

Scrumdiddlyumptious Stories:
Reflections and Reinforcements of Ideological Structures
in Roald Dahl's Books for Children
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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved July 2013 by the
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August 2013

ABSTRACT

Roald Dahl's books for children have often been characterized as deviating from "normal" plots in books for children because they feature elements and themes (e.g., violence, crude/rude behavior and humor, inversions of authority) that make representatives of the dominant culture (parents, school officials, teachers, librarians, etcetera) uncomfortable. Rather than view the stories holistically, challengers are quick to latch on to the specific incidents within these texts that cause discomfort, and use the particular as grounds to object to the whole. A deeper, and more critical, look reveals that instead of straying from established elements and themes in children's stories, Dahl's works have much in common with fairy tales—narratives that have endured in multiple iterations and over millennia. As with fairy tales, Dahl's stories for children offer readers ways to interpret—to make sense of and derive meaning from—their lives, while reflecting and reinforcing the ideological structures (family, appropriate behavior, capitalism) within which we find ourselves.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.	1
<u>Matilda</u>	3
<u>George’s Marvelous Medicine</u>	5
<u>The Witches</u>	7
ROALD DAHL: SOME CONTEXT.	9
IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONY.	14
Alternative and Oppositional Culture.	17
FAIRY TALES AND MEANING-MAKING.	19
Contradictory Consciousness, Violence, and Rubbish.	21
Some Elements of Fairy Tales.	26
UNMASKING <u>JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH</u>	30
Violence (Children’s Anxieties) and Self-Confidence.	31
Crude/Rude Behavior (Presence of Evil) and Appropriate Behavior.	35
Inversion of Authority (Period of Introspection) and Reincorporation.	39
CONCLUSION(S)	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

Introduction

Acts of revenge, playing with household chemicals, and premeditated mass murder—these are just a sampling of the shenanigans in which the protagonists of Roald Dahl’s stories for children engage. Having penciled some 42 short stories (compiled into 6 collections), 24 books for children, 6 screen/teleplays, contributions to various newspapers and magazines, a collection of ghost stories, a cookbook, and numerous unpublished works, Dahl began his half-century literary career writing short stories for adults rather than the children’s stories for which he is best known. Even though he demonstrated “his remarkable ability to connect with children in many contexts,”¹ Dahl resisted his agent’s multiple attempts to nudge him in that direction.² For example, although *The Gremlins* was “marketed as a children’s story, there is little evidence that Dahl felt [it was written as] a self-consciously juvenile piece.”³ In letters to his mother, he described it as “a sort of fairy story, [using] his memories of Norse folklore. . . his love of the countryside, . . . and [a] fund of gremlin detail” that he had assembled with a fellow passenger on a boat trip from England to New York.⁴ Despite his initial misgivings about writing for children, his first intentional attempt at a book for young readers, *James and the Giant Peach*,⁵ met with tremendous success.

1. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 340.

2. After first suggesting it in 1953, Sheila St. Lawrence (Dahl’s agent) finally convinced him, “the third time around,” to try his hand at a book for children. In 1959, he began working on *James and the Giant Peach*. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 341, 350–51.

3. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 175.

4. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 174.

5. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*.

Such a prolific author's corpus will presumably generate a body of scholarship that exponentially exceeds its origins—it has. However, the scope of this thesis is limited to Dahl's books for children, and the elements within them that have been deemed objectionable by an assortment of adults. Current scholarship—including biographies, analyses of his books for children in various anthologies about children's literature, compilations of articles that appeared in *Children's Literature in Education*, transcriptions of interviews, reviews of his books, two documentaries about him as a writer for children, as well as the books themselves—reveals the following overarching theme: Dahl's books for children discuss topics that make grown-ups uncomfortable. With claims that his books feature violence, crude/rude behavior and humor, and inversions of authority, various groups representing the dominant culture—such as parents, school officials, teachers, and librarians—have sought, sometimes successfully, to challenge or ban them. Not surprisingly, there is no dearth of research about the titles that have encountered criticism and challenges; the ones most frequently addressed are: *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Witches*, *The BFG*, *Danny, the Champion of the World*, and *The Twits*. Yet the aspects adults find objectionable in these books are precisely those that appeal to Dahl's audience: children. Moreover, when characters behave “distastefully,” other characters are quick to step in and present examples of more appropriate actions. Looking at *James and the Giant Peach* as a case study demonstrates that although they have been characterized as deviating from established elements and themes of children's stories, Dahl's works have much in common with fairy tales—narratives that have endured in multiple iterations and over millennia. As with fairy tales, Dahl's stories for children offer readers ways to interpret—

to make sense of and derive meaning from—their lives, and have more in common with elements of alternative culture rather than with those of oppositional culture. In other words, despite objections to Dahl’s books for children, and his own assertions that he does not intend to moralize or impart particular lessons,⁶ his books do, in fact, reflect and reinforce the ideological structures (family, appropriate behavior, capitalism) within which we find ourselves.

By no means an exhaustive set of examples, the following vignettes offer a glimpse at why this master of the macabre’s⁷ stories for children might have offended adult sensibilities. These illustrative instances precede a brief biographical sketch that outlines some of the real-life experiences that influenced and inspired Dahl’s fiction. Subsequently, explications of ideology and hegemony, as well as a discussion of fairy tales and their importance in meaning-making provide the theoretical pulls that reveal the replications of central culture concealed behind the curtains of objectionable material in *James and the Giant Peach*. Finally, an examination of the endings to Dahl’s stories for children leads to the conclusion that these romps through unsavory topics actually support, rather than oppose, social conventions.

Matilda

Capable of speaking clearly at eighteen months, and having taught herself how to read by the age of three, Matilda Wormwood is an “*extra-ordinary*” child who must contend with

6. West, *Trust Your Children*, 73–74.

7. Described as a “conjurer with ‘a macabre imagination,’” the “runaway success” of his second short story collection, *Someone Like You*, included Dahl “receiv[ing] his first Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America.” Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 329–30. This moniker is also the title (perhaps not ironically) to chapter 13 of Sturrock’s *Storyteller*.

parents who are quite the opposite of those who dote upon their offspring.⁸ Rather than celebrating and encouraging her abilities, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood describe her as “a noisy chatterbox,” and claim she is “getting spoiled” when she asks her father to buy her a book. During the week, she is frequently “left alone in the house” while her family goes to school, to work, or to play bingo.⁹ Matilda’s interactions with her parents and brother are frustrating at best—until she begins to push back.

She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn’t. The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling. . . . She decided [to] get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. . . . she was hardly five years old and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so, she was determined to have a go.¹⁰

In her first act of revenge, Matilda sticks it to her father. Shortly before he leaves for work, she carefully lines the inside of Mr. Wormwood’s hat with superglue. He only notices the accessory is stuck to his head when he arrives at work, where he pretends “he actually *meant* to keep his hat on all day.”¹¹ At home, Mrs. Wormwood is unable to yank the chapeau off her husband’s pate, and Matilda’s father continues wearing it through dinner, has to skip his evening shower, and discovers the impossibility of lying on a

8. Dahl, *Matilda*, 10–11 (original emphasis).

9. Dahl, *Matilda*, 11–12.

10. Dahl, *Matilda*, 29.

11. Dahl, *Matilda*, 30–32 (original emphasis).

pillow with a hat permanently affixed to one's head.¹² The headgear does not loosen by the morning, either.

So Mrs Wormwood . . . cut the thing off his head, bit by bit. . . . Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back, she had to chop the hair right off to the skin. . . . And in the front, where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin, there remained a whole lot of small brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

At breakfast Matilda said to him, “You *must* try to get those bits off your forehead, daddy. It looks as though you’ve got little brown insects crawling all over you. People will think you’ve got lice.”

“Be quiet!” the father snapped. “Just keep your nasty mouth shut, will you!”

All in all it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.¹³

George's Marvelous Medicine

George is an only child who lives with his parents and grandmother on a farm that is “miles away from anywhere,” and therefore devoid of any other children to play with.¹⁴ While grandmothers in children's stories are typically “lovely, kind, helpful old ladies,”¹⁵ George's is not. When his parents are out, Grandma treats George badly—“ordering

12. Dahl, *Matilda*, 32–36.

13. Dahl, *Matilda*, 36–37 (original emphasis).

14. Dahl, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, 1.

15. Dahl, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, 2.

[him] about,” telling him he ought to grow down rather than up, and frightening him with her claims of possessing magic powers.¹⁶ Left to look after his “grizzly old grunion of a grandma” on a Saturday morning while his mother is “shopping in the village,”¹⁷ George finds a way to stir things up.

George sat himself down at the table. . . . He was shaking a little. Oh, how he hated Grandma! He really *hated* that horrid old witchy woman. And all of a sudden he had a tremendous urge to *do something* about her. Something *whopping*. Something *absolutely terrific*. A *real shocker*. A sort of explosion. . . . He may have been only eight years old, but he was a brave little boy. . . .

“I’m not going to be frightened by *her*,” he said softly to himself. But he *was* frightened. And that’s why he wanted suddenly to explode her away.

Well . . . not quite away. But he did want to shake the old woman up a bit.¹⁸ George considers putting a firecracker beneath her chair, slipping a snake down her dress, and locking her in a room with multiple large rodents. However, because he does not have any of these things, he cannot. Then he espies the bottle of Grandma’s medicine, which, despite taking it four times a day, “didn’t do her the slightest bit of good.”¹⁹ George decides to create a “*new medicine*” for her, a “*magic medicine* [that is] so strong

16. Dahl, *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, 2–9.

17. Dahl, *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, 1.

18. Dahl, *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, 10 (original emphases).

19. Dahl, *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, 12.

and so fierce and so fantastic that it will either cure her completely or blow the top off her head.”²⁰ Using a giant pot from a cabinet, he gets to it.

George had absolutely no doubts whatsoever about how he was going to make his famous medicine. He wasn't going to fool about wondering whether to put in a little bit of this or a little bit of that. Quite simply, he was going to put in EVERYTHING he could find. There would be no messing about, no hesitating, no wondering whether a particular thing would knock the old girl sideways or not. The rule would be this: Whatever he saw, if it was runny or powdery or gooey, in it went.²¹

The Witches

Unable to leave the room before he is discovered, the unnamed, seven-year-old protagonist hides behind a screen during the Annual Meeting of all the witches in England.²² However, although he “hadn't washed for days,” he is smelled out just as the meeting ends.²³ The Grand High Witch Of All The World turns him into a mouse²⁴ using her Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker, a concoction she intends to put in chocolate bars in order to rid England of its children.²⁵ He escapes and returns to his

20. Dahl, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, 12 (original emphases).

21. Dahl, *George's Marvelous Medicine*, 14 (original emphasis).

22. Dahl, *The Witches*, 60–64.

23. Dahl, *The Witches*, 88, 109–11.

24. Dahl, *The Witches*, 112–16.

25. Dahl, *The Witches*, 78–87.

hotel room, where he explains his new appearance to his (retired witchophile) grandmother.²⁶ Realizing this is an opportunity to eliminate “every witch in England in one swoop. . . . *And* The Grand High Witch [in] the bargain,”²⁷ they devise a cunning plan.

Suddenly all the other witches. . . were beginning to scream and jump out of their seats as though spikes were being stuck into their bottoms. Some were standing on chairs, some were up on the tables and all of them were wiggling about in the most extraordinary manner.

Then, all at once, they became quiet.

Then they stiffened. Every single witch stood there as stiff and silent as a corpse.

The whole room became deathly still.

“They’re shrinking, Grandmamma!” I said. “They’re shrinking just like I did!”

“I know they are,” my grandmother said. . . .

In another few seconds, all the witches had completely disappeared and the two long tables were swarming with small brown mice.

All over the Dining-room women were screaming and strong men were turning white in the face. . . . everyone was yelling, “Mice! Mice! Mice! We must get rid of the mice!” Only the children in the room were really enjoying it. . . .

26. Dahl, *The Witches*, 118–30. A witchophile is a “person who studies witches and knows a lot about them” (40).

27. Dahl, *The Witches*, 134 (original emphasis).

something good was going on right there in front of them, and they were clapping and cheering and laughing like mad.

“It’s time to go,” my grandmother said. “Our work here is done.”²⁸

Mischief, mayhem, and murder are characteristic of Dahl’s plots for children’s stories. Ranging in seriousness from harmless pranks to potentially dangerous chemical interactions to imprisonable crimes, the antics in these three excerpts illustrate some of the material that representatives of the dominant culture may have found distasteful.

Roald Dahl: Some Context

As with many storytellers who use their craft to work through personal experiences, elements of Dahl’s life influenced his writing. The most clearly autobiographical of his books for children are *Boy* and *Going Solo*. On the acknowledgements page of each, Dahl states he “would never write a history of [himself]” because something like that would have “all sorts of boring details,”²⁹ and asserts he has been “extremely selective [and has] written about only those moments that [he] consider[s] memorable.”³⁰ In addition to these two books, events and details from Dahl’s childhood and adulthood feature prominently throughout his stories for children.

Born on September 13, 1916, in Llandaff, Wales, to Norwegian parents, Dahl spent his youth in England, with annual visits to Norway with his mother and siblings.

28. Dahl, *The Witches*, 184–87 (original emphasis).

29. Dahl, *Boy*, n.p.

30. Dahl, *Going Solo*, n.p.

Besides providing material for *The Gremlins*, these aspects of Dahl's life appear in *The Witches*: Although the protagonist was born in England, his parents and grandmother are Norwegian, the family visits Norway twice a year, and he remains in Norway after his parents die in a car accident.³¹ Dahl attended Repton Public School, where he endured corporal punishment, was considered a poor writer, excelled at sports, and participated in testing new chocolate bars created by Cadbury's. Miss Trunchbull—the school headmistress in *Matilda*—typifies Dahl's experiences with disciplinarians,³² and *Charlie & Chocolate Factory* epitomizes his “obsess[ion] with chocolate” while reminiscing about his participation in focus groups for a renowned chocolatier.³³

In 1934, instead of going to university, Dahl began a career with Shell Oil Company in England, where he worked as a salesman, and was sent to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, two years later. When World War II broke out he joined the Royal Air Force (RAF) in Nairobi, Kenya; despite his 6'6" frame, he was trained as a pilot officer. Not only present in his short stories for adults, themes of flight occur frequently in Dahl's works for children. For example, James flies across the Atlantic Ocean in a giant peach; the Greggs have their arms turned into duck wings by a girl with a magic finger; Charlie, the entire Bucket family, and Mr. Wonka travel through space and time in the Great

31. Dahl, *The Witches*, 12–14.

32. Dahl, *Matilda*, 110–33.

33. Sturrock, “Roald Dahl.” Among the many knickknacks on Dahl's desk in his writing hut is a large foil ball made from the wrappers of the Cadbury's Dairy Milk bars he ate during lunch while working for Shell in London in the 1930s. See Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, “Explore the Writing Hut”; and Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 6.

Glass Elevator; and Little Billy visits the Minpins by riding on the backs of various birds.³⁴

In March 1942, six months after he had returned to England, Dahl accepted a post in Washington, DC, as an RAF assistant air attaché. His primary function would be “to use his experiences as a wounded fighter pilot”³⁵ to garner support for the British war effort while delivering speeches about his encounters in Greece and hobnobbing with America’s rich and powerful at RAF-sanctioned events. Asked to write a piece about this for the *Saturday Evening Post*, C. S. Forester took Dahl to lunch. Because they both found it difficult to eat, talk, and write simultaneously, Dahl offered to jot down his experiences as a pilot—he did so that night and sent Forester the story the next day. Some days later (the exact number varies between a few and ten), Dahl claims Forester sent him a check for \$900³⁶ (the true amount was \$187.50) and told him he was a writer.³⁷ Dahl continued writing for the remainder of his life. This first story, “A Piece of Cake,” and “Lucky Break”—an essay describing his encounter with Forester—are included in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*. Dahl’s identity as an author also manifests when some of his children’s stories feature the protagonist, a main character, or

34. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach; The Magic Finger; Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator; and The Minpins*. See also “The Swan,” in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, 73–98; and “The Cow,” and “The Toad and the Snail,” in *Dirty Beasts*, 20–30.

35. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 165–66.

36. Dahl, “Lucky Break—How I Became a Writer,” in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, 198–99.

37. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 167–70.

the narrator—James, the BFG, the narrators of *The Magic Finger* and “The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar”—writing about the events just described.³⁸

In July 1953, he married actress Patricia Neal, with whom he had five children (Olivia, Tessa, Theo, Ophelia, and Lucy). After a marriage punctuated by tragedy—Theo’s brain injury, Olivia’s death, Neal’s stroke and subsequent rehabilitation, and Dahl’s extramarital affair with Felicity “Liccy” Crosland—they divorced in July 1983. Dahl married Liccy later that year, and eventually transferred his existing copyrights and control of his estate to her.³⁹ Described as “the most autobiographical of all his children’s stories,” *Fantastic Mr. Fox* best reflects Dahl’s personality and aspirations as a husband, father, and provider.⁴⁰

As a young pilot Dahl sustained major injuries to his head and spine in a plane crash, the aftereffects of which plagued him throughout his life; he suffered from headaches and persistent back pain, and underwent several surgeries to help alleviate this. Although not quite exact reflections of his own life, some characters in Dahl’s books for children suffer from head injuries or other wounds. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Twit get “THE DREADED SHRINKS” and disappear; Peter in “The Swan” is shot in the leg; and Patrick Maloney in “Lamb to the Slaughter” receives a fatal a blow to the head.⁴¹ In

38. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 119; *The BFG*, 207–8; *The Magic Finger*, 7; and “The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar,” in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, 166–69.

39. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 555–57.

40. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 444–48.

41. Dahl, *The Twits*, 75–76 (original emphasis); “The Swan,” 96–98, and “Lamb to the Slaughter,” in *Skin and Other Stories*, 26–27. “Lamb to the Slaughter” was first published in 1953 as part of *Someone Like You*, a collection marketed to adults. The summary on

summer 1990, Dahl discovered that the sideroblastic anemia, with which he had been diagnosed earlier in the year, “was evolving into myelofibrosis—a rare form of leukemia.” After spending the next few months in and out of the hospital, Dahl died at John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford on November 23, 1990.⁴²

Describing him as a “sparky, fun-loving, anti-establishment, jokey person,” Donald Sturrock, author of a recent biography of Dahl, asserts that some of Dahl’s “more outrageous and sometimes offensive. . . behavior had been misunderstood. . . because a lot of it was done with a twinkle in the eye.”⁴³ Similarly, Stephen Roxburgh, one of Dahl’s publishers, says he is “not in the least bit offended by [Dahl’s] earthy humor or his comic violence. . . . he has a good sense of what children find entertaining.” Explicating further, Roxburgh attributes strong plots, amusing characters, and a sense of humor as the elements that attract children to Dahl’s books.⁴⁴ Rather than view the stories holistically, challengers are quick to latch on to the specific incidents within these texts that cause discomfort, and use the particular as grounds to object to the whole. A deeper, and more critical, look reveals that his work is “no more scary [or offensive] than other children’s authors before him,”⁴⁵ and perpetuates aspects of much older traditions and forms of cultural (re)production.

the copyright page for *Skin and Other Stories* describes it as a compilation that “Introduces teenagers to the adult short stories of Roald Dahl.”

42. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 557–61.

43. Sturrock, “Roald Dahl.”

44. West, *Trust Your Children*, 158.

45. Sturrock, “Roald Dahl.”

Ideology and Hegemony

We cannot help being guided by how we are raised, the settings in which we find ourselves, and our relationships with those we encounter. Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams asserts that rather than assume we behave according to a “predicted, prefigured and controlled” determinism, we ought to consider that there is no external-to-man power influencing society, that social conduct operates on a continuum, and that people’s relationships are not static.⁴⁶ Additionally, although the concept of a “totality of social practices” describes reality more accurately, it risks ignoring “that there is any process of determination. . . . [or] notion of intention.”⁴⁷ Failure to account for intentionality overlooks the particular “social intentions. . . by which we define the society, [typically] the rule of a particular class.”⁴⁸ Said differently, neglecting intentionality renders invisible the specific structures and practices designed deliberately by the dominant class—often through claims of naturalness or universality—for the easy (and unquestioning) acceptance of laws, theories, and ideologies that perpetuate the status quo. Thus, when parents, teachers, librarians, etcetera challenge a book based on isolated sections without examining the rest of the text (or additional ones), these systems remain undisturbed.

To help keep intentionality visible, Williams suggests using the model of totality in conjunction with the concept of hegemony. Reflecting our everyday experiences more obviously and permeating deeper than ideas rooted in versions of base/superstructure,

46. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 5–6.

47. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 7.

48. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 7.

hegemony comprises our sense of reality and defines the “the limit of common sense for most people under its sway.”⁴⁹ In other words, hegemony creates and is part of the way things always have been, are, and (most likely) will be; it operates from within, rather than as an external force inflicted upon, society. For Williams, if hegemony were merely another form of ideology—“a kind of overt training”⁵⁰ of our habits and practices—it would be much easier to implement change. But it is not. Instead, hegemony is ingrained in our consciousnesses much deeper than any ideology, which is part of what makes it so complex. Hegemony’s intricate workings dictate that in order to maintain its totality, it must exist as a “central system of practices, meanings, and values, which [Williams calls] dominant and effective.”⁵¹ Rather than singular or unchanging, hegemonic structures must be “renewed, recreated and defended” constantly, as well as “challenged and . . . modified.”⁵² This multiplicity explains the endurance and repetition of certain narratives, but each time with a slightly different focus, depending on what is important to the dominant culture in a given epoch.

In a similar vein, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim argues that prior to taking on their particular forms, “myths and fairy tales alike [were] subject to continuous change. . . . either condensed or vastly elaborated in the retelling over the centuries; some stories merged with others. All became modified by what the teller thought was of greatest interest to his [*sic*] listeners, by what his concerns of the moment or the special

49. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 8.

50. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 8.

51. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 9.

52. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 8.

problems of his era were.”⁵³ Thus, based upon the intentions of the ruling group, particular meanings and practices are (or are not) given importance, others are suppressed, while still others are reinterpreted. In fact, the only way the dominant culture exists and remains in power is through processes of (selective) incorporation, created and re-created within the various establishments of “social training”: education, family, work, and intellectual and theoretical traditions.⁵⁴

Writing “contribute[s] to the effective dominant culture and [is] a central articulation of it. [It embodies] residual meanings and values [and expresses]. . . some emergent practices and meanings.”⁵⁵ Malleability is vital to maintaining dominance and perceptions of relevance and import. In the process of incorporating emergent practices and meanings that align with and/or benefit the interests of those in power, “the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features.”⁵⁶ Although Dahl’s books for children include scenes of anti-establishment behavior (such as playing pranks on one’s parents), they still uphold dominant beliefs. For example, after Matilda has read all the children’s books at the local library, she asks the librarian for a recommendation. Mrs. Phelps’s “first thought was to pick a young teenager’s romance. . . but for some reason she found herself instinctively walking past that particular shelf.” She eventually suggests Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*,

53. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 26.

54. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 9.

55. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 14.

56. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 14.

citing that it is “very famous and very good.”⁵⁷ Exposed to Dickens while in school,⁵⁸ Dahl supports and reinforces the ideological and cultural worth of this author through Mrs. Phelps recommending it to Matilda. The subsequent pages tell us that Matilda proceeds to read a “formidable list” of texts over the next six months,⁵⁹ many of which are still considered “classics.”

Alternative and Oppositional Culture

Despite its centrality, the dominant culture has to account for and be able to accommodate (or quash) “the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes”⁶⁰ that might exist within a society. Contingent on the particular historical situation at a given moment, Williams classifies that which is “not corporate,” or not part of the principal system, as stemming from “alternative” (deviation) or “oppositional” (challenge) forms of culture.⁶¹ Within these variations from the central structure, Williams further differentiates between “*residual* and *emergent* forms, both of alternative and oppositional culture.”⁶² He explains “residual” as those “experiences, meanings and values” that are impossible to confirm or articulate in terms of the dominant culture, yet are still practiced based on the remainder(s) of a “previous social formation” (e.g., the

57. Dahl, *Matilda*, 13–15.

58. Sturrock, *Storyteller*, 55.

59. Dahl, *Matilda*, 16–18.

60. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10.

61. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10.

62. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10 (original emphases).

monarchy in England).⁶³ Although removed from it, parts of a residual form of culture are incorporated into the mainstream to prevent what might be quaint or nostalgic (residual-incorporated) from becoming oppositional (residual not incorporated) to the dominant culture.⁶⁴ Williams explicates “emergent” as the new practices or experiences that are “continually being created.” These are often quickly absorbed as “part—and yet not part” of the mainstream culture (e.g., subcultural fashion).⁶⁵ As with residual forms of culture, this swift incorporation involves preventing something edgy or ground-breaking (emergent-incorporated) from becoming oppositional (emergent not incorporated) to the dominant culture.⁶⁶

Both residual and emergent forms of culture are spaces, within a hegemonic system, wherein people can deviate (as long as they are not oppositional) from what the dominant culture has incorporated and classified as “normal.” Whether a residual or emergent form of culture is to be interpreted as alternative or oppositional depends on how it affects the central culture. Williams uses the example of the difference between the person who simply wants to live differently (alternatively) than others (on his or her own)—Willy Wonka who lives in the chocolate factory yet participates in capitalism—and the person who wants the society to live differently from (in opposition to) the

63. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10; and Taylor, “Dominant/Residual/Emergent,” 201.

64. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10–11.

65. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 11; and Taylor, “Dominant/Residual/Emergent,” 201.

66. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10–11.

current way of life⁶⁷—the protagonist in *The Magic Finger* who wants people to stop hunting. Drawing from folklore he was told as a child (residual), his own experiences (current ideologies), and his ability to see the world from a child’s perspective (emergent), Dahl’s books for children reflect and reinforce dominant cultural values and practices (family, appropriate behavior, capitalism) by using elements present in and performing the same functions as fairy tales—narratives that have endured in multiple iterations and over millennia.

Fairy Tales and Meaning-Making

Echoing Williams’s assertion that “a great deal of writing is of a residual kind [and that] some of its fundamental meanings and values have belonged to the cultural achievements of long-past stages of society,”⁶⁸ Bettelheim explains that much of “our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales,”⁶⁹ and regardless of their origins in mythology or folklore, they “embod[y] the cumulative experiences of a society [that] wished to recall past wisdom for themselves and transmit it to future generations.”⁷⁰ Said differently, by committing them to writing, the dominant culture assigns value to particular beliefs and principles—often stemming from generations ago—that they want preserved and continued. Carrying within them the “deep insights that have sustained mankind through the long vicissitudes of its existence,” Bettelheim declares that no other manner of

67. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 11.

68. Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 13.

69. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 12.

70. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 26.

storytelling presents a society's traditions "as simply and directly, or as accessibly, to children."⁷¹

Fairy tales ameliorate anxieties in uncanny ways, and reflection through repetition (listening to or reading a story over and over) allows children to work through their problems in their own manner and at their own speeds. However, spelling out to children why they find particular stories appealing deprives them of the satisfaction and confidence that comes from arriving at a solution all by oneself.⁷² Bettelheim argues that "teachings about the correct ways of behaving in this world" are plentiful in religion, myths, and fables. Fairy tales, in contrast, "do not pretend to describe the world as it is, nor do they advise what one ought to do. . . . although [they] may begin realistically enough and have everyday features woven into [them]." Rather, the "unrealistic nature of these tales. . . is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual."⁷³ Like fairy tales, Dahl's books for children are clearly fantastical, and their self-evident departures from reality offer readers ways to interpret—to make sense of and derive meaning from—their lives.

Bettelheim asserts that seeing psychoanalysis as "having the purpose of making life easier" is a misconception. Rather, he contends, "psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it."⁷⁴ In

71. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 26.

72. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 18–19.

73. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 25.

74. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.

other words, psychoanalysis presents tools for working through and deriving meaning from our lives. Fairy tales, according to Bettelheim, are to children as psychoanalysis is to adults, offering “exactly the same message” in multiple ways: “that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable. . . [however,] if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.”⁷⁵ Modern stories circumvent and fail to provide symbolic suggestions for resolving the existential difficulties with which we all grapple. “‘Safe’ stories mention neither death nor aging, the limits of our existence, nor the wish for eternal life. The fairy tale, by contrast, confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments.”⁷⁶ Most of Dahl’s stories for children present readers with problems similar to those in fairy stories: dead/deficient parents, bullying adults, unprovoked attacks, and poverty. The protagonists then struggle through these setbacks—usually with the help of a benevolent adult or anthropomorphized animal—and devise solutions by means of wit or magic.

Contradictory Consciousness, Violence, and Rubbish

In his explanation of the existential predicament of being a child, Bettelheim reminds us that despite adults’ desire for them “to believe that inherently, all men are good. . . . children know that *they* are not always good; and even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the

75. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.

76. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.

child a monster in his own eyes.”⁷⁷ Using Gramsci’s concept of contradictory consciousness, cultural critic Henry A. Giroux presents an understanding of ideology that gives us agency over what we call “common sense,” or our everyday, taken-for-granted views of the world. This perspective on common sense allows for a more dialectical understanding of ideology; one characterized by “disorder rather than harmony”—a grappling with opposing ideas and behaviors.⁷⁸ In other words, our contradictory consciousness is informed both by, and in tension with, our observations and interpretations of our social reality as well as the institutionalized interpretations of social reality that are sanctioned (and taught) by the dominant culture. Perhaps even more than adults, children struggle to make sense of incongruous messages daily, especially when those who wield power over them (adults) seem to use double standards. For example, when Matilda objects to her father’s underhanded methods for reselling cars as “dishonest [and] cheating,” pointing out that the profit he earns through such “disgusting” tricks is “dirty money,” she is told that “no one ever got rich being honest,” and that she is an “ignorant little squirt.”⁷⁹ Mr. Wormwood’s approach to generating sales contradicts the lessons and rules about lying, cheating, and honesty that most parents impart to their offspring.

Children select favorite fairy tales until they work out their anxieties; one reason they ask to hear the same story over and over. When confronted with a new set of problems, they choose different ones to help them. If a single story is unable to address

77. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7 (original emphasis).

78. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, 82–83.

79. Dahl, *Matilda*, 22–26.

all of their concerns, then they may use multiple stories to compensate for its shortcomings.⁸⁰ Presenting “dimensions to the child’s imagination which would be impossible. . . to discover. . . on his [*sic*] own. . . the form and structure of fairy tales suggest [ways to] structure his daydreams and. . . give better direction to his life.”⁸¹ Although children love their parents, the tension caused by inconsistent messaging can lead to a desire for violence toward these adults. Stories set within a world of fantasy allow children to play out these scenarios without doing actual harm. Further, these types of narratives allow a child to split out the aspects of adults they find conflicting; separating characteristics into unique entities makes the ambivalence easier to tussle with.⁸² For example, when children feel loved and protected, or are allowed to behave in ways they enjoy, they might see adults as Big Friendly Giants, helpful anthropomorphized insects or animals, or caring parents, grandparents, or teachers. On the other hand, when children feel unloved, threatened, or are required to behave in ways they dislike, they might see adults as Bloodbottling Giants, Grand High Witches, vermicious Knids, Cloud Men, towering headmistresses, or horrible aunts, parents, or grandmothers.

Bettelheim argues that “the prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him [*sic*] most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies.”⁸³ Rather than allow children to explore all the

80. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 17–18.

81. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7.

82. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 66–67.

83. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7.

facets of their personalities, parents limit their children to “only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images. . . the sunny side of things.” However, Bettelheim is quick to point out that “such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny.”⁸⁴ Said differently, children cannot disentangle the conflicting aspects of their developing identities by encountering only positive representations of the world. Thus, “when unconscious material *is* to some degree permitted to come to awareness and worked through in imagination, its potential for causing harm—to ourselves or to others—is much reduced.”⁸⁵ In other words, experiencing violence toward others (or other “dangerous” emotions) vicariously through clearly fantastical texts serves as a way for children to channel and work through their inner conflicts. Dahl uses violence in his children’s stories for the same purpose as fairy tales. Countering critiques of violence, Roxburgh maintains that “[Dahl’s] violence is always tempered with humor, and this. . . mitigates the harshness of it.” Moreover, “most children couldn’t care less about adult conventions, and that’s why they take great delight in Dahl’s violations of these conventions.”⁸⁶ Similarly, Sturrock doubts Dahl was “self-consciously creepy [rather,] he knew just how to frighten them and just how far you could go.”⁸⁷

Discussing adult challenges to Dahl’s work, Roxburgh states: “many adults have a tendency to become overly zealous when it comes to protecting children from certain

84. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7.

85. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7 (original emphasis), 52–60.

86. West, *Trust Your Children*, 158.

87. Sturrock, “Roald Dahl.”

books. . . . It's when adults see themselves as the protectors of innocent children that they can lose sight of other people's rights."⁸⁸ Bettelheim cites "the impact of parents and others who take care of [a] child" and "our cultural heritage" as the two most important factors that help a child discover meaning in his or her life.⁸⁹ However, "the dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist, and professes a belief in an optimistic meliorism."⁹⁰ When challenging Dahl's stories for children, educators, librarians, and parents take issue with his refusal to follow the instructive model of most children's literature. Responding to a lack of didacticism in his work, Dahl states: "My only purpose in writing books for children is to encourage them to develop a love of books. I'm not trying to indoctrinate them in any way."⁹¹ Author and poet Peter Dickinson's six reasons "children ought to be allowed to read a certain amount of rubbish,"⁹² help to counter claims that Dahl's books for children are "tasteless."⁹³ Defining "rubbish" as reading material that has, *for some adults*, "no visible value, either aesthetic or educational," Dickinson also asserts that because it has "absolutely no quality," it is "neutral"; thus, it is not the same as the "sorts of reading which are deleterious, and from which a child should be discouraged."⁹⁴

88. West, *Trust Your Children*, 159.

89. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 4.

90. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 7–8.

91. West, *Trust Your Children*, 111.

92. Dickinson, "A Defense of Rubbish," 73–74.

93. Cameron, "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature," 103.

94. Dickinson, "A Defense of Rubbish," 76.

Although no book can truly be “neutral,” Dickinson’s use of the term implies texts that can be classified as “rubbish” neither attempt to teach specific lessons nor contain subject matter that might be unsuitable for children. However, this does not mean reading rubbish is unimportant. Different from saccharine stories that present only the “sunny side” of things, Dickinson argues young readers should be exposed to rubbish for the following reasons: Children need to have at least one whole culture at their fingertips; Children should belong to a group of children who share that culture; Children need to discover things for themselves; Children sometimes need to read things that require no intellectual or emotional effort; A balanced reading list needs a bit of roughage; It may not be rubbish after all.⁹⁵

Some Elements of Fairy Tales

Warning that even learning how to read loses value if the material “adds nothing of importance,”⁹⁶ Bettelheim declares “the worst feature of. . . [‘safe’] children’s books is that they cheat the child of what he [or she] ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning.”⁹⁷ Although literature for older audiences features more underlying themes, more nuanced characters, and more complex plots, the search for this insight continues beyond childhood, argues Bettelheim, and “at each age we seek, and must be able to find, some modicum of meaning congruent with how our minds and

95. Dickinson, “A Defense of Rubbish,” 74–76.

96. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 4.

97. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 4.

understanding have already developed.”⁹⁸ Unlike Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker, which includes an alarm-clock to activate the potion,⁹⁹ this sense-making process does not have a built-in timer, so “an understanding of the meaning of one’s life is not suddenly acquired at a particular age, not even when one has reached chronological maturity.”¹⁰⁰ Fairy tales express “overt and covert meanings. . . speak simultaneously to all levels of human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult.”¹⁰¹ Thus, while they may not be mature enough to comprehend the contents of the “classics” Matilda reads at the library,¹⁰² young readers have a list of recommendations to which they can return later. Additionally, the same list provides adults a set of books they can peruse in the future or reminisce about having read when they were younger.

Modern children’s stories uphold the dominant culture’s tendency to reject the presence of negative emotions such as “loneliness and isolation, . . . mortal anxiety,” anger, jealousy, or greed in children.¹⁰³ When children articulate these feelings as “fear of the dark, of some animal, anxiety about [the] body,” they are largely ignored or demeaned by adults. Thus, “the deep inner conflicts originating in our primitive drives and our violent emotions are all denied. . . and [children are] not helped in coping with

98. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 3.

99. Dahl, *The Witches*, 93–96.

100. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 3.

101. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 5–6.

102. Dahl, *Matilda*, 18.

103. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.

them.”¹⁰⁴ Conversely, fairy tales recognize and address these “anxieties and dilemmas. . . the need to be loved[,] fear that one is thought worthless[,] love of life, and. . . fear of death.”¹⁰⁵ With deliberate emphasis, fairy tales present characters, quandaries, and conclusions “briefly and pointedly,” which allow children to perceive similarities with their own lives and gain meaning from the stories.¹⁰⁶ Rather than showing only the positive aspects of human behavior and interaction, “practically every fairy tale [features] good and evil [as] omnipresent in life [just as] the propensities for both are present in every [person].”¹⁰⁷ Until children’s personalities develop enough to recognize ambiguities, they think in binaries and they cannot yet comprehend “the complexities that characterize real people.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, fairy tale characters “are not ambivalent. . . as we all are in reality”; instead, they are “either good or bad, nothing in between.”¹⁰⁹ Bettelheim explains that rather than “stressing right behavior,” use of such simple contrasts facilitates recognition of the differences between the figures.¹¹⁰ Additionally, readers’ identifications with characters depend “not so much on right versus wrong, as on who arouses [their] sympathy and. . . antipathy”¹¹¹ Said differently, the presence of good and

104. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.

105. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.

106. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8.

107. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 8–9.

108. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

109. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

110. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

111. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

evil in fairy tales helps children straighten out their inner discords by offering ways to compartmentalize conflicting emotions (in the form of opposite characters) and by allowing them to choose their associations based on their needs. Amoral fairy tales—those lacking juxtapositions between good and evil—offer the “hope [and assurance] that even the meekest can succeed in life.”¹¹² Through fairy tales, “internal processes are externalized and. . . the figures of the stor[ies] and [their] events” permit readers to find their “*own* solution[s], through contemplating what the stor[ies]. . . imply about [them and their] inner conflicts.”¹¹³ Following repeated engagement with these adventures, as well as sufficient time to reflect upon and absorb the messages in them, children gain “rich personal meaning” by identifying with and imagining themselves as the protagonists, drawing parallels between the obstacles in the tales and their own anxieties, and learning ways to overcome these challenges.¹¹⁴ After taking them to “wondrous world[s],” fairy tales restore readers to “reality, in a most reassuring manner,” and demonstrate to them that escaping into “fantasy. . . is not detrimental, provided [they do] not remain permanently caught up in it.”¹¹⁵

Just as the focus of enduring narratives morphs with the needs of the dominant culture in a given epoch, what children derive from fairy tales differs according to their inner conflicts at particular moments their lives. Nevertheless, “fairy tales have great psychological meaning for children of all ages, both girls and boys, irrespective of the

112. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.

113. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 25 (original emphasis).

114. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 17, 58.

115. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 63.

age and sex of the story's hero."¹¹⁶ The general trajectory of the "growth process" represented by such stories "begins with the resistance against the parents and the fear of growing up, and ends [with] psychological independence[,] moral maturity, and [the ability] to relate positively to [the opposite sex]."¹¹⁷ In other words, most of these narratives introduce the protagonist to a conflict representative of the reader's own unsure self, take the protagonist through a number of scenarios that show the reader finding a solution is possible, and conclude with the protagonist's triumph to reassure the reader that resolution is possible. If and when necessary, children will return to the same tale to work through new problems, or will connect with characters and themes in other narratives to sort out unaddressed issues.¹¹⁸ For example, a reader who seeks to resolve feelings of anger toward a parent may identify with Matilda's frustration with her parents and use the story to learn that one way to counter this aggravation is by connecting with someone external to the family, as Matilda does with Miss Honey. The child might return to the same story to address a fear of parental neglect, or could turn to George's experiments in household chemistry to deal with a desire to retaliate against an ornery relative.

Unmasking *James and the Giant Peach*

Hegemony is recreated, adapted, and extended constantly. Originally published in 1961, *James and the Giant Peach* was on the American Library Association's list of "100 Most

116. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 17.

117. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 12.

118. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 12.

Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–1999.”¹¹⁹ Some aspects of the book that challengers found objectionable were: James’s glee upon the death of his aunts (they were flattened by the peach), the violence experienced by the characters (a shark attack), and some of the language the Centipede uses. Focusing on this particular text helps illustrate that failure to go beyond the specific instances that offend representatives of the dominant culture mask the ways hegemony is perpetuated. A closer look at *James and the Giant Peach* shows it is a more mainstream story than challengers claim. Although some scenes may come across as anti-establishment, the overall messages in this text are more alternative than oppositional.

Violence (Children’s Anxieties) and Self-Confidence

At the age of four, James Henry Trotter is tragically orphaned by “an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London Zoo.” Uprooted from his “perfect life,” he is sent to live with his aunts who are “both really horrible people.”¹²⁰ Dahl describes the aunts as “selfish and lazy and cruel,” and tells us how poorly they treat James—beatings for no reason, refusal to call him by his real name, deprivation of toys and picture books—before likening James’s room to a prison cell.¹²¹ The aunts “could [not] ever be bothered to take him out. . . and he certainly wasn’t permitted to go alone.” Instead, he is confined to a garden with “no swing, no seesaw, no sand pit, and no other

119. American Library Association, “100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990–1999.”

120. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 1–2.

121. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 2.

children. . . invited to come up the hill to play.” Denied any interaction or companionship with others, James grows “sadder and sadder, and more and more lonely.”¹²²

Three years later, during “a blazing hot day in the middle of summer.”¹²³ James meets an old man who gives him a bag of “tiny green things” that contain “more power and magic. . . than in all the rest of the world.”¹²⁴ On his way home, James trips, loses all the tiny green things, and witnesses (on a tree that has been barren for years) the growth of a mammoth peach “as tall and wide. . . as a small house.”¹²⁵ This peach is the weapon in James’s act of involuntary manslaughter, a getaway vehicle to a magical adventure, and his new home.

“I wonder what became of that horrible little boy of ours last night,” Aunt Sponge said. “He never did come back in, did he?”

“He probably fell down in the dark and broke his leg,” Aunt Spiker said.

“Or his neck, maybe,” Aunt Sponge said hopefully.

“Just *wait* till I get my hands on him,” Aunt Spiker said, waving her cane.

“He’ll never want to stay out all night again by the time *I’ve* finished with him.

Good gracious me! What’s that awful noise?”

Both women swung around to look.

122. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 3.

123. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 4.

124. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 8–9.

125. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 19.

The noise, of course, had been caused by the giant peach crashing through the fence. . . and now, gathering speed every second, it came rolling across the garden toward the place where Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker were standing.

They gaped. They screamed. They started to run. They panicked. They both got in each other's way. They began pushing and jostling, and each one of them was thinking only about saving herself. . . . but before they could do this, the mighty peach was upon them.

There was a crunch.

And then there was silence.

The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.¹²⁶

Despite challengers' resistance, the "tremendous burst of cheering all around"¹²⁷ that erupts from James and his companions when Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker are squashed does not seem unwarranted. Dahl's portrayal of James's life with his aunts leaves a reader with little sympathy for the two women who deprive a child of food for a whole day, thus reinforcing the dominant ideology that children should be nourished/cared for.¹²⁸ The aunts' demise helps alleviate anxiety a reader may feel about lack of adequate protection from the adults who are responsible for a child's well-being.¹²⁹ Similarly, the

126. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 39–40 (original emphases).

127. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 44.

128. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 21–22.

129. See Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 32–33.

matter of hunger is also resolved.¹³⁰ When the peach eventually comes to a stop, James and the insects climb onto the top of the fruit and discover they are afloat in the ocean. After calming his new friends' dread of drowning by pointing out the fruit is "floating beautifully . . . [and that] sooner or later a ship is bound to come along and pick [them] up,"¹³¹ James addresses the Earthworm's fear of starvation.

"Can't you *realize*. . . we have enough food here to last us for weeks and weeks?"

"Where?" they said. "Where?"

"Why, the peach, of course! Our whole ship is made of food!"¹³²

More importantly, the peach houses a group of anthropomorphized insects who relieve James's loneliness and help him mature into a more complete person. In sharp contrast to his interim caregivers after being orphaned, and reinforcing the "it takes a village to raise a child" ideology, these creatures like him, listen to him, and care for him. Each obstacle they encounter involves the other characters turning to James for an answer and features James taking on a leadership/hero role of providing solutions. For example, when the peach is attacked by sharks, the insects begin to panic: "'Is there *nothing* we can do?' asked the Ladybug, appealing to James. . . . Suddenly they were all looking at James."¹³³ The boy hesitates to propose a course of action, but after some coaxing, he produces a plan. Using the Earthworm as bait, James ties string (spun by the Silkworm

130. See Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 15.

131. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 48.

132. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 49–50 (original emphasis).

133. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 55–56.

and Miss Spider) around the necks of “five hundred [and two] seagulls,” and attaches them to the peach’s stem in order to “lift [it] clear out of the water” and escape.¹³⁴ Lauded with much cheering and dancing, James’s act of problem-solving helps him develop self-confidence and reinforces for readers the ideological narrative of the benefits of teamwork. Likewise, when James and the insects find themselves above New York City the following morning, he figures out how to return to land.¹³⁵ Similar instances of relieving children’s anxieties and helping them cultivate their identities play out in numerous other stories by Dahl. For example, Matilda outwits her parents and Miss Trunchbull multiples times, and chooses to live with Miss Honey instead of fleeing the country with her parents; Charlie’s worries about poverty and starvation are alleviated when Willy Wonka gives him the chocolate factory; and the Fox family and their friends escape the farmers who are hunting them.

Crude/Rude Behavior (Presence of Evil) and Appropriate Behavior

The Centipede is obnoxious, self-centered, and demanding—aspects of our personalities of which we are not always proud.¹³⁶ While he is not quite evil/bad the way witches, giants, or dragons are in fairy tales, this character provides a child with evidence that “crime [or in this case, being a pest] does not pay.”¹³⁷ For example, when James first

134. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 57–66.

135. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 102–4.

136. In other, psychoanalytic analyses of this book, the Centipede has been identified as representative of the id. See West, “Regression and the Fragmentation of the Self in *James and the Giant Peach*.”

137. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 9.

meets the insects in the peach, the Centipede ropes James into helping him remove all of his shoes, during which time he announces:

“I am a pest!”. . . grinning broadly and looking around the room for approval.

“He is *so* proud of that,” the Ladybug said, smiling at James. “Though for the life of me I cannot understand why.”¹³⁸

After two hours of unpicking 42 sets of “the most terrible complicated knots,”¹³⁹ James and the Centipede are the last ones to go to bed. The Centipede tells the Glow-worm (who James has not met yet), to turn out the light. After the Centipede angrily shouts this again, James asks if he is talking to him. The Centipede responds thusly: “Of course I’m not talking to you, you ass!”¹⁴⁰ The Centipede behaves in a similarly uncouth manner when they first encounter the Cloud-Men, who are making hailstones. Incredulous that the Cloud-Men are making hailstones in the middle of summer, the Centipede becomes progressively louder, despite his friends’ exhortations to make less noise.

The Centipede roared with laughter. “Those imbeciles couldn’t hear anything!” he cried. “They’re deaf as doorknobs! You watch!” And before anyone could stop him, he had cupped his front feet to his mouth and was yelling at the Cloud-Men as loud as he could. “Idiots!” he yelled. “Nincompoops! Half-wits! Blunderheads! Asses! What on earth do you think you’re doing over there!”¹⁴¹

138. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 29 (original emphasis).

139. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 33.

140. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 34.

141. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 85.

The Cloud-Men stop what they are doing and stare at the peach and its passengers.

Everyone (except the Centipede) is afraid of what might follow.

“Now you’ve done it, you loathsome pest!” whispered the Earthworm to the Centipede.

“I’m not frightened of *them!*” shouted the Centipede. . . and he stood up to his full height and started dancing about and making insulting signs at the Cloud-Men with all forty-two of his legs.¹⁴²

Understandably, the Cloud-Men do not appreciate the Centipede’s antics. They attack the travelers with hailstones until the seagulls pull the fruit to safety.¹⁴³

In this manner, the Centipede does and says things for which adults often reprimand children, making his character objectionable. However, his oppositional behavior is neither tolerated nor condoned by the other insects. For example, when the Centipede insults the placement of James’s ears, the Earthworm swiftly interjects with an admonishment and a suggestion of appropriate redress.

“You know what I think is ridiculous?” the Centipede said, grinning away as usual. “I don’t mean to be rude, but *I* think it is ridiculous to have ears on the sides of one’s head. It certainly *looks* ridiculous. You ought to take a peek in the mirror some day and see for yourself.”

“Pest!” cried the Earthworm. “Why must you always be so rude and rambunctious to everyone? You ought to apologize to James at once.”¹⁴⁴

142. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 86–87 (original emphasis).

143. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 87–88.

144. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 73–74 (original emphases).

Some time later, the Centipede falls off the edge of the peach because he “had begun dancing wildly around”¹⁴⁵ while regaling the group with a song. James ties some string around his waist and jumps to his rescue. While he exclaims that James saved him, the Centipede does not thank him. Rather, he is more concerned with the fact that his “precious boots. . . . are ruined by the water!” Again, the Earthworm helps put things into perspective: “‘Be quiet!’ the Earthworm said. ‘You are lucky to be alive.’”¹⁴⁶

Rather than destroy the Centipede—as would be the fate of an evil/bad character in a fairy tale—Dahl puts him in a vastly uncomfortable situation. During an encounter with the Cloud-Men, the Centipede has a “a gallon of thick purple paint” dumped onto him and is unable to move anything but his mouth.¹⁴⁷ After the seagulls pull the peach to safety, James and the insects gather around the Centipede to examine his situation:

He really did look a sight. He was purple all over, and now that the paint was beginning to dry and harden, he was forced to sit very stiff and upright, as though he were encased in cement. And all forty-two of his legs were sticking out in front of him, like rods. He tried to say something, but. . . . [he could only] make gurgling noises in his throat.¹⁴⁸

The companions’ remedies for the Centipede’s predicament include putting “a bird-bath on the top of his head” and using him as a lawn decoration, attempting to peel the paint off him “like a banana,” “rubbing him with sandpaper,” and “turn[ing] him inside out” by

145. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 79.

146. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 80–81.

147. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 94.

148. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 94–95.

pulling on his tongue.¹⁴⁹ However, while they contemplate this last idea, the Cloud-Men return and release a “great solid mass of water” that removes the paint from the Centipede.¹⁵⁰ After this point, the Centipede’s rambunctiousness seems somewhat subdued, and there are no further incidents that call for reproach; arguably, he becomes more civilized. Thus, although Dahl presents a character who embodies bad behavior (hence inviting censure from some adults), each instance of misconduct is quashed quickly, reinforcing existing ideologies concerning correct comportment. Comparable scenes take place in other books by Dahl. For example, the Enormous Crocodile is hurled into the sun for trying to eat children; each of the children’s transgressions in the chocolate factory is met with negative consequences; and the animals to whom the Twits are cruel retaliate against them.

Inversion of Authority (Period of Introspection) and Reincorporation into Society

James initially uses the peach to escape an unhappy life with two people who dislike him. In the peach, James finds friends with whom he can share a caring, loving community, and who help him face a number of difficulties. He eventually sheds his “miserable, guilt-ridden, withdrawn” self and emerges from the peach as “a cheerful and capable boy [who] is able to make friends and sustain his self-confidence.”¹⁵¹ In other words, after a time of identification, repetition, and reflection, James resolves a number of his inner

149. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 96.

150. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 96–99.

151. West, “Regression and the Fragmentation of the Self in *James and the Giant Peach*,” 21.

conflicts—desire for love and protection, hunger, and fear—and becomes a more self-assured child who is able to form meaningful relationships with other children.

Although Dahl sets up James’s friendship with the insects in the peach as a potential alternative-emergent culture group, they are absorbed into the mainstream culture soon after their arrival in New York City. When the peach is impaled upon the spire of the Empire State Building, James and his companions are initially viewed as oppositional (emergent not incorporated) to the existing dominant culture. Unsure of what to make of the peach, “two hundred firemen and six hundred policemen” crowd onto the observation roof and “[clutch] their hatchets [or hold] their guns at the ready, with their fingers on the triggers.”¹⁵² The Centipede is the first to peer over the side of the peach, followed by the other six insects. With each one’s appearance, the New Yorkers panic and speculate what it might be, including: Dragon, Gorgon, Manticore, Snozzwanger, Whangdoodle, Oinck, Scorpula, and vermicious Knid. James eventually comes into view, greets the crowd, and assures everyone that his companions are not dangerous.¹⁵³

Once James relates “his story to a group of flabbergasted officials. . . . everyone who had come over on the peach” is immediately accepted (emergent-incorporated) and the Mayor decides to ““have a ticker-tape parade for [the] wonderful new visitors.””¹⁵⁴ After it is lowered “onto a very large truck,” James shares the peach with the city’s

152. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 108.

153. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 108–11.

154. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 115.

children, who came “running from all directions to join the feast.”¹⁵⁵ By likening the “trail of children a mile long chasing after the peach” to the Pied Piper of Hamelin “descend[ing] upon New York,”¹⁵⁶ Dahl offers a moment of nostalgia (residual-incorporated), before fulfilling James’s wish to interact with other children. James, who was once “the saddest and loneliest little boy that you could find, now [has] all the friends and playmates in the world.”¹⁵⁷

All the peach’s inhabitants are “rich and successful in the new country.”¹⁵⁸ Although the insects drop by to visit with James from time to time,¹⁵⁹ they do not all live together as an alternative culture. Rather, they are rapidly absorbed into the dominant system of American capitalism and their success is marked by their ability to produce wealth for themselves or others. Each insect engages in wage labor in capacities to which he or she is perfectly suited, reinforcing the idealized notion of self-actualization in the workplace: the Centipede works for a high-end boot and shoe company, the Earthworm is employed as a face cream spokesperson, the Silkworm and Miss Spider enter into business together, the Glow-worm becomes the light in the Statue of Liberty’s torch, and the Old-Green-Grasshopper joins the New York Symphony Orchestra. The Ladybug is the only insect for whom there is no specific job title or description. Instead, we are told

155. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 116.

156. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 116–17.

157. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 118.

158. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 117.

159. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 118.

she participates in the institution of marriage.¹⁶⁰ This swift incorporation prevents something edgy or ground-breaking (emergent-incorporated)—a little boy living with seven giant insects in a giant peach stone—from threatening the dominant culture.¹⁶¹ Further, James writes a book about his “adventures on the peach,”¹⁶² thus contributing to, and embedding his story within, the dominant culture. Analogous incorporations into the dominant culture after a period of escape or inversion abound in Dahl’s texts. For example, Matilda loses her telekinetic powers once her brain is challenged with more work at school; Sophie and the BFG live next door to the Queen once they have captured the giants; and Charlie contributes to capitalism by running the chocolate factory.

Conclusion(s)

Dahl appeals to the child in each of us who fantasizes about exacting revenge on our enemies (adults)—who make our lives miserable. His books serve as conduits for letting off steam by providing narratives that allow children to sublimate their own fantasies, which helps them to not act on them. After a period of deviance, the protagonists are reincorporated within “normal” society, which demonstrates to readers how they might reintegrate themselves into their own realities. Thus, Dahl’s books for children closely resemble a more residual-incorporated form of dominant culture—fairy tales.

Like fairy tales, Dahl’s stories address children’s existential anxieties—need to be loved/fear of neglect, love of life/fear of death, fear of separation, etcetera—directly,

160. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 117–18.

161. See Williams, “Base and Superstructure,” 10–11.

162. Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*, 118–19.

and present answers in ways they can grasp. Rather than imply eternal life, conclusions such as “and they lived happily ever after” point to what Bettelheim argues is the one thing that “can take the sting out of the narrow limits of our time on this earth: forming a truly satisfying bond to another.”¹⁶³ Said differently, instead of compelling children to believe they will live forever, such endings suggest that the solution to one’s existential anxieties is to develop interpersonal relationships with others. Dahl uses the specific phrase “and they lived happily ever after,” a residual-incorporated throwback to fairy tales and the closure they provide, only three times in his books for children. In his retelling of the story of Cinderella, she marries a jam-maker instead of the prince, “and they were happy ever after”; at the end of *Esio Trot*, Mrs. Silver and Mr. Hoppy get married and live “very happily ever after”; and the Ladybug in *James and the Giant Peach* marries the Head of the Fire Department, with whom she lives “happily ever after.”¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, most of Dahl’s stories for children end similarly to fairy tales: evil/bad characters are destroyed or punished, the protagonists establish fulfilling connections with others, the protagonists embark on new adventures, or the protagonists are able to remain with the people they love.

Highlighting the message that bad things happen to characters who are evil/bad, *The Magic Finger* concludes with the protagonist—having successfully taught the Greggs a lesson—running off to find another family of hunters so as to turn them into birds; all the characters in *The Twits*, “including Fred [the man who came to read the gas meter, shout]. . . ‘HOORAY!’” when Mr. and Mrs. Twit are no more; the farmers Boggis, Bunce,

163. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 10.

164. Dahl, “Cinderella,” in *Revolting Rhymes*, 9; *Esio Trot*, 61; and *James and the Giant Peach*, 118.

and Bean “are still waiting” for Mr. Fox to come out of his hole; and the Enormous Crocodile (flung into the sky by Trunky the Elephant) “crashe[s] headfirst into the hot, hot sun [where he is] sizzled up like a sausage!”¹⁶⁵ Depicting characters forming satisfying bonds with others, when Matilda’s family flee the country, she is allowed to stay behind with her teacher, Miss Honey, and they both watch “the big black car. . . disappearing for ever into the distance”; the vicar of Nibbleswicke finds a cure for his Back-to-Front Dyslexia and “for the rest of his life he [becomes] a lovable eccentric and a pillar of the parish”; and although—after being adopted by a loving new owner—Alfie the tortoise takes thirty years (rather than a few months) to double in size, he “[makes] it in the end.”¹⁶⁶ Some of Dahl’s books finish with beginning of the rest of each of the characters’ lives. For example, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, when the whole family is on their way to the chocolate factory, Charlie responds to Grandma Josephine’s question about whether there will be food with: ““Anything to *eat*?’ . . . Oh, you just wait and see!”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, on the last page of *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, when Grandpa Joe remarks that it has been a busy day, Charlie retorts, ““It’s not over yet. . . . It hasn’t even begun.”¹⁶⁸ Likewise, *The Witches* draws to a close with the protagonists discussing their plans to travel around the world and turn all the witches into mice. In the final line, the grandmother kisses the narrator and exclaims, “I can’t wait to get

165. Dahl, *The Magic Finger*, 63; *The Twits*, 76; *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, 90; and *The Enormous Crocodile*, 42.

166. Dahl, *Matilda*, 240; *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*, 40; and *Esio Trot*, 62.

167. Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 155.

168. Dahl, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, 159.

started!”¹⁶⁹ In the same vein, *Boy* closes with Dahl suggesting he may tell the second half of his story “one of these days.”¹⁷⁰ Other stories that conclude with the protagonists being able to stay with the people they love underscore the importance of family: *Going Solo* ends with Dahl’s reunion with his mother; and *Danny the Champion of the World* finishes with the statement that Danny’s father “was the most marvelous and exciting father any boy ever had.”¹⁷¹

Even Dahl’s books that do not fall neatly into the abovementioned categories reinforce ideologies of closure. The last page of *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* features the Monkey’s farewell song for Billy (the narrator); the final sentences of *The Minpins* and *George’s Marvelous Medicine* reflect on the characters’ encounters with magic; and the closing lines of *The BFG* and *James and the Giant Peach* tell the reader he or she has just finished the book the protagonists wrote about their adventures.¹⁷² Preceding their atypical conclusions, these narratives still offer the reassurance and hope present in fairy tales: The Giraffe, the Pelican, and the Monkey live and work at the Duke of Hampshire’s home while Billy owns and runs a sweet shop; Little Billy continues to receive visits from his friends the Minpins; George no longer has to contend with his insufferable grandmother; Sophie and the BFG live next door to one another (and the Queen) in Windsor Great Park; and James lives in the enormous peach stone in Central Park. Thus, whether assiduously adherent or edgily unusual, the conclusions to Dahl’s

169. Dahl, *The Witches*, 208.

170. Dahl, *Boy*, 176.

171. Dahl, *Going Solo*, 210; and *Danny the Champion of the World*, 205.

172. Dahl, *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, 73; *The Minpins*, 48; *George’s Marvelous Medicine*, 89; *The BFG*, 208; and *James and the Giant Peach*, 119.

stories for children are comparable to those of fairy tales because they remind us of and reinforce the convention that the end of a story provides closure.

Despite his reputation as a subversive, anti-establishment author, Dahl's books for children illustrate how hegemony functions. Drawing from and perpetuating elements of much older traditions and forms of cultural (re)production—fairy tales—his narratives highlight particular values (family, appropriate behavior, employment), suppress others (neglect, cruelty, bad behavior) and reinterpret still others (murder, poaching, revenge). Dahl's "The Hitchhiker" is analogous to the sleight-of-hand way the dominant culture maintains power. In this short story, the narrator tells of his journey with a hitchhiker by the name of Michael Fish.¹⁷³ At one point, the driver watches his passenger roll a cigarette, observing that "the speed with which he performed this rather difficult operation was incredible."¹⁷⁴ Fish asserts it is "because [he's] got fantastic fingers [that] are quicker and cleverer than the best piano player in the world."¹⁷⁵ The narrator attempts to decipher his companion's profession, offering guesses of piano player, conjurer, and cardsharpener. Scoffing at these speculations, Fish suddenly produces the driver's belt, followed by his shoelace, watch, and multiple other items on his person.¹⁷⁶ Balking at the narrator's deduction that he is a "pickpocket," Fish explains he actually is "a professional fingersmith"—just as goldsmiths and silversmiths are "experts with gold and silver [, he

173. Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, 32.

174. Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 35.

175. Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 35–36.

176. Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 36–38.

is] an expert with [his] fingers.”¹⁷⁷ When the driver expresses his surprise, Fish points out, “You never saw nothin’ . . . You never saw me move an inch.”¹⁷⁸

Dahl pulls off a similar cultural sleight of hand. His inclusion of violence, crude/rude behavior and humor, and inversions of authority simultaneously makes grown-ups uncomfortable, appeals to children, and offers readers ways to interpret their lives while sublimating negative emotions. A deeper, and more critical, look—achieved here by examining *James and the Giant Peach*—demonstrates that Dahl is not as deviant as his mythology alleges. In fact, these romps through ostensibly unsavory aspects of human behavior have more in common with elements of alternative culture rather than with those of oppositional culture. Said differently, Dahl’s stories for children rehearse, reproduce, and reinforce, rather than resist the dominant culture: Violence is perpetrated upon characters who are evil/bad (the peach kills James’s cruel and neglectful aunts); distasteful behavior is addressed using examples of more appropriate actions (the Earthworm chides and corrects the Centipede); and although the protagonists invert conventions, they are eventually reintegrated into society (James and his friends travel in a giant flying peach but ultimately land in New York City and find gainful employment). Thus, just as Fish the fingersmith distracts the narrator with conversation while he removes his possessions, Dahl the wordsmith distracts readers (and adults) with taboo topics while he removes their deviance.

177. Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 39.

178. Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 37.

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