidders,’ the BFG said. ‘Little chidders who is building sandcastles on the beach. That is who the swimmeling ones are after. Little chidders is not so tough to eat as old grandmamma, so says the Childchewing Giant.’

As they talked, the BFG was galloping fast over the land. Sophie was standing right up in his waistcoat pocket now and holding on to the edge with both hands. Her head and shoulders were in the open and the wind was blowing in her hair.

‘How else do they catch people?’ she asked.

‘All of them is having their own special ways of catching the human bean,’ the BFG said. ‘The Meatdripping Giant is preferring to pretend he is a big tree growing in the park. He is standing in the park in the dusky evening and he is holding great big branches over his head, and there he is waiting until some happy families is coming to have a picnic under the spreading tree. The Meatdripping Giant is watching them as they lay out their little picnic. But in the end it is the Meatdripping Giant who is having the picnic.’

‘It’s too awful!’ Sophie cried.

‘The Gizzardgulping Giant is a city lover,’ the BFG went on. ‘The Gizzardgulper is lying high up between the roofs of houses in the big cities. He is lying their snuggly as a sniggler and

watching the human beans walking on the street below, and when he sees one that looks like it has a whoppsy-good flavour, he grabs it. He is simply reaching down and snitching it off the street like a monkey taking a nut. He says it is nice to be able to pick and choose what you is having for your supper. He says it is like choosing from a menu.’ (BFG, 68-9)

And finally, the last scene proves that the carnival-grotesque world of the giants lies outside of the normal world. The Head of the Air Force and the Head of the Army and their team of soldiers are heading towards Giant Country, with the BFG leading them.

In the leading machine, the Head of the Air Force was sitting beside the pilot. He had a world atlas on his knees and he kept staring first at the atlas, then at the ground below, trying to figure out where they were going. Frantically he turned the pages of the atlas. ‘Where the devil *are* we going?’ he cried.

‘I haven’t the foggiest idea,’ the pilot answered. ‘The Queen’s orders were to follow the giant and that’s exactly what I’m doing.’

The pilot was a young Air Force officer with a bushy moustache. He was very proud of his moustache. He was also quite fearless and he loved adventure. He thought this was a super adventure. ‘It’s fun going to new places,’ he said.

‘*New places!*’ shouted the Head of the Air Force. ‘What the blazes d’you mean *new places?*’

‘This place we’re flying over now isn’t in the atlas, is it?’ the pilot said, grinning.

‘You’re darn right it isn’t in the atlas!’ cried the Head of the Air Force. ‘We’ve flown clear off the last page!’

‘I expect that old giant knows where he’s going,’ the young pilot said.

‘He’s leading us to disaster!’ cried the Head of the Air Force. He was shaking with fear. In the seat behind him sat the Head of the Army, who was even more terrified.

‘You don’t mean to tell me we’ve gone right out of the atlas?’ he cried, leaning forward to look.

‘That’s exactly what I *am* telling you!’ cried the Air Force man. ‘Look for yourself. Here’s the very last map in the whole flaming atlas! We went off that over an hour ago!’ He turned the page. As in all atlases, there were two completely blank pages at the very end. ‘So now we must be somewhere here,’ he said, putting a finger on one of the blank pages.

‘Where’s here?’ cried the Head of the Army.

The young pilot was still grinning broadly. He said to them, ‘That’s why they always put two blank pages at the back of the atlas. They’re for new countries. You’re meant to fill them in for yourself.’ (BFG, 176-8)

In this scene, we are literally out-side the world: if it is not in our atlas, it does not belong to the 'normal' world. We have entered a new place. The Head of the Air Force and the Head of the Army are both afraid of losing their grip on the world, which is symbolised by their clutching on to the atlas. They are the ones "shaking with fear" (BFG, 178). As it befits a topsy-turvy world, the young officer is telling his superiors what to do. At the same time, the young pilot represents us, the readers. Like him, we like adventures – or else we would not be reading. The filling in of the blank pages symbolises the readers' ability to discover new places (worlds) through books and in their own imagination.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have discussed Dahl's most popular children's books: *Matilda*, *The BFG*, *The Witches*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *James and the Giant Peach*. All of them show elements of the carnival-grotesque – a theory, which Mikhail Bakhtin made popular again in his work *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin distinguishes between three different manifestations of folk culture, namely ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate.

As the last two basically deal with language itself, I have used Sue Vice's definition (see chapter 1, p.7) of the carnivalesque to come up with three different – and yet closely linked – subjects: I have analysed textual images, plot, and language in Dahl's work.

After discussing Bakhtin's view on the carnival-grotesque in chapter 1, I analysed various images taken from Dahl's books. The carnivalesque ritual spectacle appeared in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (the 'parade' towards the factory gates; the singing and dancing of the Oompa-Loompas), and in *The Witches* (the use of the mask; the chanting of the witch-song). Next, I discussed the representation of various characters – Mr Willy Wonka, whose appearance and behaviour reminded me of a jester; the witches (often seen as an anti-feminist element in Dahl's work); etc.

Besides the accusations of anti-feminism, Dahl has been accused of putting too much violence in his stories, and also the excess of food in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is unrealistic, some critics claimed. But we have seen, that excessive drinking and eating, and excessive violence is part of the carnival-grotesque tradition. The same is true for Dahl's use of 'taboo words'. The carnivalesque world is precisely a world where normal rules and regulations lost all meaning.

Dahl's wordplay, his creative and innovative approach to words, and his black humour all contributed to cause the readers to laugh. Laughter is, after all, an important element of the carnival-grotesque.

I would like to end this dissertation with a quote from Catriona Nicholson on the importance of laughter:

Such tales of triumph signify children's capacity for self-preservation in the face of adult threat and show that boys and girls can overcome adult oppression. Fleischman identifies three narrative elements that betray our unconscious rather than our formal literary taste: "The supernatural; hero tales; and writ especially large, HUMOR. And these are the delights of childhood. To be safely frightened. To identify with larger-than-life heroes. To laugh. [...]" Roald Dahl, it would seem, has exploited these elements to the full. (as quoted in Nicholson, 324)

I can only agree.

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