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## **Utopian and Dystopian Elements in Children's Books:**

Images and Constructs of Childhood in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*  
and in *Matilda*



## Abstract

Many children's books contain utopian and/or dystopian elements. These elements can function as a means to make the reader aware of established ideas. Adults often believe in simplified constructs of childhood. These constructs are changed or criticized repeatedly in children's literature. This research focuses on the utopian and dystopian elements in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and in *Matilda* written by Roald Dahl and on how these elements contribute to the critique of simplified constructs of childhood.



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## Introduction

Elements of utopia and dystopia are present in many works of fiction. Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry write in the introduction to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* that children's books often portray a paradisiacal place that can be understood as a kind of utopia (1). A utopia is a better world than the main protagonist lives in. For children this better world can be a place where they are not marginal figures of an adult world. According to Colin Heywood, Senior Lecturer in Social History at the University of Nottingham, in the Western world children were marginalised for thousands of years (2). This marginalisation is the reason why children are perceived according to simplified constructs. In time different constructs of childhood prevail, for example the pre-Romantic construct in which children are seen as imperfect adults, and the Romantic construct in which children are ideal pure creatures. In children's literature these and other constructed images of childhood are present. Sometimes there is rebellion against them, which can take the form of a reversal of the marginal position of children. This reversal can be interpreted as an element of utopia, for in many utopias accepted ideas are criticized and shown to be wrong by reversing them.

The children's books of Roald Dahl often show this reversal. Dieter Petzold, teacher in English Literature at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg in Germany, states that Dahl sides with his child protagonists against the negatively portrayed adult characters (185). Dahl's books also deal with unjust aspects of reality. This happens in *Matilda*. Matilda is more intelligent than many adults. She is righteous and braver than her teacher. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* on the other hand the children are extremely nasty. Both books deal with simplified constructs of childhood. Roald Dahl uses stereotypes to criticize stereotyping children in real life.

The utopian and dystopian elements in *Charlie and the Chocolate* and in *Matilda* will be analysed. The focus of the research lies with the different preconceptions adults have of children and how these simplified constructs are revealed and critiqued in the two books. The research question is: how do utopian and dystopian elements contribute to the critique of simplified constructs of childhood in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda*? For those unfamiliar with these texts a summary is enclosed in the appendix.

# 1. Theoretical Framework

## 1.1 Utopia, Dystopia and Their Elements

Utopia is an imaginary secluded place better than the real world with its own rules and traditions. When the secluded place is significantly worse than the real society it is called a dystopia.

Utopia is a word and concept with multiple definitions. Through the ages the concept has changed and in different fields of study utopia has a different connotation. According to Fátima Vieira, Associate Professor at Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, utopia has two different meanings: namely it "alludes to imaginary paradisiacal places" and it is "a particular kind of narrative" (4), known as utopian literature. In utopian literature the imaginary paradisiacal place is portrayed. In this thesis both notions will be used. A utopia originates from "the desire for a better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in" (Vieira 6).

The narrative structure of utopian literature often derives from travel literature, in which people go on voyages and discover new worlds where societies are arranged differently. Utopian literature generally takes the form of the main protagonist living in a real place, going on a voyage, finding utopia, receiving a tour through utopia, and returning to the real place. The relation between utopia and reality is crucial (Vieira 8). The passage from the real world to the fictional utopia has to be gradual (Vieira 8). This gives the voyage a special function. During the crossing the protagonist and the reader are being prepared for what is coming. Slowly they enter the utopian world. Utopia reflects on the present and makes the reader reconsider his or her own society. Dystopias have the same function; both are didactic and moralistic by nature (Vieira 17). The distance between reality and fiction should not be too great, for the reader to be able to see the relation between the secluded place and reality (Vieira 8).

Place and home in general receive a special meaning in utopian literature. The boundaries of places are explored. The present society and 'home' of the protagonist is contrasted with other places, utopian or dystopian. In many political utopias the reader is addressed and inspired to commit real changes in his or her own society. In this sense the values of utopia reach beyond its textual boundaries into the reader's world. The utopia is a wish of the writer or one of the characters. This can make a utopia from earlier periods, for example the 16<sup>th</sup> century, feel dystopian to modern readers. Likewise

a modern utopia would probably feel dystopian to readers from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Children's utopias would probably feel dystopian for grown-ups. Utopia can be seen as a myth and, according to Northrop Frye, who was a professor of English at Victoria College at the University of Toronto, this myth begins "in an analysis of the present" (323). A utopia or dystopia criticises society by changing or reversing established ideas, rituals, and/or norms and this makes the reader aware of them.

The contrast between reality and utopia or dystopia is one of the utopian elements that will be used in this research. When you look at utopian literature more elements can be recognized, to be specific: the narrative structure, including the journey towards utopia and the tour through utopia, the secluded place itself and the exposure or critiquing of accepted ideas by reversing them.

Utopian and dystopian literature is not only for the politically active and highly educated person. Thinking about one's society and dreaming of a better one is a thing all people do. Clare Bradford, Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Education on the Melbourne campus of Deakin University, Australia, calls this a defining feature of humanity (2). Elements of utopian and dystopian thought and/or literature are found in many works of literature including children's books.

## 1.2 (Utopian) Children's Books

According to Hintz and Ostry many children's books present an invented secondary world with its own rules and conventions (1). With the use of elements of utopia these non-existent societies are sometimes presented as significantly better or worse than the readers own.

Utopian literature for children often shows a 'confrontation between the child and the adult world' (Hintz 1), the nature of justice is researched, and the tension between individual freedom and the needs of society is explored (Hintz 9). One major difference between utopias for adults and utopias for children is the nature of the utopia. "While many adult utopias are ideal cities, many utopias for children incorporate the myth of a childhood golden age into a pastoral utopia" (Hintz 93).

In many children's books wishes and fears of children are made real: the child is no longer a marginal figure in an adult world. The roles children and adults play in real life are often reversed in children's books. In many utopian books for children and young adults children outsmart adults and save the day. The author can cast a critical

eye on society, its citizens, values, beliefs, and rituals (Vieira 10) through the child protagonist because children perceive the world in a different way (Hintz 8). The authors of children's books are, however, adults. This, among other things, makes it a complicated and fascinating genre. Adults construct the children in children's books. Children's books are therefore often not free of simplified constructs of children. On top of that, story worlds are always made simpler than the real world. Children's books are made more simple, in order to make them easier to understand. It is also in children's books that simplified constructs of childhood are (implicitly) criticized.

### 1.3 Constructs of Childhood

Children and childhood are perceived differently through time and space. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in pre-Romantic times, children were seen as incompetent little adults and childhood was merely a preparation for adulthood (Heywood 2). Children were a part of the adult world: child labour, for example, was conventional (and in some cultures it still is). This view changed radically in the Romantic period. Children were idealized; they were creatures "blessed by God [and] childhood ... [was] a source of inspiration that would last a lifetime" (Heywood 3). The Romantic child is pure and innocent and must also be protected and cared for. According to the Romantic concept of childhood children are not yet corrupted by the adult world and can make adults understand what is significant and what is not. The Romantic Child in itself can be seen as a utopian construct (Hintz 6) made by adults. Adults often idealize their own childhood and look back with melancholy, wishing to return to that safe place full of adventures, where imagination could take you anywhere. In reality children do not always experience childhood as joyful and carefree. This idea of childhood is a cultural invention of the Western world.

The Romantics' notion that children are different from adults became a starting point for researching children and childhood. But until 1960 children were still seen as "incomplete organisms and childhood merely a preparation for adult life" (Heywood 3). Researchers looked at how "the immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and acultural child changed into a mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous adult" (Heywood 3). Children and childhood are constructed concepts (Heywood 4). Adults prejudice children based on simplified, generalised images. In reality children are more complex and less nice (Hintz 6) than the Romantic concept of children makes one

believe. The Romantic image of the mythical child “empowers and limits children” (Hintz 6). In Children’s books these simplified constructs are (implicitly) criticized by, for example, creating a child hero capable of saving the world. This, however, is again a construct, which can be called the post-Romantic construct of childhood.

In 1998 sociologist Allen Prout<sup>1</sup> came up with “a new paradigm of the sociology of children” based on six features. Three of them seem very striking, namely, first, childhood should be understood as a social construction. Children and childhood are given different meanings in different cultures. Second, childhood is only one of the variables when looking at children. Class, gender and ethnicity make every child and every childhood different. And third, “children must be seen as active, determining their own lives and the lives of those around them”. Children cannot be reduced to “passive receptacles of adult teaching” (Heywood 4). These proposed features, however, mostly reach only scientists and researchers. In everyday life children are often still stereotyped and marginalised (Heywood 4).

The pre-Romantic and Romantic constructs are examples of simplified views of children. Probably many more of such constructs exist but a lot of them can be subdivided in pre-Romantic, Romantic and post-Romantic. The different constructs of childhood seem to develop one out of the other: they are not just the reversal of a former construct. The pre-Romantic child is not much different from adults but needs to learn, the Romantic construct reveals a pure creature, different from adults but helpless, and the Post-Romantic child, created in contemporary books, is often still pure but no longer helpless: he or she can defend itself and change the (story) world. The Pre-Romantic and Romantic concepts of childhood live in the real world. The post-Romantic child emanates from these concepts and is an answer to them. This construct is present in literature and other media but not in the real world.

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) wrote his children’s books between 1943 and 1990. Many of these books are about the triumph of an underdog. This initially powerless protagonist is always a child. The world and the grown-ups are looked at from a child’s perspective and adults are often described as ugly, huge and malevolent. Dahl seems to stress the notion that there is more to children than preconceptions make one believe. The marginal position of children is challenged and implicitly critiqued. The adults are the characters with power, which they will use against the powerless children. The

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<sup>1</sup> together with Allison James and Chris Jenks



children triumph in the end, with the help of intelligence, some kind of superpower, and righteousness on their side. Dahl implicitly criticizes simplified constructs of childhood by exaggerating his characters until they are caricatured and flat.

To summarize: utopian elements in literary texts can contribute to address real life issues. Children are seen differently in different times and places. In children's literature the marginal role children play and the preconceptions adults have of children are often denounced, for example by reversing the roles children and adults fulfil in real life, enlarging the simplifications till they seem ridiculous, and contrasting different images. This thesis will argue that both *Matilda* and *Charlie the Chocolate Factory* critique simplified constructs of childhood and that the utopian and dystopian elements in these books contribute to exposing them for what they are.

## 2. Choice of Primary Texts

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*<sup>2</sup> and *Matilda* will be used in this research for different reasons. First of all, they are very different stories. The structure of many of Dahl's children's books, malevolent adults oppressing the child protagonist, but the child eventually triumphing over the adult, is present in *Matilda*. A tiny 5-year-old overpowers the grotesque Headmistress Trunchbull. According to Petzold, "in most of Dahl's children's books ... the satire is primarily directed against adults" (190). In *Charlie* the children are the main focus of the satire. They are divided in two groups. Most child-characters are extremely nasty and Charlie is the only child who is kind. The characters do not go through a major development. In *Matilda* the adult characters have certain visions of children, but the children in the story don't act according to these images. The main character develops from a little victim into the hero.

Another reason to use these books is the criticism they evoked. Although Dahl's children's books are very popular many adults decried the extreme "siding with children against adults" (Petzold 185). This "radical siding with children ... seems to undermine authority and to pander to the children's natural rebelliousness while missing the opportunity to teach them something about the complexities of real life" (Petzold 190-91).

*Charlie* is criticised because, according to parents, librarians and teachers, the story lacks sophistication and portrays life too simply. Anne Merrick says in her article on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* that the events in the story follow a linear pattern and that every bad character can be recognized by his unpleasant physique (25).

*Matilda* received criticism because "it involves a devastatingly negative picture of parents" (Petzold 185). Adults fear the book will bring out the worst in children. Children, on the other hand enjoy both books. Millions of copies have been sold of both *Matilda* and *Charlie* and they were both turned into Hollywood productions. This controversy contributes to their interest for this research. Furthermore, both stories present a very obvious utopian element: the secluded place with its own set of rules.

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<sup>2</sup> In order not to clutter up the text *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* will from now on be referred to as '*Charlie*'.

### 3. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

*Charlie* was first published in 1964 and the book became a huge success. Two Hollywood productions were based on the story and numerous plays and musicals were written about this poor boy visiting Willy Wonka's incredible Factory. The story is set in a modern society (with television sets) and at first it may seem a form of realist fiction. In the Chocolate Factory however impossible things are made, including ice cream that doesn't melt and a gum that contains a three-course meal. The book is thus classified as a fantasy story.

*Charlie* has been researched in different ways, for example in the light of multiculturalism (Mendoza). Dahl was accused of racism because the Oompa Loompas bore a resemblance to African slaves. Dahl made adjustments in the story and the Oompa Loompas now look like blonde Tarzans and Janes. *Charlie* is mentioned in the book *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. According to Hintz *Charlie*

has a claim to the title of "utopia" because of the enclosed nature of its structure (no one is ever seen coming in or out), the strictness of the workers' discipline and an emphasis on beauty in industrial life reminiscent of William Morris. (Hintz 4)

The utopian Chocolate Factory is not the only utopian element present in the book. The narrative structure of utopia and the reversal of established ideas are also present. *Charlie* has not yet been researched extensively with the help of utopian elements.

#### 3.1 Images and Constructs of Childhood

The children in *Charlie* are presented in a certain manner. They are either portrayed as nasty, an image adults fear (Merrick 26), or kind, the way parents hope a child is (Merrick 25). The nasty children are exaggerated and simplified. These caricatures show only one overemphasized character trait. The personalities of the characters are partly described by their physical appearance. Augustus Gloop, one of the nasty children and the first Golden Ticket finder, is

so enormously fat he looked as though he had been blown up with a powerful pump. Great 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. (Dahl, *Charlie* 29)

The greedy character of Augustus is described through his physique. Veruca's father says that Veruca "would lie for hours on the floor, kicking and yelling in the most disturbing way." she would scream: "*Where's my Golden Ticket! I want my Golden Ticket!*" (32). The father reacts by looking harder for the Ticket. All the nasty children show one exaggerated dominant characteristic: "Augustus Gloop - greed; Veruca Salt - spoiled tantrums; Violet Beauregarde - gum chewing; Mike Teavee - television addiction - all of which are common adult prejudices" (Merrick 26).

Charlie is just a kind and generous child, the joy of his grandparents: "He was the only bright thing in their lives, and his evening visits were something that they looked forward to all day long" (17). No details are given about his thoughts or actions apart from the fact that he is kind and generous. He wants to share his birthday present, one chocolate bar, with his six family members: 'We'll share it, I want everybody to taste it' (35). Inside the Chocolate Factory Charlie is the only child who seems to appreciate the magic and comprehend the possible danger of the Factory. As a person he does not go through a huge development though he changes from a poor boy into the heir of the biggest Chocolate Factory in the world. Charlie is not simplified till the extreme, unlike the nasty children. He is not a construct; the reader is given the freedom to make him up according to his own fantasy.

The nasty children in *Charlie* owe their nasty characters and habits to their parents. "Even though there is a certain sadistic delight in the way these children's various punishments are described, they can really be seen as victims of parental neglect and/or spoiling" (Petzold 190). The parents of Veruca Salt carry the blame for her dreadful personality.

'Who spoiled her, then? Ah, who indeed?

Who pandered to her every need?

Who turned her into such a brat?

Who are the culprits? Who did that?

Alas! You needn't look so far  
To find out who these sinners are.  
They are (and it is very sad)  
Her loving Parents, MUM and DAD.  
And that is why we're glad they fell  
Into the rubbish chute as well.' (Dahl, 1964, 105)<sup>3</sup>

The reason these children turned out to be so dreadful lies with their parents; they are to blame. The nasty children are an example of what can happen with children when bad parents raise them. The nasty children are a part of the adult world: they are constantly seen alongside their parents. They even command their parents in some scenes. Charlie on the other hand is almost never with his parents. They do not even accompany him to the Factory. He is alone or with his grandparents, listening to their stories. The grandparents are not fully part of the adult world (anymore). All they do is sleep and eat and enjoy Charlie's company, almost like little children. Though they have the memories of adult life they are now part of another world. Charlie is part of a different world than the adults.

The nasty children think the Chocolate Factory is a place of only pleasure and candy. Charlie realizes the Factory can be dangerous. Grandpa Joe and Charlie are aware of the enormity and dangers of the Factory. They also believe in the impossible-seeming inventions of Willy Wonka and the other children don't.

Then suddenly, a small bar of chocolate appeared in the middle of the screen.  
'Take it!' shouted Mr Wonka, growing more and more excited.  
'How can you take it?' asked Mike Teavee, laughing. 'It's just a picture on a television screen!'  
'Charlie Bucket!' cried Mr Wonka. 'You take it! Reach out and grab it!' (114)

And Charlie grabbed the bar out of the TV screen. Children are often associated with the capability to imagine and fantasize, more so than adults (Heywood 3). This can be a reason why Charlie, a part of the world of children, believes in many of the fantastic things Willy Wonka makes in his Factory and why he is willing to grab the chocolate bar

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<sup>3</sup> In this chapter all references to Roald Dahl's *Charlie* will be only by page number.

out of the TV, in contrast to the nasty children who seem to be members of the adult world.

### 3.2 Utopian Elements

The following utopian elements are present in the book: the structure of travel literature, the secluded place with its own set of rules, the contrast between home and utopia and the reversal of the marginal position of children.

Charlie goes on a figurative journey towards the Factory. The Chocolate Factory and its marvels are gradually introduced to Charlie and the reader. The narrator decides what to show the reader and how. Grandpa Joe tells stories about the amazing Willy Wonka and the unbelievable candy that is made in the Factory. Willy Wonka is the guide who provides the tour in utopia and explains how things work inside the Factory. He introduces the utopians, the Oompa Loompas, and how they live and work. It seems a harmonious society. After the tour Charlie returns home where now the problems of the Bucket family are solved. They are going to live in the Chocolate Factory and will never be cold and hungry again.

The Chocolate Factory is the utopia, the central secluded place in the story with its own rules and conventions. It is "a place that has affinities with [...] fairy castles and prince's palaces in its labyrinthine quality and the magical surprises to be encountered there" (Merrick 29). The Factory is defamiliarizing. It is a maze with numerous doors and rooms, most of which stay locked. The Chocolate Room is described as Arcadia or a pastoral paradise, ideal and rustic. "A general sense of harmony", an attribute given to Arcadia in children's books according to Maria Nikolajeva, Professor and Chair at the University of Cambridge (21), fills the Chocolate Room. Inside the room lies a "lovely valley". At the bottom of the valley "flowed a great brown river" made of chocolate and halfway along the river was a "tremendous waterfall" (62). "Graceful trees and bushes were growing along the riverbanks - weeping willows and alders and tall clumps of Rhododendrons with their pink and red mauve blossoms. In the meadows there were thousands of buttercups" (63). "And of course they are all eatable!" (64) Willy Wonka proclaims. This resembles the pastoral often present in children's utopias (Hintz 93). This Garden-of-Eden-like place is not just full of food, but it is all made of sugar. The Chocolate Factory is an enormous paradisiacal candy store. Everybody tries a blade of grass made out of a new kind of minty sugar, except Augustus Gloop who takes a

handful. Augustus tastes from the forbidden fruit, in the form of the chocolate river and the sense of harmony is disturbed. He is immediately punished: he falls in the river, almost drowns and is transported to the fudge room. Augustus and his parents are 'banished' from the tour and the Factory. Through songs the Oompa Loompas pronounce the values that are appreciated in the Factory and what kind of behaviour Willy Wonka and the utopians disapprove. Greed, gum chewing, TV addiction and spoilt tantrums are not accepted in the Chocolate Factory and those who show these bad habits are punished. After Mike Teavee is shrimped due to travelling by television, the Oompa Loompas sing:

'P.S. Regarding Mike Teavee,  
We very much regret that we  
Shall simply have to wait and see  
If we can get him back his height.  
But if we can't - it serves him right.' (123)

The nasty children are not able to listen to the guide. They cannot behave. They have preconceptions themselves and cannot abide by the rules of the Factory.

The contrast between the utopia and the reality of the reader is important (Vieira 8). There is a clear contrast between Charlie's home and the utopian Factory. The world in which Charlie and his family live is unfair. Even though the house is filled with kind family members and Charlie's father works hard, they are extremely poor, the house is ugly, cold, and there is not enough food. Inside the Chocolate Factory there is "enough chocolate ... to fill *every* bath in the *entire* country! And all the swimming pools as well!" (63). It is warm and beautiful inside. Justice prevails in the Chocolate Factory. Misbehaviour is punished and Charlie is rewarded. The boundary between reality and fiction is the same as the division line of utopia and the real world. In the Chocolate Factory impossible candy is made, for example a kind of drink that makes you float through the air. The world outside of the Factory seems not much different from the reality of the reader.

Another utopian element is the reversal of an accepted unjust idea, in this case the marginal position of children. Children are the ones that are invited to the Factory,

not adults, and it is a child who will become the heir of Willy Wonka, though many adults would pay a lot of money to become the owner of the Factory.

### 3.3 Critiquing of Simplified Constructs of Childhood

In *Charlie* the way children are presented, the utopian elements and some characters critique simplified constructs of childhood.

A too simple view of children in real life is carried to an absurd extreme: the nasty children become caricatures with one exaggerated character trait. This technique, *Reductio Ad Absurdum*, reveals the simplified constructs of childhood as absurd or false.

The different utopian elements contribute to criticizing constructs of childhood in the following way:

- The narrator, part of the narrative structure, provides the information that makes the simplified images stand out. He contrasts Charlie with the nasty children, which makes them even more exaggerated and stereotyped.
- The secluded place, the Chocolate Factory, has specific rules and conventions that provide an opportunity for bad behaviour and its punishment. This element helps emphasize the stereotyped images, making them easier to recognize and criticize.
- The contrast between home and utopia can be found in justice. The nasty children, who are extremely simplified, are punished inside the Chocolate Factory. This punishment can be interpreted as a critique on simplifying children.
- The reversal of the marginal position of children can be found in the fact that only children are invited to the Factory and a child becomes the heir of Willy Wonka. This element does not explicitly contribute to the critique of simplified constructs of childhood.

Apart from the images of children and the utopian elements, other aspects of the story also contribute to criticizing simplified images. Other characters criticize the nasty children. The grandparents of Charlie call Augustus "a repulsive boy" and his mother "a revolting woman" (30). Veruca is "even worse than the fat boy" according to grandma Josephine (32), and Violet is a "Beastly girl" (38). The grandparents ask themselves: "do all children behave like this nowadays – like these brats we've been hearing about?" And Mr Bucket answers, "quite a lot of them do, but not all" (40).



## 4. Matilda

*Matilda* was first published in 1988 and the book was turned into a Hollywood film in 1996. It tells the story of a remarkable, intelligent child born into a dysfunctional family and having to deal with a terrible headmistress in school. *Matilda* clearly shows a "confrontation between the child and the adult world" (Hintz 1). This book is classified as fantasy fiction due to, for example, Matilda's capability of telekinesis. *Matilda* can also be seen as a fairy tale in disguise, with "all the elements of the true fairytale," "magic," "gross violence," "retribution," "no well-rounded, three-dimensional characters," "good triumph[ing] over evil" (Petzold 186). Matilda is the gifted hero and Miss Trunchbull serves as the dragon or ogre that has to be slain. Miss Honey is a mixture of the kind helper and the princess that needs to be saved (Petzold 186). However, the story also shows realistic elements that make *Matilda* partly utopian and dystopian: the story deals with constructs of childhood that exist in the real world.

The story has been researched and criticized by feminist critics (Petzold 185) and by educators (Merrick). It has also been analysed for its apparent child-adult opposition (Hansson). *Matilda* has not yet been studied for its utopian elements and how they contribute to other aspects in the story.

### 4.1 Images and Constructs of Childhood

The adult characters in *Matilda* express prejudices about children. Two different constructs of childhood are present. Matilda's parents and Miss Trunchbull dislike children. Their behaviour towards children can be understood as a pre-Romantic view of childhood. Mrs Phelps and Miss Honey seem to believe in a more Romantic concept of children.

In *Matilda* the adults are exaggerated and simplified. They are either kind or unkind towards children. The ugliness, beauty, and names of the grown-up characters function as an echo of the values these characters believe in. Trunchbull makes you think of a truncheon and a bull and Miss Honey very obviously alludes to sweetness and to a nickname like sweetheart or darling. The cruel characters that dislike children have an unfortunate appearance. Mrs and Mr Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull all have unpleasant looks. Mrs Wormwood was

a large women whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out. (Dahl, *Matilda* 27)<sup>4</sup>

Mr Wormwood always wore loud checked suits with bright coloured bowties and pants. He was a “small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache” (23). He deals in stolen car-parts. Miss Trunchbull, the Headmistress, is exaggerated to the point of being grotesque. Her physique and her actions are unbelievably frightening.

She was above all a most formidable female. ... Looking at her you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. Her face, I’m afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. (83)

These adults think children are unintelligent and good for nothing. “The parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away” (10). According to Mr Wormwood “small girls should be seen and not heard” (11). In the Wormwood house children are marginalised. Thomas van der Walt, author of *Change and Renewal in Children’s literature*, states that “a key theme in Dahl’s novels is the use of violence and cruelty by authority on the weak. Dahl generally depicts at least one authority in each story as incredibly cruel, sadistic and bigoted” (133). In *Matilda* this incredibly cruel character is Miss Trunchbull. The Headmistress of Crunchem Hall Primary School is a “gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike”(67). She thinks girls are “nasty dirty things” and says “glad I never was one” (86). Miss Trunchbull distances herself from children on the one hand, but on the other hand sees them as little adults. When Miss Honey tells Miss Trunchbull Matilda can already read, the Headmistress replies: “so can I” (88). She sees children as stupid, obnoxious little creatures.

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<sup>4</sup> In this chapter all references to Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* will be only by page number.

Miss Honey on the other hand is a lovely character, described as an angel. "She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown" (66). Her physique is compared to a porcelain figure, so fragile and beautiful.

She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders. Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss Honey's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to class. (67)

Miss Honey understands children and believes they need to be protected, according to the Romantic concept of children (Heywood 5).

The librarian, Mrs Phelps, is a minor character in *Matilda*. She is one of the two adults who are likable in the story. She helps Matilda choose famous adult books and though she is astonished by the small child's capability, she doesn't meddle and lets Matilda read as much as she wants.

Miss Trunchbull sees childhood as merely a deplorable phase before turning into an adult, much like the pre-Romantic concept of children (Heywood 2). Childhood should be as short as possible. "I cannot for the life of me see why children have to take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose," Miss Trunchbull says (151). In the Wormwood household the children are expected to do what the adults do. The whole family has to watch TV shows. There is no record in the book of toys or children playing. Mr and Mrs Wormwood decide what the children do. This traps the children in the adult world. Matilda escapes this world by reading. According to Miss Honey on the other hand childhood is a delicate phase in which children dream and fantasize most of the time. When Matilda tries to tell Miss Honey she is gifted with telekinesis Miss Honey thinks it is extraordinary "how often small children have flights of fancy like this" (173).

In *Matilda* the children are not portrayed in a simplified way. The physique of the children is not related to their character or behaviour. They come in different sizes. Matilda, and especially her friend Lavender are extremely small. Bruce Bogtrotter is described as "decidedly large" (118), but despite his bigness he becomes a kind of hero. The same goes for one of the senior girls, Hortensia, who looks like a giant to Matilda and Lavender. Hortensia has a huge boil on her nose, but even this blemish becomes "a

badge of courage” (108) when Matilda and Lavender hear what she did to Miss Trunchbull. The children don’t fit the images the adult characters have. Children are much more complicated (Heywood 4). The pupils of Chrunchem Hall are kind but also mischievous. They play tricks with Miss Trunchbull. Hortensia once put itching powder in one of Trunchbull’s sports knickers. The tiny child Lavender puts a newt in the water of the Headmistress. Instead of, according to the Romantic concept of children, adults protecting vulnerable children (Heywood 3), the children in *Matilda* protect and defend themselves.

Matilda defamiliarizes the reader. She is an extraordinary character. She is very young and small and extremely intelligent. She is not particularly sweet or kind. She does not behave like other children. “Most children in Matilda’s place would have burst into floods of tears. She didn’t do this” (41). She has attributes that belong to an adult. She can sympathise with other characters, interprets Miss Honey’s feelings and does not show off. “You are so much wiser than your years” Miss Honey says to Matilda. “Although you look like a child, you are not really a child at all because your mind and your power of reasoning seem to be fully grown-up. So I suppose we might call you a grown-up child, if you see what I mean” (195). Though an extreme example, Matilda can be interpreted as an illustration of how complicated children actually are. She comes up with a method of survival. Every time one of her parents mistreats her, she punishes them. After Mr Wormwood shredded one of her library books “Matilda’s wonderful subtle mind was already at work devising yet another suitable punishment for the poisonous parent.” (410). Matilda is courageous and defends herself. She even “takes charge” (208) of Miss Honey’s problems. Matilda’s teacher, though she is an adult, is not able to take life into her own hands and fix her problems. Jenny Hansson states in her bachelor thesis on child-adult dichotomy that Miss Honey is described as a childish adult: she is a victim who needs to be saved (19). The adults in *Matilda* often behave like children. They are mean, bully small children, do not take responsibility for their actions, and are unfair. Even Miss Honey is helpless when she is too scared to face Miss Trunchbull and demand back what is hers. Matilda is a grown-up child and the adult characters are child grown-ups.

## 4.2 Utopian Elements

Certain utopian and dystopian elements are present in *Matilda*, to be specific: part of the narrative structure, the secluded place, the contrast between home and utopia/dystopia and the reversal of the marginal position of children.

The narrative structure of utopian literature does not play a large part in *Matilda*. However, the narrator can be interpreted as the guide through the secluded place and the story world. He introduces the characters. He tells the reader about Mr and Mrs Wormwood and how they look and act. He explains how things work in the Wormwood house and at Crunchem Hall. In the story itself Miss Honey and Hortensia introduce Miss Trunchbull to Matilda and the reader. These characters show Matilda and the reader how things work inside the dystopian school and how to behave in a manner that does not upset the Trunchbull. It is the narrator who tells the reader what an extraordinary child Matilda is. She does not behave at all according to the expectations of Miss Trunchbull, Mr and Mrs Wormwood, and Miss Honey. The narrator is all knowing. He shows the reader the ideas the different adults have of children, which he does not share. The narrator describes how the child characters really are. He filters what is happening and what he tells the reader and how.

A utopia and a dystopia are both present. Crunchem Hall Primary School, which sounds like “crunch them”, is a secluded place and is truly a dystopia for every child. The rules of society do not apply in this school. Headmistress Trunchbull rules and nobody can stop her from hurting the children. Miss Honey’s classroom is a place where Matilda is recognized, has friends and is able to learn. The classroom, however, is still a part of Crunchem Hall and Miss Trunchbull can come in whenever she wants. It is not a safe place. Matilda’s house is also a secluded place where her parents make the rules and the laws of society seem to be absent. When her parents forget to send Matilda to school at the right age, no child supporter comes. Everyone in the house has to behave according to the bidding of Mr Wormwood.

Miss Honey’s cottage is described as a house belonging in a pastoral poem. Even the name, ‘cottage’, alludes to a rural world with shepherds and sheep. It is a kind of utopia, which contrasts with the hectic house of Matilda. As already noticed utopias for children often take the form of the pastoral (Hintz 93) where life is “simple, rural or rustic” (Nikolajeva 21). The journey towards the cottage is a gradual one from hectic to secluded and pastoral. Matilda and the reader are being prepared for what is coming

(Vieira 8). To go to the cottage you have to go up a “narrow country road where there where no people anymore and very few motor-cars” (177). When Miss Honey and Matilda walk to the cottage they name the plants and flowers they see. To get into the garden where Miss Honey’s cottage is hidden, you have to open a gate. The cottage

seemed so unreal and remote and fantastic and so totally away from this earth. It was like an illustration in Grimm or Hans Andersen. It was the house where the poor woodcutter lived with Hansel and Gretel and where Red Riding Hood’s grandmother lived and it was also the house of The Seven Dwarfs and The Three Bears and all the rest of them. It was straight out of a fairy-tale. (186)

Matilda experiences Miss Honey’s cottage as utopia not only because it has attributes of the pastoral, something completely different from her own house, but also because the cottage seems to come right out of the books she has read. The cottage is her personal utopia, though there is no furniture and no food.

The utopia and dystopia are not only places in *Matilda*. The characters in the story have a major influence on how much better or worse the secluded places feel. Through the values the characters express utopia and dystopia are intensified. The dystopian atmosphere of Matilda’s house is made worse by the presence of Mr and Mrs Wormwood. The atmosphere at Crunchem Hall is intensified by the presence of Miss Trunchbull. The preconceptions of childhood these characters have are connected to the notion of a bad world. Miss Honey, on the other hand, is connected to utopia.

Miss Honey’s cottage is a much nicer place than Matilda’s home even though there is nothing in it. The thing that Miss Honey’s cottage has that lacks in Matilda’s home is good company. The contrast of home and Crunchem Hall is not that big because they are both bad places. The boundary between reality and fiction is the same as the boundary between Matilda’s house on the one hand and Crunchem Hall and Miss Honey’s cottage on the other. Though Matilda’s parents are extremely unkind it could still be realistic. In Crunchem Hall truly unbelievable things happen, including Miss Trunchbull bullying the children to a point that is extreme and Matilda’s ability to move objects with her mind. This boundary or tension between ‘reality’ and utopia or dystopia is important (Vieira 8).

The marginal position of children is reversed. Matilda punishes the adults in order to teach them something about right and wrong, something adults often do to children in real life. Towards the end of the story Matilda fixes Miss Honey's problems and saves the school from the Trunchbull.

### 4.3 Critiquing of Simplified Constructs of Childhood

Different aspects of *Matilda* contribute to criticizing the simplified constructs of childhood, to be specific: the way the adult and child characters are presented, the utopian and dystopian elements and the fact that characters with different views of childhood do not get along.

The adults in *Matilda* have simplified and enlarged preconceptions about children. The children in the book do not act in a way that conforms to these preconceptions, which makes the reader question them. What's more, the adult characters are exaggerated and their views of children are extremely simplified. This also makes the constructs of childhood stand out more, and makes them easier to recognize.

The utopian elements present in *Matilda* contribute to the criticizing of constructs of childhood in the following manner:

- The narrator tells and shows the reader that the children are different from what the adult characters believe.
- The secluded places offer a clear backdrop for the stereotyped and exaggerated characters to come forward. Utopia or dystopia is a simpler world in itself, which makes the simplified images the adults have of children more visible. Crunchem Hall Primary School is a place that does not fall under normal legislation. Miss Trunchbull can do horrible things to children without ever receiving complaints from parents. Mr and Mrs Wormwood have the same power. The fact that these characters can do as they please without any consequences make the school and the Wormwood residence truly secluded places and it makes the characters and their actions stand out more. In *Matilda* utopia and dystopia are not only places. The adult characters, through their values, can make a place feel more dystopian or utopian. By relating Miss Trunchbull to dystopia the images of children she has are criticized. This does not happen to the construct of childhood

Miss Honey believes in because she is related to utopia. For that reason this element only contributes to criticize constructs of childhood to a certain extent.

- The contrast of home and utopia and dystopia does not explicitly contribute to criticizing constructs of childhood. The contrast of home and utopia does make the reader aware of the fact that nice people, like Miss Honey, also can have simplified ideas (about childhood).
- The marginal position of children is the generally accepted unjust idea that is reversed in *Matilda*. This reversal makes the reader aware of this preconception and shows that the constructs of childhood do not cover the complexity of children.

The simplified images are not only exposed with the help of the utopian and dystopian elements. In the story there is a clash between the characters that believe in different images of childhood. Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull do not get along. The same goes for Miss Honey and Mr and Mrs Wormwood. They simply do not understand each other. This gap between the characters and their views on children contrasts the simplified constructs with one another.



## 5. Comparative Analysis

*Matilda* and *Charlie* are two very different stories. In *Charlie* constructs of childhood are criticized by exaggerating the simplification of (the nasty) children. In *Matilda* simplified constructs are criticized by on the one hand exaggerating the adult characters that have these visions of children and on the other hand showing that the child characters are more complicated than these visions. Roald Dahl makes his child characters heroes, but this does not mean that they can be understood as nothing more than post-Romantic constructs. Charlie becomes the hero in the story by just being himself and doing nothing special: he is an ordinary boy. Matilda on the other hand is an extraordinary child, but she is so different that she can hardly be interpreted as acting according to a certain construct: she is much more complex.

In both stories, more or less, the same utopian elements are present. These elements contribute differently to the critiquing of simplified constructs. In *Matilda* utopia and dystopia are also the result of expressions of values of certain characters. The narrator is interpreted as a utopian element in the sense that he accompanies the main protagonist and the reader to utopia or dystopia: he is part of the narrative structure. In both books he introduces and explains the story world and the secluded place to the reader. In *Matilda* he shows the reader how complex the child characters are, which contributes to showing the simplified ideas the adult characters have of children are incorrect. The narrator in *Charlie* does not explicitly contribute to exposing or criticizing constructs of childhood.

The most important utopian element is the secluded place. In both *Matilda* and *Charlie* the utopia or dystopia serves as a backdrop for the stereotyped characters to come to fully exaggerated expression, which makes them more recognizable for the reader. In the Chocolate Factory the constructs of childhood are also criticized because the children who are portrayed in a simplified way are punished.

The contrast of home and utopia in *Charlie* contributes to the critiquing of childhood concepts in much the same way as the secluded place does. By presenting the Chocolate Factory as a place where justice prevails, unlike the home world of the characters, the nasty simplified characters are punished, which criticizes them and at the same time simplified constructs of childhood in general. In *Matilda* this utopian element does not explicitly criticize simplified visions of childhood.

The reversal of the marginal position of children reveals this position children have in real life. This marginalisation can be seen as a part of constructs of childhood. In *Matilda* this reversal shows children are more complex and capable than the simplified ideas make one believe. In *Charlie* this element does not explicitly criticize constructs of childhood.

## 6. Conclusion

In *Charlie*, the image of children critiques the simplified construct of childhood through ridiculous exaggerations. In *Matilda* the adult characters who have simplified visions of childhood are exaggerated in the extreme and the children do not act like the images the adult characters have of them: they are much more complex.

The research question, how do utopian and dystopian elements contribute to the critique of simplified constructs of childhood in *Charlie* and *Matilda*, has yielded two answers: on the one hand the utopian and dystopian elements make the reader aware of the existence of simplified constructs of childhood and their inaccuracy: they serve as a backdrop or stage that make the simplified constructs stand out clearly. On the other hand the utopian and dystopian elements explicitly critique constructs of childhood by punishing the children who represent them (*Charlie*) and connecting the simplified image with dystopia (*Matilda*).

### 6.1 Further Research

This discourse on utopian and dystopian elements, images of children, and critique of simplified constructs of childhood is one possible interpretation of *Charlie* and *Matilda*. This subject could be researched further. Other subjects surfacing during this research are: what do children perceive as a utopia or dystopia? How do the preconceptions of the author function in children's literature? One must not forget that, although the main protagonist is a child in many children's books, it is an adult who creates these child-characters.

### 6.2 Reflection

In researching utopian and dystopian elements in children's books it has become clear that these elements can be used to expose the simplified, inaccurate constructs of childhood present in children's literature. Because utopias are often about showing the reader what is wrong with his or her present society it seems logical to use utopian elements to research something that is wrong or inaccurate in this society: to be specific, the simplified constructs of childhood. This research should function as an inspiration for others to research (children's) literature for their use of constructs of childhood. This

subject could also receive attention in secondary schools, for example, for debating. Students need to be made aware of constructed viewpoints of children and age groups in general. People are often not aware of the preconceptions they have of others, and how inaccurate these assumptions are.

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## Appendix

### 1. Summary of *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*

Charlie Bucket is a little boy who lives with his parents and four grandparents in a small house. They are so poor they don't have enough to eat. The biggest Chocolate Factory in the world is situated in their town. Grandpa Joe tells Charlie stories about the Factory and the amazing chocolatier Willy Wonka. The Chocolate Factory is a mysterious place: no workers are ever seen going in or coming out of that place.

One day Charlie hears Willy Wonka has hidden five Golden Tickets in five ordinary Wonkabars. The five children who find the Tickets are invited to the Factory for a whole day. The first four children are extremely unkind and spoiled. Charlie finds the last Golden Ticket. On the big day the children may bring their parents to accompany them. Grandpa Joe goes with Charlie.

The Factory and Willy Wonka are extraordinary. During the tour, one by one, each child misbehaves, is punished and led out of the Factory, except Charlie. When Charlie is the only one left, Wonka congratulates him and names him his heir. The entire Bucket family will live inside the Factory; they will never be hungry again. When Willy Wonka can no longer run the Factory, little Charlie will take over.

### 2. Summary of *Matilda*

Matilda Wormwood is an extraordinary child. She can already read when she is 3 years old and visits the library every day because her parents leave her alone all day with nothing to do. Mr and Mrs Wormwood do not even notice what a gifted child Matilda is and they mistreat and neglect her. Matilda comes up with a way of survival. Whenever one of her parents mistreats her she punishes them. This way Mr Wormwood's hat is glued to his head and his hair is turned platinum blonde.

Matilda starts school later than the other children because her parents forgot to make the proper arrangements in time. She is enrolled in Crunchem Hall Primary School where the Headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, is a malevolent monster who hates little children. Matilda's teacher on the other hand, Miss Honey, is very kind. Matilda is allowed to work on advanced material when the other children in the first form learn to spell.

Matilda finds out she is able to move objects with her eyes. She makes a glass of water with a newt in it tip over on the bosom of Miss Trunchbull.

Matilda learns Miss Honey is the niece of Miss Trunchbull and that the evil Headmistress has taken her house and her money. Matilda determines to help her teacher. The next time Miss Trunchbull teaches the first form Matilda, during class, writes a message for Miss Trunchbull on the blackboard with her magic power. She makes it look like a note from the dead father of Miss Honey, demanding that Miss Trunchbull give back the money and the house. This scares Miss Trunchbull into giving back everything and she leaves town. Miss Honey becomes the new Headmistress of Crunchem Hall Primary School. Matilda often visits her in her lovely house.

In the meantime it is discovered that Mr Wormwood is dealing in stolen car parts. The Wormwood family flees to Spain and leaves Matilda with Miss Honey. Miss Honey adopts her and they now form a happy family.