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Roald Dahl and the Construction of Childhood: Writing the Child as Other

Keywords

Roald Dahl, childhood, other, child as other

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Madeline Spivey

Roald Dahl once said, “I am totally convinced that most grown-ups have completely forgotten what it is like to be a child between the ages of five and ten...I can remember exactly what it was like. I am certain I can” (*Boy: Tales of Childhood* 179). There is no doubt that Dahl’s lasting connection to childhood facilitated his writing for children. Known as “The World’s No. 1 Storyteller,” Dahl proves continuously popular, especially amongst his child readership. This popularity certainly is due in part to his celebration of nonsense, in which “the fantastic would always triumph over the literal, lest he succumb to his ‘constant unholy terror of boring the reader’” (Sturrock 567). His carefully crafted stories are not all fun and games, however. Amidst his humor and fantastical plot elements, Dahl manages to relate to the child’s position as “other” in an adult-centric world, illuminating the dynamics of their precarious situation. Dahl represents the ways in which children’s otherness impacts the nature of their relationships with adults. He thus provides his readers with the opportunity to consider their relationship to others, urging empathetic interactions across the socially constructed adult-child divide he sees in the world and presents in his stories.

Applying the concept of “the other” to the child is not uncharted territory. Owain Jones approaches “the otherness of childhood” in an expansive essay that explores the range and complexities of the topic, detail-

ing several concepts that prove enriching to an in-depth analysis of Dahl's work. Broadly speaking, the child is other to the adult (196). As the child is often associated with development and "becoming," the adult is more often associated with fixedness and "being," even though "becoming" need not truly end when a person reaches an arbitrary point in their life. Social spaces are created primarily for being and are adult-centric in nature (200). Take the average kitchen counter, for example. They are designed and constructed to cater to the adult's height, in order for the adult to easily utilize the space. If a three-year-old were to approach the counter, however, their eyes might not even reach the level of the counter. Dahl's representation of children confirms this difference, both the intrinsic and the constructed. It is important to note that, while in discussing race or ethnicity, otherness is fixed, the same cannot be said when discussing the child as other. All adults were children at one point in time, and therefore have experienced the otherness of childhood firsthand. In the process of becoming, however, it seems that a disconnect occurs for many adults. It is these adults, the ones who have forgotten what it is like to be a child, that Dahl's fiction interrogates. In turn, he celebrates those who can continue to identify with children, even as adults.

With regard to adult-child relationships, adult-lead socialization is an inevitable and natural part of a child's otherness. Adults teach children, inform their development, and therefore impart their constructions of childhood and adulthood onto the child. As Jones writes, "otherness is not only healthy for children and for child-adult relationships, it is essential to what children are" (197). While socialization is not an inherently nega-

tive process, as the “becoming” of a child is dependent on the “being” of the adult, Jones recognizes that often “adult agendas [...] seek to colonize and control childhood,” as well as determine “what children are and what they should be” (196). The word “colonization” itself suggests imposition through force, such as that of a strict teacher who treats the otherness of the child as something needing to be fixed or corrected. There is no doubt that adult constructions of childhood often influence the nature of relationships between adults and children. As Jones suggests, “The question then is, what is the nature of these differences between these worlds, and what manner of trade can occur between them?” (196). We can also ask, how does otherness manifest itself in the lives of children, and how might adults interact with this otherness? Dahl’s stories suggest answers to these questions. Individually, *Matilda* (1988), *The BFG* (1982), and *Danny the Champion of the World* (1977) present the reader with a differently situated protagonist. Matilda has two abusive and apathetic parents, Sophie of *The BFG* has no living parents, and Danny has one living parent who loves him. Each child relates to the adults in their lives in differing ways, and therefore their respective experiences of otherness differ. Collectively, however, these stories illuminate the dynamics of their otherness for Dahl’s child readers.

Matilda: Other to the Ordinary

While Dahl’s beloved *Matilda* centers on the small but mighty titular character, he devotes much of the narrative to two adults in Matilda’s life: the terrifying Miss Trunchbull and the sweet Miss Honey. Like Matilda’s family, the Wormwoods, Miss Trunchbull treats children as people

who should already be adults, stating, “I cannot for the life of me see why children have to take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose” (145). Their otherness as children irritates Miss Trunchbull, and her ensuing expectations and treatment of children are rather contradictory in nature. She expects children to act as mature as adults yet also believes they are incapable of doing so. In contrast, Miss Honey reaches out to children in their vulnerable, shifting state: “she seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelm young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders” (61). Instead of treating them like a group of “herded” animals, Miss Honey attends to each of their needs as children who are others in their world. Applying Jones’ terminology of “being” and “becoming,” it becomes clear that Miss Trunchbull is fixed in her ways. She fails to comprehend the necessity of “becoming” and therefore abuses children on account of their lack of “being,” according to her own constructions of how children should act and what they should be in relation to adults. The open-minded Miss Honey, on the other hand, presents structured space for the child’s “becoming,” as is demonstrated through her interactions with all of her students, including Matilda.

“Extraordinary” is the first word ascribed to Matilda. “By that,” the narrator adds, “I mean sensitive and brilliant. Matilda was both of these” (4). While she may be small in stature and physical strength, her brainpower extends far beyond that of those around her. As Dahl establishes from the very beginning, Matilda’s existence differs greatly from those who are a part of her world. She is a lover of literature amidst a family of television

addicts. She is a small child in a large, adult-focused world, where people like Miss Trunchbull routinely belittle and abuse children in their inherently vulnerable state. She is a masterful thinker amidst her young peers who are only just learning how to read. She possesses supernatural brain-power that sets her apart from everyone else in the novel, both friend and foe, child and adult. Matilda, the extraordinary, is other to the ordinary. She is becoming and being at the same time, not strictly adhering to Jones' dichotomy. Not only that, but she is other to the adult constructions of childhood that seem to enclose her on all sides, especially to Miss Trunchbull's construction of the child. She has the knowledge of an adult while inhabiting the body of a child. This hybridity acts as a means to explore constructed otherness versus genuine otherness, that is, adult constructions of childhood versus the innate development of a child. In looking at Matilda, one is prompted to ask several basic questions: what does it mean to be a child? What does it mean to be an adult? And what does it mean for each to relate to the other?

The reader first comes to understand Matilda's individuality through her relations with her family, the Wormwoods. Dahl presents the Wormwoods as the worst kind of parents. To the Wormwoods, Matilda is a bothersome scab that they must shed over time: "Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood looked forward enormously to the time when they could pick their little daughter off and flick her away, preferably into the next county or even further than that" (4). They feel that their daughter is a burden while she is in the state of childhood, and only when she enters into the independence of adulthood will she not be an annoyance to them. Even though Matilda is speaking by the age of one and a half and reading by the age of three, her

parents are “wrapped up in their own silly little lives.” They often become verbally abusive, as when Matilda points out the reality of her father’s crooked business tactic. He responds, “You’re just an ignorant little squirt who hasn’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about” (19). While Matilda’s older brother Michael “seemed to have inherited his father’s love of crookery” and mimics the ways of his parents, as many children do, Matilda does not (18). Rather, her very nature veers drastically from her own family’s shallow existence. In making the gap between Matilda and her family extreme, Dahl represents the child’s view of the situation. For Matilda and other children, it can seem like the whole world is against them. Dahl validates this sentiment in the way he chooses to describe Matilda’s family.

While her parents are oblivious to her unique, intellectual abilities, others take immediate notice, such as the friendly librarian, Mrs. Phelps, who is “slightly taken aback at the arrival of such a tiny girl” at the public library (6). Upon reading *all* of the children’s books that are available to her, Matilda quickly moves on to the world of literature intended for adult readers, coming into contact with such authors as Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and John Steinbeck. Amidst a family who does not seem to understand her, Matilda finds comfort and belonging in the books she reads where there is space that is much needed for a child’s “becoming,” according to Jones. For the child who does not fit into an adult understanding of childhood, for Matilda, adult literature offers a space relatively free of restrictive assumptions, a place where Matilda can explore various models of mature being that her parents fail to provide. It is especially pertinent to consider Matilda’s appreciation of Dickens, an author who often offers social critique

through his writing, especially concerning the hardships children faced as vulnerable members of Victorian England. Through reading such texts, Matilda would not only consider her own abusive situation, but she would also gain insight into the world of the other, the adult.

At the age of five and a half, Matilda shifts her time from reading at the library and undermining her father at home to studying at school. At Crunchem Hall Primary School, Matilda, as in her family, is at the bottom of the hierarchy with “eighteen other *small* boys and girls” (60, emphasis added). They are small not only in comparison with adult figures, but also in comparison with the older, bigger children. This space, while intended for children, still presents problems for the child. At the school, Dahl introduces the two central adult figures of the text: Miss Trunchbull and (her niece) Miss Honey. Aside from their positions as educators and their shared family history, they differ in nearly every way. Miss Trunchbull, or just “The Trunchbull” as Dahl often refers to her, is identified largely by her looming physical presence as a former Olympic athlete. “If a group of children happened to be in her path,” Dahl writes, “she ploughed right on through them like a tank, with small people bouncing off her left and right” (61). The very language used to describe her presence makes her seem inhuman, as she is explicitly compared to a machine of war. As she is unusually large, the physical distance that differentiates her from the children under her supervision is enlarged. Matilda and her classmate, Lavender, quickly learn in the schoolyard that “she hates very small children” and “thinks five-year-olds are grubs that haven’t yet hatched out” (96). Such sentiments are extremely ironic as Miss Trunchbull is the headmistress of a school for children.

In Miss Trunchbull's construction of childhood, children are individuals who should already be adults, or should at least act like adults. At the same time, she believes children should be "seen and not heard" (5). She shows no compassion for the child, unlike Miss Honey. Rather, she abuses children as a result of her own fixed and closed-off mindset. For example, when Amanda Thrupp, another of Matilda's classmates, wore "childish" pigtails in her hair to school, Miss Trunchbull orders her to cut them off. When the considerably smaller Amanda does not cooperate, Miss Trunchbull grabs the girl by her pigtails and throws her over the fence at the edge of the schoolyard, using her physical superiority to abuse Amanda. More generally, anytime a child displeases Miss Trunchbull, she locks them up in "the Chokey," a claustrophobia-inducing cupboard designed for maximum discomfort. Her hatred of children is central to her character. Miss Trunchbull takes her place among Dahl's adult characters "who reject and abuse children" and so "have no redeeming features either physically or morally speaking" (Alston 87). In order to reflect what Dahl views as their inner ugliness, he assigns characters noticeable attributes according to their treatment of children, defining them as either child-abusers or child-supporters.

While she despises children's inability to grow up on demand, Miss Trunchbull uses her low regard of children to keep them entrapped within the otherness that she has constructed through her own conceptions of childhood. For someone who claims she "never was one [a child]", Miss Trunchbull certainly has a strongly developed sense of what a child should and should not be able to do (80). For example, during her first weekly visit to Matilda's class, she is outraged when she discovers that the young children

have learned to spell “difficulty.” She says, “What nonsense [...] you are not supposed to learn long words like that until you are at least eight or nine” (140). Because they are young children, she presupposes the extent of their abilities and disregards the reality that unfolds before her eyes. Her understanding of their otherness is fixed, even though she interacts with children every day. When the children subvert her notion of the child, as they are all able to spell the word with ease because of a song Miss Honey helped them learn, she erupts. At the same time, however, this response contradicts her previous exclamations that children take too long to become adults. It seems that Miss Trunchbull is at an utter loss with how to interact with the inevitable otherness of the child, whether she chooses to recognize it or not. After falsely accusing Matilda of putting a stink-bomb in her office, Miss Trunchbull replies firmly, “I am never mistaken [...] of course you did” (80). Her response is decidedly fixed in tone.

In presenting a character like Matilda, and in bringing her into a hostile classroom environment, Dahl challenges Miss Trunchbull’s construct of the child as other. Matilda the extraordinary escapes the confines of Miss Trunchbull’s version of what a child should and should not be. For example, Miss Trunchbull thinks that children are “stupid” and “idiotic,” yet Matilda surpasses the intellect of any adult in the story, breaking past the restrictive construction that guides Miss Trunchbull in all her interactions with children. Her philosophy on the nature of children could be likened to that of 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who believed that humans are innately evil and therefore need restrictions in order to avoid societal collapse (Lloyd and Sreedhar). For Miss Trunchbull, however, restrictions often

come in the form of physical abuse and physical restriction, as through the tight confines of the Chokey. Dahl paints Miss Trunchbull as an undoubtedly frightening individual. While Matilda does not exhibit much fear or intimidation in her interactions with Miss Trunchbull, as she has the mind of an adult, the other children, who have the minds of children, are not as easily able to escape the anxiety that precedes Miss Trunchbull's terror. After all, it is their childness that Miss Trunchbull attacks.

Miss Honey is the antithesis of the notorious Miss Trunchbull. While Miss Trunchbull's construction of childhood can be identified with Hobbes' view of humanity, Miss Honey's could be likened to that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher who believed that humans are innately good when in a free environment (Bertram). Miss Honey, who admires her intellectual tendencies, is the only one Matilda is able to turn to, perhaps because she feels best known and understood by her, as Miss Honey was also raised in an abusive and restrictive household. While Miss Honey is herself no longer a child, she nonetheless recognizes the inherent value of childhood and is therefore willing to appreciate and protect such otherness. In comparison to her fellow teachers, even Miss Honey recognizes that she is "the exception" (187). Like Dahl himself, Miss Honey manages to stay in touch with childhood.

Rather than abusing her power through her position in adult-child relationships, she uses it to uplift the child, as is quite clear in how she interacts with Matilda. Relating to children is Miss Honey's "rare gift" (60). She celebrates children and their current state of being, rather than forcing them forward into adulthood. Instead of bestowing hatred upon the children, she

gives them love and attention. She does not assume the life of the child, but rather allows the child the space to explore. In the language of Jones, Miss Honey “deliberately leave[s] space for the otherness of children” and “do[es] not attempt full colonization” (199). Rather she assumes the role of socialization-guide for the child, assisting the child in their becoming.

Miss Honey’s approach becomes evident when Matilda finally discovers her supernatural power. When Matilda first shares her peculiar ability, Miss Honey, while at first unsure that Matilda could have tipped over a glass of water by using just her eyes, is still open to hearing Matilda out: “It is extraordinary, thought Miss Honey, how often small children have flights of fancy like this” (167). As seen through this example, it is clear that Miss Honey is not void of constructions of childhood. However, even in light of her own understanding, she nonetheless allows Matilda the space to prove her wrong. Although she is still shocked at Matilda’s ability, she invites Matilda over for tea, where Matilda finally learns that Miss Trunchbull is Miss Honey’s abusive aunt. With that information, Matilda takes it upon herself to use her new-found power to pursue justice, a theme that is common throughout Dahl’s fiction (Worthington 126). Once Miss Trunchbull is gone and Matilda is free to join an upper-level class (as Miss Trunchbull would not allow her to do so before), she ends up losing her supernatural ability. Yet her extraordinariness does not fade away with it. She continues to thrive as she comes under the care of Miss Honey, the sole adult in the text who shows Matilda what every child, and adult, wants and needs: love. As Dahl writes early on, after describing the nature of the Wormwoods, “Matilda longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding

and honourable and intelligent” (43). Miss Honey, while not her biological parent, possesses all the attributes that Matilda identifies with desirable parenting.

“Am I a phenomenon?” Matilda asks Miss Honey in discussing her supernatural power (173). Miss Honey responds, “it is quite possible that you are.” Not only is Matilda a phenomenal child, but Dahl’s narrative is also an extraordinary account detailing the various ways that otherness is a part of childhood, showcasing not only the power of the child, but also the ways in which an adult can positively interact with and celebrate such otherness and becoming, which are central to a child’s experience. In comparing the ways in which Miss Trunchbull and Miss Honey approach children through their own constructions of childhood, it becomes clear that, when given the opportunity to develop outside of limiting adult-formulated constructions, every child has the potential and power to be extraordinary. For the child reader, even one who interacts with a “Trunchbull” in their own life, Dahl demonstrates the possibility to break past restrictive constructions and oppressive forms of adult colonization. Additionally, he showcases the ways in which caring and understanding adults can positively influence and support the child in their becoming, a becoming that is perhaps not so distinct from the adult’s own continual development. As Ann Alston so aptly comments, “the message remains: children and adults must remain open to learning from each other” (98).

The BFG: Parallel Forms of Otherness

The BFG is a tale of fantastical proportions about Sophie, a young

girl, and the Big Friendly Giant, who together combine their efforts to stand up against the evils they encounter in their worlds. Upon discovering that the other inhabitants of Giant Country eat humans every night, Sophie teams up with the BFG, finally convincing the Queen of England to put a stop to the deadly behavior of the beastly giants. On a thematic level, *The BFG* is an exploration of otherness. The young protagonist is an orphan, an other to the majority of children who have parents. She is a female in a male-dominated culture. She is a child in an adult-centric world. Likewise, her friend the BFG similarly assumes the role of the other, as he is a small, snozzcumber-eating, loner giant who is more often than not at the mercy of the human-bean-eating giants that loom over him at twice his size. And yet their respective forms of otherness prompt them to effectively change their world. Their uncolonized, child-like imaginations give birth to their own happy ending. Their very “becoming” allows for their triumphant being.

Dahl appeals to his child reader’s smallness. While he certainly does so in his other books, such as *Matilda*, his attention to this aspect of the child’s life is most evident in *The BFG*, a story which exaggerates the power-size dynamic through the introduction of actual giants. In the real world, children find themselves in a world where spaces are created to best accommodate the adult population, a population in which the individuals are physically larger than their child counterparts. In *The BFG*, this reality takes center stage through Sophie’s experience in the orphanage and in her interactions with the giants of the story. The reader discovers the consequences of Sophie’s physical size early in the book. For example, Sophie was punished for not following the strict rules in the orphanage. She was

locked up in a “dark cellar for a day and a night without anything to eat or drink,” physically deprived, much like the Chokey in *Matilda* (31). In that situation, Sophie was at the mercy of Mrs. Clonkers, the adult who had physical power over her during her time at the orphanage. The size differences between Sophie and Mrs. Clonkers establish Sophie as the other to the fully-developed adult. All children can relate to this, of course, as all children must deal with the physical reality of their size difference. Dealing with size difference, therefore, is inevitable. Dahl intentionally takes this size dynamic a step further when he introduces the looming BFG himself.

The first time the reader meets the BFG, the narrator describes him as “so tall its head was higher than the upstairs windows of the houses” (4). His largeness, and implicitly Sophie’s smallness, is central to the first several chapters. It is clear that, from the beginning, Dahl crafts a strong sense of physical-size disparity, and he builds up the tension through the use of mystery. By withholding important details, such as the underlying benevolence of the BFG, the reader feels Sophie’s fear and anxiety. Only during the “witching hour,” when everything is “pale and ghostly and milky-white,” does the narrator disclose the size of the BFG, the one aspect of the giant that Sophie can comprehend in that time and space. At the mercy of the giant’s huge hand in the chapter entitled “The Snatch,” Sophie “wanted to scream, but no sound came out” (8). In this moment of the story, she is utterly helpless, a sentiment that other children can identify with whether or not they have encountered a giant. Being dependent, and in a way “helpless,” is central to what it means to be a human child. The physical size of the child, Sophie’s petite frame in this case, plays into this reality.

Of course, this size dynamic becomes even more evident once the story transitions into the land of the giants, where Sophie enters the “*enormous* cavern with a *high* rocky roof” that is the BFG’s home (16, emphasis added). The landscape looms over Sophie. She is but the size of a pencil on the giant’s table that stands at least twelve feet from the ground. In a conversation consisting of questioning and word-play with the BFG, however, Sophie quickly comes to realize that the giant who has taken her is friendly, a “nice and jumbly Giant in Giant Country” who will not eat her, as the other giants surely would (22). The size disparity between Sophie and the BFG seems to shrink as they come to learn more about each other. For example, when the BFG learns that Sophie is an orphan and is often abused at the orphanage, he begins to cry. Sophie notes in the moment, “his heart is melting for me” (31). Sophie exhibits similar behavior upon witnessing the BFG’s abuse at the hands of the other giants. Empathy towards each other’s experience of otherness seems to lessen their difference in size. Their respective forms of otherness create a bond that pushes past the otherness that initially separates them.

In Giant Country, the other giants enter the frame and the BFG becomes the smaller one. As he explains to Sophie, “Those giants is all at least fifty feet tall with huge muscles and cockles alive alive-o. I is the titchy one. I is the runt. Twenty-four feet is puddlenuts in Giant Country” (28). The other giants verbally and physically abuse him, tossing him around as if he were an inanimate object, calling him such names as “Troggy little twit! Shrivelly little shrimp!” and “Mucky little midget!” (67). Dahl crafts the story in such a way that both Sophie, a little girl, and the BFG, a giant,

are considered small and helpless in their respective settings. The bond that forms between Sophie and the BFG begins to make sense in light of this subtle reality; these two seemingly opposite beings are able to relate to one another in the way that their respective worlds have shut them out.

Sophie is in a state of “becoming,” as a child, and is constantly learning about the ways of the world, both human and giant. Similarly, the BFG showcases a tendency towards growth, especially as he learns more about the human world through Sophie. Dahl emphasizes the becoming of both characters through his use and creation of language. Made-up words, also known as gobblefunk, fill the pages when the BFG is speaking. There is much talk of whizzpopping, a funny-sounding word for flatulence, along with snozzcumbers, fleshlumpeaters, buzzy-hum, bloodbottler, and glump-tious, to name a few of the words and names that one might find upon randomly flipping to any page of the book. These lingual creations not only develop the BFG’s singular voice, but also display the ways in which he is learning and becoming. As he learns human words after finding and studying a human book, and he considers his own lexicon, the BFG develops his voice. Telling Sophie of the book he used to learn how to write (Charles Dickens’ *Nicholas Nickleby*), he says, “I is reading it hundreds of times [...] And I is still reading it and teaching new words to myself and how to write them. It is the most scrumdiddlyumptious story” (105). His becoming is not restricted by a fixed end-date.

The linguistic inventiveness does not end there, as much of the dialogue between Sophie and the BFG is filled to the brim with word-play. In fact, their very first conversation consists solely of it. The BFG explains

that “Turks from Turkey is tasting of turkey” and “Greeks from Greece is all tasting greasy,” both instances using homophones of the countries’ names (18). He continues, claiming that, “human beans from jersey is tasting of cardigans,” referring to jersey fabric rather than the state itself (20). Their discourse is a game of words, resulting in a humorous effect. Sophie even questions, “but were they jokes?” Humor, by extension, is for the child a way to examine their world and the world of the adult, ask questions about it, point out absurdities, and turn confusion or anxiety in fun and play (Stallcup 32). It can even act as a source of empowerment to the child. After all, the adult-world is other to the child, a place to be discovered and interpreted. Not only do these puns make for a funny bit of dialogue, but they also represent part of the child’s perspective, as children are in the process of learning the—sometimes arbitrarily—constructed rules of grammar. In breaking down proper English, the child can find joy in their becoming and perhaps even consider how they might take control over language in their own life, whether that be through making up words, as exemplified by Dahl, or by simply expanding their vocabulary. As others in an adult-centric world, children have the opportunity to explore the otherness of adulthood through their exploration of language and the constructed rules governing it.

Words are not the only humorous elements of the story. As explained near the beginning of the story, the BFG captures dreams, creates new dreams, and then blows such dreams into the bedrooms of sleeping children. The BFG describes his creations positively, calling them, “Nice dreams. Lovely golden dreams. Dreams that is giving the dreamers a happy

time” (34). Near the middle of the story, the reader gets a glimpse of some of these dreams. One dream is labeled, “I is inventing a car that runs on toothpaste” (102). Another is marked as, “I is abel to jump out of any high window and flote down safely” (103). Another reads, “I has a pet bee that makes rock and roll musik when it flies” (104). They are seemingly peculiar dreams, but they are just strange enough to appeal to the child’s sense of worldly possibilities that extend beyond the practicalities of the adult world. All are dreams with a sense of child-like freedom, in which no question is a wrong question, anything is possible, and even spelling is irrelevant to the benevolent potency of the dream. These dream-creations showcase the BFG’s own understanding and inevitable construction of childhood, a construction that allows space for the otherness of the child. Instead of nudging children towards a future of static adult-being, the BFG specializes in encouraging children to dwell in their becoming, as thinkers whose minds have not been colonized by adult-centric agendas.

Sophie does not interact or deal much with adult constructions of childhood within the confines of the narrative. The BFG, while he appears to be an adult figure, actually mimics the becoming nature of Sophie and is child-like in the way he interacts with the world around him. In a way, he is a child of the giant world, where he is smaller than everyone else. Simply put, there are few adults in her life who could impose their constructions of childhood. It is not until Sophie actually confronts the Queen of England that she interacts with a human adult, aside from her interactions with Mrs. Clonkers, which lie outside the narrative proper. Upon reaching the Queen, Sophie considers the unique situation she finds herself in: “She

found it almost impossible to believe that she, Sophie, a little orphan of no real importance in the world, was at this moment actually sitting high above the ground on the window-sill of the Queen of England's bedroom, with the Queen herself asleep in there behind the curtain not more than five yards away. The very idea of it was absurd" (139). Nevertheless, the Queen remains calm and speaks with Sophie plainly, respecting her claims even though she is a young child who has seemingly magically appeared at her window. Instead of belittling her, the Queen responds to her as a fellow human being, rather than as an adult speaking down to a child. Any of the Queen's unspoken doubts are quieted when the BFG responds to Sophie's call and comes to the window to greet the Queen. While Sophie's identity as a child is not erased, her identity does not subject her to abuse in the presence of the queen. The entire story, rather than emphasizing her childness and its limits, emphasizes her and the BFG's parallel paths of becoming. For the child reader, reading *The BFG* offers the opportunity to simply dwell in their becoming. They can laugh at Dahl's invented words, or consider their own absurd dreams, or perhaps even imagine meeting the Queen of England. When *The BFG* celebrates becoming, it correspondingly celebrates the otherness of the child.

Danny the Champion of the World: Others Together

In *Danny the Champion of the World*, Dahl focuses on the shared otherness of a loving father and adoring child. Upon reaching the end of *Danny*, after a whirlwind of pheasant-poaching and small-English-village adventure, Dahl leaves his (child) readers with a strong suggestion for when

they have children of their own. He writes, “a stodgy parent is *no fun at all* / What a child wants / *and deserves* / is a parent who is / SPARKY” (215). Out of context, the message might seem irresponsible and careless, but such a message fits the narrative superbly. More than anything, *Danny* is a story about the love between an eccentric, “sparky” father and his adoring son. Danny speaks highly of his father, saying “it was impossible to be bored in my father’s company. He was too sparky a man for that. Plots and plans and new ideas came flying off him like sparks from a grindstone” (17). When Danny discovers his father’s pheasant poaching habit, the father-son duo goes on to create a masterplan to poach all of the nasty Mr. Victor Hazel’s pheasants. United, as father and son, as friends, as equals, as others together, they embark on a seemingly absurd journey to execute their wildly entertaining plan.

While many, if not most, of Dahl’s stories involve magical or supernatural elements, such as giants in *The BFG* or mind-powers in *Matilda*, *Danny* is firmly rooted in reality, that is, in the same world as the reader. Although some of the key plot points may seem extraordinary or unlikely, such as drugging hundreds of pheasants with spiked raisins in order to poach them, they are still an imaginable possibility. The realistic setting and story are not the only distinguishing factors of *Danny*, however. Danny’s father is not like other parents in Dahl’s stories. While *Matilda*’s parents are cruelly apathetic and *Sophie*’s parents have passed away, leaving her an orphan, *Danny*’s father is benevolent, present, and an ideal parent. *Danny* begins to showcase that paternal benevolence from the very beginning of the story, within the first few pages. Rather than a story of his own life, *Danny*

points the reader's attention to the father he looks up to, perhaps encouraging the reader to come to know his father, and then also look up to him.

The reader comes to know Danny's father through his son's adoring descriptions. While *Matilda* and *The BFG* were both told in the third person, *Danny* is distinguished by the use of the child's first-person voice. The reader can enter the mind of a child, that is, according to Dahl's own understanding of what it means to be a child. Early on, Danny describes the fatherly love that he has received, and continues to receive, from his father. Upon disclosing the death of his mother, Danny details his father's actions after their loss. He says, "When I was still a baby, my father washed me and fed me and changed my nappies and did all the millions of other things a mother normally does [...] But my father didn't seem to mind. I think that all the love he had felt for my mother when she was alive he now lavished on me" (2-3). Danny's father loves him in multiple ways, even in ways that were not usual for a father-figure in 1970s Great Britain, such as by performing stereotypical motherly duties. Danny continues his praise: "most wonderful of all was the feeling that when I went to sleep, my father would still be there, very close to me, sitting in his chair by the fire, or lying in the bunk above my own" (7). He treats Danny with regular storytelling, including stories of the BFG. He prepares midnight snacks for the both of them. He walks Danny to and from school each day, two miles each way. His care and love for his son is evidenced throughout the story, and the enduring strength of their filial bond claims center stage. To Danny, his father was "without the slightest doubt [...] the most marvelous and exciting father any boy ever had," a sentiment which he repeats word-for-word as the final

remark of his story (8).

While these characteristics certainly establish Danny's father as one of the few good parent figures in Dahl's canon, it is his poaching habit, and his inclusion of Danny in that part of his life, that distinguishes him as a "sparky" parent, as one who is not afraid to indulge in fun and subvert the adult-constructed rules that surround both himself and his child. His imagination, when it comes to pheasant-poaching specifically, is untamed. He is the ideal father because he has not forgotten what it was like to be a child, as he often recounts tales of his childhood when telling of his own father's poaching adventures. As Dahl's own father died when he was very young, Danny's father seems to be, perhaps, a slice of Dahl's imagination in considering what his father might have been like. There is no doubt that Dahl has designed Danny's father as an ideal parent figure, perhaps one who he might have longed for in his own boyhood.

Danny's love for his father is not blind, however. He recognizes his father's imperfections. Before detailing his father's secret to the reader, a moment which can be identified as the turning point of the narrative, he comments on his feelings towards his father's otherness, for just as the child's world is other to the adult, so is the adult world other to the child. Danny remarks, "You will learn as you get older [...] that no father is perfect. Grown-ups are complicated creatures, full of quirks and secrets. Some have quirkier quirks and deeper secrets than others, but all of them [...] have two or three private habits hidden up their sleeves that would probably make you gasp if you knew about them" (25). He recognizes that what his father does is technically illegal and is at first surprised: "my own father a

thief! This gentle lovely man!” (30). Danny’s father explains himself, justifying himself and his own father who had also practiced “the art of poaching,” by commenting on the wealthy, pompous, and artificial nature of pheasant-shooting. From there, Danny asks to go along on future poaching ventures with his father. When Danny learns of his father’s activities, the gap between their respective child and adult worlds seems to lessen. Or rather, Danny’s father never truly abandons the child within, an aspect that seems to characterize Dahl himself. The act of poaching, after all, violates the adult-constructed legal order. While his father’s parenting methods may, at times, seem careless and bound for disaster to other adults in his world, it is clear that Danny has all he needs to grow and thrive: a parent who celebrates his otherness and his becoming, but most importantly, gives Danny unconditional love.

While their deep love for each other certainly defines their relationship, there is another aspect of their interactions that counters assumptions about childhood and adulthood. An early example in the book emphasizes this unique dynamic. Upon realizing his father has not returned from poaching at the predetermined time, Danny decides to take immediate action. In order to act as efficiently as possible, he decides to drive a car to locate his father in the dead of night. With only a flashlight in hand and a basic understanding of how to drive a car with manual transmission, he sets out into the darkness. The very act of a child driving a car is alarming, yet through this act, Danny takes a step into the adult world. Just as Danny’s father subverts the laws of poaching, he subverts the laws of the road. After finding his father injured in a pit designed to catch poachers, he drives him

home and then ensures that he is tucked in comfortably while they wait for the doctor to arrive to take care of the father's injured ankle. In his moment of action, Danny becomes, in a way, the adult or parent of the situation, while his father, in turn, takes on the role of child who is physically helpless and unable to care for himself. Danny disregards the limits of a socially constructed childhood (i.e. not being able to legally drive) in order to save his father: "There are differences within childhood—but they are just that—*within* something that society has felt the need to mark as different from adulthood" (Jones 196). While some constructions are genuine and necessary according to the vulnerable nature of children and their actual otherness as non-adults, other constructions inhibit the child's natural way of becoming. Such constructions, therefore, are able to be dismantled for the benefit of the child and the adult.

This is not the only time where Danny assumes the position of responsible "adult." Upon deciding that they will fill 200 raisins with sleeping pill powder, the two consider the project's logistical implications. Danny voices his concerns about their limited time-frame, saying, "Each one will have to be cut open and filled with powder and sewed up again, and I'll be at school all day" (105). In response, Danny's father says, "No you won't [...] you will be suffering from a very nasty cold on Friday and I shall be forced to keep you home from school." Danny responds with a simple and joyous "hooray!" While Danny initially voices the responsible, adult-minded perspective, that he must attend school, his father counters by suggesting that he should skip school altogether, because preparing raisins for the purpose of poaching pheasants is far more fun than attending school. Danny's

father continues to be the voice of fun that seems to fit better within the world of a child's understanding. Danny is practical and pragmatic. His father is still practical, but in a way that seems to subvert the usual understanding of what it means to be a responsible parent who socializes the child according to societal norms and expectations. It is in moments like these that Dahl is reaching out to the child reader, and catering to their interests. It is as if, through Danny's father, he is saying, "I understand." He refuses to let the inherent otherness of childhood become an excuse for relational inequality.

Later on, as the two consider the riskiness of their business, Danny's father is firm in his dedication to fun. Danny asks, "how will we stop the keepers from seeing us?" Danny's father responds light-heartedly saying, "That's the fun of the whole thing. That's what it's all about. It's hide-and-seek. It's the greatest game of hide-and-seek in the world (133). Even once the heist is complete, and the pheasants are in their possession, Danny's father continues to be the voice of fun while Danny continues to act as the responsible figure between the two. When Danny's father says, "I have decided to buy an oven" in order to roast the pheasants, Danny responds practically, rhetorically questioning, "Won't it be very expensive?" In line with his character, Danny's father boldly declares, "No expense is too great for roasted pheasant" (171). In the case of Danny and his father, "there is not a simple division between children and adults" (Jones 196).

While his home life is idyllic in the way that his father has not entirely dissociated himself from the child's world, Danny is no stranger to the reality of an adult-centric world, a place where the child's otherness

is a disadvantage and even a weakness. This is clearly evidenced during his time in school, particularly through his teacher Captain Lancaster, a harsh teacher who cares little for the children in his charge, much like the fictional Trunchbull in *Matilda*. In fact, he was “a violent man, and we were all terrified of him” (113). As Danny comments on Lancaster’s interactions with his peers, “He never called any of us by our names. It was always ‘you’ or ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ or something like that” (117). Lancaster clearly belittles the children in his classroom, calling them “blithering little idiot[s],” and even physically punishes Danny and his friend Sidney Morgan. In this way, he dismisses their personhood. Because they do not follow the adult-designed rules within the classroom, Lancaster abuses them in their vulnerable, othered state as children. The Captain imposes his position of power on the children, who are all physically smaller than himself. Because he is both an adult and their teacher, he assumes that he has authority over the others. Classroom power dynamics find their way in Dahl’s other texts, such as *Matilda* and his autobiography *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. However, in Danny’s case, he has the support of his parent, whereas Matilda did not.

While Lancaster is certainly a villain within the school and in Danny’s school life, Mr. Victor Hazel claims the title of main antagonist of the story. A “roaring snob” who “tried desperately to get in with what he believed were the right kind of people,” it becomes quite clear why Danny and his father dislike the man. Once, upon stopping by to get gas for his Rolls-Royce, he belittles and bullies eight-year-old Danny. In a barking manner, he states, “fill her up and look sharp about it [...] and keep your filthy little hands to yourself, d’you understand?” (45). His hatred towards

Danny is magnified when Danny voices confusion in response to his blunt instructions. Hazel says, “If you make any dirty finger-marks on my paint-work [...] I’ll step right out of this car and give you a good hiding.” Fortunately for Danny, Hazel does not get the opportunity to lay a finger on him, as his caring father is quick to the scene. He says, “next time you threaten someone with a good hiding I suggest you pick on a person your own size” (46). Danny’s father recognizes the adult-child power dynamic between his son and Hazel, and he is prompt to ensure that Danny’s otherness as a child is not abused by Hazel. Put in his place, Hazel drives off in a blur. By the end of the story, both Danny and his father “get back” at Hazel through the execution of their poaching plan, the plan that gives Danny the title of “champion of the world.” Hazel’s hostile othering of Danny becomes silenced.

Size is not only used to emphasize the maliciousness of bad adult characters, as seen in the behavior of Lancaster and Hazel. It can also act a sign of solidarity with those of a similar size. Doc Spencer, who is first introduced when he is called on to attend to Danny’s father’s injured ankle, is described as a physically small adult: “He was a tiny man with tiny hands and feet and a tiny round face [...] he was some sort of an elf [...] Nobody feared him. Many people loved him, and he was especially gentle with children” (80). His smallness, and therefore his affinity with the child’s reality, makes him the perfect candidate to be truly understanding of the child.

No one, however, identifies with Danny’s position as a child more so than his own father. Not only does this ideal parent figure physically protect Danny in his otherness, but his passion for adventure and unadul-

terated fun showcases the way in which he celebrates the child, even within a world that so often celebrates the growing-up of a child into adulthood. In a world where Mr. Hazel-type individuals hold the financial power and have the means to suppress others, people like Danny and his father find ways to thrive. In the end, while *Danny* is a fun story about a father and son stealing some birds, it is also something more. For the child reader, *Danny* offers an opportunity to consider their own otherness, including varying constructs of that otherness. It is a celebration of the adult who has not forgotten childhood and is not so wrapped up in their own adult-centrism as to neglect the realities of the child's experience. It is a story where the adult does not attempt to erase the child's otherness, but rather chooses to participate in it. Being other does not equate to being alone, as is evident through the active involvement of Danny's father in his life. Looking again to the conclusion, perhaps Dahl could have written something else. Perhaps Dahl means to convey a great deal about the nature of Danny's father in the sole word of his choice: "sparky." Perhaps he could have written, "a parent *fixed in the adult-world* is no fun at all. What a child wants and deserves is a parent *whose outlook is not restricted to the realm of adult-thinking, a parent who is able to uplift children in their otherness and perhaps even participate in it—a parent who never stops becoming.*"

Concluding Thoughts

Speaking on the nature of his own writing, Roald Dahl once said, "Sometimes it gives me a funny feeling that my writing arm is about six thousand miles long and that the hand that holds the pencil is reaching all

the way across the world to faraway houses and classrooms where children live and go to school. That's a thrill all right" (Sturrock 568). Reaching into the lives of children, as others, clearly brought much joy to Dahl, just as his stories continue to bring joy to many readers. Dahl is a Miss Honey to his child readers, providing space for their otherness in the way he constructs his stories. Dahl is the quintessential dream-blower, mixing up a story as the BFG mixes up a dream. A book published by Dahl is a dream blown into the world for any reader to enjoy. He crafts narratives that appeal to the unshackled imagination of the child, as well as reawaken the youthful musings of the adult reader. Dahl is undoubtedly sparky in both his choice of content and tone. He openly participates in and celebrates the world of the child, urging readers of all ages to pursue continual becoming and relational understanding across constructed borders of otherness. Not only does Dahl's attention to the child provide readers with a way of approaching constructions of childhood, but his work throughout his various books demonstrates the extent of his literary artistry and the rightful place of his work within the genre of children's literature.

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