

Wonka, Witches, and Wormy Spaghetti
Transgressive Humour in Roald Dahl's Novels for Children

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Abstract

Vanaf het moment dat ze zijn gepubliceerd hebben Roald Dahls kinderromans veel zware kritiek ontvangen en zijn ze ervan beschuldigd seksisme, racisme, overmatige engheid en geweld te bevatten. De onderwerpen en de humor in Dahls romans overschrijden vaak sociale en morele grenzen en zijn in die zin transgressief.

In deze scriptie is onderzocht wat transgressieve humor is, wat de normen waren voor het bespreken van sociaal en moreel transgressieve onderwerpen in kinderromans van de jaren 60 en de jaren 80 en welke humor kinderen doorgaans waarderen. Uit een analyse van transgressieve onderwerpen en transgressieve humor en hoe deze worden behandeld in Dahls *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Twits* (1980) en *The Witches* (1983) is gebleken dat Dahls werk als transgressief kan worden getypeerd op beide vlakken: onderwerpen en humor.

Keywords: Roald Dahl; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; *The Twits*; *The Witches*; transgressive humour; children's literature

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Introduction

Problem indication

In *The Horn Book Magazine* of 19 October 1972, children's book author Eleanor Cameron published an article in which she sharply criticized Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Cameron especially objected to the humour in the novel, which she called "phony" and "based on punishment with overtones of sadism", and, most of all, "tasteless".¹ She ended her article by asking herself if *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is harmful to children.

Months later, on 27 February 1973, Roald Dahl responded to her criticism. While he admitted that Cameron was free to criticize his work as she pleases, he did not appreciate the implied allegation that he is tasteless and nasty as well.² He went on to state that Eleanor Cameron is "completely out of touch with reality".³ He called the implication that his novel could be harmful to children "insensitive and monstrous".⁴

On 19 April 1973, Cameron published a new article in *The Horn Book Magazine*, responding to Dahl's letter. She denied his accusation that she would have anything against him personally, adding that Dahl's personal life "has nothing whatever to do with those ideas and attitudes as far as criticism of the book is concerned".⁵ She called the treatment of the Oompa-Loompas "regrettable" and "anything but funny",⁶ and added that a book's popularity has little to do with literary value.⁷

What followed were numerous letters from subscribers to *The Horn Book Magazine*. Most subscribers took the side of Eleanor Cameron, thanking her for her article and expressing relief in finding someone who shared their opinion of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Ursula K. Le Guin of Portland, Oregon, wrote that her daughter turned from amiable into "quite nasty" after having read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.⁸ Several subscribers agreed with the general gist of Cameron's criticism, but felt that she was at times too harsh,

¹ Eleanor Cameron, "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part I," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 19 October 1972, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=mcluhan-youth-and-literature-part-i-2>.

² Roald Dahl, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory: A Reply," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 27 February 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=charlie-chocolate-factory-reply>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eleanor Cameron, "A Reply to Roald Dahl," *The Horn Book Magazine*, 19 April 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=a-reply-to-roald-dahl>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ursula K. Le Guin, letter to the editor, *The Horn Book Magazine*, April 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=letters-editor-1973>.

leaving no room for nuance.⁹ There were, of course, also subscribers who agreed with Roald Dahl, arguing that the crucial issue was how to make children read, and that Dahl offered a solution to this by writing novels that children actually wanted to read.¹⁰ According to school librarian Ellen Chamberlain, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a modern fairy tale, and therefore not in need of “the woes of the real world”.¹¹

This dialogue took place in the United States in the 1970s, and the norms for children’s books which Cameron, Dahl, and the subscribers employed are dependent on this place and time. But, while the Cameron versus Dahl case is a rare and sharp exchange, Eleanor Cameron was neither the first nor the only person to severely criticize Dahl’s novels for children; his books have been accused of being disgusting, sexist, and racist.¹² Children, however, thoroughly enjoy Dahl’s writings, drawn by their humorous absurdity and exaggeration. In a survey conducted by the *Young Telegraph* in 1993, children ranked Dahl’s novels eight times in the top ten of their favourite books, and his popularity continues to grow even today.¹³ An area of tension arises around the author’s popularity amongst children and the supposed immorality of his work: children laugh at books that contain sensitive subjects, sometimes even at these subjects themselves.

It is generally accepted that certain subjects, such as sex and death, should be treated with the utmost delicacy in children’s books, or should not appear in children’s books at all. In Roald Dahl’s books, however, not only do such subjects indeed appear, they are often treated as humorous subjects. This combination of sensitive subjects and humour makes for children’s books that often transgress social and moral boundaries. Through a discussion of transgressive humour, social and moral norms in children’s books of the 1960s and the 1980s, and the kinds of humour that children appreciate, this thesis will examine the transgressiveness of three of Roald Dahl’s books for children.

⁹ Betti Johnson, letter to the editor, *The Horn Book Magazine*, June 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=letters-editor-1973>.

¹⁰ Maria L. Brenton, letter to the editor, *The Horn Book Magazine*, April 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=letters-editor-1973>.

¹¹ Ellen Chamberlain, letter to the editor, *The Horn Book Magazine*, June 1973, <https://www.hbook.com/?detailStory=letters-editor-1973>.

¹² David Rees, “Dahl’s Chickens: Roald Dahl,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 19, no. 3 (1988): 147; John Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children’s Literature* (Harmondsworth: Kestrel Books, 1974), 255.

¹³ “Your Fave Rave Reads!” *Young Telegraph* 157 (2 October 1993): 14; Laura Viñas Valle, *De-constructing Dahl* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 1-2.

Scope

In this thesis, the transgressiveness of several of Roald Dahl's books for children will be analysed and discussed. The following three novels will be examined: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Twits* (1980), and *The Witches* (1983). These novels have been chosen because the combination of transgressiveness and humour is, out of all of Dahl's novels for children, most evident in these, and because they are three of Dahl's most popular novels.¹⁴

Literature Review

Roald Dahl and Transgression

From the moment Dahl's first children's novel, *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), was published, his work has received criticism, followed by the analyses of many scholars and experts on children's literature. Opinions on Dahl's literary merit and harmfulness to children have always been divided, and especially the humour Dahl uses is a contentious subject. Although much has been written on this subject, not much is to be found on the role of transgression and humour specifically.

As has been mentioned before, the humour Roald Dahl uses in his novels is not loved by all adults. The most prominent discussion is whether children will understand Dahl's novels to be humorous at all. According to children's book author and critic David Rees, a fervent faultfinder of Dahl's writings, children are not always aware that Dahl's writings are humorous, and may accept them as truths, which could be harmful to them.¹⁵ Literary scholar Jonathon Culley, however, states that children are indeed aware of the difference between humorous fiction and the serious, real world.¹⁶

Whether children are aware of Dahl's humour also depends on how children use humour themselves. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, cited in literary scholar Mark I. West's article, argues that children use humour to mitigate aggression when they make a mean joke about another child: there are fewer social restrictions when something is said in jest; West claims that Dahl uses this same technique.¹⁷ He adds that children use humour to defuse tense

¹⁴ "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory Tops Dahl List," *BBC News* (12 September 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-37336976>.

¹⁵ Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 147.

¹⁶ Jonathon Culley, "Roald Dahl – 'It's About Children and It's for Children' – But Is It Suitable?" *Children's Literature in Education* 22, no. 1 (1991): 62.

¹⁷ Mark I. West, "The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl's Humorous Writings for Children," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (autumn 1990): 116.

situations.¹⁸ Rees objects that this spiteful joy and humiliation are unnecessary in a children's book,¹⁹ but fails to take into account that laughing at others has a function to children: it lets them feel as if they are part of a group.

Scholars generally agree on why children enjoy Dahl's jokes, and why adults appear not to. According to child psychologist Paul E. McGhee, cited in West's article, children enjoy making jokes about taboo and tense subjects.²⁰ This kind of humour can be found frequently in Dahl's books for children. Culley adds that adults do not appreciate Dahl's indecent humour because they believe children should be protected from such subjects.²¹ One of these subjects is the occurrence of violence and other forms of danger. Dahl's books are rife with child characters who find themselves in all sorts of precarious situations. Remarkably, not all scholars agree on the value of dangerous situations in Dahl's novels. Children's book author and children's literary scholar Barbara Basbanes Richter, for example, argues that danger is an important didactic device: fear helps children understand the complexity of the world.²² She adds that danger is a prerequisite to make children interested in literature, enabling them to overcome the obstacles in their own lives.²³ Rees agrees that fear in children's literature definitely has a place and a function, but argues that the fear in Dahl's books does *not* always have a function, and is therefore unnecessary.²⁴ Rees, however, does not make clear how he measures when fear is functional and when it is not, and this observation seems to be based mainly on his own opinion.

Another contentious matter regarding Dahl's works is his treatment of adult characters. According to Culley, Dahl portrays his adult characters as the villains of his stories because he believes adults to be authoritative and hypocritical, and wants to convey this message to his readers.²⁵ West adds to this that children enjoy reading about flawed adults.²⁶ Rees objects that the manner in which Dahl treats his adult characters is bad and unrealistic.²⁷ Again, Rees believes that children are not aware of the difference between a fictional world and the real world. Rees's biggest complaint is the character of *Charlie and the Chocolate*

¹⁸ Ibid., 115-116.

¹⁹ Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 145.

²⁰ West, "The Grotesque," 115.

²¹ Culley, "Roald Dahl," 65-66.

²² Barbara Basbanes Richter, "Roald Dahl and Danger in Children's Literature," *Sewanee Review* 123, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 334.

²³ Ibid., 329.

²⁴ David Rees, "Dahl's Chickens: Roald Dahl," *Children's Literature in Education* 19, no. 3 (1988): 147-148.

²⁵ Culley, "Roald Dahl," 66.

²⁶ West, "The Grotesque," 115-116.

²⁷ Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 145.

Factory's Willy Wonka, who, being a capitalist slaveowner, should be the villain, but is actually the hero of the story.²⁸

Research on the transgressiveness of Roald Dahl's novels for children is lacking. While all of the researchers mentioned above agree that Dahl's work is transgressive, the observations they make on this particular subject are all rather superficial. Especially Rees seems to be heavily influenced by his own opinions, reading Dahl's books with the eyes of an adult, rather than a child. The result is an over-simplified image of Dahl's work. Most of the other authors take a stance in favour of Dahl in their research, instead of trying to state both the merits and harms for children reading Dahl.

Sporadically, there is an expression of whether Dahl conforms to the norms of what is suitable for children to read, although these norms are often based on personal preference. When sensitive subjects are discussed, there is often no in-depth analysis of how Dahl treats these subjects in his works, and how these subjects do or do not conform to norms. Especially a discussion on the working of humour, transgression and norms in Dahl's novels is lacking. Most researchers briefly touch upon the humour Dahl uses in his novels, but only West dissects the manner in which Dahl uses humour. Unfortunately, West's article consists of only two pages, not allowing for the scope needed to truly analyse this subject. As there are significant gaps in research concerning transgressive subjects and humour in Roald Dahl's novels for children, this thesis will focus on this area of research specifically.

Humour in Children's Literature

A part of humour in children's literature is based on the occurrence of humorous characters. Mallan, for example, claims that children generally enjoy grossly exaggerated humorous characters; these exaggerated characters are usually authority figures, such as teachers, parents and other adults.²⁹ Such an exaggeration does not necessarily have to be negative in order to be funny: children also enjoy excessively innocent, trusting, honest, somewhat naïve characters.³⁰ Because it is more difficult to laugh at a character with whom children can identify, these innocent characters are often several years younger than the intended age group of the book.³¹ The humorous characters Mallan describes, however, are all characters children can laugh *at*, as opposed to characters children can laugh *with*. Children's literary scholar

²⁸ Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 154.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 11-12.

Elena Xení elaborates on this, stating that identification with humorous characters is an important means through which children can overcome their fears.³²

Another element that contributes to the humorous potential of a children's book is humorous situation, and while it seems contradictory, violence is an important source of humour in children's books. However, this does not mean that all violence is appreciated by children of all ages: experts agree on the importance of experience when interpreting violence and humour. Child psychologist Pauline Davey Zeece, for example, states that the more life experience and insight into human nature children have, the more they can appreciate different humorous situations.³³ This also applies to violent situations: while older children are able to laugh at violence in books, these same situations can be scary to younger children.³⁴ Mallan claims that this contrast exists because older children are better at discerning between reality and fantasy.³⁵ Nevertheless, even older children cannot withstand all sorts of gruesomeness or scariness, but violence that eventually leads to a happy ending is generally enjoyed.³⁶

While humorous language plays a significant part in the humorous potential of children's books, not much research has yet been done on this particular subject. The researchers that have looked into language in children's literature, however, all agree on the importance of it. According to Mallan, a lot of humour is based on language, and young children as well are interested in how language works.³⁷ While Mallan states that humorous books challenge children to play with language,³⁸ psychologist Du Juanzi claims that the humorous language in itself teaches children about life and other human beings.³⁹ As with situational humour, the age of the child matters in how many different kinds of humour based on language they will understand and appreciate.⁴⁰

Although the function of humour in children's literature is an area of research which allows for much interesting discussion, research on this particular subject is limited. The experts that have analysed the function of humour all elaborate, though briefly, on different

³² Elena Xení, "Meeting Childhood Needs: The Need for Humour in Children's Literature," in *Negotiating Childhoods*, ed. Lucy Hopkins, Mark Macleod and Wendy C. Turgeon (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 156.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5; Davey Zeece, "Laughing," 93.

³⁴ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 18.

³⁹ Du Juanzi, "Appreciation and Creation of Children's English Picture Books," *Frontiers in Educational Research* 2, no. 2 (June 2019): 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Davey Zeece, "Laughing," 93.

aspects of said function. Mallan, for example, states that humorous literature requires its readers to play with language, and invites them to examine people and their actions.⁴¹ Moreover, it shows the reader the differences between expectation and reality.⁴² Researchers of children's literature Frank Serafini and Richard Coles add to this that humorous writings are not necessarily easy, or that they do not offer anything else besides humour: they also contain complex aspects of satire, irony, and parody, making readers think and use their imagination to make connections.⁴³ This makes for readers who are critical, not passively accepting whatever they read.⁴⁴ Children's books can also function in conveying messages to children: they always contain an overt or covert ideological message, and, as children's literary scholar Julie Cross claims, in order to make this message more memorable to children, it can be wrapped in the form of a joke.⁴⁵

While children's literature and children's humour have been analysed extensively, research on humour in children's literature is lacking, and when said research has been conducted, the resulting observations are rather superficial. Apart from the sources mentioned above, not much valuable research was to be found on the working of humour in children's books. Although the existing research on humour in children's literature does address in which elements of a children's book humour can be found and what the function of said humour is, it does not touch upon transgressive humour, humour that violates social or moral boundaries. This is surprising, as children are known to transgress boundaries and even take delight in such transgressions: Mallan even discusses how children enjoy violence, but does however not address the transgressive nature of violence. Moreover, transgressive humour can be found in both character, situation and discourse. In order to fill this gap in research, this thesis will study transgressive humour in Roald Dahl's books for children.

Research questions

The gaps in the existing research have led to the following research question:

How are Roald Dahl's novels for children transgressive in relation to the standards for children's books and the standards for humour?

⁴¹ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 18.

⁴² Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 18.

⁴³ Frank Serafini and Richard Coles, "Humor in Children's Picture Books," *The Reading Teacher* 68, no. 8 (2015):

⁴⁴ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 18.

⁴⁵ Julie Cross, *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011): 26-27.

In order to be able to answer this question, the following sub-questions will need to be answered:

- What is transgressive humour?
- What were the standards for discussing socially and morally transgressive subjects in children's books in the 1960s and the 1980s?
- What kinds of humour do children appreciate?
- What kinds of humour can be found in Roald Dahl's novels?

Methodology

Transgressive humour

In order to be able to decide whether events in Roald Dahl's novels for children are (transgressively) humorous, this thesis will use a theory by children's psychologist Aileen K. Beckman, quoted by Mallan. According to Beckman, humour in children's literature can be divided into three elements: character, situation, and discourse. Consequently, humorous transgression can also be found in characters, situation, and discourse. The humorous potential of events in Dahl's novels will be determined based on these three elements as well as transgressive humour techniques such as schadenfreude, violence, defiance, and ridicule.⁴⁶

Analysis

The norms and humour in Dahl's novels have been divided into four categories: horror, violence, impropriety, and morality. These categories sprang naturally from the analysis of Dahl's work. Moreover, they can all be connected to transgression, as they all touch upon social and moral boundaries. The purpose of this division, apart from enhancing the readability of this thesis, is to determine how humour and transgression interact in each of the four categories. As such, it can be seen if Dahl's treatment of sensitive subjects is humorous or merely transgressive (or both) for each category.

Outline of the thesis

The first three chapters of this thesis will provide the theoretical framework for the analysis of Dahl's novels for children. The fourth chapter will explore the humour Dahl uses in each of

⁴⁶ Katherine H. Kappas, "A Developmental Analysis of Children's Responses to Humor," *Library Quarterly* 37 (1967), quoted in Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 3; Annette Curtis Klause, "So What's So Funny, Anyway?" *School Library Journal* (February 1987), quoted in Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 3.

his three novels. The four subsequent chapters will discuss the occurrence of transgressive subjects in combination with transgressive humour in Dahl's novels, divided into the four categories as described in the methodology.

The first chapter discusses what transgressive humour is. It examines transgressive humour in relation to social and moral boundaries.

The second chapter relates what the norms were for discussing socially and morally transgressive subjects in children's books of the 1960s and the 1980s. These subjects are, when possible, discussed per decade.

The third chapter discusses what kinds of humour children generally enjoy, using Beckman's theory as mentioned in the methodology to do so.

The fourth chapter contains summaries of the three novels and discusses the kinds of humour that can be found in them. It also examines the role humour plays and how it is used in the novels.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 discuss humour in relation to the transgressive subjects found in Roald Dahl's novels. These subjects were divided into the four categories as mentioned in the methodology: horror, violence, impropriety, and morality.

Chapter 1: Transgressive Humour

What is transgressive humour?

In order to be able to answer the research question, it is important to establish what it is that makes humour potentially “transgressive”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a transgression is “an act that goes beyond the limits of what is morally or legally acceptable”.⁴⁷ This is exactly what transgressive humour does: it violates social and moral boundaries. This chapter will discuss transgressive humour in relation to social boundaries, moral boundaries, and taboo. It should be noted that these theories are all relevant for (part of) *Western* culture.

Transgression

Most humour transgresses some sort of boundary, either social or moral;⁴⁸ the humour discussed here is not about humour in general, but humour that transgresses boundaries more severely than “regular” humour. It depends on the extent of the boundary transgression whether the joke is appreciated or accepted.⁴⁹ An important part of the assessment of the extent of humorous transgression, apart from audience, has to do with the joke’s subject matter: a subject may not be deemed suitable for use in humorous conversation.⁵⁰ Whether a subject transgresses boundaries differs from culture to culture (and, within a culture, even from person to person), but in most societies aggressive or violent behaviour, sex, racism, death, disease, authority figures, bad hygiene and stupidity are most likely to transgress some sort of boundary, and therefore most likely to receive a negative response when used as joke material.⁵¹

Giselinde Kuipers, professor of sociology and a leading humour scholar, states that the difficulty in producing good transgressive humour lies in finding a balance between what is funny and what transgresses a boundary.⁵² This balance is very delicate: a joke can go either too far or not far enough, and in both cases it would not be considered funny anymore, or sometimes even offensive.⁵³ Whether humour goes too far (or indeed, not far enough) is

⁴⁷ *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, s.v. “Transgression,” accessed 7 April 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/transgression?q=transgression>.

⁴⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019): 88; Giselinde Kuipers, “Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 3, no. 2 (2009): 222.

⁴⁹ Giselinde Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006): 148.

⁵⁰ Emrys Westacott, *The Virtues of Our Vices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012): 181-182.

⁵¹ Kuipers, *Good Humor*, 126-127; Giselinde Kuipers, “Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 3, no. 2 (2009): 222, 230.

⁵² Kuipers, *Good Humor*, 150-151.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148.

largely dependent on its audience, as different people employ different concepts of where these boundaries lie.⁵⁴ This is where the notion of identification comes into play: if a person heavily identifies with the “butt” of the joke, they may be offended more easily by it, and vice versa.⁵⁵

If humour does not go far enough, it is often considered unfunny. According to Emrys Westacott, professor of philosophy, “attempted humor is unfunny simply because it is puerile; we might laugh at it if we were six, but we aren’t, so we don’t”.⁵⁶ Kuipers adds that humour that does not transgress any social boundaries is often assessed as “tepid, corny, or superannuated”.⁵⁷ She states that most (successful) humour is at the expense of someone or something else.⁵⁸ Westacott agrees that humour needs a victim in order to enable it to succeed, and that to exclude all humour that may injure or offend someone would not make much sense.⁵⁹

Sick jokes

A specific kind of transgressive humour is the “sick joke”. Sick jokes also transgress boundaries, but their subject matter is taken a little (or, sometimes, a lot) further; an example would be the infamous “dead baby” jokes, in which dead or dying babies are subjected to all sorts of gruesomeness. What sets sick humour apart from “regular” transgressive humour is the fact that it does not need a victim to be present in order to be considered distasteful. Westacott states that “[t]he implication is that a healthy mind would not come up with a joke of this kind, would not pass it along, and would not find it funny”.⁶⁰ In other words, it is assumed that there is something wrong with people who tell, or laugh at, dead baby jokes; we presume that they lack the proper amount of sympathy.⁶¹ At the same time, people who laugh at sick jokes may feel shame or guilt at having enjoyed a joke that is so morally depraved.⁶² On the other hand, people do make and tell sick jokes, which means that, in certain circumstances (again, dependent on audience and subject matter), people allow themselves to laugh at sick jokes.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 156.

⁵⁶ Westacott, *Virtues*, 178.

⁵⁷ Kuipers, “Humor Styles,” 222.

⁵⁸ Giseline Kuipers, “The Sociology of Humor,” *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008): 382-383.

⁵⁹ Westacott, *Virtues*, 187-188.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 207.

⁶¹ Ibid., 184.

⁶² Ibid., 211.

Gross humour

According to Westacott, there is another kind of “tasteless” humour (apart from the sick jokes mentioned above): gross humour. Where sick humour deals with shocking subjects, gross humour is more concerned with subjects people generally find disgusting (although not necessarily morally objectionable), such as vomit or excrement.⁶³ Gross humour is not considered to be funny by some adults, and we mostly associate it with children’s humour.⁶⁴ It should however be noted that gross humour can also be targeted at adults specifically: television shows such as *South Park* and *Rick and Morty* are good examples of gross humour that is intended for and enjoyed by adults. While it is by all means distasteful, gross humour is not necessarily harmful, because, just as sick humour, it has no direct victim.⁶⁵

Social boundaries

The boundaries that transgressive humour violates are often of a social nature. The breaking of social boundaries is closely connected to the notion of incongruity: a “juxtaposition of mismatched elements”.⁶⁶ This does not necessarily mean that all incongruity is humorous, but it is generally accepted that all (or, at least, most) humour contains some element of incongruity.⁶⁷ When a social boundary is transgressed or broken, the ensued situation is incongruous: we expect certain social patterns to be adhered to, either passively or actively, and are surprised when they are not. While the breaking of social patterns is usually not appreciated, it is often considered humorous when done so as a joke.⁶⁸

The existence of social boundaries is already learned at a young age; children are taught by their parents where social boundaries lie. According to Billig, children do not inherently know that, for example, you should not laugh at people who are in pain, but know this because they have been told so.⁶⁹ However, by teaching children what they cannot say or do, the parents (unintentionally) give their children a tool with which to break social rules.⁷⁰ Kuipers adds that transgressive humour can only be appreciated when it is recognized as such: only when children learn that something is bad will they start to find it funny.⁷¹ Children, of

⁶³ Ibid., 181-182.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁶ Kuipers, “Humor Styles,” 221.

⁶⁷ Ibid; Westacott, *Virtues*, 167, 208.

⁶⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), quoted in Kuipers, “Humor Styles,” 221.

⁶⁹ Billig, *Laughter*, 207.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 204-205.

⁷¹ Kuipers, “Humor Styles,” 229.

course, thoroughly enjoy breaking and mocking rules, social or otherwise. In this sense, children's humour can be seen as quite rebellious: it often mocks the social rules of authority.⁷² Billig does add that rebellious humour often has a disciplinary function: when laughing at an authority, the audience is all the more aware of the authority's power; they are laughing because they should not be.⁷³ According to Westacott, children may also laugh at transgression because they do not entirely realize the gravity of some transgressions and do not yet have the empathetic capabilities to understand it.⁷⁴

Moral boundaries

Where social boundaries are implemented by the society in which we live, moral boundaries are more inherent and rely on personal principles of right and wrong, although they are of course still influenced by society.⁷⁵ When we laugh at humour that makes fun of morally sensitive subjects, it does not automatically mean that we approve of these subjects or that we do not take them seriously.⁷⁶ According to the 18th-century scholar, philosopher, and moralist James Beattie, we can still laugh at subjects that we consider immoral.⁷⁷ Kuipers argues that this is possible because people generally value amusement above morality: the manner and context in which a joke is told matters more than the content of the joke.⁷⁸ Consequently, immoral jokes often avoid moral conviction precisely because they are jokes, and can therefore be taken further than mere statements.⁷⁹ This does not mean that all humour is always appreciated by all audiences; moral boundaries, just as well as social boundaries, differ markedly from person to person.

According to Westacott, one of these boundaries lies at what we consider to be hurtful. He explains that humour is hurtful when it "causes unnecessary and undeserved pain to a particular person or group of people who are present".⁸⁰ While hurtful statements are more permissible when dressed up as jokes, it is difficult to see where exactly the joke ends and bullying starts,⁸¹ which may be why people treat this boundary with a lot of caution and might

⁷² Billig, *Laughter*, 208.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁷⁴ Westacott, *Virtues*, 209.

⁷⁵ *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, s.v. "Morality," accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/morality?q=morality>.

⁷⁶ Kuipers, *Good Humor*, 156-157.

⁷⁷ James Beattie, *Essays on Poetry and Music* (1778), quoted in Eagleton, *Humour*, 69.

⁷⁸ Kuipers, *Good Humor*, 156-157.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸⁰ Westacott, *Virtues*, 179.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

altogether refrain from immoral jokes in certain company. Westacott adds that a part of what we consider immoral is dependent on our own ideology. There are topics that one might not find suitable joke material, simply because they are not in keeping with one's ideology.⁸² Generally, such jokes concern racism, sexism, sexual prejudice, or cultural arrogance.⁸³

There are subjects that are considered to be so serious that it is generally not appreciated if they become the subject of humour (there are, of course, always people who will appreciate and produce humour that addresses these subjects specifically, precisely because they are so serious).⁸⁴ Generally, a taboo is a subject that is considered so offensive or embarrassing that it must not be mentioned.⁸⁵ These taboo subjects differ from location to location, from time to time, from culture to culture and even from person to person, but in many cultures the subjects of religion, sexuality, and death are taboo.⁸⁶ More extremely, this means that taboos may be imposed by religion, law, or society, and that these indirectly dictate what subjects are considered suitable to make jokes about, and what subjects are not.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In short, transgressive humour does what its name already implies: it transgresses boundaries. Whether a boundary is transgressed "too far" or not far enough depends largely on social influences and moral preferences. While it has been established that successful humour usually transgresses some sort of social or moral boundary, it has usually to do with the subject matter of the joke that parents, teachers, or other adults deem the humour unsuitable for children. The norms regarding these subjects and how they should be handled have of course changed over the years. In the next chapter, the approach to sensitive subjects in children's books from the 1960s and the 1980s will be discussed.

⁸² Westacott, *Virtues*, 180-181.

⁸³ Kuipers, "Humor Styles," 230; Westacott, *Virtues*, 180-181.

⁸⁴ Westacott, *Virtues*, 163.

⁸⁵ *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, s.v. "Taboo," accessed 23 March 2020, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/taboo_1?q=taboo.

⁸⁶ Uwe Böker, "Taboo and Transgression: A Social-Historical and Socio-Cultural Perspective," in *Taboo and Transgression in British Literature from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Stefan Horlacher, Stefan Glomb, and Lars Heiler (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 26.

⁸⁷ Böker, "Taboo," 24, 26.

Chapter 2: Children's Books

What were the standards for discussing socially and morally transgressive subjects in children's books in the 1960s and the 1980s?

In 1966, children's book author Elizabeth Guilfoile composed a list of criteria that contribute to the quality of children's books (according to teachers and librarians).⁸⁸ According to Guilfoile, "[a] *good* book serves the purpose for which it was written"⁸⁹, and while the judgement of "good" is largely subjective, it is interesting to take a look at these criteria. In her article, Guilfoile states that a good book contains a main character which children can easily identify with, is true to life and to facts, broadens a child's knowledge of the world, "its physical phenomena, its social processes, its present, its past, and its future", has meaning, and does not spell out morals.⁹⁰ Especially this last criterion seems striking: there are countless articles in scholarly journals, newspapers, and magazines that explicitly try to dictate which virtues and vices should appear in children's books, and, most importantly, which should definitely not. It should however be noted that there is an important distinction between explicit moral, which Guilfoile believes should not be present in children's books, and implicit moral, which is always present in all children's books, whether so intended by the author or not.

As children's literary scholar Anne Scott Macleod already stated in 1983, "[t]he code [of moral and social values in children's books] is most easily described in the negative, by its taboos".⁹¹ This chapter will give an overview of the norms regarding certain sensitive subjects in children's books of the 1960s and the 1980s. These subjects are divided into the four categories as explained in the introduction: horror, violence, impropriety, and morality. Broadly speaking, these sensitive subjects have remained the same over the past several decades. The norms for addressing these subjects, however, have constantly been changing. In order to be able to determine whether Roald Dahl's books for children were only transgressive during the time in which they were written or whether they still are now, it is important to acknowledge and consider these changes. Below, the manner in which sensitive subjects have been (or should have been) handled in children's books in the 1960s and the 1980s (whenever possible) as well as in general will be discussed.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Guilfoile, "Good Books for Children," *Elementary English* 43, no. 1 (January 1966): 21.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 21-25.

⁹¹ Anne Scott Macleod, "Censorship and Children's Literature," *The Library Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (January 1983): 32.

Before this discussion, however, it is important to note that not everyone agreed or ever will agree on what is suitable for children to read: there are no rigid rules for what children should or should not be exposed to, as this is mainly a matter of ideology. This chapter does not mean to establish the standards of children's literature, but rather to give a brief exploration of the general norms regarding the suitability of sensitive subjects for children's books in the 1960s and 1980s.

Horror

Death

In the 1960s, the norm was that death was a subject which was not suitable for young readers.⁹² This does not mean that death did not occur at all in children's books of the 1960s: characters in books did sometimes (although rarely) die, but their deaths were usually discussed after the event.⁹³ Even so, authors of the 1960s were generally very careful when discussing death in children's books, afraid that if they were not, the subject might be too disturbing for their readers.⁹⁴ According to children's literary scholar Peter Hunt, there were exceptions to the taboo of character deaths in 1960s children's books: death was permissible if it occurred in history or war, or if its victims were "inconvenient parents".⁹⁵

In the 1980s, the taboo on the subject of death in children's books had been partially lifted, although it was still not openly discussed.⁹⁶ Death was still a highly personal affair, as well as a taboo even in the adult world, and not meant to be openly discussed in front of children.⁹⁷ According to experts on children's literature Lois Rauch Gibson and Laura M. Zaidman, parents' deaths were still a handy and acceptable plot device for authors of children's books. Dead parents enabled a child protagonist to go on adventures that were more dangerous than a parent would have allowed.⁹⁸

⁹² Peter Hunt, ed., *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 260.

⁹³ Scott Macleod, "Censorship," 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Hunt, *Children's Literature*, 260.

⁹⁶ Lois Rauch Gibson and Laura M. Zaidman, "Death in Children's Literature: Taboo or Not Taboo?" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 232.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

Violence

Although violence in children's books of the early 1960s was not entirely unthinkable, authors were not meant to dwell on violent scenes.⁹⁹ In the late 1960s, it was acknowledged that children seem to enjoy stories about war and violence more than books that simply state facts, but elaborating on gruesome details was still discouraged.¹⁰⁰

Today, still, many adults consider it important that *if* violence occurs in children's books, the author should also include the repercussions of the violence: the youthful readers should be made aware that (unnecessary) violence leads to suffering.¹⁰¹ It should also be pointed out that there are other ways to resolve conflict than mere violence.¹⁰² According to philosopher of education Christopher Winch, violence in children's books should never encourage children to commit acts of violence themselves. He adds that "incitement should be explicit to be recognised as such".¹⁰³

On the other hand, violence, to some teachers and parents, offers a handy tool with which to keep children in line: if children read that a character is punished because they did something bad, they might be less inclined to do bad things themselves.¹⁰⁴ A rather unwelcome consequence of this, according to expert on children's literature Maria Tatar, is that children take delight in "the grotesque and macabre"; think, for example, of the grotesque misfortune that befalls *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory's* Augustus Gloop: while it is a lesson on not being greedy, children actually enjoy the punishment Augustus receives. Moreover, children may take inspiration from the bad behaviour displayed in the books, and the parents' idea of restraining their children then has the opposite effect.¹⁰⁵

Impropriety

Rude language

The general norm today is that rude language should have no place in a child's world. From a very young age, children are taught by their parents what they should and should not say (the

⁹⁹ Scott Macleod, "Censorship," 32.

¹⁰⁰ Evelyn Goodenough Pitcher, "Values and Issues in Young Children's Literature," *Elementary English* 46, no. 3 (March 1969): 288, 290.

¹⁰¹ Maureen Nimon, "Violence in Children's Literature Today," in *Dreams and Dynamics: Selected papers from the Annual Conference of the International Association of School Librarianship* (Adelaide, 1993): 31.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Christopher Winch, "Should Children's Books Be Censored?" *Westminster Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (1993): 48.

¹⁰⁴ Maria Tatar, "'Violent Delights' in Children's Literature," in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 78.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

danger of this, as discussed in the previous chapter, is that children delight in doing things they should not, and are therefore handed a very enjoyable weapon).¹⁰⁶ This also means that swearing is usually regarded as a subject that should not appear in children's literature. In order to make literature realistic, however, experts on children's literature Betsy Hearne and Deborah Stevenson argue that some books *have* to contain rude language, and that children are very aware of this.¹⁰⁷ They add that the occurrence of rude language does not automatically contribute to a book's quality, but that the absence of it does not do this either.¹⁰⁸

Dirtiness

The general social norm is that children should take regular baths and should therefore not be dirty. When a child is dirty, this reflects badly on the child-raising skills of the parents, as parents are supposed to teach their children the norm of personal hygiene.¹⁰⁹ Social psychologist Jessica L. Collett makes an important distinction between "new dirt" and "old dirt": while it is all right for a child to become dirty during the day from normal child practices (new dirt), old dirt is a sign of parental neglect, and therefore inexcusable.¹¹⁰

Morality

In the 1950s, children were often seen as malleable, and until the early 1960s, books for children were often rife with morality. Most books told an optimistic story in which children could always rely on wise, just, caring, and trustworthy adults, in which good always triumphed over evil in the end, and of which the young readers could always be sure the wrongdoers would be punished.¹¹¹

In the late 1960s, the question arose whether morality should play a part in children's books at all.¹¹² This of course does not mean that overt morality in children's books disappeared altogether: child development specialist Evelyn Goodenough Pitcher argued in a 1969 article that children have difficulty nuancing between good and bad, and that they are

¹⁰⁶ Billig, *Laughter*, 205.

¹⁰⁷ Betsy Hearne and Deborah Stevenson, *Choosing Books for Children: A Commonsense Guide* (Champaign, IL: Illinois University Press, 1999): 180.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Jessica L. Collett, "What Kind of Mother Am I? Impression Management and the Social Construction of Motherhood," *Symbolic Interaction* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 339-340.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Scott Macleod, "Censorship," 33.

¹¹² Lucy Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children's Literature in Britain: Publishing and Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s* (London: Routledge, 2013): 47.

generally better at describing bad things than good things.¹¹³ She adds that therefore moral messages should “not be fuzzy, but should be clearly and explicitly expressed”.¹¹⁴ On the other side of the debate, children’s book author Emily Neville suggested in 1967 that morals should never be overtly preached to children, but that books should make children question and wonder about the world around them.¹¹⁵

In the 1970s, this debate shifted from a discussion on whether morals should have a place in children’s books at all to a discussion on which morals should appear in children’s books and which should not. Many critics in the 1970s believed there were ideological issues with the treatment of women, people of colour and working-class people in children’s books.¹¹⁶ Consequently, a new form of didacticism developed: new ideologies started to appear in children’s books, both overtly and covertly, trying to replace the old alleged racist, sexist, and classist views.¹¹⁷ Thereupon, children’s book authors struggled with creating books that in no way contained any suggestion of “wrong” morals, for fear of their books not being published.¹¹⁸ In the following decade, a lot of sexism and racism was edited out of pre-existing books, to the discontent of many parents, teacher, experts, and authors.¹¹⁹ They feared that these new moralistic “guidelines” that were now demanded of the authors would lead to children’s books that would not portray “the world as it is or was [...] [but] only as it ought to be”.¹²⁰ While there were of course written and unwritten moral rules on what children’s book authors of the 1950s and the 1960s could write about, the rules of the 1970s and the 1980s were much more prescriptive and commanding, and the authors of the latter two decades felt the repercussions of not conforming to these rules more severely than those of the former two decades.¹²¹

Sex

Although the 1960s were a period of liberation in many respects, discussing sex in children’s books was still considered unacceptable.¹²² In a society in which the mere existence of sex

¹¹³ Goodenough Pitcher, “Values,” 293.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 293-294.

¹¹⁵ Emily Neville, “Social Values in Children’s Literature,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 37, no. 1 (January 1967): 46.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹¹⁷ Pearson, *Modern Children’s Literature*, 47.

¹¹⁸ Julia Eccleshare, “Trends in Children’s Fiction in the United Kingdom During the 1980s,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 22, no. 1 (1991): 21.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁰ Jill Paton Walsh, quoted in Hunt, *Children’s Literature*, 302.

¹²¹ Hunt, *Children’s Literature*, 260.

¹²² Scott Macleod, “Censorship,” 32; Winch, “Children’s Books,” 48-49; Hunt, *Children’s Literature*, 259-260.

was often unacknowledged, this does not come as a surprise.¹²³ Only in the 1970s did the first children's books in which sex was, sometimes still covertly, discussed emerge, although these were mainly targeted at teenagers.¹²⁴ This did not mean there was suddenly an extensive collection of books from which children could learn anything and everything about sex, but some information was made available to them. In the 1980s, some parents, teachers, and experts on children's literature agreed that the children's book authors of the 1970s had been too liberal in the sex-related information they had unveiled in their writings, and that there no longer was "a safe and carefree phase in a child's development that would allow children to make important discoveries about themselves and become truly autonomous thinkers".¹²⁵

Nowadays, while the norms on sex have become less tense than they were in the decades mentioned above, sex is still a subject which many authors of children's books prefer to avoid and which adults would rather not have their children read about.¹²⁶ According to Hearne and Stevenson, the reason for this is not that parents worry what harm reading about sex may do to their children, but that they struggle with dealing with the subject of sex and the "puritanical taboos of our society" themselves.¹²⁷ When sex is discussed in children's books, it frequently does not matter to what extent it is discussed or in what context: it is often still condemned as unsuitable for children.¹²⁸ Winch adds that, because young children do not yet possess the "physical equipment" to be able to react appropriately to the sexual content of books, parents, teachers, and experts generally tend to agree that this means that children do not yet *need* to read about sex.¹²⁹

Sexism

For all decades the same principle applied: overt sexism has no place in children's books. However, the stance on how male and female characters should be treated, especially in relation to each other, has changed significantly from the 1960s to the 1980s. While no children's book author of the 1960s would write a children's book in which he or she advocates in favour of sexist treatment of women, critics and authors of the 1970s and the

¹²³ Scott Macleod, "Censorship," 32.

¹²⁴ Hunt, *Children's Literature*, 259-260.

¹²⁵ Jack Zipes, "Taking Political Stock: New Theoretical and Critical Approaches to Anglo-American Children's Literature in the 1980s," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 14, no. 1 (June 1990): 7-22.

¹²⁶ Hearne and Stevenson, *Choosing Books*, 179.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹²⁸ Alyson Miller, "Unsuited to Age Group: The Scandals of Children's Literature," *College Literature* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 125.

¹²⁹ Winch, "Children's Books," 49.

1980s believed the children's books of the 1960s and earlier did indeed contain a lot of overt and covert sexism, whether so intended or not. This shows how the ideas of what sexism exactly entails have changed over the years. Sexism could of course still be addressed in children's books of the 1960s, but blatant, unpunished sexist treatment of characters was generally not accepted. When an author did discuss sexism, it was believed important that they conveyed in their story that they did indeed disapprove of sexism.¹³⁰

Interestingly (and somewhat contradictorily), a lot of sexism still occurred in children's books of the 1960s. During this decade, a much heard complaint was that authors of children's books often portrayed stereotypical female characters, and that these characters usually played a passive rather than an active role in the story.¹³¹ In the 1970s, emphasis was laid on the role books play in the personal development of children: authors often assigned traditional roles to the male and female characters in their books, and children were sure to pick up on this, consciously or unconsciously.¹³² According to Wilma J. Pyle, professor of education, children's books needed to teach girls that they did not have to adhere to these expectations, that they had "the right and obligation to develop into people in their own right" and that this should be conveyed in children's books.¹³³

During the same decade, ideas on the "right" morals, especially with regard to sex and gender, changed, and children's book authors became afraid that they would have to conform their writing to these new ideas. In the 1980s, most forms of sexism, whether punished or unpunished, were censored from children's books or were rewritten. Children's book authors adapted their writing so that their books, now non-sexist, would still be published.¹³⁴

Racism

A characteristic that has been condemned just as much as sexism, or perhaps even more so, is racism. While the idea of what racism exactly entails has shifted over the decades (and is still constantly shifting),¹³⁵ the prevailing social norm was and is that racism is not suitable for children's books. Before the mid-1960s, the subject of any racial conflict was in fact barely commented on in children's books.¹³⁶ Racism in children's books in itself was considered

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³¹ Mary Lou White, "Censorship-Threat over Children's Books," *The Elementary School Journal* 75, no. 1 (October 1974): 5.

¹³² Wilma J. Pyle, "Sexism in Children's Literature," *Theory Into Practice* 15, no. 2 (April 1976): 117.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Eccleshare, "Trends," 21.

¹³⁵ Pearson, *Modern Children's Literature*, 11.

¹³⁶ Scott Macleod, "Censorship," 32.

relatively harmless, as long as the author showed his disagreement with racism as a whole. Unpunished racist characters, on the other hand, were not tolerated.¹³⁷

In the 1970s, the absence of black people in children's books became a much-debated topic of discussion. Bettye I. Latimer, expert on black representation in children's books, pointed out the fact that in most children's books, all the significant characters were white.¹³⁸ She added that children, black and white, cannot help but think that whiteness is some sort of virtue, and that black people do not really matter.¹³⁹ When black characters did appear in a children's book, it was often in the role of servant, maid, janitor, slapstick comedian, or villain; never a central character, and always rather unintelligent.¹⁴⁰ When children's book dealt with racism, it was usually from a white perspective, not doing justice to the severity of the subject.¹⁴¹

As with sexism, new ideologies in the 1970s caused most forms of racism, both punished and unpunished, to largely be censored from or rewritten in children's books in the 1980s. Again, children's book authors struggled to write non-racist books, so that their writings would still appear on the shelves of bookstores and libraries.¹⁴²

Conclusion

This chapter has given a brief overview of sensitive subjects in children's books from the 1960s to the 1990s. While very few subjects were expressly forbidden, the manner in which authors dealt with these subjects was (and, in some cases, still is) considered very important. Furthermore, the delicate treatment of these subjects demanded a lot of consideration from authors, who did not always appreciate their creative freedom being restricted. While not all subjects are deemed suitable for children, this does not mean that children do not enjoy reading and laughing about these subjects. The next chapter will elaborate on the subjects children find humorous.

¹³⁷ Winch, "Children's Books," 46.

¹³⁸ Bettye I. Latimer, "Children's Books and Racism," *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 8 (May 1973): 21.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴² Eccleshare, "Trends," 21.

Chapter 3: Children's Humour

What kinds of humour do children appreciate?

In the previous two chapters, it has been established that people love to laugh at subjects they should not be laughing at, and that some of these subjects are not only deemed unsuitable joke material, but also unsuitable children's book material. While "laughing against the rules" is universal amongst children, acceptance of this laughter is not: many adults consider the things children like to laugh at offensive or even shocking.¹⁴³ In order to be able to answer the research question, it is important to establish what children find humorous and how this humour is transgressive. This chapter will discuss why children laugh and what they laugh at; this last component has been divided into the elements of character, situation, and discourse as described in the methodology.

Why children laugh

But, before it can be discussed *what* children laugh at, it is important to determine *why* they laugh and make jokes. Very early on in their lives, children learn that humour can be used to communicate and to build social and emotional connections.¹⁴⁴ Later, children learn that making jokes leads to social interaction with and acceptance by peers, and that humour enables them to become part of a larger group.¹⁴⁵ This socializing aspect of humour is not all positive: a form of humour that is particularly common amongst children themselves is "derogatory remarks and name-calling".¹⁴⁶ The effect of such unfriendly humour is that children are able to include themselves into a group by excluding others.

Another important function of children's humour is that humour and laughter teach children which forms of language and behaviour are acceptable in which situations.¹⁴⁷ In this manner, positive humour not only strengthens the bonds between children, but also between adults and children.¹⁴⁸ Humour also helps children to deal with the world around them, and to

¹⁴³ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 42-43.

¹⁴⁴ Zeece, "Laughing," 96; Serafini and Coles, "Humor," 637.

¹⁴⁵ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 2; Zeece, "Laughing," 96.

¹⁴⁶ Aileen K. Beckman, "The Psychology of Humor and Children's Funny Books: Where Do They Meet?" (speech; 17th Annual Meeting of the Keystone State Reading Association; Hershey, PA; 11-14 November 1984), quoted in Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 16.

¹⁴⁷ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005): 205.

¹⁴⁸ Davey Zeece, "Laughing," 96.

express their feelings and reactions in a safe way, and enables them to reduce their fears by laughing.¹⁴⁹

Incongruity

Incongruity, as established in Chapter 1, is often seen as a key ingredient to all humour: an understanding of incongruity is essential in order to decide whether something is funny.¹⁵⁰ Children also realize the importance of incongruity: they find unexpected situations funny, and apply them in their own jokes.¹⁵¹ Comprehension of incongruity is needed in order to discern whether something is funny, but that does not mean that all children are able to appreciate all incongruent situations: their level of intellectuality, experience and the complexity of the humorous material all play an important role in how children react.¹⁵²

Character

As was established in Chapter 1, most people enjoy laughing at others' misfortunes, albeit often guiltily. This is not necessarily because we enjoy seeing people hurting, but more often because other people's misfortune makes us feel better about ourselves.¹⁵³ This is no different for children: when unfortunate things happen to someone else, whether it is a real person or a book character, children often find this amusing. This may be because they do not yet realize the social rule of not laughing at people who are in pain, but it may also be because they *do* realize this rule, and children simply enjoy breaking the rules.¹⁵⁴

Situation

To older children, the subject of general grossness becomes more and more appreciated, mainly because children of that age realize grossness is something adults do not particularly enjoy; thus the children can use it to break away from what adults deem decent behaviour.¹⁵⁵ A specific variety of transgressive or gross humour is the sick joke. The appreciation and production of sick jokes begins in the final years of primary school and the first years of secondary school. According to Mallan, older children make "dirty" jokes to distance

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵⁰ Frank Serafini and Richard Coles, "Humor in Children's Picture Books," *The Reading Teacher* 68, no. 8 (2015): 636.

¹⁵¹ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 4; Davey Zeece, "Laughing," 93.

¹⁵² Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 2; Serafini and Coles, "Humor," 636.

¹⁵³ Serafini and Coles, "Humor," 637.

¹⁵⁴ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 49.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

themselves from their youth and to oppose what adults deem acceptable behaviour.¹⁵⁶ Consequently, the “naughty” language that children find so humorous grows more complicated as they age. Children like to intellectually challenge themselves when it comes to humour, and thus they will find new ways to defy the rules set by their parents and other authoritative adults.¹⁵⁷ Laughing at dirty or obscene forms of humour or at what adults deem taboo is universal. Acceptance of this laughter is not universal: adults often find the subjects children laugh at offensive.¹⁵⁸

Discourse

A lot of children’s humour is based on language; even very young children enjoy wordplay.¹⁵⁹ The older a child becomes, the more different situations they will interpret as funny, and the more kinds of humour based on language they will understand and appreciate.¹⁶⁰ This can also be seen in puns: although children of most ages enjoy puns, the puns older children understand and use are often more sophisticated and subtle.¹⁶¹ Of course, not all verbal humour is innocent: (using) rude language is funny to children because it crosses a social boundary.

Conclusion

The sources of humour for children do not seem markedly different when compared to what adults find humorous as established in Chapter 1, although adults do not think all subjects that they themselves laugh at are suitable humour material for children. While not yet able to appreciate subtler forms of humour, children also find humour in jokes that transgress boundaries, much the same as adults do. Over the next five chapters, humour in Roald Dahl’s novels for children will be discussed.

¹⁵⁶ Kerry Mallan, *Laugh Lines: Exploring Humour in Children’s Literature* (Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association, 1993): 7.

¹⁵⁷ Paul E. McGhee, *Humor: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco, CA: W.H. Freeman, 1979): 80, quoted in West, “The Grotesque,” 115.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁵⁹ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 2, Davey Zeece, “Laughing,” 93.

¹⁶¹ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 17.

Chapter 4: Humour in Roald Dahl

What kinds of humour can be found in Roald Dahl's novels?

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

Two reviewers in *The Times Literary Supplements* of 14 December 1967 and 3 October 1968 praised Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), calling the novel "the funniest children's book I have read in years",¹⁶² and "highly enjoyable, inventive and original".¹⁶³ Children's book author David Rees, on the other hand, calls the novel "sadistic", "disturbing", and "reprehensible".¹⁶⁴ While Rees's wording is rather strong, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has frequently been met with commentary of the same kind, often with accusations of violence and racism.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* remains one of Dahl's most popular books for children. Below, a summary of the novel and a brief exploration of the humour used in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can be found.

Summary

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the reader is introduced to Charlie Bucket and his family, who live in extreme poverty. In the town where the Buckets live stands the largest chocolate factory in the world. The owner of the factory, the eccentric Willy Wonka, has decided to allow five children to enter his factory if they find one of the Golden Tickets he has hidden in his chocolate bars. The first four tickets are found by the greedy Augustus Gloop, the spoiled Veruca Salt, the gum-chewing Violet Beauregarde and the television-addicted Mike Teavee. By a stroke of luck, Charlie finds the last golden ticket and visits the chocolate factory with his Grandpa Joe.

Inside the factory, the children and their guardians meet Willy Wonka and the Oompa-Loompas, small people from Loompaland who work in the factory. One by one, the children disappear: Augustus Gloop is sucked up by a huge pipe that transports chocolate through the factory; Violet Beauregarde eats a piece of gum that makes her swell up and turn purple like a blueberry; Veruca Salt is thrown into a trash chute by a hundred squirrels; and Mike Teavee lets himself be hit by a ray that turns objects smaller and into television pictures, turning Mike tiny.

¹⁶² *The Times Literary Supplement*, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," 3 October 1968.

¹⁶³ *The Times Literary Supplement*, "Roald Dahl: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," 14 December 1967.

¹⁶⁴ Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 144-145.

¹⁶⁵ Basbanes Richter, "Roald Dahl," 325-327; Culley, "Roald Dahl," 64.

In the end only Charlie is left. While on their way to the Buckets' house in a great glass lift, Willy Wonka reveals that he sent out the Golden Tickets in order to find an heir to his factory. Because Charlie is the last child, Willy Wonka gifts him his chocolate factory, and invites him and his family to come live in the factory until Charlie is old enough to run it himself.

Humour

There is a lot of humour to be found in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, mainly based on the characters and language. The plot in itself, though highly imaginative, is not necessarily humour-driven.

Most of the humour in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is based on language, caricature, and cruelty. Dahl uses a lot of non-existent, funny sounding words, such as “snozzberries” and “Oompa-Loompa”. Furthermore, Dahl makes frequent use of puns (the television-addicted boy is called “Mike Teavee”) and other wordplay: amongst the many creams that Willy Wonka uses in his factory, “hair cream” can be found, and next to cacao beans and coffee beans, the factory processes “has beans”.

Many, if not all, of the characters in *Charlie* are caricatures: children's literary scholar Seth Lerer called the children who are allowed to visit the factory “creatures out of some medieval book of sin”, embodying “gluttony, envy, pride, [and] wrath”.¹⁶⁶ The characters are exaggeratedly fat, spoiled, rude, or innocent, adults as well as children. Willy Wonka is the most eccentric character of all, which is already made clear when he is first introduced: “He had a black top hat on his head. He wore a tail coat made of a beautiful plum-coloured velvet. His trousers were bottle green. His gloves were pearly grey. And in one hand he carried a fine gold-topped walking cane. [...] The whole face, in fact, was alight with fun and laughter”.¹⁶⁷ Especially this last characteristic tells the reader a lot about Willy Wonka's character: throughout the rest of the novel, Mr Wonka yells and jumps excitedly about his factory.

A significant part of the humour in *Charlie*, however, is based on the cruelty of particularly Willy Wonka. It need not be said that cruelty is a rather transgressive subject of humour, that adults do not want children to take delight in, especially not when this cruelty is inflicted by the supposed hero of a story. In the next chapter, the approach Dahl takes in *Charlie* to cruelty and other transgressive subjects will be more extensively discussed.

¹⁶⁶ Seth Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, From Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 302.

¹⁶⁷ Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (London: Puffin Books, 1964), 70.

The Twits

“*The Twits* is a disgusting novel. But that is not a criticism.”¹⁶⁸ Thus begins children’s novel author Gillian Cross her review of Roald Dahl’s *The Twits* (1980) in *The Times Literary Supplement*, a weekly literary review, of 21 November 1980. She goes on to state that the novel is rife with repulsiveness, which seems to work in favour of the novel, instead of against it. Fellow author of children’s novels David Rees, however, does very much believe that the disgustingness of *The Twits* is a serious flaw: “[t]he net result of all this disgusting behaviour is a disgusting novel”, he declares in an article in the academic journal *Children’s Literature in Education*.¹⁶⁹ Unfortunately for Rees, it is precisely the gruesomeness of *The Twits* that makes it so appealing to children, while at the same time repulsing adults. According to Cross, “[m]any adults prefer to ignore this kind of crude delight in the disgusting, but most children share it at some time and all but the very squeamish will revel in finding it recognized in *The Twits*.”¹⁷⁰

These reviews, written by two adults, both authors of children’s novels even, show how mixed the reviews *The Twits* received were. It should however be noted that the approach of these two authors is vastly different as well: while Cross admits that *The Twits* will be highly amusing to children specifically, Rees appears to read the novel from an adult’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of its intended audience. This juxtaposition confirms the ambiguity of *The Twits*. Below, a summary of *The Twits* and an explanation of the humour used in the novel can be found.

Summary

Roald Dahl’s *The Twits* tells the story of the disgusting Mr and Mrs Twit, a married couple who love to play nasty tricks on each other. The first half of the novel is mainly devoted to these practical jokes: Mrs Twit puts her glass eye in her husband’s beer; Mr Twit puts a frog in his wife’s bed; she feeds him spaghetti that is actually worms; he makes it appear as if she is shrinking and then lets her fly away on a bundle of balloons.

In the Twits’ garden stand a cage with monkeys in it and a large tree. The monkeys, the leader of which is called Muggle-Wump, are forced to perform tricks upside down, and are beaten with Mrs Twit’s walking stick if they fail. Every Wednesday, Mr Twit puts glue on the tree’s branches to catch birds, so that Mrs Twit can make Bird Pie with them. One day,

¹⁶⁸ Gillian Cross, “Foul But Funny,” *The Times Literary Supplement* (21 November 1980).

¹⁶⁹ Rees, “Dahl’s Chickens,” 147.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

four little boys accidentally climb up the Twits' tree and become stuck on the sticky branches. After Mr Twit threatens to turn them into Boy Pie, the boys take off their pants and flee. A bit later, the Roly-Poly Bird, a large bird from Africa, visits the monkeys. Together, they warn the birds not to sit down on the Twits' tree, much to the anger of the Twits. After a few more attempts to catch the birds, the Twits decide to buy guns to shoot the birds out of the sky.

Tired of the Twits' cruelty, the monkeys and the birds come up with a plan to get rid of them. While the Twits are out buying guns, the animals use the glue to stick all of the Twits' furniture to the ceiling, dropping some glue on the Twits' heads when they return. Panicked because of their upside-down house, the Twits stand on their heads, effectively gluing their heads to the floor. Eventually, because of the weight pressing down on their heads, the Twits shrink away until there is nothing left of them but their clothes.

Humour

Most of the humour in *The Twits* is based on grossness, which is transgressive in itself. Mr and Mrs Twits' nauseating appearance and the nasty tricks they play on each other are described in great, vulgar detail. As has been mentioned before, children generally enjoy gross humour. It is often claimed that this is because they believe that adults loathe all things that are unclean, but whether this is actually the case is unresolved. Apart from nasty elements, a lot of the humour relies on coarse and abusive language (also known as "billingsgate"¹⁷¹), and violence: even more transgressive subjects for humour.

The Twits has clearly been written for the purpose of humour. Much of the language in the novel is nonsensical and exaggerated, both of which are popular sources of humour for children. The characters, especially Mr and Mrs Twit, are also gross exaggerations of unpleasant or dirty people, adding to the humorous tone of the novel. This is not to say that every reader will find *The Twits* hilarious, but the intent of the novel is evident.

The Witches

"*The Witches* is sexist and gratuitously frightening. If you wanted to give children nightmares and thoroughly confuse them about adult behaviour – the behaviour of women in particular – then *The Witches* could well do a first-class job." Thus states children's book author David

¹⁷¹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Billingsgate," accessed 8 May 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/billingsgate>.

Rees in an article in *Children's Literature in Education*.¹⁷² Although Rees is particularly outspoken, he was not the first to voice the criticism that Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) had misogynistic and scary undertones. Expert on feminism Catherine Itzin took *The Witches* as proof that "womanhatred is at the core of Dahl's writing".¹⁷³ According to a study by literary scholars Sally Maynard and Cliff McKnight, the majority of children considers *The Witches* to be scary.¹⁷⁴

As was discussed in the literary review in the introduction, some children, especially older children, can find humour in situations that are scary. Scariness, however, is not the only source of humour in *The Witches*. Below, a brief summary of the novel and a discussion of the humour used in it can be found.

Summary

The Witches is told from the perspective of the unnamed narrator, a seven-year-old English boy. After his parents are killed in a car accident, he goes to live with his grandmother in Norway. There, she tells him that witches are real, and warns him about the danger they pose to children. She explains to him how he can recognize a witch, and tells the stories of five children who became the victims of witches' tricks.

Soon after, they move to England, where the narrator meets his first witch. His grandmother becomes ill with pneumonia and, after her recovery, they take a holiday in the luxurious Hotel Magnificent in Bournemouth. There, the narrator accidentally becomes trapped in the same room as the "Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children" (RSPCC), a group of women who turn out to be witches. It is soon revealed that one of these witches is The Grand High Witch, and that she plans to turn all the children of England into mice by putting a potion, "Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker", in chocolates. To demonstrate, she turns a greedy boy staying at the hotel, Bruno Jenkins, into a mouse. The narrator is discovered and turned into a mouse as well, although he does not really mind this.

Together with his grandmother, the narrator, now a mouse, forges a plan to turn the witches into mice themselves. By pouring the Formula into the witches' soup, the plan succeeds. Unfortunately, the narrator is discovered by a cook and has part of his tail chopped

¹⁷² Rees, "Dahl's Chickens," 147.

¹⁷³ Catherine Itzin, "Bewitching the Boys," *Times Educational Supplement* (27 December 1985): 13, quoted in Culley, "Roald Dahl," 60.

¹⁷⁴ Sally Maynard and Cliff McKnight, "Author Popularity: An Exploratory Study Based on Roald Dahl," *New Review of Children's Literature & Lib* 8, no. 1 (2002): 167.

off. Back in Norway, the narrator and his grandmother come up with another plan to rid the entire world of witches with the same potion.

Humour

Humour is woven throughout the entirety of *The Witches*, although it plays a less prominent role than it does in *The Twits*. Again, there are some words and phrases in the novel and the characters of the witches can to some extent be called humorous. Several humorous situations occur throughout the novel, and there is a humorous tone to the narrator's voice, mainly because of the words used (such as "churning and burning and whizzing and phizzing")¹⁷⁵, but the plot in itself is not fundamentally humorous to children specifically. There may be some instances of humour in *The Witches* which children might not pick up on, but which adults will be able to appreciate more. An example: at the end of the novel, Grandmamma accidentally knocks over a vase, to which she responds: "Forget it [...]. It's only Ming."¹⁷⁶ The incalculable value of a Ming vase is a notion that adults are more often aware of than children.

Most of the humour in *The Witches* is based on cruelty, nastiness, and scariness. It need not be said that especially cruelty transgresses a social boundary of what is deemed suitable humorous material, especially for children. As has been established before, most children enjoy nastiness, as it is claimed that they believe adults do not approve of it. It could also be said that most of the humour is based on scariness, although this type of humour will be mainly appreciated by older children.

¹⁷⁵ Roald Dahl, *The Witches* (London: Puffin Books, 1983): 7.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

Chapter 5: “Mouse-Heads Is Rrrolling Across the Floors like Marbles”

How do humour and horror interact in Roald Dahl’s novels?

In the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “horror” is defined as “an extremely strong feeling of fear and shock, or the frightening and shocking character of something”.¹⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, the occurrence of horror in children’s books often verges on boundary transgression. In this chapter, the appearance of horror in relation to humour in Roald Dahl’s novels for children will be discussed, divided into themes of scariness and death.

Scariness

It should be noted that scariness is not necessarily a bad thing. According to Basbanes Richter, scary situations in books are an important didactic tool for helping children understand the complexity of the world. Moreover, children demand scariness in their books: they enjoy the feeling of danger.¹⁷⁸ Often, children use humour to discharge the fear caused by the scary situations.¹⁷⁹ The same technique is often used in children’s books.

In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the little scariness that can be found in the novel usually presents itself through detailed descriptions. When introducing Charlie Bucket’s grandparents, the narrator relates that they are “as shrivelled as prunes, and as bony as skeletons”.¹⁸⁰ Charlie, too, is described in such a manner when he and his family are beginning to starve: “His face became frighteningly white and pinched. The skin was drawn so tightly over the cheeks that you could see the shapes of the bones underneath.”¹⁸¹ These images are very visual, and the comparison to skeletons especially can be scary.

Undeniably, scariness plays a more significant role in *The Witches*. The novel opens by stating that witches are, in fact, real, but that they are nothing like the witches in fairy tales. The narrator states that “[t]here’s nothing [witches] hate so much as children, and they work all kinds of terrifying spells to get rid of them”.¹⁸² The rest of the chapter is devoted to explaining how exactly a witch would go about getting rid of children, and states the difficulty of distinguishing a witch from a regular woman. The narrator relates that:

¹⁷⁷ *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “Horror,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/horror>.

¹⁷⁸ Basbanes Richter, “Roald Dahl,” 329, 334.

¹⁷⁹ West, “The Grotesque,” 115-116.

¹⁸⁰ Dahl, *Charlie*, 9.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸² Dahl, *Witches*, 1.

For all you know, a witch might be living next door to you right now. Or she might be the woman with the bright eyes who sat opposite you on the bus this morning. She might be the lady with the dazzling smile who offered you a sweet from a white paper bag in the street before lunch. She might even – and this will make you jump – she might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment.¹⁸³

It need not be said that the idea that any woman may be a witch can be scary to a child; especially the notion that the person reading the book to the child right now brings the scariness very close to the child.

When Grandmamma tells the narrator the stories of five children who disappeared because of witches, she does not leave out any details, adding to the scariness of the stories and the message: this could also happen to you. This focus on details contributes greatly to the overall feeling of scariness in the novel: when the narrator describes the face he sees when The Grand High Witch takes off her mask, he says:

It was so crumpled and wizened, so shrunken and shrivelled, it looked as though it had been pickled in vinegar. [...] There was something terribly wrong with it, something foul and putrid and decayed. It seemed quite literally to be rotting away at the edges, and in the middle of the face, around the mouth and cheeks, I could see the skin all cankered and worm-eaten, as though maggots were working away in there.¹⁸⁴

After The Grand High Witch has explained her diabolical plan, she and the other witches sing a terrifying song:

Down with children! Do them in!
Boil their bones and fry their skin!
Bish them, sqvish them, bash them, mash them!
Brrreak them, shake them, slash them, smash them!¹⁸⁵

This song, which names several ways in which children can be done away with, is only a

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

small part of the horrifying things the witches say about children. Not only can scariness be frightening to children, the whole idea of killing children transgresses the norm of suitable death and scariness in children's books. It should be noted that the murder of children is not normalised in *The Witches*: the narrator realizes, too, that “[t]hese females are actually talking about how to kill [him]”.¹⁸⁶

Scariness in *The Witches* is not treated humorously, but not seriously either: it is merely scary, and the same applies to the scene in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. As mentioned before, scariness in children's books has several benefits, not in the least because scary situations learn them how to deal with fear.¹⁸⁷ Whether a book is considered too scary or not depends largely on the adults judging it. Rees, while believing that *some* scariness and fear is beneficial to children's development, thinks that the scariness in *The Witches* does not serve a real purpose, and is therefore irresponsible.¹⁸⁸ Excessive scariness therefore adds to the transgressiveness of *The Witches*.

Death

The subject of death, whether directly or indirectly, is frequently mentioned in *The Witches*. Although especially adults consider death a serious topic, it is not always treated as such in this novel. There are several instances of death being used as the subject of humour or other non-serious speech. When Grandmamma is telling the narrator about the witches, she tells him that they often turn children into slugs, because adults hate slugs.¹⁸⁹ She continues: “[t]hen the grown-ups step on the slug and squish it without knowing it's a child”,¹⁹⁰ effectively killing the child. Later on in the novel, when The Grand High Witch is explaining her diabolical plan to her fellow witches, she exclaims that after the children have been turned into mice, “[a]ll over school, mouse-trrrraps is going *snippety-snap* and mouse-heads is *rrrolling* across the floors like marbles!”.¹⁹¹ Both of these examples can be scary as well as confusing to children: the idea of people turning into slugs and tiny mouse's heads rolling across the floors like marbles (which is funny to some children) and being squished or snapped to death (which is usually not funny to children) are mentioned within two sentences. Moreover, The Grand High Witch's use of the words “snippety-snap” is an instance of

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸⁷ Rees, “Dahl's Chickens,” 147.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

humorous discourse. This particular event is therefore a good example of how humour and horror interact: seriousness and non-seriousness are mingled, resulting in a transgressive combination.

There are only two instances in which death is described in a serious, sad manner. Because children like the character of Grandmamma, the chapter in which she becomes ill may be as frightening to them as it is to the narrator. Because of her smoking habit, Grandmamma falls ill with pneumonia. The narrator relates that the doctor tending to his grandmother told him that “pneumonia is not normally a dangerous illness nowadays because of penicillin, but when a person is more than eighty years old, as my grandmother was, then it is very dangerous indeed”.¹⁹² The narrator does not make any jokes about his grandmother’s illness, but treats it in a most serious manner. Many children reading *The Witches* will have grandparents, and the idea of them dying can be distressing, but because they can sympathize with the narrator and the way he explains his worries, *The Witches* can offer a comforting account of dealing with the death of a loved one.

The other event which conforms to the norm of dealing with death in a serious manner has to do with the death of the narrator’s parents. Already in the second chapter of the novel, the narrator’s parents are killed when their car drives into a ravine. After, the narrator and his grandmother find a lot of comfort in each other. As established before, a parent’s death is one of the few excusable deaths in a children’s book, as it enables the child protagonist to go on new adventures. In *The Witches*, the narrator and protagonist is appointed a new guardian: his grandmother. But, instead of teaching him what is and is not decent, she tells him that it is all right not to have baths. The guardian, in this case, is not a responsible adult, but one that child readers can easily identify with.

The two occasions in which death is dealt with in a serious manner are more likely to score some points with parents than those in which death is used as a vehicle for humour. Because there are more instances of the latter in *The Witches*, the novel can indeed be called transgressive on the discussion of death.

¹⁹² Ibid., 48.

Chapter 6: “Pumping Each Other Full of Lead”

How do humour and violence interact in Roald Dahl’s novels?

“Actions or words that are intended to hurt people” or “extreme force”.¹⁹³ That is the definition the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* gives for the word “violence”. As was discussed in Chapter 2, violence, especially when unpunished, is not a subject that is deemed suitable for children to read about, even though older children do enjoy reading about violence. This chapter will explore the occurrence of violence and humour in Roald Dahl’s novels for children by discussing the themes of abuse and cruelty in the novels.

Abuse

Several characters in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, both antagonists and heroes, express abusive tendencies. When Veruca Salt finds her Golden Ticket, Grandma Georgina says: “She needs a really good spanking”.¹⁹⁴ Later, when Charlie and Grandpa Joe are in the factory and Veruca Salt is listing more things that she wants, Grandpa Joe whispers to his grandson: “She wants a good kick in the pants”.¹⁹⁵ Hitting or kicking children is morally objectionable to say the least and transgresses significant boundaries. Because these beliefs are uttered by the “good guys” of the story, this behaviour (physically punishing children) seems to be encouraged by the author. Moreover, children reading *Charlie* may believe that it is all right to inflict corporal punishment on disobedient or spoiled children, transgressing another boundary.

An exceptionally violent character in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is Mike Teavee. When the reader is first introduced to Mike, he is sitting in front of his television, carrying nearly twenty toy pistols on his body, firing them every once in a while. Meanwhile, he is watching a film “in which one bunch of gangsters was shooting up another bunch of gangsters with machine guns”.¹⁹⁶ Mike Teavee clearly enjoys this sort of violence, proclaiming: “They’re terrific, those gangsters! Especially when they start pumping each other full of lead, or flashing the old stilettos, or giving each other the one-two-three with their knuckle-dusters! Gosh, what I wouldn’t give to be doing that myself!”.¹⁹⁷ The

¹⁹³ *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “Violence,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/violence>.

¹⁹⁴ Dahl, *Charlie*, 31.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

exaggerated language in this (especially “pumping each other full of lead”) has humorous potential, showing the transgressive combination of violence and humour. As was established in the second chapter of this thesis, authors in the 1960s were not meant to dwell on violent scenes or to elaborate on gruesome details. Roald Dahl, in letting Mike Teavee express his love for violence in detail, here thus transgresses a social boundary. However, because Mike Teavee is not a character with whom children will identify, his behaviour is not excused, mitigating the transgressiveness of his character. Of course, in the end Mike is punished, although this does not seem to alter his personality in any way, as he takes a liking to biting in his mother’s hand.

In *The Twits*, physical abuse plays a significant role, and it is an overall good example of a novel in which the violent characters are punished. This does, however, not take away from the fact that the abuse in the novel does not conform to the norm of how violence in children’s books should be discussed, making it transgressive. The Twits, both obvious stereotypes of nasty people, seem to have it out for children and small animals in particular. When Mrs Twit’s character is described, the narrator states that she carries a walking stick “so that she could hit things with it, things like dogs and cats and small children”.¹⁹⁸ Mrs Twit also plants thistles and stinging nettles in her garden, “[to] keep out nasty nose little children”.¹⁹⁹ Her husband likes to put glue on tree branches in order to catch birds with which to make Bird Pie.²⁰⁰ When the glue trap one day does not yield birds but four boys who have accidentally gotten stuck, Mr Twit says he likes Boy Pie better than Bird Pie anyway, because boys have “[m]ore meat and not so many little bones”, much to the horror of the boys.²⁰¹ The age group at which this novel is targeted (9 to 11 years old)²⁰² will be able to identify the humour in these characters and situations, although younger children can be scared by them.

It soon becomes clear that the Twits do not only like to abuse creatures that are smaller than them: Mr Twit also becomes the victim of a beating with his wife’s stick. After the incident with the balloons, when Mrs Twit is descending again, she lands on top of her husband, “lashing out with the stick and cracking him all over his body”.²⁰³ At the end of the novel, however, Mr and Mrs Twit are punished for all their nasty behaviour. They are tricked into having their heads glued to the floor of their house, until their heads begin to get

¹⁹⁸ Roald Dahl, *The Twits* (London: Puffin Books, 1980), 8.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 41-43.

²⁰² “The Twits,” NovelTrust, accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.noveltrust.org.uk/novel/t/the-twits/>.

²⁰³ Dahl, *Twits*, 35.

squashed into their bodies and they shrink away completely.²⁰⁴ This scene is of course completely absurd, making it potentially humorous. And while the violent characters definitely feel the repercussions of their violence, which would make the novel more acceptable in the eyes of adults, their ending is quite violent, too. Although death is usually a sad occasion, when the Twits have passed away, the characters who knew express a clear case of schadenfreude: “everyone, including Fred [the gas meter man], shouted... HOORAY!”²⁰⁵ While it could be argued that the Twits had it coming, celebrating someone’s death transgresses the norm of treating death with respect and seriousness. Moreover, the implied message that bad people come to a bad end is a rather pessimistic one, especially for a children’s book.

Cruelty

The subject of cruelty and transgression of the norm of not treating people with cruelty can be frequently found in Dahl’s novels for children. “Cruelty” is here defined as “having a desire to cause physical or mental pain and make somebody suffer”,²⁰⁶ which in itself is already transgressive. Willy Wonka is by all means the cruellest character in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, which is rather surprising, seeing as he is the hero of the story. When Augustus Gloop is sucked up by one of the pipes transporting chocolate through the factory and carried to the Fudge Room, his parents are hysterical. Mr Wonka, however, does not really seem to care about the boy’s unfortunate position: when Mr Gloop says that there is nothing funny about Augustus being sucked up by a pipe, his wife replies: “Mr Wonka doesn’t seem to think so! [...] Just look at him! He’s laughing his head off!”²⁰⁷ When Mr Wonka assures her that he does not at all think it is funny and that he would never allow fudge to be made out of Augustus because it would be “quite uneatable”, he cannot help but “[giggle] madly behind his beard”,²⁰⁸ signifying that he does indeed take some pleasure out of Augustus Gloop’s mishap. The delight Mr Wonka takes in Augustus’s misfortune is a classic example of schadenfreude, showing the interaction of humour and cruelty.

Willy Wonka also does not show any sympathy towards the other unfortunate children. When Violet Beauregarde turns purple after eating some strange gum after Mr

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 87.

²⁰⁶ *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “Cruel,” accessed 5 May 2020, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/cruel_1?q=cruel.

²⁰⁷ Dahl, *Charlie*, 90-91.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 93.

Wonka told her not to, he says “[t]hat’s what comes from chewing disgusting gum all day long!”²⁰⁹ After he explains to Mr and Mrs Salt that the trash chute that their daughter has just been thrown into ends in a furnace, he does not seem bothered by their screams, giving them an unconvincing reassurance: “[d]on’t worry, [...] there’s always a chance that they’ve decided not to light it today”.²¹⁰ After the unfortunate children have been somewhat returned to their former states, Grandpa Joe and Charlie exclaim how terrible some of them must feel, but Mr Wonka does not really care and even seems to think he has done the children a favour: “‘And how healthy she looks! Much better than before!’ ‘But she’s purple in the face!’ cried Grandpa Joe. ‘So she is,’ said Mr Wonka. ‘Ah, well, there’s nothing we can do about that.’”²¹¹ These instances of Willy Wonka not really caring about the misery of others and even enjoying it would be less transgressive if the author showed contempt for Mr Wonka. The chocolate factory owner, however, is portrayed as the hero of the story, receiving no punishment for his cruel behaviour, making *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* more transgressive.

Apart from the factory owner himself, his employees, the Oompa-Loompas, are also quite cruel. After each child who has disappeared, they sing a song that addresses the many shortcomings of the children and their parents. In Augustus Gloop’s case, they sing that being turned into fudge would only contribute to his likableness; after Mr and Mrs Salt have fallen into the trash chute after their daughter, the Oompa-Loompas say they are “very glad they fell [i]nto the rubbish chute as well” after spoiling her so much;²¹² before Mike Teavee is to be stretched out in an attempt to return him to his former non-tiny state, they agree that if the treatment does not work “it serves him right”.²¹³ Because the Oompa-Loompas are characters with whom children will sympathise and because their songs are quite humorous, their cruelty is transgressive, mainly because their behaviour goes unpunished.

One other cruel character in the novel is Violet Beauregarde. When telling the reporters all about her gum-chewing habits, she confesses that she often sticks a bit of gum on one of the control buttons in the lift, so that the next person accidentally gets the piece of gum on their finger. She then laughingly says: “You get the best results with women who have expensive gloves on”.²¹⁴ The difference between the cruelty of Willy Wonka, the Oompa-

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 164.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

Loompas and Violet Beauregarde is that the last one is punished for her cruel behaviour. This mitigates the transgressiveness of Violet's character, and by that the transgressiveness of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Although the majority of the cruelty in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is directed against the antagonists of the story, it is still performed by the supposed heroes of it. As cruelty against others violates significant social and moral boundaries and as cruelty is an extensively used subject in this particular novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* can be called transgressive in this respect.

Cruelty is also a central theme in *The Twits*. Mr and Mrs Twit constantly play mean tricks on each other and enjoy it, too. When Mrs Twit serves her husband a plate of spaghetti that is actually worms, the narrator states that, "[i]t gave her great pleasure to watch him eating worms".²¹⁵ When Mr Twit has finished his meal, she triumphantly tells him what he just ate, "clapping her hands and stamping her feet on the floor and rocking with horrible laughter".²¹⁶ Consequently, after Mrs Twit has flown away with the balloons, Mr Twit "didn't feel sorry for her at all".²¹⁷ The Twits are also cruel to their pet monkeys, who live in a cage inside their garden, where they are required to perform all sorts of tricks.²¹⁸ Mr Twit wants to own the first "upside-down monkey circus" in the world, meaning that the monkeys have to do everything upside-down. The narrator states that "[s]ometimes the two small monkey children would faint with so much blood going to their heads. But Mr Twit didn't care about that".²¹⁹

Mr and Mrs Twit are not the only cruel characters in the story, however. Their monkeys, Muggle-Wump and his family, and the Roly-Poly Bird laugh at the Twits when one of their tricks has failed.²²⁰ Whereas to children it might seem all right to laugh at such cruel people, the general norm is that laughing at people's misfortunes is not proper behaviour. Furthermore, laughing at others or ridiculing them is a good example of an interaction between humour and impropriety, showing the transgressiveness of this particular event.

While Mr and Mrs Twit are punished severely for their cruelty in the end, their malice towards each other, other human beings, and animals deviates from social norms of proper behaviour. Parents generally want their children to not grow up to be mean people, and

²¹⁵ Dahl, *Twits*, 17.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 50, 53.

reading about the cruel things the Twits do to each other and others transgresses the boundaries of what is considered decent.

Cruelty also plays an important part in *The Witches*. While the witches are not the only cruel characters in the novel, they are the most mercilessly cruel. Although there is some “comic” cruelty in the novel (such as the mouse-narrator scaring the cooks in the hotel kitchen), other instances can be seen as scary or unsettling cruelty.

Some of the cruelty in *The Witches* can be called *schadenfreude*, and therefore carries more humorous potential. This potential is mainly due to the fact that the cruel character in these cases is a child (either the narrator or the children staying at the hotel). In other words, these are characters that young readers can more easily identify with than witches or mean parents. The narrator of the story, too, shows some signs of cruelty. When he realizes that Bruno Jenkins is going to be turned into a mouse, he confesses that he does not like Bruno very much and that he “was secretly hoping it might happen”.²²¹ After the narrator has poured the Formula into the witches’ soup, a cook discovers him in the kitchen and pandemonium breaks out. When the narrator finally escapes, he says “[t]he fact that a tiny little creature like me had caused such a commotion among a bunch of grown-up men gave me a happy feeling. I couldn’t help smiling [...]”.²²² Other children in the hotel (actual children, not mouse-children) take great delight in the witches’ distress when they are turning into mice. The narrator states that the children “all seemed to know instinctively that something good was going on right there in front of them, and they were clapping and cheering and laughing like mad”.²²³

When the narrator and his grandmother think up a plan to rid the entire world of witches, they agree that the witches “have to be smashed and bashed and chopped up into little pieces”.²²⁴ Not only are these words reminiscent of the witches’ song, the narrator and his grandmother also look forward to killing all the witches of the world:

“Oh, my goodness me, we’re going to be busy these next few weeks and months and years!” she cried. “I think we are,” I said. “But what fun and excitement it’s going to be!” “You can say that again!” my grandmother cried, giving me another kiss. “I can’t

²²¹ Dahl, *Witches*, 101.

²²² *Ibid.*, 175.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 187.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

wait to get started.”²²⁵

The only solution to the witch problem being to kill all of them makes for a rather pessimistic message in *The Witches*. Furthermore, parents and other adults, such as Rees, generally do not appreciate it when children take delight in others' misfortune (even though this is frequently a source of laughter for themselves), let alone the murdering of other sentient beings. Moreover, according to Rees, children are already gleeful and spiteful by nature and they do not need this to be fed by stories in which characters or narrators revel in others' misery. The narrator laughing at the cooks' distress and the children laughing at women's panicked screaming therefore transgresses the boundaries of social norms of decency. Moreover, because this bad behaviour is carried out by characters with whom children can identify, it seems as if Dahl is encouraging said behaviour, making the novel even more transgressive.

An obvious example of unpleasant cruelty is the behaviour of the witches. According to the narrator, “[a] REAL WITCH gets the same pleasure from squelching a child as *you* get from eating a plateful of strawberries and thick cream”.²²⁶ The witches' cruelty is not limited to children, however. When one of the witches present at the RSPCC meeting asks The Grand High Witch what would happen if an adult were to accidentally eat a Formula-chocolate, to which The Grand High Witch answers: “[t]hat's just too bad for the grrrown-up”.²²⁷

A lot of the unsettling cruelty in *The Witches* is directed against mice. When the narrator's grandmother gives him two mice as pets in the hotel, the chambermaid tells him “that the first mouse to break the rules would be drowned in a bucket of water by the hall-porter”.²²⁸ At the end of the novel, after Grandmamma has returned mouse-Bruno to his parents, the narrator says: “I wouldn't be surprised if his father gave him to the hall-porter to drown in the fire-bucket”.²²⁹ Cruelty, whether directed at people or other more defenceless creatures, violates social norms of decent behaviour, adding to the transgressiveness of *The Witches*. Because these particular instances of cruelty are carried out by the antagonists of the story, however, some of this transgressiveness is diminished.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

Chapter 7: “Children Should Never Have Baths”

How do humour and impropriety interact in Roald Dahl’s novels?

According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “impropriety” is “behaviour that is dishonest, socially unacceptable, or unsuitable for a particular situation”.²³⁰ Especially the “socially unacceptable” part of the definition of the word is significant here: behaviour that is socially unacceptable transgresses social boundaries. In the chapter below, the occurrence of impropriety and humour in Roald Dahl’s novels for children will be discussed, according to the subjects or themes of grossness, dirtiness, rudeness, and naughtiness.

Grossness

As was established in Chapter 3, children often enjoy humour with a “gross” component.²³¹ These gross jokes often have a reputation of being shocking to adults, much to the delight of children.²³² *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, while not as disgusting as *The Twits*, contains some instances of grossness. When Violet Beauregarde relates to the reporters that she is a chewing gum champion, she discloses that she often sticks her gum on the end of her bedpost at night, so that she can continue chewing it in the morning: “a bit hard at first, maybe, but it soon softens up again after I’ve given it a few good chews”.²³³ The piece of gum she is chewing right now is over three months old. Willy Wonka, while greeting the children, tells Veruca Salt that he thought a verruca was “a sort of wart that you got on the sole of your foot!”.²³⁴ While this image is gross, a respectable girl being named after a type of wart carries humorous potential. Later, Mr Wonka tells Mrs Gloop her son would never be made into strawberry-flavour chocolate-coated fudge, because “the taste would be terrible”.²³⁵ The image of a boy being turned into fudge is quite nasty, but, because Mr Wonka is a humorous character who does not take this seriously at all, this scene is potentially humorous. While the grossness in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is rather mild, its combination with humour does make it transgress a social boundary of the norm of decent behaviour. In the novel, grossness is expressed by both the antagonists and the heroes of the story, making the treatment of this particular subject even more problematic.

²³⁰ *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “Impropriety,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/impropriety>.

²³¹ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 7.

²³² J. Cross, *Humor*, 31.

²³³ Dahl, *Charlie*, 38.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

Much of the humour in *The Twits* is based on situations that are objectively disgusting: Mrs Twit puts her glass eye in Mr Twit's beer and serves him spaghetti made out of worms; Mr Twit puts a frog in Mrs Twit's bed and sticks small bits of wood to Mrs Twit's walking stick to make it appear as if she is shrinking. Apart from this last one, these are all fairly dirty tricks, but children will find these situations humorous precisely because of this grossness. This combination of improper grossness and humorous potential makes this scene transgressive. The characters in the novel themselves also transgress quite a few social boundaries. The narrator of *The Twits* makes it clear from the start that especially Mr Twit is a "foul and smelly old man";²³⁶ he has a beard, which he never washes, "not even on Sundays".²³⁷ The narrator then goes on to describe in the minutest detail what sorts of nasty food particles are left in Mr Twit's beard after a meal, and how Mr Twit still eats these morsels "[b]y sticking out his tongue and curling it sideways to explore the hairy jungle around his mouth".²³⁸ The humorous language ("hairy jungle") in combination with the grossness of the description make for a transgressive scene. Because this grossness is carried out by Mr Twit, the antagonist of the story, children reading *The Twits* will know that this sort of behaviour is discouraged by the author of the novel.

Of course, Mr and Mrs Twit also become the victim of some gross jokes. When two birds drop some glue on their heads, the Twits are convinced it is bird droppings, and they both start screaming.²³⁹ The idea of two such nasty adults getting bird droppings on their heads carries great humorous potential for children. This sort of schadenfreude, however, is improper, showing the transgressiveness of the combination of impropriety and humour.

Dirtiness

Many children enjoy humour that is based on nastiness or dirtiness. It is often claimed that children take such delight in these subjects because they believe that adults find things that are nasty or dirty bad (an answer to the question of whether this is actually true has yet to be found). In this way, children are able to rebel against their parents and what is considered decent. In *The Witches*, especially dirtiness seems to be a sort of virtue.

When Grandmamma is explaining everything she knows about witches to the narrator, she tells him that witches can smell children: "The cleaner you happen to be, the more smelly

²³⁶ Dahl, *Twits*, 5.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

you are to a witch. [...] The dirtier you are, the less you smell”.²⁴⁰ She then discourages her grandson from taking baths too often, so that the witches cannot smell him as well: “Once a month is quite enough for a sensible child”.²⁴¹ Later, she changes her opinion to “[c]hildren should *never* have baths”.²⁴² The narrator wholeheartedly agrees with his grandmother. When the narrator is trapped inside the room with the witches, he tries to remember when he last had a bath, deciding that it must have been before he and his grandmother arrived at the hotel. Looking down at his hands, he sees that “[t]hey were covered with smudge and mud and goodness knows what else”.²⁴³ In the end, the witches do find him because of his smell, although it takes them a lot longer because he has not washed himself in so long. Because the child readers identify themselves with the narrator of *The Witches* and his grandmother, they may assume Grandmamma’s advice is truth and not take baths, transgressing social norms of personal hygiene.

There are also other forms of humorous nastiness that do not have to do with washing yourself in *The Witches*. When the narrator sees one of the witches scratching her head, he says: “[i]t is always funny when you catch someone doing something coarse and she thinks no one is looking. Nose-picking, for example, or scratching her bottom”.²⁴⁴ While the narrator clearly states that those specific actions are coarse, he is also laughing at them: this reaction implies both humour and transgression. Moreover, nose-picking and bottom-scratching are things parents do not want their children to do, let alone laugh at, as they transgress the boundary of decency. When Grandmamma tries to return mouse-Bruno to his parents, she tells them that he has suffered a mishap. Bruno’s father, Mr Jenkins, replies that “[h]e suffers from overeating and then he suffers from wind. You should hear him after supper. He sounds like a brass band!”.²⁴⁵ Of course, the idea of farts sounding like a brass band is amusing to children. The social norm, however, is that farting is indecent and not something that should be laughed at. This particular scene thus shows the interaction between transgressiveness and humour, but, because this comparison is made by a rather unsympathetic character, some of this transgressiveness is weakened.

When the narrator (in mouse-form) is trying to escape from the kitchen after the cooks have discovered him, he climbs up a cook’s trousers, much to the hilarity of the other kitchen

²⁴⁰ Dahl, *Witches*, 26-27.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

²⁴⁴ Dahl, *Witches*, 63.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

staff. The unfortunate cook starts screaming: “[i]t’s in my knickers! It’s running round in my flaming knickers!”²⁴⁶ Children reading this passage join the rest of the kitchen staff in their laughter: the image of a mouse in a grown-up man’s underwear is a humorous situation. To adults, this particular section of the novel is less entertaining: talking and, even worse, laughing about underwear and mice in underwear in particular is usually considered improper, and thus does not conform to social norms.

Rudeness

Apart from Charlie himself, the children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are all quite rude, usually towards their parents or other adults. When Mrs Beauregarde reprimands her daughter, Violet replies “All right, Mother, keep your hair on!”²⁴⁷ In the chocolate factory, Mr Wonka warns Violet not to eat a piece of his chewing gum, as it has not been properly tested yet, but she scoffs, spurred on by both of her parents, and takes the gum anyway. But Mike Teavee is undoubtedly the rudest character in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. When reporters are trying to interview Mike after he has found his Golden Ticket, he angrily says “[c]an’t you fools see I’m watching television?”, and “[d]idn’t I tell you not to interrupt!”²⁴⁸ After he is turned tiny by television, his father makes it clear that he is going to get rid of the television set as soon as they get home. Being addicted to his television, Mike of course does not appreciate this, biting his mother’s hand and screaming “I want to watch television! I want to watch television! I want to watch television!”²⁴⁹ Screaming at and biting parents and other adults obviously transgresses a social boundary. Nevertheless, this rudeness is not portrayed as humorous, and because it is expressed by characters with whom children will not identify, the transgressiveness of these rude characters is acceptable.

Rudeness is not exhibited solely by the antagonists of the story: Willy Wonka also expresses an enjoyment in things that are usually considered rude. When telling his guests about “fizzy lifting drinks”, which are drinks that make you float in the air, he informs them that the only way to come down again is to “do a great big long rude burp”.²⁵⁰ Burping, of course, is generally considered rude, and something that children should definitely not be encouraged to do. Mr Wonka, being a sympathetic character, here thus transgresses a boundary of social decency.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁴⁷ Dahl, *Charlie*, 38.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

Rude language

A subcategory of rudeness in Roald Dahl's novels for children is rude language. Whether language is considered rude or offensive is, just like humour, partly a personal matter, although it is often also dependent on the culture in which one lives. For this thesis, *Green's Dictionary of Slang* has been used to determine what words are or are not rude or offensive.

Many of the characters in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* use rude language, regardless of their being antagonists or heroes in the novel. Of this latter category, especially Charlie's grandmothers, Josephine and Georgina, have a habit of expressing rude language. When Willy Wonka announces that he will open his chocolate factory to five children, Grandma Josephine mutters: "The man's dotty!".²⁵¹ According to *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, "dotty" means "eccentric [or] odd".²⁵² Grandma Georgina joins Grandma Josephine's rudeness in calling Augustus Gloop and his mother "revolting" and "repulsive".²⁵³ They then go on to call Violet Beauregarde "beastly" and "despicable".²⁵⁴ While these children are undoubtedly the intended antagonists of the story and it therefore could be argued that they are deserving of this abusive language, the rudeness is still performed by the heroes of the story, which can encourage young readers to be rude towards other people, however deserving of it, as well, transgressing social boundaries of proper behaviour.

Of course, there are also other characters who use rude language in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The Oompa-Loompas incorporate a range of swear words in their songs, calling Augustus Gloop, amongst other things, a "nincompoop", a "pig", "greedy, foul, and infantile", and a "brute".²⁵⁵ To clarify, a "nincompoop" is "a fool [or] a simpleton".²⁵⁶ They go on to call Violet Beauregarde a "repulsive little bum".²⁵⁷ Willy Wonka himself, too, uses several terms of abuse. After Mr Wonka shows his guests "square sweets that look round", Mrs Salt says that he is lying, as the sweets look very obviously square. Mr Wonka replies to this: "My dear old fish, [...] go and boil your head!".²⁵⁸ While the suggestion is of course absurd, adding to the humorous potential of this particular sentence, calling someone an "old fish", however dear, is clearly a case of rude language. Because the Oompa-Loompas and Mr

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁵² *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. "Dotty," accessed 21 May 2020, <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/t7vrlqy>.

²⁵³ Dahl, *Charlie*, 27-28.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

²⁵⁶ *Green's*, s.v. "Nincompoop," accessed 21 May 2020, <https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/b7vb32i>.

²⁵⁷ Dahl, *Charlie*, 117.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

Wonka are heroes of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, their rude language can seem acceptable or even encouraged in the eyes of young readers, making the novel even more transgressive.

Mrs Salt seems to think Willy Wonka a rude person, too, and makes it clear that she does not wish to be spoken to like that, to which Mr Wonka replies: “Oh, do shut up”.²⁵⁹ These words are echoed by Mr Teavee when his son interrupts Mr Wonka once again: “‘Shut up!’ said Mr Teavee”.²⁶⁰ It need not be said that telling someone to shut up is rude. It is interesting to note that telling people to shut up is done by both a hero and an antagonist of *Charlie*. Still, using rude language transgresses boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable behaviour, although it is more acceptable in a children’s book when such language is uttered by an antagonist.

Rude language is also prevalent in *The Twits*. The narrator of the story from the start does not shy away from calling the protagonists, Mr and Mrs Twit, all sorts of nasty names. On the second page already, when the narrator introduces Mr Twit, it is stated that “Mr Twit was a twit. He was born a twit. And now at the age of sixty, he was a bigger twit than ever”.²⁶¹ To clarify, a “twit” is “a fool [or] an idiot”.²⁶² While this remark in itself might seem only mildly offensive, the intention behind it is clear: to brand Mr Twit as a stupid person. Because the Twits are the obvious antagonists of the story and the narrator believes this as well, children reading *The Twits* will sympathize with the narrator over Mr and Mrs Twit and thus believe that calling people, however nasty, “twits” is all right. Using rude language, however, transgresses social boundaries of proper behaviour, and is therefore not all right.

Not only the narrator is keen on using swear words; the protagonists themselves also enjoy calling each other all sorts of nasty names. When Mrs Twit tells her husband she is watching him, he replies “Oh, do shut up, you old hag”;²⁶³ the idea that Mrs Twit is an “old hag” is confirmed by the narrator only two pages further: “Dirty old hags like her always have itchy tummies”.²⁶⁴ According to *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, a “hag” is “an unattractive or sexually promiscuous young woman; thus derogatory”.²⁶⁵ The dirty old hag is, however, not merely the victim of abusive language: when she is furious because Mr Twit tied her to some

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 147.

²⁶¹ Dahl, *The Twits*, 2.

²⁶² *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, s.v. “Twit,” accessed 8 May 2020, <https://greensdictofslang.com/search/basic?q=twit>.

²⁶³ Dahl, *Twits*, 10.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 12.

²⁶⁵ *Green’s*, s.v. “Hag,” accessed 8 May 2020.

balloons to “stretch her” and then let her fly away, she calls him a “grizzly old grunion”, a “rotten old turnip”, and a “filthy old frumpet”.²⁶⁶ Especially this last word is bound to get some laughs from children, as it is a nonsense word and children generally enjoy nonsensical humour.²⁶⁷ Although these words do not appear in *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*, they are reminiscent of the billingsgate as mentioned in Chapter 4, and can therefore also be seen as rude language.

As was established in Chapter 3, a lot of children’s humour is based on name-calling, which would already partly account for the humorous potential of *The Twits*. The combination of this humorousness and the transgressiveness of rude language shows the interaction between impropriety and humour, although some of this transgressiveness is mitigated because the rude language is uttered by the antagonist of *The Twits*.

As in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Twits*, some rude language occurs in *The Witches*, although it is significantly less frequent. While in *The Twits* some of the foul language is uttered by the narrator, the swearing in *The Witches* is exclusively done by antagonists or other unsympathetic characters. One of these characters is Bruno Jenkins. Right before The Grand High Witch turns him into a mouse, he says: “[w]hat the heck’s going on?”.²⁶⁸ While “heck” is a euphemism for the somewhat ruder “hell”, it is often still considered improper to say. A few sentences later, Bruno says: “[w]ill one of you crazy punks kindly tell me what all this is about?”.²⁶⁹ It need not be said that calling someone a “crazy punk”, especially a stranger, is usually considered bad. Later, Bruno calls The Grand High Witch a “filthy old cow”,²⁷⁰ which is also generally considered wrong.

Bruno is not the only character making use of swear words. When the narrator is hiding in the hotel kitchen, he witnesses how the cooks spit on a guest’s dinner (exclaiming “give her some gravy!”²⁷¹) because she complained. Several members of the hotel staff call her an “old hag”,²⁷² a term also frequently used in *The Twits*. Bruno’s parents, when Grandmamma is trying to return their son to them, call the grandmother a “silly old woman”, a “mad woman”, and a “nasty cheeky old woman”.²⁷³ The Grand High Witch, when her

²⁶⁶ Dahl, *Twits*, 33.

²⁶⁷ Mallan, *Laugh Lines*, 13.

²⁶⁸ Dahl, *Witches*, 101.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

fellow witches are misunderstanding her plan, angrily calls them “idiots”.²⁷⁴ Because all of the swearing is done by unpleasant characters, children reading *The Witches* are less likely to believe that it is all right to swear, making the novel less transgressive.

Naughtiness

The theme of naughtiness only plays a part in *The Twits*. These naughty jokes are fairly innocent, but still transgress the boundaries of some social norms. When Mrs Twit is descending with the balloons “[her] petticoat billowed out like a parachute, showing her long knickers. It was a grand sight on a glorious day, and thousands of birds came flying in from miles around to stare at this extraordinary old woman in the sky”.²⁷⁵ This image is humorous to children, and the narrator improperly calling it a “grand sight” shows the interaction between humour and impropriety.

Similarly, when the four young boys in *The Twits* escape from the tree by taking off their pants and run away, their “naked bottoms [are] winking at the sun”²⁷⁶ is an example of naughty humour. “Naked bottoms” is an amusing idea to children, and because this act is done by characters with whom children can sympathize, running around naked seems to be encouraged by Dahl. This makes *The Twits* more transgressive, as random nakedness does not conform to social norms of proper behaviour.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

Chapter 8: “A Witch Is Always A Woman”

How do humour and morality interact in Roald Dahl’s novels?

As stated in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “morality” is “a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behaviour and character”.²⁷⁷ As was established in Chapter 2, overt morality was not appreciated in children’s books during and after the 1970s, although this does not mean that covert morality disappeared from the books, as all books, consciously or subconsciously, express a certain worldview. The chapter below will discuss morality in Roald Dahl’s novels for children, using the themes or subjects of cynicism, racism, misogyny and sexism, greed, and spoiledness. The themes in this chapter are all only loosely tied to morality, and may therefore seem like a random hotchpotch of subjects. Partly this is due to the fact that some of them remained after the other themes had been divided, but other themes are more closely connected to morality. They are all, however, important to the transgressiveness of Roald Dahl’s novel, and therefore do need to be discussed.

Cynicism

Even very young readers can understand the moral of *The Twits*: do not be nasty and do not mistreat other people or animals. There is, however, another, less positive moral in this novel: the world is a bad place, but, fortunately, bad people will meet a sticky end. With this, the message in *The Twits* is significantly more cynical than the moral in most adult-approved children’s books: good eventually always triumphs over evil. Apart from this overarching moral, *The Twits* contains some other moralistic messages.

At the beginning of the novel is one of the most-quoted phrases of Roald Dahl’s novels:²⁷⁸

If a person has ugly thoughts, it begins to show on the face. And when that person has ugly thoughts every day, every week, every year, the face gets uglier and uglier until it gets so ugly you can hardly bear to look at it. A person who has good thoughts cannot ever be ugly. You can have a wonky nose and a crooked mouth and a double chin and

²⁷⁷ *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “Impropriety,” accessed 1 June 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/morality>.

²⁷⁸ “The Twits,” Roald Dahl’s website, accessed 21 April 2020, <https://www.roalddahl.com/roald-dahl/stories/p-t/the-twits>.

stick-out teeth, but if you have good thoughts they will shine out of your face like sunbeams and you will always look lovely.²⁷⁹

While the sentiment of this idea is rather nice, it also suggests that ugly people are automatically bad, and that beautiful people are always good. This, of course, is not true. Rees finds this particular passage in *The Twits* worrisome, stating: “[d]o we want [children] to think that all ugly people are evil, that all physically attractive people are virtuous?”²⁸⁰

Later on in the novel, four little boys decide to climb up the Twits’s tree (“just for fun”²⁸¹), the narrator states that there is nothing wrong with climbing up strange people’s trees.²⁸² Whether adults agree with this or not remains a personal matter, but because the narrator also states that the Twits are bad (which many, if not all, children will agree with), and because children more easily identify with the boys than the nasty couple, young readers might automatically also agree that it is indeed all right to climb up trees in other people’s gardens.

While it is (and was, in the 1980s) up for discussion whether children are able to discern between what is true and real or not in fiction, the primary discussion is whether explicit morality should have a place in children’s novel at all. Moreover, the question is whether cynical, untrue or “wrong” morals and ideas of how the world works, such as in the quote above, should be printed in children’s novels. Thus, although children like and believe what the narrator says, it is precisely this, and the cynicism, that makes the morality in *The Twits* so transgressive.

Racism

Several times, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has been accused of containing racist material, especially concerning the portrayal of the Oompa-Loompas. Rees called the name “Oompa-Loompas” a “racist put-down” and compared them to slaves,²⁸³ and children’s book author John Rowe Townsend called Dahl’s treatment of racially delicate matters “astonishingly insensitiv[e]”.²⁸⁴ Mr Wonka, however, seems to think of himself as the

²⁷⁹ Dahl, *Twits*, 7.

²⁸⁰ Rees, “Dahl’s Chickens,” 147.

²⁸¹ Dahl, *Twits*, 41.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Rees, “Dahl’s Chickens,” 145.

²⁸⁴ Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children*, 255.

Oompa-Loompas' saviour. Moreover, the racism in *Charlie* is laced with humour, a precarious combination.

In earlier versions of the novel, the Oompa-Loompas were African black pygmies. Because of the backlash this depiction received, Dahl changed the Oompa-Loompas' appearance in later versions to rosy-white skin and long, golden-brown hair.²⁸⁵ The Oompa-Loompas' origin story remained the same, however. According to Willy Wonka, they lived in tree houses in "thick jungles infested by the most dangerous beasts in the world",²⁸⁶ until he found out that they practically worship the cocoa bean. He then convinced the Oompa-Loompas to come work in his factory in exchange for these cocoa beans and "smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them".²⁸⁷

The name "Oompa-Loompa", because of its silliness, is of course humorous, especially to children. Dahl uses other strange sounding words to describe Loompaland, such as "hornswoggler", "snozzwanger", "whangdoodle", and "bong-bong tree".²⁸⁸ The songs the Oompa-Loompas sing, though often mean or cruel, are also humorous precisely because they are cruel: a good example of *schadenfreude*, which is both humorous and transgressive. But while the depiction of the Oompa-Loompas may have racist undertones, the characters in themselves are not racist. The character of Willy Wonka could however be seen as dubious. While the Oompa-Loompas are not technically slaves, as they are generously compensated for their labour, they were taken from their native land to work for a Western factory owner. The fact that Mr Wonka believes that he "saved" the Oompa-Loompas is reminiscent of the so-called White Saviour Complex: the "idea that it is the role of the White outsider to 'lift' the poor and oppressed in developing countries".²⁸⁹ The allusions to slavery and the slave trade and the racism that comes with it are quite clear, whether they were so intended by Dahl or not. Although children may not pick up on this reference, most adults will. Because the racist perpetrator in this novel, Willy Wonka, is not punished for his behaviour and mentality, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* transgresses a significant boundary of what is deemed suitable for children's books.

Racism is less evident, but therefore not less significant, in *The Twits*. There is in fact only one instance of possible racism in the novel: when the monkeys try to make it clear to

²⁸⁵ Dahl, *Charlie*, 91.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

²⁸⁹ Rolf Straubhaar, "The Stark Reality of the 'White Saviour' Complex and the Need for Critical Consciousness: A Document Analysis of the Early Journals of a Freirean Educator," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 45, no. 3 (2015): 384.

the birds that they should not sit on the tree, the narrator states that “these were English birds and they couldn’t understand the weird African language the monkeys spoke”.²⁹⁰ Describing an African (or any non-English language) as “weird” can be seen as the narrator (or indeed the author) looking down on these languages and their respective cultures. Although it was established in the chapter on children’s novels that most racism disappeared from or was censored out of children’s novels in the 1970s and the 1980s, this particular sentence in *The Twits* proves that this effort was not successful in all children’s novels, and that it was still used as a way to convey humour. Despite the fact that this is just one sentence, *The Twits* still transgresses a significant moral boundary.

Misogyny and sexism

One of the most commonly occurring complaints about *The Witches* is the novel’s presumed misogynistic or sexist undertone. When describing witches in the first chapter, the narrator states that “[a] witch is always a woman. [...] There is no such thing as a male witch”.²⁹¹ Obviously, the witches are the antagonists in this story and them necessarily being women could come across as the narrator (or Dahl himself) wanting to put women in a bad light. It should however be noted that the narrator specifically states that he “[does] not want to speak badly about women”; he claims that “[m]ost women are lovely”.²⁹² Witches just happen to be women. This might of course just be an excuse in order to be able to say nasty things about women.

The witches in the novel also state sexist (or, at least, outdated) opinions about women. When The Grand High Witch explains how the children, after eating the chocolates, will all turn into mice while they are at school, she states that “[t]eachers will be hopping up and down! Vimmen [women] teachers will be standing on desks and holding up skirts and yelling, ‘Help, help, help!’”.²⁹³ While this particular image carries humorous potential because of The Grand High Witch’s peculiar accent and the strange situation in itself, the idea that women are all afraid of mice could be seen as sexist, as men could be afraid of mice just as well. The Grand High Witch expands on this notion by stating that the narrator’s pet mice, which she has unfortunately found, “qvite obviously belong [...] to some rreepellent little child in the hotel! A boy it will be for a certainty because girls are not keeping pet mice!”²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ Dahl, *Twits*, 48.

²⁹¹ Dahl, *Witches*, 9.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

Again, an assumption is made that women (and girls) do not like mice in the least and that they are in fact afraid of them.

There is one instance of the narrator uttering a possibly sexist remark in *The Witches*. When his grandmother tells him that a REAL WITCH is always bald, the narrator is shocked: “[t]here was something indecent about a bald woman”.²⁹⁵ The narrator and his grandmother agree that bald women are both horrid and disgusting.²⁹⁶ Because the witches are the obvious antagonists in this novel, them stating sexist beliefs and opinions is to a lesser degree transgressive: the readers are not expected to agree with what the “bad guys” of the story say. However, because children identify with the narrator and his grandmother, they are more likely to assume their declarations as truth. Having sexist beliefs transgresses a moral boundary, and because the above-mentioned excerpts can be interpreted as sexist, and, in the case of the narrator and his grandmother, unpunished sexism, *The Witches* is transgressive.

Greed

Greed is not a quality that adults like to see in children. Greedy behaviour is considered impolite, and therefore transgresses social and moral boundaries. The greediest character in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is of course Augustus Gloop. His greed is most obviously displayed through his fat exterior, which the narrator seems to deem a flaw, even before Augustus has uttered his first words in the novel. When describing the boy, the narrator states that “[g]reat flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body and his face was like a monstrous ball of dough with two small greedy curranty eyes peering out upon the world”,²⁹⁷ essentially fat-shaming Augustus. Inside the factory, Mr Wonka invites the children to have a taste of the grass, which tastes like sugary mint. All the guests politely take one blade of grass, “except Augustus Gloop, who took a big handful”.²⁹⁸ The Oompa-Loompas, too, seem to find Augustus Gloop a greedy boy. In the factory, Augustus finds that the chocolate river tastes delicious, and proceeds to drink it by handfuls, ignoring Willy Wonka’s protests. According to the narrator, “Augustus was deaf to everything except the call of his enormous stomach”.²⁹⁹ Unfortunately, Augustus falls into the river and is sucked up by a huge pipe, after which the Oompa-Loompas sing their song, in which they call him a “pig” and a “greedy

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Dahl, *Charlie*, 26.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 87.

brute”.³⁰⁰ Because Augustus is a character with whom children will not sympathize, they will also not believe that it is all right to be greedy. Augustus’ character is therefore also less transgressive, especially because he is punished for his greedy behaviour.

However, it is uncertain whether he has learned from his mistakes. When in the lift, Willy Wonka, Charlie and Grandpa Joe see Augustus walking out of the factory, looking much thinner than he did before. According to Mr Wonka, this is because he was squeezed in the pipe. It thus seems as if the narrator does not consider greed to be Augustus’ shortcoming, but rather his being fat; the narrator implies a direct link between greed and fatness. It should however be noted that there is a minor fat character in the novel whose fatness does not seem to make him a bad person. When Charlie buys the bar of chocolate that contains his Golden Ticket, the man behind the counter is described as “fat and well-fed. [...] The fat around his neck bulged out all around the top of his collar like a rubber ring”.³⁰¹ But, instead of greedily taking the Golden Ticket from Charlie, he says: “I’m awfully glad you got it. Good luck to you, sonny”.³⁰² The message Dahl conveys in *Charlie* about fatness is therefore quite ambiguous.

There are quite a few cases of greed in *The Witches*, although they only occur around one person: Bruno Jenkins. When The Grand High Witch wants to show the other witches the effects of Formula 86 Delayed Action Mouse-Maker, she lures Bruno to the room in which the witch meeting is held by promising him chocolate bars. Bruno, impatient to get his hands on the sweets, shouts: “[w]here are those chocolate bars you promised me? I’m here to collect! Dish them out!”.³⁰³ He does not stop at this, but continues to ask The Grand High Witch for his chocolate, always in a rather rude manner: “where are my six bars of chocolate? [...] [g]imme my chocolate!”³⁰⁴ Readers might expect that being turned into a mouse will teach Bruno a lesson, but he is just as greedy as a mouse. He is not only rude to the antagonists of the novel, but also to Grandmamma: when she wants to return him to his parents, he says: “[g]ive me the rest of that banana I was eating”, instead of asking for it politely.³⁰⁵ Usually, adults prefer children not to be impolite, greedy people, as being so transgresses social boundaries. Bruno Jenkins, while not being the actual antagonist of *The Witches*, does not exactly set a good example. Of course, Bruno is punished for his greed by

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁰³ Dahl, *Witches*, 99.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

presumably being drowned in a bucket, but because Bruno is not a character with whom children are likely to sympathize, this punishment holds little didactic value.

Spoiledness

The most spoiled character in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is undoubtedly Veruca Salt. After Veruca has gotten her Golden Ticket, her father relates to the reporters how “she would lie for hours on the floor, kicking and yelling in the most disturbing way”, until he had found her ticket.³⁰⁶ It soon turns out that visiting a very exclusive chocolate factory is not enough for Veruca. As soon as she sees the Oompa-Loompas, she tells her father: “I want an Oompa-Loompa! I want you to get me an Oompa-Loompa! I want an Oompa-Loompa right away!”, not relenting until Mr Salt has promised he will get her one before the end of the day.³⁰⁷

In the Nut Room, where a hundred squirrels are peeling walnuts, Veruca Salt makes it clear that she wants to take one of the squirrels home. When her mother tells her that she cannot have one, as they belong to Mr Wonka, Veruca shouts: “I don’t care about that!”, and attempts to take one of the squirrels herself.³⁰⁸ According to Grandpa Joe, nothing good can ever come from spoiling a child,³⁰⁹ and the squirrels throwing Veruca into the trash chute confirms this. In their song, the Oompa-Loompas do not only criticize Veruca Salt for her spoiled behaviour, but mainly her parents. They sing that a girl cannot spoil herself, but that the parents are the “sinners” who turned her into a brat.³¹⁰ They therefore believe it to be a good thing that Mr and Mrs Salt also fell into the trash chute. There is no humorousness about Veruca Salt’s character, and the matter of her spoiledness is treated seriously, albeit with some exaggeration.

Spoiledness is of course not a trait parents want to see in their children, and Veruca’s behaviour towards her parents and Willy Wonka transgresses the boundaries of what is socially and morally acceptable. As Veruca is an obvious antagonist of the novel and because she is in the end punished for her behaviour, and were she the only one blamed for her behaviour, the moral of her story would be acceptable in a children’s book. The message in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is more pessimistic than this, however, as the blame is mostly laid on the parents. In other words: children cannot help being spoiled brats, it is their parents’ fault for making them so. This makes *Charlie* more transgressive: putting a

³⁰⁶ Dahl, *Charlie*, 30.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

pessimistic moral in a children's story instead of a positive, uplifting one, is not a quality that is deemed suitable for children's books.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to answer the following research question:

How are Roald Dahl's novels for children transgressive in relation to the standards for children's books and the standards for humour?

In order to answer this question, several sub-questions on transgressive humour and children's humour needed to be answered. These answers will be discussed in the results section below.

Results

Humour can be called transgressive when it violates one or more boundaries. Whether a joke transgresses a boundary or not is usually based on two things: the external influence of society and the internal influence of one's own morality. Apart from this, context and timing also play an important role in whether or not a joke is accepted as humorous. While all successful humour transgresses some sort of boundary, social and moral standards decide whether this transgression goes too far (or not far enough), making the joke unfunny. Especially when concerning children, humour more easily goes too far, as some subjects are deemed unsuitable for children.

Authors of children's books of the 1960s and the 1980s also had to take this into account when writing a story. While most sensitive subjects did appear in children's books of the 1960s and 1980s, the manner in which these were dealt with was of high importance. Transgressors of social and moral boundaries such as violence, swearing, or racism needed to be punished, so children learned what was appropriate and decent and what was not. Some critics argued that the punishment of morally objectionable behaviour was not enough: in the 1970s and the 1980s, many forms of racism and sexism in children's books, whether it was punished or not, disappeared from children's books, as they were deemed unsuitable characteristics for children's books.

The humour that children appreciate can be divided into three categories: humorous characters, situations, and discourse. In all of these categories, boundaries can be transgressed. Moreover, children enjoy humour with a transgressive subject just as much as adults, often because they realize its transgressiveness. These three categories (characters, situations, and discourse) and the transgression within them can also be found in Roald Dahl's novels. Humour in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Twits*, and *The Witches* is often based on

exaggerated characters, absurd situations, and wordplay. Furthermore, the categories of horror, violence, impropriety, and morality are often used as the subject of humour.

Answer to the research question

In his novels, Roald Dahl often transgresses social and moral boundaries of what is deemed suitable for children to read. Moreover, socially and morally transgressive subjects are often used for humorous characters, situations, and discourse. While most children's books discuss some sort of socially or morally sensitive subject, these subjects are permissible when they are treated seriously or when characters who do not treat these subjects with respect are punished. Because these sensitive subjects are often combined with humour in Roald Dahl's novels, they are not always treated seriously, and transgressing characters, especially when it concerns transgressing heroes, are not always punished. There are of course also characters who are punished for their transgressive behaviour: the Twits and the nasty children in *Charlie* all suffer the horrendous consequences of their actions.

These observations have led to the following answer to the research question: by adding unpunished excessive scariness, death, abuse, cruelty, dirtiness, swearing, racism, and sexism to his novels, Roald Dahl transgresses several significant social and moral boundaries of what is appropriate for children's books. Furthermore, by using the sensitive subjects of death, abuse, grossness, dirtiness, swearing, rudeness, and racism as subjects for humour and thus not treating them with the seriousness that social norms require from children's book authors, Roald Dahl transgresses numerous social and moral boundaries of the standards for humour.

Discussion

The most significant result of this study is that Roald Dahl's novels can indeed be called transgressive: both the subjects and the humour in the books transgress social and moral boundaries. Moreover, the combination of unsuitable subjects and transgressive humour makes Dahl's work doubly transgressive; this sometimes accounts for fiercely critical reactions such as David Rees's.

Another important result is Dahl's or the narrator's encouragement or discouragement of transgressive behaviour. When characters are punished and their behaviour is thus discouraged, this shows young readers what is good and what is bad. When they are not punished and their behaviour is thus encouraged, children may believe that it is all right to transgress social and moral boundaries; novels in which this occurs are then deemed

unsuitable for children. Apparently, conveying the right morals in children's books is still as important as it was in the early 1960s; the only difference between the 1960s and today is that "wrong" morals are supposedly not deserving of a place in books for children. The morals in Roald Dahl's novels, whether thus intended or not, are so-called "wrong" morals: racist characters are made into heroes, seemingly good characters are fond of swearing, and innocent characters are revealed to have cruel thoughts. Consequently, the message Dahl conveys is often a pessimistic one, rather than the optimistic one many adults allegedly prefer to see in children's books. This also adds to the transgressiveness of Dahl's novels.

In relation to transgressive humour, it can be said that the humour in Roald Dahl's books for children often goes "too far". While the jokes in Dahl's novels often transgress the same boundaries as those in adults' jokes, the "rules" for children's jokes are apparently stricter. It could be that adults believe that children still need to learn what is right and what is wrong, and that sensitive subjects should therefore be treated with seriousness until children are old enough to understand when a joke transgresses a boundary.

Interestingly, all three of the novels transgress the boundaries of what is deemed suitable material for children's books in the 1960s as well as the 1980s. None of the novels clearly stands out regarding transgressive subjects, which is somewhat surprising: as *The Witches* was written after children's book authors were subjected to more severe "rules" or guidelines on what they could and could not write, it could be expected that it would not transgress as many (especially moral) boundaries as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Twits*. There are, however, pronounced instances of sexism and misogyny in *The Witches*, making the novel just as transgressive as the other two.

Limitations and suggestions

While this study has answered an important question about the works of Roald Dahl, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all aspects of transgressiveness in Dahl's books for children. A more extensive study could take all of Dahl's works for children into account, providing a more thorough reflection of his novels. More research could also be done on how children interpret the humour and transgressiveness of Dahl's books. While there was one study that investigated this, there is still much more that could be explored in this area. Studies could also be conducted on the relationship between funniness and scariness in Roald Dahl's works, or on whether the established transgressiveness is actually harmful to children or not.

To me, reading Roald Dahl's novels today is just as enjoyable as it was when I still belonged to the intended age group. Perhaps somewhat contrary to the results of this study, I do not believe that Dahl's novels are unsuitable for or harmful to children. I think children have their own way of making sense of things they do not yet understand; they will do the same when reading about the transgressive subjects in Dahl's work.

Roald Dahl, for me, shaped the beginning of my love for books, and this was precisely because of the humour. Reading these jokes created an enjoyable feeling of tension: I somehow knew that this humour was verging on "forbidden-ness", I just did not know exactly *why* this was. Having found an answer to this question during this has not changed my opinion on Dahl's novels: a pile of his books already lies waiting to be read by my own children.

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