The War of Ages:

A Deconstruction of the Adult-Child Dichotomy in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*

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Engelska för lärare 61-90

Vårterminen 2012

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Abstract

This literary essay is centered around Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and employs deconstructive theory in order to dismantle the binary relationship between adults and children that the novel's author attempts to uphold. The portrayal of adult characters as either evil or passive, and child characters as innocent and helpless, establishes children and grownups as juxtaposed and limits the choice of hero to a child. However, an analysis of the child hero reveals an identity that more resembles an adult. The essay contends that novel's protagonist, a child in body but not in mind, does not support the adult-child dichotomy that Dahl has established in *Matilda*.
1. Introduction

Success goes hand in hand with scrutiny. Though adored by most, many insist that Roald Dahl’s novels are burdened by immoral content that is not suitable for children. Critics have attempted to make sense of Dahl’s writing style, intentions, world views and more, and critique of his work has indicated varying degrees of approbation and disapprobation. Sharon E. Royer discusses accusations of Dahl that he is unfair in his treatment of adults, often portraying them as beastly, both physically and behaviorally (Royer). Jonathon Culley also lists vulgarity, violence, sexism, racism and promotion of criminal behavior as some issues that have received a considerate amount of attention in this context (59). However, Catriona Nicholson cites the “blend of humor, subversion and violence” as the essence of Dahl’s popularity among children (“Children's Books” 55). Nineteen immensely popular children's books have sold millions of copies, thus, regardless of what critics may have to say, Dahl's twisted fantasy has delighted millions of children around the world, and this has been his self-expressed intention all along.

At the centre of almost all of Dahl’s children’s books stands a hero – always a child – whose social situation is compromised in some way, always by way of the adult characters' shortcomings. Poverty, a lack of family, neglect and abuse are some of the issues surrounding Dahl’s young protagonists. The negative aspects of these children’s lives are always represented by adults. In William Honan’s words, Dahl's admitted conspiracy with children against adults and his largely revolting humor is the winning combination that seems to gratify young readers in a uniquely Roald Dahl way (Honan).

Dahl provides the reader with numerous negative descriptions, both physical and behavioral, of adult characters, portraying them as oppressive, ignorant, ugly, and generally unkind. In contrast, the child heroes are portrayed as innocent, admirable and unable to defend themselves against the maltreatment they receive. Dahl stresses numerous positive qualities of children and the inability or unwillingness of adult characters to see and appreciate these. The
focus lies on the way the child hero is victimized by adult antagonists, revealing a binary relationship between children and adults in which children are the obviously favored party.

Children versus adults is thus a recurring theme in Dahl’s children’s literature, and at first glance this theme is clearly maintained in *Matilda*. Matilda is a highly intelligent little girl whose parents can only be described as neglectful, ignorant, self-absorbed and malicious: one can easily say that the Wormwood residence is a home that completely lacks love and parental responsibility. In contrast, the main character is portrayed as admirable, though she has no effective means of asserting herself. In the context of the binary relationship between children and adults, this makes her innocent, defenseless and, from a narrative point of view, favored. However, this hierarchical relationship is not as stable as it may appear.

Steven Lynn observes that one way of using deconstructive theory in literature is to identify opposing pairs which the text attempts to uphold and then look for evidence against this binary relationship. In *Matilda*, the fundamental binary relationship is of course that between children and adults. This particular relationship is characteristic of Dahl’s work and easy to identify in this text. The evidence against the dichotomy is not as obvious, but lies in the novel’s key character: tiny, five-year-old Matilda. A deeper analysis of her portrayal shows that, with the exception of her age and size, there is nothing remotely childlike about her. Intellectually, socially, morally and emotionally she is as mature as an adult, and it is through these adult traits that she is able to fulfill her role as hero. In other words, Dahl’s dichotomy between children and adults can be challenged, because the heroic child is not a child at all, but an adult mind encased in a tiny five-year-old body. Through a close reading of the character of Matilda I aim to undress Dahl’s portrait of the child hero to reveal a largely adult identity, and, in doing so, deconstruct the oppositional relationship between children and adults that is asserted throughout the novel.
2. Matilda: Innocent and Favored Child in Dahl’s Dichotomy

In an extreme contrast to the adult characters in the novel stands Matilda Wormwood, a tiny, defenseless four year old who is the subject, or rather the victim, of these adults’ ignorance and cruel intentions. The characterization of Matilda is achieved mainly through the narrator, who provides a physical and behavioral description as well as insight into Matilda’s emotions, attitudes and her situation in general. From the start there is heavy focus on Matilda’s young age, which is often written in italics to emphasize how unusually young she is for someone so “nimble and brilliant” (10). Her small size is also given a lot of attention. For example, during her visits to the library she is described as a “tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor” (16) and at home she is “not quite tall enough to reach things around the kitchen” (21). She even “toddlers” when she walks and is frequently referred to as “tiny” (12).

When it comes to her character, Matilda is portrayed very favorably. Firstly, the narrator describes her as polite and modest, traits that are manifested in her actions and dialogue. She normally does not speak unless spoken to, she always says ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, “she [displays] almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never [shows] off” (101). Though Matilda carries out a few acts of revenge against her parents, she understands the moral difference between right and wrong and would never harm an innocent person. Through focalization the narrator also gives the reader an idea of Matilda’s experience and her emotional reaction to it. In this way, the reader learns that Matilda “resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid” and that she “longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honorable and intelligent” (29). In the context of the Wormwood family dynamics, Guest makes a relevant observation in that “Matilda’s thoughts … place her parents and brother without the possessive pronoun that marks their relationship, rendering them ‘the’ father, mother, and brother. This grammatical disassociation … conveys Matilda’s desire to disown her family” (252).
The narrator also conveys the helplessness of Matilda’s situation. The fact that Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood lack every moral quality one expects in parents is something “she [has] to put up with” (49). The narrator also reminds the reader that Matilda is “still hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up” (29). As a result of all this is the reader sides with Matilda for the situation she is forced to endure, strengthening the opposition between her and her parents in particular, and children and adults in general. From this one can also draw parallels to the school “war” that the schoolmate Hortensia describes: all children all defenseless and must endure whatever adults decide to subject them to. The focus on children's helplessness accentuates the opposition and draws on the reader to agree with the narrator’s favoring of children.

3. Roald Dahl's Treatment of Adult Characters

Roald Dahl has stated that he generally writes “for children between the ages of seven and nine” (West 116), and this explicit intention is evident in most of his children's novels. Dahl normally constructs adult characters from the child’s perspective, creating an oppositional relationship between adults and children, with a negative focus on the former. In *Matilda*, all the elements of the division are present: the malevolence of specific adult characters is prominent, as is the disapproval of adults in general, often through the narrator’s voice. The victimization of children by adults is also clearly conveyed while the child hero is unmistakably portrayed as innocent and admirable. The circle is completed with strong connotations of the hero’s inability to defend herself, resulting in an unmistakable child-adult dichotomy in which adults are evil, ugly and passive.

Dahl uses this dichotomy to form a connection with his young readership, a connection which Nicholson refers to as “a binding rapport” (“Fantasy” 324). In her attempt to discover the root of Dahl’s popularity among children, Nicholson finds that children easily identify his recurring pattern of children versus adults. One boy is quoted as saying “I like Dahl’s books
because the adults and children are always having a war and the children always win in the end” (Nicholson, “Fantasy” 324). Nicholson points out that this resolution, the powerless triumphing over the powerful, is echoed throughout most of Dahl’s works for children, including *Matilda*, and that his “strong measures of adult ridicule or exposure is a winning formula” (“Fantasy” 324). The delight of seeing adults defeated by children, accompanied by the security that this will always be the outcome, seems elementary when it comes to Dahl’s popularity among children.

3.1 The Evil and Ugly

In *Matilda*, the dichotomy between adult and child is represented by Matilda herself on the one hand, and her parents and the school headmistress on the other. The binary relationship between Matilda and her parents is firmly established almost immediately when the narrator says “… the parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away” (10). This attitude shines through in the consistent portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood as negligent, wicked, ignorant, corrupt and pretentious.

The general attitude of her parents towards Matilda is hostile, and it is not uncommon for them to refer to her as “an ignorant little twit” (22) or to ask her to keep her “nasty mouth shut” (37). As a particularly hard blow, Matilda’s father informs the headmistress at Matilda’s school – the child-hating military force that is Miss Trunchbull - about her supposedly naughty behaviour, creating the same insecurity at school as in the home. In fact, everything Matilda does seems to annoy her parents to some extent. If she talks she is a “noisy chatterbox” (11), if she is clever she is accused of being a “cheat and a liar” (55) and when she reads quietly to herself her father tears up the book. Though Matilda is a fluent reader by the age of four, books are highly discouraged, forcing her to satisfy her thirst for knowledge outside the home. The fact that she can read and that she secretly visits the library every afternoon goes by unnoticed,
and when her parents do pay her attention it is to blame, belittle or criticize. In short, Matilda is nothing but a “scab” (10) to her parents.

The narrator’s physical description of Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood is also a strong factor in portraying them negatively. It is generally the case that Dahl’s evil characters have a physical appearance to match their malevolent persona, and though the appearance of Matilda’s parents is not as extreme as that of characters in *The Witches* or *The Twits*, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood are no exception to Dahl’s habit. The reader’s first introduction to Mr. Wormwood’s physical appearance corresponds to the behavior he exhibits. While proudly explaining to his son how best to cheat a customer, Mr. Wormwood is described as “a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty mustache. He liked to wear jackets with large brightly colored checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green” (23). The weasel-like physical appearance corresponds to his behavior of cheating customers, and his bold style of dress matches the pride and shamelessness with which he does it. Many of Mrs. Wormwood’s most prominent traits can be identified in a passage that deals with her appearance:

Mrs. Wormwood sat munching her meal with her eyes glued to the American soap-opera on the screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out (27).

Ignorance is found in Mrs. Wormwood's in her total unawareness of her figure. There is also a presence of vanity, found in her exaggerated attempts to enhance her outer appearance with
based on the physical description of both Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, the reader interprets them as rather unattractive. Their looks magnify their ugly personalities, which accentuates the portrayal of adults as the unfavored side of the adult-child dichotomy.

Miss Trunchbull, the “gigantic holy terror” (67) that is the headmistress of Matilda’s school, is also an adult villain, one who hates all little children. She subjects Matilda and her schoolmates to a number of cruel and bizarre punishments, and she believes Matilda to be an unusually cunning and nasty child. The portrayal of Miss Trunchbull contributes to the characterization of adults as unattractive and evil. She is successfully constructed through a combination of strong physical and behavioral description as well as dialogue that reveals her child-hating demeanor.

Miss Trunchbull's physical appearance and behavior carry strong connotations of the male gender and the military, ranging from her exaggerated masculine physique to her army-like style of running a primary school. Physical descriptions of Miss Trunchbull direct attention to her “bull-neck”, “thick arms” and “powerful legs” (83), and her face is described as “neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever” (83). As a result of the narrator referring to her as “a female” (82) and not a woman and that she is known as the Trunchbull, her character is dewomanized to the extent of resembling a man. Further physical description adds a military dimension to her appearance, created mainly through her fashion choice of “breeches … made of coarse twill” and “a brown cotton smock which [is] pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt” (83). In addition to this she often carries a horse-crop, implying a violent demeanor which is in turn affirmed through her actions.

The verbal and physical abuse Miss Trunchbull subjects students to is extreme, to the point of resembling a war. Examples range from throwing a boy out of a window, causing broken bones, to locking a girl up for a whole day in “the Chokey” (104), Miss Trunchbull’s personal torture chamber. She also uses demeaning expressions like “miserable little gumboil” (120) and “witless weed” (148) when addressing or referring to the children. Miss Trunchbull’s
emotional side is also revealed, and it is stated explicitly that she does not have the children’s best interest at heart. The opposition between the headmistress and the children is warlike, and there are several references to armed conflict. Hortensia, an older girl at Matilda’s school, describes the situation from the children’s point of view: “…it’s like a war… And the casualties are terrific. *We* are the crusaders, the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the Trunchbull is the Prince of Darkness, the Foul Serpent, the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command” (109). The quote describes the dynamics between children and adults that is present throughout the text. Adults have all the power at hand and use it over the brave children despite their inability to defend themselves.

Laura Viñas Valle points out that Dahl’s narrators habitually contribute to the negative portrayal of specific characters through the use of irony, quoting the example from *Matilda* mentioned below: “It seemed that bingo afternoons left [Mrs Wormwood] so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal” (294-295). The sarcastic tone signals disapproval and functions as a guide for readers to disapprove of the adult characters. Matilda’s situation and the means by which it is depicted, is effectively summed up by a sarcastic comment from the narrator: “Mr and Mrs Wormwood were both so gormless and wrapped up in their own silly little lives that … I doubt they would have noticed had she crawled into the house with a broken leg” (10). Valle goes further and means that most of Dahl’s narrators, as is the case in *Matilda*, have a fixed ideological position from the beginning (294); thus the reader receives the story from the narrator's moral perspective, leading the reader to view adult characters negatively.

3.2 The Passive

Not all adult characters in *Matilda* torment children. Miss Honey and Mrs. Phelps, the village librarian, are two characters who both have the children’s best interest at heart. However, despite their good intentions, these two characters actually contribute to the child-
adult division, but do so more passively. One of the most crucial problems Matilda faces is that her intelligence is neither acknowledged nor encouraged at home. Miss Honey recognizes her brilliance at once but fails in convincing both the parents and Miss Trunchbull of its significance. Matilda becomes deeply attached to Miss Honey, but she is no more capable of standing up to the evil adults than any child is, leaving Matilda to fend for herself. As Kristin Guest resolves, “Miss Honey may be as questionable a role model as Mrs. Wormwood insofar as she appears to support progressive ideas while silently affirming conservative values” such as traditional gender roles (253). Mrs. Phelps also wants the best for Matilda and while at the library she is very helpful. However, she does no more than her duty requires, which is to provide literature to visitors. It is obvious that she cares for Matilda, but despite recognizing the safety issues of a four-year-old wandering back and forth alone to the library every day, she decides “not to interfere”, with the argument that “it [is] seldom worthwhile to interfere with other people’s children” (18). In other words, adult characters that are not evil are weak, despite being good at heart, and therefore all adult characters contribute to the adult-child dichotomy in which children are innocent victims of adult power or complete lack thereof.

3.3 Objections to Dahl's Treatment of Adult Characters

Though most adults approve of and even praise Dahl for his way with children, some strongly object to his negative treatment of adults, which on the other hand children find entertaining. Jacqueline Rose and Perry Nodelman share the idea that adults “write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves we approve of or feel comfortable with” (qtd. in Lassén-Seger, 13). Keeping this perspective in mind, it may explain why many of Dahl’s works for children have been so widely debated. Mark West notes that adults may find Dahl’s children’s work “tasteless” because they interpret the stories too literally and “cannot appreciate the humor in them”. According to West, Dahl intends for his books to “appeal to the less civilized side of children’s sense of humor”, a side that many
adults have lost since growing up. Martha Wolfenstein explains this further in saying that “the adult and the child rarely find themselves in the same emotional situation at the same time” (qtd. in West 116). This statement would explain why Mr. Wormwood’s permanent hat or Miss Trunchbull’s violent ways are entertaining to children but objectionable to some adults.

4. Issues and Values as Contributors to the Child-Adult Dichotomy

In the Wormwood residence, Matilda is the victim of several serious issues. The reader first learns of Matilda’s situation by being introduced to her family and home environment. This four year old girl is mistreated in many ways, and emotional abuse has a strong presence in the house. Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood single out Matilda, much the way schoolyard bullies seek out the most vulnerable child, subjecting her to unjustifiable cruelty. They are convinced that their daughter is both unintelligent and unusually naughty, and have no qualms about conveying this to her in the most insensitive way.

Neglect is another prominent issue in Matilda’s life. In a more direct form of neglect, Mrs. Wormwood leaves Matilda at home alone every afternoon so that she can enjoy playing bingo in the next village. This takes place when Matilda is just a few years old, and she is expected to look after herself and pass the time watching television. Matilda’s parents show no signs of acknowledging the safety issues of leaving such a young child alone for several hours. The encouragement of television as a replacement for books is an example of a more subtle form of neglect. Caring parents would want their children to learn and prosper, not spend hours in front of a screen being fed useless information, but Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood do not exert themselves for the sake of Matilda’s development. Instead, their disregard for Matilda is so deep that they fail to send her to school at the correct age, and she is a year older than her classmates when her proper education begins. The fact that Matilda never receives a home-cooked meal is another example of neglect. It is more the reasons behind the bought dinners
that account for the neglect, not the dinners per se. Mrs. Wormwood does not cook because she is lazy and uncaring.

One could say that the Wormwood house – ‘home’ is an exaggeration – serves as a model for the adult-child dichotomy that develops throughout the novel. Valle makes a relevant point in that Dahl’s narrators constantly establish contrasts, and the narrative in *Matilda* is no exception (295). Books vs. television, books vs. looks and wealth vs. honesty are a few examples of contrasts found in the Wormwood residence. Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood reject things that normal parents would encourage or even push their children into. To begin with, books are frowned upon. To Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, books are useless “trash” (39) and practically non-existent in the house. Instead, television is encouraged to such an extent that even dinner is served there every evening. Furthermore, good physical appearance in girls is valued above intelligence and proper education, which is obvious based on the attitude of Mrs. Wormwood, whose idea of female success is “sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessman” (98). Lastly, money is valued above honesty. Mr. Wormwood makes no secret of his crooked ways with customers. Throughout the interaction between Matilda and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood show total disregard for their daughter’s superior intelligence and moral judgment. In fact, they have completely contradicting standpoints on all the values discussed above. Alongside the issues discussed above, this strengthens the negative portrayal of adults.

5. The Portrayal of Matilda as an Adult

*Matilda* is a novel that depicts an imbalance between children and adults as well as between good and evil, that no one seems able to restore; no one, that is, except a tiny five-year-old girl called Matilda. Matilda represents everything her parents and Miss Trunchbull are not: she is attentive, intelligent and modest and can truly distinguish between right and wrong. She is also completely innocent of all the accusations made of her, making the dichotomy
between her and her adult adversaries especially pronounced. Matilda also has all the qualities of a literary hero: though caught in a very distressing situation, she exhibits courage and uses her unique ability to disarm evil adults of their power.

Considering the dichotomy that has been discussed thus far, it is also significant that the hero is a child. Against a background where adult characters are portrayed as either evil or passive and children are portrayed as an oppressed group bravely fighting a losing battle, it would not make sense for the hero to be an adult, as it would contradict the dichotomy Dahl continually emphasizes. In fact, the hero must be a child in order to validate the portrayal of all adults as evil or passive. A child hero validates the basic dichotomy that is the distinction between children and adults as morally different.

In Dahl's world the distinction between adults and children has mainly to do with morality. In the character of Matilda, however, one can find a number of traits that differentiate her from other children, not adults as one would expect, and these traits have to do with intelligence, moral consciousness, social capacity and independence. In Matilda these traits are developed to such an advanced stage that they are untypical of a child and even border the unrealistic when examined with the use of cognitive development theories.

The first descriptions of Matilda have to do with her immense intellectual capacity. She is described as "extraordinary" and "brilliant", with a mind so "nimble" that anyone should have noticed her unique ability. "Her speech [is] perfect" by the age of one and a half, at three she has taught herself to read, and at the age of five she has learned enough to qualify her for the top form at school. Furthermore, Miss Honey calls her a "child-genius" and believes she could be brought up to university level within two or three years. Though being this knowledgeable is not necessarily a trait adherent to all adults, it is certainly not a trait common in children. A child developing at a normal rate normally knows up to two hundred words by the age of one and a half. Unrealistically, Matilda's speech has already reached perfection at this age. Furthermore, Lev Vygotskij's theory points to
human interaction as the source of language development, but up until the age of four Matilda's only human interaction is with her family, an interaction that is so lacking in its quality that it could not account for Matilda's remarkable language development. Still, Matilda teaches herself to read at the age of three without the help of her parents, making her seem more supernatural than childlike. Thus her remarkable capacity for language is the first trait that contradicts the portrayal of her as a child.

Matilda’s intelligence has a far reach and is responsible for all the knowledge she has acquired thus far. She also has the intellect of an adult, allowing her to recognize the significance of reading. This is seen in her choice of ‘books’ over ‘looks’, but even more so by the fact that she understands that reading widens one’s perspective. After an incident in which the parents force Matilda to watch television instead of reading her book, the narrator, through focalization, gives us insight into Matilda’s remarkable understanding of literature’s significance to the human mind. She feels that “If only [her parents] would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television” (29). In other words, she understands that her parents’ ignorance stems from not having had enough contact with academics in general and literature specifically.

Matilda is also able to draw parallels between what she has learned through literature and that which she encounters in real life, seen by numerous references to specific written works. Upon entering Miss Honey’s cottage, she references no less than four separate literary texts and recognizes that the tiny, barren home fits into the fairy-tale genre. This shows an ability to analyze and a capacity for logical thinking that according to Piaget would not even begin develop until the age of about twelve (von Tetzchner, 175, 268-269). Thus Matilda, unlike children at her age, is able to appreciate the significance of literature by acknowledging the short-comings of non-readers, and is also able to compare life with the knowledge she has gained from reading.
Matilda’s nimble mind also seems to have given her social skills that are far more advanced than that of a normal five-year-old girl. Through the narrator we learn that she easily makes friends with her classmates, despite being so superior intellectually, and this is a result of her immeasurable modesty. Children of Matilda’s age normally seek acknowledgement, especially if they have an extraordinary skill to boast about, but Matilda “[displays] almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never [shows] off” (101). Even more remarkable is her social sensitivity, which allows her to consider other people’s feelings and act accordingly. The best example of this is when Miss Honey takes Matilda home for tea in her tiny cottage. They quickly establish that Miss Honey is poor, obvious not only from the lack of proper furniture, but also from the fact that Miss Honey must bathe standing up, using water heated on a camping-stove. In Matilda’s eyes, the use of margarine instead of butter is another significant marker of Miss Honey’s economic status. The narrator is, once more, the main tool through which Matilda’s sympathetic and considerate nature is communicated: “In her wisdom [Matilda seems] to be aware of the delicacy of the situation and she [takes] great care not to say anything to embarrass her companion” (189). While treading further into the cottage, Matilda is “appalled” (190) by its barrenness and poor standard, but manages to keep these feelings to herself.

The above situation shows that Matilda is empathetic, with an acute sensitivity that would take more than five years to develop. Matilda’s consideration for others’ feelings also shows an admirable moral character. Though she does not always act accordingly, she consistently displays an understanding of the difference between right and wrong. She immediately takes a moral stance when her father discusses the way he does business, calling it “dishonest” (23) and “dirty money” (25). Through the narrator, one also learns that “She knew it was wrong to hate her parents… but she was finding it difficult not to do so” (28-29). This quote mirrors the relationship between Matilda and her parents, whom she subjects to various kinds of “punishments” in retaliation for their mean behavior towards her. In this situation,
similarly to when she spills water over Miss Trunchbull and scares her with the chalkboard incident, Matilda’s actions signal a response to injustice. If one compares Matilda's understanding of revenge to Lavender's, Matilda’s reasons are far more tolerable. Lavender only slips a slimy newt into Miss Trunchbull’s water in order to gain heroic status, not because it's the right thing to do. Matilda shows maturity in her moral judgment, and can do the wrong thing for the right reason.

According to Judy Dunn and Judith Smetana's theories on morality, a child's moral development is based on human interaction, mainly within the family (von Tetzchner, 539). A child's experiences with conflict within the family shapes his or her understanding of others' emotions and principles of justice. According to this theory, the context of Matilda's upbringing would not produce a child with an acute moral sensitivity and a sound understanding of the principles of justice. It is, then, considering Matilda's background, unrealistic for her to want to save face and not offend a person in the inferior position, which in this case is Miss Honey, or to understand and feel the moral injustice of her father's cheating ways with customers.

Matilda does not only act like an adult towards others, she is also very mature. In this regard her most striking characteristic is her independence. This trait is responsible for Matilda setting “out all by herself to walk to the public library” (12). Once there, Mrs. Phelps offers to help her find a good book, to which Matilda responds “No, thank you … I’m sure I can manage” (13). In the home Matilda shows more signs of independence, particularly when she is alone. Despite being “not quite tall enough to reach things around the kitchen”(21), she manages to make herself various warm drinks over the stove. Furthermore, she studies her more advanced school books independently while Miss Honey teaches the rest of the class. Closely related to this is Matilda’s capacity for responsibility. For example, she takes responsibility for her own learning and even takes responsibility for unshackling Miss Honey from Miss Trunchbull’s grip, something Miss Honey herself has failed to accomplish all her
life. Matilda’s independence and her ability to take responsibility for herself and others is notable and is not consistent with the behavior of a five-year-old child.

The narrator’s disposition towards Matilda is also consistent with the portrayal of her as an adult. There are several instances where the narrator explicitly informs the reader that Matilda is different from other children, and these examples deal with typically child-like behavior which Matilda does not exhibit. At the beginning of the text there is much focus on Matilda’s brilliance and the fact that she is “extraordinary” (10) as opposed to ordinary children, and the narrator refers to her as “something to make your eyes pop” (11). Another example is when Mr. Wormwood has torn up one of Matilda’s library books and the narrator says that “Most children in Matilda’s place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn’t do this” (41). The narrator is the reader’s guide to gaining deeper understanding of the characters in this text, and the attitude towards Matilda tells the reader that she is much more mature than “ordinary children” (10).

In addition to the narrator, Miss Honey’s treatment of Matilda is significant in portraying her as an adult. During the visit to the cottage, Miss Honey shares advanced poetry with her, knowing she will comprehend. Later, she opens up to Matilda, behaving towards her like one would behave towards an adult. She says:

You are so much wiser than your years, my dear… that it quite stagers me. Although you look like a child, you are not really a child at all because your mind and your powers of reasoning seem to be fully grown-up. So I suppose we might call you a grown-up child, if you see what I mean (195).

She then proceeds to reveal to Matilda all of the issues that weigh on her mind, and Matilda’s age seems to fade away as her role transforms from being Miss Honey’s primary school pupil
to being her therapist. The way Miss Honey treats Matilda is significant, because it confirms that which the quote above explicitly states: Matilda is “not really a child at all” (195).

As a result of the information Matilda receives, she makes it her own responsibility to save Miss Honey from the destitute situation she is caught in. In this way, the roles are reversed, and “Describing Matilda as a grown-up child … allows Miss Honey to claim a confidante but also to identify herself as the converse: a childish adult” (Guest 248). As a result of her “fully grown-up” “powers of reasoning” (195), Matilda takes adult responsibility, and devises a plan to frighten Miss Trunchbull into returning the house and the inheritance to Miss Honey. The plan involves using her brain-power in order to manipulate a piece of chalk to write a fake message from Miss Honey’s father Magnus. Interestingly, Matilda can only defeat Miss Trunchbull by “assuming a position of adult male power” (Guest), that is, to speak through the voice of Magnus.

In fact, none of the traits that make Matilda a hero are childlike; her virtuousness and modesty, intelligence and brain-power and her independence and mature social skills are not representative of a realistic child. Furthermore, at the time of her heroic ambush, she must take on the persona of an adult male in order to fulfill her role as the hero.

The portrayal of Matilda as an adult is interesting for several reasons, one of which is its potential role in securing a wider age range among its readers. It would probably be safe to say that children can identify with the main character in her struggle against adult dominance, but the portrayal of Matilda as an adult may also allow her to reach more mature readers. As mentioned above, Wolfenstein divides adults and children into different ‘emotional situations’, and while this explains why some adults object to Dahl, it may also account for the portion of those adult readers who enjoy *Matilda*. Matilda’s advanced intellect, moral consciousness; acute social skills and independent behavior make her the type of child character an adult can feel comfortable with, as it removes any uneasiness associated with assuming the role of the child reader. In other words, the duality of Matilda’s character reconciles the suggested
division of adults and children into different ‘emotional situations’, allowing her to appeal to all ages simultaneously.

5. Conclusion

Roald Dahl once said that “children are inclined, at least subconsciously, to regard grown-ups as the enemy. I see this as natural, and I often work it into my children’s books” (West 116). This is certainly the case in Matilda, where all the adult characters are either passive or abusive of their power; in other words they are constructed from the child’s point of view. Every adult character proves to be either evil or passive, affirming the oppositional relationship between them and children, and, to confirm this, the hero of the novel is a child. The happy ending, especially Miss Honey’s, is the result of the sole actions of tiny, five-year-old Matilda.

The construction of Matilda’s character, however, poses a problem to Dahl’s focus on the adult-child dichotomy. If one looks beyond the girl’s age and size, there is little evidence of her being a child at all. Children are not generous by nature and normally do things for esteem, not ethics, but Matilda is characterized by an innate maturity that allows her to be all the things children are normally not: independent, highly intellectual, incorruptible and socially skilled. This is ultimately manifested at the point of Matilda’s heroic gesture, where she literally takes on the identity of a grown-up in order to achieve her goal. In this literary work, the paradox seems to be that only a child can be the hero, but her heroic status can only be achieved through an adult identity.

Dahl’s objection to adults’ abuse of their power over children is distinct and sharp. In Matilda, this is manifested through an unmistakable dichotomy between adults and children. However, this division can be deconstructed by a close reading of the protagonist. The portrayal of all adult characters as either evil, ignorant or passive limits the choice of hero to the children’s group, but Dahl contradicts himself by portraying Matilda as an adult.
Conclusively, Dahl cannot resolve the paradox in *Matilda*. Portraying Matilda as an adult contradicts the adult-child dichotomy that Dahl attempts to uphold. In order to validate the dichotomy the character of Matilda must be portrayed as a realistic child, but as such she would not have the capacity to win the war against adults. Hence, giving Matilda grownup traits allows Dahl to make her the hero, but it discredits the entire division made between children and adults throughout the novel.


