

THE CONCEPT OF “INFLUENCE” IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: THE CASE OF ROALD DAHL

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Resumen

Este artículo examina el concepto de ‘influencia’ que hoy en día todavía impregna una gran parte de la crítica literaria existente en la literatura infantil y juvenil. El estudio de este concepto se ejemplifica en el caso concreto de Roald Dahl. La crítica literaria de este autor aparece claramente dividida en dos posturas contrapuestas. Por un lado, encontramos a los críticos que apoyan a Dahl y defienden que la lectura de sus libros produce un efecto beneficioso en los niños y, por otro, se sitúan los críticos que objetan a su obra alegando que su lectura puede ser altamente perjudicial. En este artículo se argumenta que el debate a favor o en contra de Dahl en el que estos críticos están inmersos, y por ende, las aparentes posiciones irreconciliables que ambas partes defienden, surgen, en realidad, de los mismos supuestos, es decir, de ‘creencias’ expresadas como ‘conocimiento’. Esto significa que tanto los partidarios como los detractores de Dahl asumen tener un control y un conocimiento total sobre el niño lector que les permite predecir su reacción a la lectura, revelando de este modo, con estos supuestos, una fe inquebrantable en la literatura como vehículo de educación y socialización.

Palabras clave: influencia, crítica literaria, Roald Dahl, partidarios, detractores, creencias.

Abstract

This article examines the concept of ‘influence’ that still pervades much of children’s literature criticism today, here exemplified in the particular case of Roald Dahl. Dahl’s criticism is divided into those who support him and those who object to him on the grounds that his books may have beneficial or pernicious effects on young readers. In this article, I argue that the for-and-against debate these critics are enmeshed in, and thus the apparently irreconcilable positions both sides are upholding, actually spring from the same ‘beliefs’ expressed as ‘knowledge’. That is, both supporters and detractors of Dahl assume control and knowledge of the child which allows them to predict and determine how a child will respond and be influenced by a book, thus revealing an unquestionable faith in literature as a vehicle of education and socialization.

Key words: influence, children’s literature criticism, Roald Dahl, supporters, detractors, beliefs.



1. Introduction

Regarding the concept of “influence” Hunt has observed the following:

Of course, this is one of those obvious things that nobody ever admits. We like to think because it is easier that way – that books have a direct, linear effect on others. No doubt they have an effect – but quite what it is, is unknowable. This is why “bibliotherapy” has always been such a dubious exercise: who can say what a book does to him or herself, let alone to children. (1991: 14)

Hunt’s statement is very revealing. On the one hand, he questions the validity of claims about the effect of texts on readers while, on the other, he still maintains that some effect actually takes place (“no doubt they have an effect”), although he also acknowledges that to be more specific on this subject would be problematic (“quite what it is, is unknowable”). This quotation actually exposes the tension between the difficulty of establishing where and how a book is going to affect young readers, and the unwillingness to give up the traditional conviction that literature is an indispensable vehicle to transmit values and morals. That is, Hunt like many other children’s literature critics¹ is suspicious about statements of the actual effects of books and admits that

reading impact cannot be easily grasped or feasibly measured, while at the same time, the idea that book-reading has, in fact, side-effects is held onto. This is an attitude that springs from an unquestionable faith in the educational value of books and the belief in the key role they play in children’s cognitive and emotional development. Behind “influence” and “effect” lies the assumption that, on the one hand, children are easily manipulated and malleable, and on the other, that “good” books, like medicine, can produce a beneficial effect on children and can therefore help them heal or satisfy unconscious needs² or can act as stimulants to instil certain desired values in them. The resistance to actually question this assumption is still very strong nowadays because, ultimately, what many children’s literature critics are concerned with is whether the books they are examining are transmitting the right morals and values to children or not. Under this light, “good” books are regarded as seeds that once planted in the child’s mind (through the power of influence) will flourish and bring benefits to society and humankind in general. This is part of the liberal humanist discourse³ that prevails in much of children’s literature criticism today⁴. Giving children the right books to read, these critics are making an investment on the young readers, laying their hope for a better future world. Tucker sums up this idea when he claims that society’s desire is “to produce future generations in the mirror of its own more positive values, but without its faults” (1981: 214). The “ennobling” or “debasing” effect of literature as postulated by liberal humanism then underlies the discussion on “influence” and certainly behind the entire traditional approach to children’s literature (CL)⁵.

“Influence” is a major issue in Dahl. Most of the criticism available consists of articles that argue for or against his books. Depending on the critics’ own views of the beneficial or pernicious effects that, according to them, Dahl has on children, criticism is divided into those who support or object to Dahl. Hunt has observed the dominance of this debate but also the lack of rigour that surrounds this criticism: “It is extremely difficult to find any serious analysis or discussion of Dahl’s books for children beyond polemic for or against” (2001: 56) and complains that “what there is does not rise much above the visceral” (56). As it is, Dahl’s success and popularity⁶ has run parallel with negative criticism and diverse accusations of “tastelessness”, “racism”, “mysogynism”, “sexism”, “fascism”, “ageism”, “violence”, “vulgarity”, “sadism”, “occult overtones”, and “promotion of criminal behaviour”, among others (see Heins, 1961; Bouchard, 1972; Cameron, 1977; Itzin, 1985; Rees, 1988; Landsberg, 1988; Kjos, 1996). The criticism available takes sides feeding into this controversy, each party believing to be holding the banner of “truth” and claiming, thus, to be “right” and to have far better

“knowledge” about child readers and the impact of Dahl’s books on them than their fellow critics. However, as this article will argue, these two apparently irreconcilable positions actually depart from the same preconceptions. The disagreement originates in the critics’ arguments being based on beliefs and not on “knowledge”, as they claim. Hence, praising or condemning Dahl will depend on whether the critics’ own subjective views about “children”, “children’s literature” and the “influence” of reading coincide or not with other critics” and with Dahl’s own understanding and beliefs about “children” and “children’s literature” as constructed in his books.

2. Dahl’s supporters

Those critics who support Dahl highlight his positive values and are anxious to demonstrate that his books are “good for” children and that there is nothing harmful in them. Spanish critic Lage, for instance, traces the didactic and pedagogic aspects of Dahl’s books and sums them up as follows:

Pedagogía paterno-filial (el padre ideal), cómo contar cuentos, corriente emancipadora, elogio de la fantasía y el ingenio, rol masculino-femenino, educación de los superdotados, pedagogía no represiva, normas para escribir un buen libro infantil, crítica a defectos de la sociedad, enunciados morales. (1993: 17)⁷

Lage feels uneasy about some aspects of Dahl’s writing though: “Caza furtiva en *Danny*” [poaching in *Danny*], “pigmeos esclavizados en *Charlie*” [enslaved pygmies in *Charlie*], “tías egoístas, perezosas y crueles que maltratan a su sobrino en *James* [selfish, lazy and cruel aunts who batter their nephew in *James*] (16) but concludes that Dahl’s most positive traits have priority, because they are more abundant, over his less desirable features (“contravalores”) [countervales]⁸.

Shields and Hollindale not only stress Dahl’s educational values but also transform negative accusations into very positive attributes as well. Both critics agree that contrary to the general view that Dahl is an amoral writer, he is actually conservative and moralistic. “His own prejudices come through quite clearly” (Shields, 1998: 41), Shields points out, referring to the strong authorial presence of Dahl’s narrators. *Matilda’s*, for instance, “opines directly on issues such as parenting and education and continues his pro-literature anti-television drive” (1998: 41). For Shields, the subversion for which Dahl has been so frequently criticized works in fact to *question* not to undermine society’s institutions like family and school. It is the “unquestioning acceptance of them” (41), claims this critic, that Dahl is

concerned with, not their removal. Thus, *Matilda* “is resolved with the banishing of Miss Trunchbull but the school remains” (41). For this matter, Hollindale has noted that all orphan or neglected children in Dahl’s books find a surrogate parent. Family is a very important feature. *Matilda* ends up finding a foster-parent in her schoolteacher Miss Honey, Sophie in the *Big Friendly Giant*, the nameless narrator of *The Witches* in his grandma, and James in the peach insects. Hollindale even ventures to say that Dahl’s books are “all love stories, in their way” (1999: 143). Furthermore, Shields is of the opinion that “Roald Dahl’s perceived subversiveness is merely a mask, a strategy intended to liberate the written word in the eyes of the child from a rather respectable, confined image compared to the television. It is a means of ... stimulating an interest in reading” (1998: 41). Hollindale agrees with Shields but he goes much further; Dahl’s books are fantasies that “cause children to rethink the human being” (1999: 147). He agrees with critic Petzold that probably Dahl’s purpose was to “teach their readers not what it really means to be an adult, but how to avoid growing into the kind of adults we see around us daily” (Petzold cited in Hollindale, 148). Eventually, Hollindale ends up comparing Dahl with Jonathan Swift and affirms that “Dahl is a satirist for children” and “like most satirists he is filled with anger and disgust at the gulf between his ideal and what adult humans actually do” (148). His presumed vulgarity, bathroom humour, and depiction of physically repulsive adults are the result of taking “a magnifying glass to ordinary adult humankind” (149) disrupting the norms of size and distance to show that “human beings are not so wonderful a species as we think” (146).

Thus, these critics are showing that in opposition to what is usually proclaimed about Dahl’s books, that “they do not teach moral values” (Barlow, 1994: 22), they do contain positive messages and are, therefore, beneficial to children⁹. Whether all critics agree that it is “good” and appropriate that children should question the world and the society they are living in, and what’s more, the adults they are surrounded by, is a different story. Dahl’s detractors, as it will be seen, certainly do not find this a welcoming idea at all. Among other issues, they are concerned that the negative depiction of adults in his books may have a negative effect on young readers.

The pleasure that reading Dahl’s books may provide children with is also an argument used by his supporters to claim that Dahl’s fiction is good for them. Campbell, for instance, declares “I would expect child readers to realise instinctively that this is not the sort of book from which to learn about social attitudes, or in

which to look for models for one's own future behaviour. What one does find in it is an abundance of pleasure" (1981: 111). Dahl's humour is a value praised by these critics who defend the amusement of his books as a liberation in contrast with the didactic stance that challengers of Dahl look for. Dahl himself likes to see himself as a non-indoctrinator, an entertainer: "My only purpose in writing books for children ... is to encourage them to develop a love of books. I'm not trying to indoctrinate them in any way. I'm trying to entertain them" (cited in West, 1988: 73-74). Entertainment and pleasure, however, are not free from didacticism and ideology, as Dahl's supporters wish to suggest. Entertainment and pleasure form part of the liberal humanist vision that seeks to enlarge and ennoble people's lives. As Dahl himself puts it: "Life becomes richer if you have the whole world of books around you and I'll go to practically any length to bring this world to children" (74).

Other critics in favour of Dahl defend his work brandishing the results of questionnaires and interviews with children, claiming hence to hold the "truth" from children themselves, and, in consequence, contending to know more about young readers than other critics do. This is the "I'm-right-you're-wrong" attitude that permeates Dahl's criticism. An example is Van Renen's reader-response research on *Danny* when he concludes that: "Parents, teachers or librarians who prefer to keep Dahl away from children surely misunderstand or ignore the way in which children respond to his work" (1988:11). *Danny* has been accused of promoting criminal activities and confusing children into believing that poaching and child driving are acceptable activities because they appear in a book. The fears that children may be tempted to copy these actions or that they might see them as "right", are, according to Van Renen, falsely founded. Children's responses to questionnaires reveal to him that "they thought that poaching was wrong, but somehow this did not affect their admiration for Danny and his father" (7). This critic's reader-response work (see also his master's dissertation, 1986) is a point of reference for supporters of Dahl. West, for example, defends *George's Marvellous Medicine* from charges that it is "advocating mercy-killing for ailing members of the family" (*The Economist*, 1981: 108) by quoting Van Renen's study on the reaction of a group of school children in relation to this book: "He [Van Renen] found that "few respondents were prepared to take the situation seriously"; they felt "that the events of this fantasy would find no ready transfer to real life"" (cited in West, 1990:116). Another critic, Culley, was determined to prove with questionnaires that accusations that Dahl's vocabulary was limited and repetitive were wrong

and also that his books, in contrast with what was generally believed, encouraged children to read and even helped to improve their spelling:

As one child put it, “I would read lots more of his books because the words make me interested in the story.” An extreme example of the children’s fascination with Dahl’s use of language is furnished by the high proportion of children that spelled words like *froboscottle*, *whizzpopping* and *snozzcumber* correctly. (1991: 68)

For Dahl’s supporters, children are not powerless fiction victim readers, unable to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. They are not passive recipients that act and behave automatically to the models and attitudes depicted in the book, but are regarded as competent readers who can question and reflect on the values that are presented to them through the books. “Influence”, however, is possible and we have seen how these critics trust that Dahl’s book will affect children in a positive manner, although they do not seem to expect an immediate cause-effect reaction. In short, for these critics, Dahl is or can be a “good” writer for children, and “hopefully” readers will be positively affected by the values presented in his works.

3. Dahl’s detractors

Dahl’s detractors obviously do not agree with the aforementioned view and maintain exactly the same position his followers hold but vice versa: “They are wrong. We are right”. Children, for them, are very impressionable, extremely vulnerable creatures that need constant adult surveillance. These critics take for granted that children will immediately spot the “racism”, “ageism”, “sexism”, “criminal promotion”, “violence”, “sadism”, “vulgarity”, “misogyny”, “subversiveness”, “disrespectful portrait of adults” and “false view of life” that Dahl is supposedly cultivating in his books. The assumption is that children will inevitably reproduce these attitudes with the obvious negative consequences for the child and future society. Thus, according to this criticism, young readers will start thinking that women are evil (*The Witches*), that grumpy grandmothers should be poisoned and killed (*George’s Marvellous Medicine*), that fat children should be disliked (*Charlie*), that stealing, poaching and farting are acceptable (*Fantastic Mr Fox*, *Danny*, *The BFG*), and that bearded people are dirty and that ugly people have ugly thoughts (*The Twits*): “The adult reader, of course, won’t take such statements seriously [Mr and Mrs Twit’s physical description] ... but this is a book for relatively young children. Do we want them to think that all ugly people are evil, that all physically attractive people are virtuous?” (Rees, 1988:147).

For these critics, an eye must be kept on what children read, especially if the books in question are written in the realist mode like *Danny*. The latter are regarded as the most dangerous because, unlike fantasy, realist fiction does not include wondrous elements that supposedly help to create a distance between the book and the reader. In this sense, Dahl's fantasies are considered less worrying. Books like *Danny*, however, as maintained by Dahl's detractors, can confuse children because they will not realise that what they are reading is also fiction with its own set of conventions and, consequently, young readers will perceive everything as "real".

Dahl's opponents are most suspicious about "amusement", which they do not regard with benevolent eyes, as Dahl's supporters do, but with deep distrust. The underlying idea is that corrupting messages are transmitted to children under the disguise of the humour device. Critic Landsberg, for example, sustains this view. In a book significantly entitled *The World of Children's Books: a Guide to Choosing the Best*, she suggests that if a book is popular it must be carefully examined in case there are subliminal messages underlying the apparent harmless entertainment. As she herself puts it, "When – or perhaps especially when – an author is gigantically popular with all kinds and categories of young readers, I believe an adult should be alert to nuance, tone and symbolism that may carry a surprising undercurrent of meaning" (1988:87). About Dahl in particular she warns, "I think it is useful for adults involved with children's reading to pause and consider the possible sources of his success, and to weigh his acknowledged strengths against what I think is a disturbing subtext" (88). Barker criticises the "unsupportable distinction between textual messages and devices" (1989:109) that this position assumes. He argues that the distinction between "message" and "device" is the result of a subjective arbitrary decision based on each critic's particular views of children's literature: "Those elements we dislike, for whatever reasons, are unacceptable "messages." Those which are not part of that dislike are a disguise put over the text and a mode of entrapment" (99). Most critics, however, do not acknowledge this and are convinced that detrimental messages can be instilled unawares into the child's mind through seemingly innocent amusing texts.

Barker has also pointed out that some critics work backwards because what they do is first to take a problem externally defined and then search the books for evidence of their response to that problem (115). That is, if we want to find out why, for instance, children are getting rougher and wilder these days, the literature

available for them must be examined. Two articles where we can find this standpoint are Honan’s “Roald Dahl, Writer 74, Is Dead; Best Sellers Enchanted Children” and Itzin’s “Bewitching the Boys”. Both critics blame Dahl as the source of inspiration for misbehaviour. Both articles’ titles already stress the effect of Dahl’s power on children (“enchanted”, “bewitching”) which suggests a situation of almost helplessness on the part of the reader, a spell under which the child reader loses all self-control. Honan explains how Dahl’s *The BFG* was suspected to be responsible for the fact that a prowler had sneaked into Buckingham Palace and had then sat down on Queen Elizabeth’s bed for ten minutes before being discovered, just as it occurs in a scene of *The BFG* published soon after the incident. The suspicion that Dahl’s book had incited this man to commit such an offence forced the publishing-house to clarify matters. According to Honan,

Mr Dahl was soon absolved of responsibility when it was determined that his book had been circulated only within the publishing industry. The perpetrator of the actual break-in could not have been prompted by the book, one editor said, “unless he’s a reader for the Book-of-the-Month Club”. (1990: 3)

It should be observed that the editor’s answer does not actually dismiss the possibility of the influence of the book as the inspiration of the prowler’s actions, which comes to expose the strong hold that the idea that books can “influence” readers has in our society. Second, Honan does not seem to be aware of the irony that it is an adult who might have been persuaded by a children’s book to commit a crime, when the traditional children’s literature critical approach assumes that adults, unlike children, are not influenced (or at least not as easily influenced as children) by what they read.

One year later, with the publication of *The Witches* (1983), Itzin saw behind the crimes she read about in the newspapers the working hand of Dahl: ““Monster who hated women” ran the headline about the man who couldn’t understand why he should want to torture and kill his baby daughter, but not his baby son” (1985: 13). For Itzin, the reason is “culturally-conditioned misogyny” (13) nourished with the reading of books like *The Witches*. Lines in the book like “A witch is always a woman ... There is no such thing as a male witch” (Dahl, 1983: 9) incite children, Itzin claims, to “the hatred and abuse of women” (1985:13). This critic also saw the pernicious influence of Dahl in the gang-rape of two girls: “Two of the boys were “just” 14: they could as easily be Roald Dahl readers as watchers of video pornography and violence” (13). For Itzin,

The Witches is “dangerous material” whose publication should be “stopped” because it is perfectly clear to her that: “Monsters are made not born. Reading *The Witches* and entering the Puffin Club witch-hunting competition are part of the process ... This is how boys learn to become men who hate and harm women” (1985: 13). Itzin’s views have been refuted with the argument that she conveniently omits to mention the words that follow the famous “misogynist” line in *The Witches* that reads: “On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male” (Dahl, 1983: 9). Tracing antisocial behaviour back to the experience of reading has proved of extreme difficulty precisely because “there are so many factors operating at the same time. Peer pressure, family and community values, religious beliefs and so on – all impinge on the individual to create his or her particular value system” (Goodman Zimmet cited in Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 121). Also, as Tucker suggests, the question remains “whether such people would have acted in this way anyhow, or whether certain stimulation from outside might have been just enough to trigger them off into specific actions they might not otherwise have considered” (1981: 203). To blame the criminal atmosphere of our times on the reading of certain books is too simplistic an idea. However, censorship and control exist because the belief in the power of books to mould a child into a better or worse person is deeply rooted in our Western culture.

Conclusions

As we can see, the argument about the positive or negative influence of Dahl is based on particular notions about how children approach texts and interpret them. Some defend that Dahl is “good” for children because he is fun and harmless, and reader-response research is there to prove this contention. Others argue that Dahl is invisibly pouring dangerous messages in the children’s ears and that his books should be kept away from them. Apparently, the two sides of the debate are sustaining different positions, but actually they are all discussing the same issue. Both claim knowledge of the child. Both believe in the “power” of books to affect children, to teach “proper” values, to help them develop a pleasure in reading and to show them models and mirrors of what they should become. Both rely on the assumption that they know what is best for children and how they will respond to the text and be influenced by it. Both sides, furthermore, present their arguments as “knowledge” when actually they are expressing *beliefs* about what is best for children, what children are like and how they relate to books. That is, the core of the debate lies actually in clashing views of “children”, “children’s literature” and the “influence” of reading. The result is an inconclusive endless debate which has

its roots in the liberal humanist stance that still pervades much of CL criticism and which Dahl’s criticism exemplifies.

Notas

- ¹ See Pinset’s (1997) and Knowles & Malmjkaer (1996) studies on language and ideology in children’s literature which mirror the tension inferred in Hunt’s quotation.
- ² Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) claims that fairy tales can provide unconscious satisfied relief to children if, for example, heroes are rewarded and villains punished. According to him, a child must be offered stories with satisfying endings – “consolation”- to make them feel psychologically safe: “Consolation is the greatest service the fairy tale can offer a child: the confidence that, despite all tribulations he has to suffer, not only will he succeed, but the evil forces will be done away with and never again threaten his peace of mind” (147). See also Yu’s psychobiography article on Dahl (2008). Here the victimized fictional children of his books are regarded as projections of the self seeking ‘to sooth a traumatic memory’ (160) from Dahl’s childhood experience. In Wei’s own words (reminiscent of Bettelheim): ‘In *James and the Giant Peach* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, in using childhood experiences that involve adults, Dahl seems to transform his self into other personas who can act with a consoling intention’ (160).
- ³ For the liberal humanists led by F.R. Leavis during the 1920’s and 30s, reading literature “made you a better person” (Eagleton 30) and education was necessary “to develop a rich, organic sensibility in selected individuals here and there, who might then transmit this sensibility to others”. (29)
- ⁴ Reading promotion activities, recommended booklists, and in general the insistence that children should read books (but not just any book) reveals the faith in literature as a vehicle of education, socialisation and improvement of the child’s mind. Literacy is the crusade for these critics and educationalists. Librarian Ann Harding, for example, says: “our role in terms of modelling the skills and the enjoyment of reading, in sharing an enthusiasm, even a passion, for books is a crucial one ... Watching a child experience the full magic of books for the first time is a wonderful sight. How inspiring to know that our actions have played a crucial part in turning that child into a reader” (1998).
- ⁵ “Influence” together with “appeal”, “identification”, “memory”, and “observation” are terms traditional of the children’s literature critical framework. Unlike the most recent theoretical approaches which tend to be text-based and regard the child not on biological and developmental psychology deterministic terms but as a socio-cultural construction and, therefore, a site of complex meanings and discourses about “childhood” (see Lesnik-Oberstein 1994; Rose 1984), traditional children’s literature criticism centres around the child as reader and the child as “real”. For this kind of criticism, children *are*/ children *like* children *enjoy*. It is paradoxically a world of singulars that ignores the plural. It celebrates the “universal child” and absolute knowledge of and control over readers is assumed. Thus, it is taken for granted that since critics were once children themselves (*memory*) or because they work with them, or have children of their own (*observation*), they are in the position of claiming full understanding of their subjects. This means that they will be able to predict how children will react when reading about certain characters (*identification*), how a book will help or harm them (*influence*), or what books have the right ingredients to become successful with children (*appeal*). Selecting “good” books for the child reader is, ultimately, at the core of this approach because it is considered that, if given the appropriate suitable books to read, children will hopefully contribute to the improvement of society in the future.
- ⁶ If sales figures stand for popularity, then Roald Dahl must be one of the most popular writers in Britain. Nineteen years after his death in 1990, his books still make best selling numbers in bookshops

and keep coming up among the top ten in the lists of the most borrowed and most favourite books in libraries and national surveys. In the World Book Day Poll in spring 2000 “over 40,000 adults and children voted Roald Dahl the country’s favourite author” (*Books For Keeps* 2000:14)

- ⁷ Father-son pedagogy (the ideal father), storytelling skills, a tendency towards emancipation, a tribute to fantasy and wit, male-female roles, talented children education, non-repressive pedagogy, rules to write a good children’s book, criticism against society’s defects, moral messages (My translation).
- ⁸ In the field of education itself, the pedagogical potential of some of Dahl’s books has been explored by teachers in the curriculum of primary schools. See Ovens’ article “Coming to a sticky end” (a science-based project inspired in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), Barlow’s “A right *Charlie!*” which is an introduction to geographical concepts like keys, direction, symbols, co-ordinates and scale based on the same book, and Casas’ “¡Hello Roald!”, the account of an ambitious project carried out by fifth grade students on seven of Dahl’s children’s books. Lage and other critics have been quick to point out that Dahl is now part of the National Curriculum in Britain, a clear sign for them that he is a “safe” writer and not the “corrupting” monster his opponents suggest.
- ⁹ Two other critics in the line of Shields and Hollindale are Sarland and Van Renen. Sarland discussing the presumed subversion of Blyton and Dahl defends these authors by arguing that “within avowedly undesirable ideological frameworks, both writers develop stories that specifically challenge those very frameworks, even though they are not finally overthrown” (1983:171). Likewise, Van Renen has observed that “Revealing the uglier side of human nature and questioning some of the assumptions we take for granted cannot be “subversive”, because it is honest and not taken to extremes ... Dahl’s balance of honesty and discretion, together with his humour, make *Danny* a positive learning experience”. (1988:10).

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