

ROALD DAHL – POSTMODERN CHILDREN’S WRITER

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Abstract: This article aims to explore the work of the British writer Roald Dahl in terms of its Postmodern traits, attempting to prove that he is a Postmodern children’s author. While the nineteenth century is generally perceived as the golden age of children’s literature, the period of time between 1950 and 1970 can be described as a second golden age of both children’s literature and children’s publishing. The two World Wars produced a number of significant social, political, and cultural changes which were noticeable in the post-war years in multiple areas of everyday life. Multiple Education Acts were passed in the United Kingdom, the concept of family changed, new media forms appeared and developed. The concept of childhood in general and children’s literature in particular were equally influenced by changing attitudes and beliefs during the post-war years. With their subversion of adults and societal norms, their use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, and the blending of fantastic and real-world elements, Roald Dahl’s writings fall in the category of Postmodern children’s literature.

Keywords: children’s literature, modernism, postmodernism, bfg, roald dahl

Introduction

Children’s literature as we know it today is the result of centuries of competition between opposing establishments and forces. At first, children’s and adults’ reading materials were not separated. There were few books specifically for children and they were in vernacular, accessible only to those who were part of “good” society or those who served the church (Shavit 1986: 160) The distinction between children’s and adults’ reading material emerged around the seventeenth century, when the concept of childhood changed under the influence of thinkers such as J.J. Rousseau and John Locke, both usually credited as the “discoverers” of childhood (Lesnik-Oberstein 2005: 24). When texts intended for young readers did not exist, children resorted to chapbooks as a means of entertainment. Chapbooks were short books – between sixteen and twenty-four pages long – with woodcut illustrations, sold at a low price by peddlers and hawkers (Shavit 1986: 162). Being illustrated, cheap, and inspired by sources otherwise forbidden to children (e.g., ballads and fairy tales), chapbooks were highly popular among the children of both the poor and the rich. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Puritan writings for children appeared under the influence of the religious establishment in an effort to provide official reading material to children (Shavit 1986: 135). These writings were tightly controlled and their purpose was to instil in young readers the desire to attain salvation after death.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, books for children were becoming more child-oriented, both in tone and in subject matter. Nathaniel Crouch’s *Winter Evening Entertainments* is an early example of this transition to more child-centred material (Kinnell 2005: 140). With the appearance of the school system, more and more importance was invested in children’s education, and a new demand appeared on the

market, that for schoolbooks and lighter reading material for children (Kinnell 2005: 140). It did not take long until publishers realised the commercial potential of selling books to those responsible for the education of children, namely to parents and schools. The first commercially successful publisher of children's books was John Newbery. He managed to combine commercial and educational interests by appealing to both children and adults: he included amusement in his books and justified it through the presence of instruction and morals (Shavit 1986: 166). Confronted with the criticism of both the educational and religious establishments on the one hand, and challenged by the growing children's books market on the other hand, chapbook publishers increased their efforts and adapted by publishing chapbooks specifically for children (Shavit 1986: 175).

As a result of the constant competition between chapbook publishers, commercial publishers, and the educational and the religious establishments, the literary polysystem became stratified (Shavit 1986: 159). In Zohar Shavit's words, "the canonized system lost its homogeneous nature and became heterogeneous (moral stories, animal stories, instructive stories, primers, readers). Eventually, it became stratified and subject to competition and struggle between the various models." (1986: 145). This observation brings us to the twentieth century, when the children's books market presented itself similarly to the manner in which we know it today: competitive and extremely diversified.

Modernism, Postmodernism, and children's literature

The growing industrialisation and the horrors of the two World Wars forever changed every aspect of everyday life, including literature. However, the passage from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century was not a sudden one. In their book, *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism* (2005), Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb consider the *fin de siècle* a transitional period from the old views of Romanticism and Victorianism to those of Modernism and Postmodernism, a period "characterised by uncertainty, both in terms of a reconsideration of the past and an apprehensive approach to the future" (74). Under the influence of Freudian ideas, the child figure partly loses its innocence as the neuroses of adulthood are linked to childhood experience (Thacker and Webb 2005: 75) and the mother-child relationship becomes problematic (83). Among other examples, Thacker refers to J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* in order to illustrate the writings characteristic of the *fin de siècle*, stating that "[u]neasiness, brought about by a shifting sense of gender, an awareness of the sexuality and cruelty of children, and an ironic view of British 'fair play' indicate the work's significance as an expression of the turmoil of the time" (2005: 81).

In the twentieth century, on the one hand there are numerous shifts affecting society (expanding industrialisation, rejection of religion, the rise of populism, etc.), and on the other hand the separation between the child and the adult markets for fiction is further deepened (Thacker and Webb 2005: 101). Adults' concern with issues of morality and the impossibility of changing the world are reflected in the children's literature of the time which "deals with these fears, either by escaping from them and

retreating to a Romantic image of innocence, or by addressing children through fractured narratives” (Thacker and Webb 2005: 101). Most writers of children’s books attempted to create safe environments for their readers characterised by certainty and confidence, yet there was an equally noticeable trend throughout the twentieth century “toward fiction which expressed the sense of alienation and anonymity more commonly expected in adult fiction” (Thacker and Webb 2005: 108). Following the Second World War, the narrative relationship in children’s texts reflects adults’ lack of confidence in their abilities to provide children with a sense of the world, and this in turn reflects “a postmodern sense of fracture and decentring” (Thacker and Webb 2005: 110). Thacker considers that texts which combine fantastic and real-world elements better convey the post-war angst of the twentieth century, allowing for darker facets of the world to be acknowledged beyond the comforting surface (2005: 111). She exemplifies this point by mentioning C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Postmodern views on children are influenced by changing notions of family and family relationships (i.e. a movement away from the nuclear family), materialism, loss of faith, and the evolution of technology and the media. As such, the child “has become a threatening, uncontrollable force” and has come to “signify a society which is out of control” (Thacker and Webb 2005: 140). However, children’s literature of the postmodern era is characterised by what Thacker calls ‘Disneyfication’ and a desire to provide a unified world view, with children’s literature becoming, “in some instances, an expression of possibility[,] embracing the energies of postmodern art” (2005: 141). It is this acceptance of postmodern energies and strategies that enables writers to “place children as readers in a powerful position” (Thacker and Webb: 142), where narrative trustworthiness, authorial control, closure, and determinate meaning are no longer defining characteristics of the child’s reading experience. Thacker (2005: 149) correlates the revolutionary force of children’s literature with its following traits: fluidity, indeterminacy of meaning, lack of closure, play with language, and the use of the carnivalesque to express a resistance to controlling narratives. She adds: “The strategies which we now name as postmodern are familiar to readers of children’s literature throughout its history, yet it is only recently that we can recognise the central role of that literature – to maintain a voice of challenge to the authoritarian voices which seek to control and enslave.” (2005: 149-150).

In the introduction to *The Making of Modern Children’s Literature* (2016), Lucy Pearson states that the period of time between 1950 and 1970 is “widely regarded as a second golden age of children’s literature”, naming C.S. Lewis, Shirley Hughes, Richard Adams, and Roald Dahl as representative writers of the time (1). She continues by adding that this period should be considered a golden age of children’s publishing as well, given that it is during the sixties and the seventies that this area of publishing significantly diversified and expanded under the effect of the strong political, social, and educational focus on childhood and its dedicated literature (Pearson 2016: 1). As society recovered from the austerity of the post-war era, a chain reaction began: the fact that people were better paid coupled with the influence of earlier educational reforms (e.g., the grammar system introduced in the 1944 Education Act) led to an increase in the

demand for books, which in its turn led to the publishing of better-quality and more varied children's books (Pearson 2016: 4). The conservatism which characterised the British way of life after the two World Wars was slowly replaced by a different worldview as a result of major changes on the social, political, and cultural levels: post-war era parents worked hard to create better lives for their children, motivated by the hope that – with the war behind them – a better life for their offspring was possible (Pearson 2016: 8); specialists, such as psychiatrists (Donald Winnicott, John Bowlby) and paediatricians (Benjamin Spock), proposed new ideas about child development which reflected and reinforced the view of childhood as “an important and formative period of life” (Pearson 2016: 9); in the United Kingdom, the passing of successive Educational Acts is proof of social and political concern with childhood, as their aim was to better the quality of education and to extend its duration (Pearson 2016: 9); there was also an augmenting concern with the “shortening of childhood”, “[t]he sense that television and other trends of the modern age were resulting in children ‘growing up faster’” (Pearson 2016: 9-10).

At the time, the rise of television seems to have been a major concern much in the same manner the rise of the internet is in present-day society. The patterns of media consumption shifted conceptions of childhood (Pearson 2016: 5), but apart from the perceived negative effects, the impact of television and radio inspired stylistic innovations, such as using the narrative modes of television – children's literature “redefined itself in terms which were relevant and exciting” (Pearson 2016: 5-6). As a result, children's books enjoyed growing critical attention not only in the media, but also in the areas of education and academia, with new awards created throughout the sixties and the seventies; Lucy Pearson mentions the following examples: 1965 – The Federation of Children's Book Groups, 1967 – The Guardian Angel, 1975 – The Other Award, 1972 – the children's books category for the Whitebread Literary Awards (2016: 5).

Roald Dahl – Postmodern children's writer

In light of Thacker and Webb's observations on the one hand and Pearson's on the other hand, it is safe to affirm that Roald Dahl's writings undeniably fall under the category of postmodern children's literature, with their subversion of adults and societal norms, their use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, and the blending of fantastic and real-world elements.

In terms of subverting adults, the manner in which Dahl depicted adult characters in a number of his books is highly relevant. Two appropriate examples are the aunts in *James and the Giant Peach* and Matilda's parents and Mrs Trunchbull in *Matilda*. After the death of his parents, James Henry Trotter moves in with his two aunts, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. In the very first chapter (Dahl 2013: 2), the narrator introduces the aunts to the reader as follows:

Their names were Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker, and I am sorry to say that they were both really horrible people. They were selfish and lazy and cruel, and right from the beginning they started beating poor James for almost no reason at all. They never called him by his real name, but always referred to him as ‘you disgusting little beast’ or ‘you

filthy nuisance' or 'you miserable creature', and they certainly never gave him any toys to play with or any picture books to look at.

All their attributes are negative: from the very beginning they are called "horrible", with the following sentences elaborating on this aspect. The use of *and* – "They were selfish **and** lazy **and** cruel, **and** right from the beginning they started beating poor James" (my stress) – creates a cumulative effect which results in a hyperbolic effect. Even the manner in which they address the little boy – "disgusting little beast", "little nuisance" – is revolting. The portraits of the aunts are enlarged with their physical attributes in the second chapter (Dahl 2013: 5-6), where Aunt Sponge is described as "enormously fat and very short", with "small piggy eyes, a sunken mouth, and one of those white flabby faces that looked exactly as though it had been boiled". The narrator concludes: "She was like a great white soggy overboiled cabbage". As for Aunt Spiker, she is depicted as "lean and tall and bony", the polar opposite of Aunt Sponge. Her skeletal appearance is complemented by her "screeching voice and long wet narrow lips", and the reader learns that "whenever she got angry or excited, little flecks of spit would come shooting out of her mouth as she talked". The two women are no more than "two ghastly hags".

The exaggeration with which they are portrayed creates a grotesque image, they become caricatures. This can also be noticed in the passage narrating their demise in chapter fifteen (Dahl 2013). The giant peach rolls across the garden, straight towards the two aunts who are selling tickets for people to see the enormous fruit: "They gaped. They screamed. They started to run. They panicked. They both got in each other's way. They began pushing and jostling, and each one of them was thinking only about saving herself." The cumulative effect is yet again apparent in the use of short, punchy sentences, all beginning with the pronoun *they*. Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker fall down, "clawing and yelling", but they cannot escape the giant peach:

There was a crunch.

And then there was silence.

The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.

James is avenged for all his years of suffering at the hands of his horrible aunts. It is a victory of the child against the adult, and more so, against cruelty and stupidity.

A similar treatment of adult characters is present in *Matilda*. The girl's parents, Mr and Mrs Wormwood, are "so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives" (Dahl 2007: 10) that they actually despise their daughter's interest in reading and learning. As for her teacher, Miss Trunchbull is similarly built to James's aunts: she is cruel, aggressive, and loud – most of the verbs used throughout the book to mark Miss Trunchbull's speech are *bark*, *bellow*, *boom*, and *shout*).

Regarding the subversion of societal norms, an appropriate example would be the grandmother of the unnamed boy in *The Witches*. In the chapter titled "My Grandmother", the little boy confesses that he felt closer to his Grandmamma than to his own mother (Dahl 2013: 12). A Norwegian and a great story-teller (2013: 12-13), "tremendously old and wrinkled", sitting "majestic in her armchair" (2013: 15), the old woman tells her grandson witch stories about missing children. Going from the story of

one child to that of the next, she smokes “a long black cigar” which smells “of burning rubber” (Dahl 2013: 16), a cigar which she offers to the boy, telling him that she does not care if he is only seven: smoking would prevent him from catching a cold. From having a character in a children’s book smoke to the act of offering the cigar to a little boy, this scene is unorthodox by any and all standards, subverting societal norms.

In the twentieth century, with the growing popularity of television, adults’ concerns regarding its effects on their children grew as well. Roald Dahl was aware of this aspect. In a 1984 interview with Terry Wogan [1], Dahl was asked how could the television generation be encouraged to read again, to which he answered that “[i]t is very, very difficult indeed” to do so. The British writer addressed this aspect of modern society in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where one of the children who found a golden ticket was a boy completely addicted to watching television. Even the character’s name is suggestive of his dependency: Mike Teavee, his surname being pronounced in the same way as the abbreviation for television, TV.

As for fantastic elements mixed with real-world ones, Roald Dahl’s books abound in instances of such blending. There are talking animals fighting against farmers (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*), fruit growing uncontrollably taking a child on a journey (*James and the Giant Peach*), and witches seeking to exterminate children, whose plan is eventually thwarted by a little boy (*The Witches*). *The BFG* is a book which brings together several fantasy and real-life elements. On the one hand, there are the giants’ land and the land of dreams. The protagonist is a kind giant who keeps dreams in jars after carefully collecting them; the other giants are cruel and gruesome, leaving their territory and roaming the world at night to feast on children. On the other hand, there is the real world, where Sophie lives in an orphanage before being taken by the BFG, and where they return to ask for the Queen’s help in London. The book reads almost like a fairy tale, with the evil forces – the children-eating giants – being defeated in the end.

Conclusion

Children’s literature journeyed from nonexistent to diverse and exciting over the span of several centuries. It is a complex branch of the literary polysystem, with multiple forces and influences at work in creating it. In the twentieth century, the main factors generating change in the field of literature for young readers were the two World Wars and the rise of television. For the first time in children’s books, it was no longer the adult who was in charge, either in terms of characters or of authorial control. Children were put in a position of power, subverting adults and societal norms. This aspect is apparent in Roald Dahl’s books: children are confronted with grotesquely-depicted adults, who are violent or unintelligent – or both –, yet it is the young ones who emerge victorious at the end of the narrative. This also holds true in the case of confrontations with fantastic evil forces, such as witches or giants. Sometimes, the adult figure in the story is the one who breaks society’s conventions, as it happens in *The Witches*, when the grandmother offers a puff of her cigar to her grandson. With their undermining of adults and of society’s rules, the association of fantastic and real-world elements, and the use of the grotesque, Roald Dahl’s books fall in the category of Postmodern children’s literature.

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