

# The narrative voice in Roald Dahl's children's and adult books

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## ABSTRACT

This article contends that Roald Dahl does not write separately and distinctly for children and adults and that differences respond mostly to the varied emphasis placed on the features that make up his books. The narrative voice that appears both in his adult and children's books suggest continuity rather than a split in his oeuvre. My examination shows that dissimilarities between his adult and children narrators amount to the different stress he places on the features that conform to the narrative voice he constructs. Thus, depending on the way Dahl understands 'children's literature' or 'adult books' to be, he will put more or less emphasis on these particular narrative aspects.

**Key words:** Roald Dahl, children's literature, short stories for adults, narrative voice, continuity, gradation.

## La voz narrativa de Roald Dahl en los libros para niños y adultos

### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las características de la voz del narrador en los libros para niños y para adultos de Roald Dahl. Se demuestra cómo en estos dos campos literarios aparentemente dispares, hay una serie de elementos comunes que sugieren una gradación en el énfasis que el autor pone en los aspectos particulares que caracterizan al narrador. Esta diferencia de énfasis responde a la concepción que tiene el autor de 'literatura infantil' y 'literatura para adultos'. Si bien la crítica insiste en presentar a Dahl como un autor con dos cabezas, defendemos aquí una continuidad a lo largo de su obra y no una ruptura cuando se trata de escribir para lectores de distintas edades.

**Palabras clave:** Roald Dahl, literatura infantil, relatos para adultos, voz del narrador, continuidad, gradación.

## La voix narrative de Roald Dahl dans les livres pour enfants et adultes

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les caractéristiques de la voix du narrateur dans les livres pour enfants et pour adultes de Roald Dahl. On démontre comment dans ces deux domaines littéraires

apparemment différents, il y a des éléments communs qui suggèrent une gradation dans l'emphase que l'auteur fait dans les aspects qui caractérisent le narrateur. Cette différence d'emphase répond aux idées que l'auteur a sur 'la littérature de jeunesse' et 'la littérature pour adultes'. Si la critique littéraire insiste sur la classification de Dahl comme un auteur à deux têtes, on défend ici une continuité tout au long de son œuvre et pas une rupture quand il s'agit d'écrire pour des lecteurs de différents âges.

**Mots-clés:** Roald Dahl, littérature de jeunesse, littérature pour adultes, narrateur, continuité, gradation.

**SUMARIO :** Introduction. 1. The narrative voice in Dahl's children's books. 2. The narrative voice in Dahl's short stories. 2.1 First person narrators. 2.2 Third person narrators. 3. Conclusion. 4. References

## INTRODUCTION

British author Roald Dahl (1916-1990) wrote successfully both for children and adults. He first became known for his collections of macabre short stories for adults (*Kiss Kiss* [1959]; *Someone Like You* [1954]). Then he went on to write for children becoming a best-selling writer with titles such as *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The Witches* (1983) and *Matilda* (1988). The general tendency in literary criticism has been to study Dahl's works in separate compartments as if he was a two-headed author writing distinctly for different audiences with no literary, thematic or stylistic links between the two. In consequence, and as critic Mark West has pointed out, 'major divisions in Dahl's writing career have led to similar divisions in the criticism of his works' (1992:ix). Furthermore, critics have found it difficult to reconcile the idea that these children's and adult books are the products of the same mind: 'jag tycker det är svårt att greppa Roald Dahl som både författare av barnböcker och skräckhistorier för vuxna' (FRANSSON, 1987:9)<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Alastair Campbell has affirmed that 'There is in fact very little that one can safely say about his work as a whole' (1981:108) adding that Dahl is 'certainly one of the more difficult authors to categorise' (108). This last claim is also shared by West who begins his critical study on Dahl asserting that 'Roald Dahl is a difficult author to label ... he achieved tremendous success both as an author of adult stories and as an author of children's books' (1992:ix). This ability to publish indistinctively and successfully (in terms of sales figures) for children and adults seems to create problems because it is generally assumed that children's literature and adult literature use different writing codes and are therefore, completely different. Rarely there have been

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<sup>1</sup> I find it difficult to comprehend Roald Dahl as both the author of children's books and horror stories for adults. (My translation).

attempts to draw bridges between Dahl's two presumed distinct writing fields. As a consequence, the author is presented like a Dr Jekyll and Hyde figure who displays his dark side to adults in his short stories and his light side to children in his children's books. West notes this when he says 'Nichols, for example, called the adult's Dahl "bitter" and the child's Dahl "sweet"' (1992:1). The overall impression is that critics do not seem to know how to best approach an author who publishes indistinctly for two supposedly different audiences.

I would like to suggest a gradation in Dahl's work. I am going to contend that Dahl does not write separately and distinctly for children and adults and that differences respond mostly to the varied emphasis placed on the features that make up his books. To support my contention, I am going to analyse the narrative voice that appears both in his adult and children's books and suggest continuity rather than a split in his oeuvre. My examination shows that dissimilarities between his adult and children narrators amount to the different stress he places on the features that conform to the narrative voice he constructs. Thus, depending on the way Dahl understands 'children's literature' or 'adult books' to be, he will put more or less emphasis on these narrative aspects.

## 1. THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN DAHL'S CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The narrative voice is a very important element in Dahl's children's books. Be it either a first-person or a third-person omniscient narrator, they all share in various degrees the following features: they are intrusive, all-knowing and overtly in control of the narrative. The implied reader is frequently addressed with questions, pieces of advice and instructions, thus demanding the reader's attention and participation in the story. These children's literature narrators are not neutral but take sides and often make comments about the events narrated and characters depicted, expressing freely their opinions. What follows is an exploration of these characteristics.

Dahl's narrators tend to be intrusive. In *Matilda*, for example, this is especially visible in the first chapter. It begins with an observation about parents:

It's a funny thing about mothers and fathers. Even when their own child is the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine, they still think that he or she is wonderful (1988/1989:7).

And two pages later, he<sup>2</sup> continues:

It is bad enough when parents treat *ordinary* children as though they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is *extraordinary*, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant (10).

The narrator tends to be highly critical and not only has he got his own views but he also shares them with the implied reader. In Dahl's children's books, narrators always express their ideological position. They show themselves in favour or against certain attitudes and habits. In the example above, it is the excess or lack of parental care that meets the narrator's disapproval. These narrators act as witnesses and judges of character and behaviour. They have already formed an opinion of the story and, therefore, what the reader gets is a story filtered through them. This means that readers cannot decide for themselves. The narrator tells us who the 'good' and the 'bad' characters are and which attitudes and habits should be 'applauded' or 'condemned.' Positive and negative adjectives and linguistic devices such as irony inform the reader of the narrator's ideological position in the story. He never stays neutral.

In *Matilda*, it is easy to identify the narrator's particular preferences and objections. In the two quotations above, the 'I' of the narrator creates ideas of 'good' and 'bad' parenting and establishes contrasts between 'disgusting'/'ordinary' children and 'extraordinary'/'sensitive' children. Also, the use of irony is revealing about the narrator's views. Three paragraphs below, in this same introduction to *Matilda*, the narrator imagines the kind of end-of-term reports he would write to the children of doting parents if he was a school-teacher:

It is a curious truth that grasshoppers have their hearing-organs in the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Vanessa, judging by what she's learnt this term, has no hearing-organs at all (8).

Fiona has the same glacial beauty as an iceberg, but unlike the iceberg she has absolutely nothing below the surface (9).

Later on, criticizing the lack of Matilda's parents' interest in literature, he says: 'At the age of *four*, she [Matilda] could read fast and well and she naturally began hankering after books. The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called *Easy Cooking* belonging to her mother' (11). TV dinners at

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the masculine third-person singular to refer to the narrator is neutral. It is not my intention to establish an identification between the author and the narrative voice which would create many theoretical problems.

Matilda's served in floppy metal containers and Mrs Wormwood's obsession with bingo also deserve an ironic comment on the narrator's part: 'It seemed that bingo afternoons left her so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal' (55). The characters of Matilda and Mr and Mrs Wormwood are created in opposition to doted-upon 'children' and doting 'parents'. She is a 'brilliant and sensitive' child but with a mother and father who are 'both so gormless and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter' (10). It is easy to appreciate where the narrator's sympathies lie. Dahl's narrators are always establishing contrasts: book reading vs. TV watching, 'good' parents vs. 'bad' parents, 'good' children vs. 'bad' children. And the narrator always sides with the victim.

In *James*, an opposition is established between the boy protagonist to whom qualifiers such as 'poor' and 'little' are attached and his aunts who are described as 'two ghastly hags ... really horrible people. They were selfish and lazy and cruel' (1961/1996:12/7). In *The Twits*, contrasts are established in similar terms. Mr and Mrs Twit are described negatively in terms of ugliness and dirtiness: 'What I am trying to tell you is that Mr Twit was a foul and smelly old man. He was also an extremely horrid old man as you will find in a moment' (283). The narrator even gives details of Mr Twit's beard to enhance his negative character: 'The whole of his face except for his forehead, his eyes and his nose, was covered with thick hair. The stuff even sprouted in revolting tufts out of his nostrils and ear-holes' (1980/1999:280). All sympathy goes to the victimized monkeys that the Twits keep caged and also to the birds that Mr and Mrs Twit catch to make bird pie ('poor things', 310). The Roly-Poly Bird, who helps the monkeys escape, is described by the narrator with positive qualifiers: 'a truly magnificent bird' with 'marvellous coloured feathers' (319). Moreover, the narrator excuses the four kids who trespass the Twits' private property and climb up their tree on the basis that they did it 'just for fun' and 'There's nothing wrong with that' (312). He is partial, as it can be appreciated.

One of the children's books where the narrator is perhaps most visible is *Revolting Rhymes* (1982), a collection of retellings of popular fairy tales in rhyming couplets. In 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', in particular, the story is told from the point of view of the bears who in this version appear as victims of the girl's actions. This is because the narrator disagrees with the original unravelling of 'this wicked little tale' (1982/1984:29). He regards Goldilocks as 'a brazen little crook' (29), a 'little toad' (30), a 'nosey thieving little louse' (30), a 'delinquent little tot' (30) and 'a revolting little clown' (33) who should be punished for the crimes she commits at The Three Bears' House: 'Had I a chance I wouldn't fail to clap young Goldilocks in jail', the narrator claims. In the original story the girl 'gets off scot-free' (34) but the narrator has his reasons to think that this shouldn't be so. To make the reader understand and empathize with the bears' cause he poses questions, trying to put the reader in the animals' shoes:

I say again, how *would* you feel  
 If you had made this lovely meal  
 And some delinquent little tot  
 Broke in and gobbled up the lot? ...  
 I say once more, what *would* you think  
 If all this horrid dirt and stink  
 Was smeared upon your eiderdown  
 By this revolting little clown? (30/33)

The narrator cross-examines the readers and makes them participate and reflect on the events. The repetition of the same question and the deictic 'you' help the narrator to bring his point across to the reader. It is interesting to observe how the narrator's power and control of the story plays such a major role that he can alter the story's ending to his own liking. This feature applies to the rest of the fairy tale stories in *Revolting Rhymes*, where unexpected endings occur.

Going back to *The Twits*, the narrator opens the book speculating about bearded men and how they manage to keep their faces clean. Again, excess, as in *Matilda* with doting or careless parents, is disapproved of by the narrator who finds too much hair on the face not to his liking. His observations are, as in 'Goldilocks', made up mostly of questions to draw the readers' attention and get them involved in the debate:

When the very hairy ones wash their faces, it must be as big a job as when you and I wash the hair on our heads. So what I want to know is this. How often do all these hairy-faced men wash their faces? And do they shampoo it? Do they use a hair-dryer? Do they rub hair-tonic in to stop their faces from going bald? ... I don't know. But next time you see a man with a hairy face (which will probably be as soon as you step out on to the street) maybe you will look at him more closely and start wondering about some of these things (1980/1999:279).

The narrator creates a contrast of positive and negative attitudes between hairy and non hairy-faced men and he is careful to distance himself from the first group and to invite the reader (presumably a child) to agree with him. He establishes a bonding and a complicity using deictic formulas and a casual familiar tone to draw the reader's sympathies: 'you and I', 'you will start', 'as you step out', 'you see'. In this way, the narrator tends to assume that the reader's views are his own too. Similar examples that can be found in other children's books are:

One would have expected her to look surprised, as you and I would have done... (*The BFG*, 1982/1996:166).

Had this been you or me,  
We would have jumped up instantly  
(‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’, 1989/1990:48).

To you and me there is not much difference between one tortoise and another  
(*Esio Trot*, 1990/1999:238).

Once the complicity with the reader is established, the narrator entrusts the implied reader with privileged information. The knowledge of Dahl’s narrators is always superior to the reader’s but they are happy to share it:

I am going to tell you about it as best I can ... I shall now tell you what those things were (*The Magic Finger*, 1968/2001:1/9).

Why would that happen? I’ll tell you why (*The Twits*, 1980/1999:284)

I guess you think you know this story  
You don’t. The real one’s much more gory.  
The phoney one, the one you know,  
Was cooked up years and years ago,  
And made to sound all soft and sappy  
Just to keep the children happy. (‘Cinderella’, 1982/1984:5)

The readers’ views and reactions are often taken into consideration. The narrator makes guesses at what readers might be thinking. For example, how they would react if they met Matilda or Danny’s father in *Danny, the Champion of the World*<sup>3</sup>:

You would have thought she was a perfectly normal 5’5 year old child ... This is a sensible and quiet little girl, you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or maths, you would have never known the extent of her brain-power (*Matilda* 1988/1989:325).

You might think, if you didn’t know him well, that he was a stern and serious man (*Danny* 1975/2001:9)

The narrator also gives pieces of advice to the reader. In reference to Miss Trunchbull, for example, the narrator stresses that: ‘Thank goodness we don’t meet many people like her ... If you ever do, you should behave as if you met an enraged

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, *Danny*.

rhinoceros out in the bush' (1988/1989:291). In *The Witches*, the whole first chapter is a series of recommendations and precautions that the implied reader should adopt to avoid being tricked by the apparent ordinary appearance of witches:

Even when you know all the secrets (you will hear about those in a minute), you can still never be quite sure whether it is a witch you are gazing at or just a kind lady ... They all look like nice ladies ... For all you know, a witch might be living next door to you right now ... But there *are* a number of little signals you can look out for, little quirky habits that all witches have in common, and if you know these ... then you might just possibly manage to escape from being squelched before you are very much older (1983/1985:11).

Besides giving pieces of advice to the readers, Dahl's narrators also tend to emphasize a point or clarify issues for them:

As I said, he was a very very shy man (*Esio Trot*, 1990/1999:220)

I repeat that he was not aware of what he was doing ... He would subconsciously pick out the most significant word in the sentence and reverse it. By that I mean he would automatically spell the words backwards (*The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*, 1991/1992:17).

Sometimes the narrator uses brackets to make particular observations and provide further details mostly related to the violence, ugliness and eating habits of the villains. Examples can be found in *The Twits*:

But if you looked closely (not that you'd ever want to) you would see tiny little specks of dried-up scrambled eggs stuck to the hairs. ... If you looked closer still (hold your noses, ladies and gentlemen), if you peered deep into the moustachy bristles sticking out over his upper lip (1980/1999:282/283).

Further examples can be found in *Dirty Beasts*:

These French go even more agog  
If someone offers them a FROG!  
(You'd better fetch a basin quick  
In case you're going to be sick)  
(‘The Toad and the Snail’, 1823/1984:25)

Also, in ‘Snow-White’:

“I trust you killed her nice and slow.”  
Then (this is the disgusting part)  
The Queen sat down and ate the heart!



(I only hope she cooked it well.  
Boiled heart can be as tough as hell)  
(1982/1984:24).

The interaction between the narrator and the illustrations in Dahl's children's books is probably the most extreme example of the narrator demanding participation from the reader. Instances of this can be found in *Charlie*<sup>4</sup>, *The Twits*, *George's Marvellous Medicine*<sup>5</sup> and *Fantastic Mr Fox*<sup>6</sup>. Here words and illustrations interact as in a picture-book. The text refers directly to the picture in question so that the reader has to take both text and illustration into account to reach an overall interpretation. For example, the opening chapter of *Charlie* reads:

[Illustration of grandparents in bed] These two very old people are the father and mother of Mr Bucket ... [Illustration of grandparents in bed] And *these* two very old people are the father and mother of Mrs Bucket ... [Illustration of parents] This is Mr Bucket. This is Mrs Bucket ... [Illustration of Charlie] This is Charlie ... [Illustration of a wooden house] The whole of this family – the six grown-ups (count them) and little Charlie Bucket – live together in a small wooden house (19964/1985:11-15).

The introduction to *Charlie* is written in an unusual way, in present tense, with the narrator acting as host, introducing us to the characters as if he was showing us a photographic album. The reader is invited to contrast picture and text and also to join in counting the grown-ups. Thus, the implied reader (presumably a child) can try his/her counting skills. In *The Twits*, *George* and *Mr Fox*, something similar occurs. The reader is invited to draw his/her own conclusions by 'reading' the pictures. This strategy of using pictures interactively is mainly employed when it comes to describing the visual aspect of a character or a place. Thus in *Mr Fox*, the narrator instead of describing the hill where Mr Fox and his family live, gives the reader a 'snapshot' instead: 'In the beginning, the hill looked like this [Illustration]. After about an hour, as the machines bit away more and more soil from the hilltop, it looked like this: [Illustration]' (1970/1988:36-37). In *George*, the effect that his marvellous medicine produces on the animals of his father's farm is conveyed in illustrations rather than with words:

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* will be referred to as *Charlie*. References to the sequel, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, will be referred to as *Charlie II*.

<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, *George*.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, *Mr Fox*.

George gave each of them some medicine, and this is what happened... [Illustration of black bullocks] Then the sheep... [Illustration] He gave some to his grey pony, Jack Frost [Illustration]. And finally, just for fun, he gave some to Alma, the nanny-goat... [Illustration] (1981/1982:71-74).

But probably one of the best examples is in *The Twits*. Mr and Mrs Twit are not only introduced with illustrations but also with questions and comments put to the reader asking for confirmation of the narrator's views. These comments already predispose the reader against the characters. Mrs Twit's picture matches the following lines: 'Take a look at her. Have you ever seen a woman with an uglier face than that? I doubt it' (1980/1999:284). Similarly, the Twits' house illustration reads: 'Here is a picture of Mr and Mrs Twit's house and garden. Some house! It looks like a prison. And not a window anywhere ... And what do you think of that ghastly garden?' (308). As it can be appreciated, the narrator demands participation and corroboration of his viewpoint.

It should be noted that the implied reader the narrator is addressing in these books is overtly marked as a child. There are many instances that support this argument. In *Charlie*, for example, the narrator presupposes that the implied child reader, being a 'child', *naturally* loves chocolate and sweets. Therefore, the narrator assumes that the reader will empathize with Charlie's situation. Charlie's family is so poor that all they can afford eating is potato soup and cabbage. The narrator gives details of how Charlie is slowly starving and how much he is suffering because: 'I haven't told you about the one awful thing that tortured little Charlie, the lover of chocolate ... It was the most terrible torturing thing you could imagine ... within *sight* of the house in which Charlie lived, there was an ENORMOUS CHOCOLATE FACTORY!' (1964/1985:18). A natural cause and effect relationship is established between Charlie (the fictional child), the implied child reader and chocolate, here highlighted in capital letters. Children and chocolate are presented as a natural correlation, as part of the essence of childhood, and implied child readers are invited hence to 'suffer' with Charlie. On other occasions, the narrator refers overtly to the implied child reader by mentioning, for example, the 'natural' environment children are supposed to move around in, school in particular: 'She [a witch] might even be – 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' (*The Witches*, 1983/1985:10). The physical growth of children, also mentioned, works as a signpost that it is children the narrator is addressing: 'You yourself, for example, are actually growing taller everyday that goes by, but you wouldn't think it, would you? It's happening so slowly you can't even notice it from one week to the next' (*The Twits*, 1980/1999:295). Also in *Danny*, the end of the story is followed by a postscript that reads: 'A MESSAGE to Children Who Have Read This Book. When you grow up and have children of your own do

please remember something important. A stodgy parent is *no fun at all*. What a child wants *and deserves* is a parent who is SPARKY' (1975/2001:215).

Assuming an implied child reader in the book leads the narrator to adopt a patronizing attitude. He possesses superior knowledge and expects the reader not to know why certain things occur or the meaning of specific words that the narrator considers too 'difficult' for a child reader to understand. Hence, explanations are provided accordingly. For instance, when James and the insects are crossing the Atlantic Ocean pulled by seagulls, they discover that the bottom of the giant peach where they are travelling is hardly damaged at all despite the sharks' attacks it has suffered. It is then that the narrator indicates:

A shark, you see, has an extremely long sharp nose, and its mouth is set very awkwardly underneath its face and a long way back. This makes it more or less impossible for it to set its teeth into a vast smooth curving surface such as the side of a peach (1961/1996:92).

Similarly, in *Esio Trot*, when the word 'hibernating' appears, the narrator clarifies: 'the tortoise would crawl in there and bury himself deep under the hay and go to sleep for months on end without food or water. This is called hibernating' (1990/1999:225).

The narrator in control of the narrative decides like a film director where to point the camera. He shows what he wants the readers to see. Thus, he chooses what to tell us, what to keep to himself and when to disclose certain information. He is in charge of the pace and rhythm of the story. These narratives are peppered with comments such as:

Now we come to a certain bright morning ... But enough of that. He must get on with the job (*Esio Trot*, 226/241).

But that's enough of that. We can't go on for ever watching these two disgusting people doing disgusting things to each other. We must get ahead with the story (*The Twits*, 1980/1999:308).

The expressions used to change the direction of the narrative are similar. The reader is taken by the hand of the narrator acting as a guide, showing the way.

## 2. THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN DAHL'S ADULT SHORT STORIES

In *Someone Like You* (1954) and *Kiss Kiss* (1959), his two adult collections of short stories, the third-person omniscient narrator predominates. This is the case of 'Parson's Pleasure', 'The Great Automatic Grammatizator', 'Mrs Bixby and the

Colonel's Coat', 'Royal Jelly', 'Edward The Conqueror', 'Genesis and Catastrophe', 'Pig', 'The Soldier', 'Skin', 'The Wish', 'The Sound Machine', 'William and Mary', 'The Landlady', 'Lamb to the Slaughter', 'Dip in the Pool', 'Skin', and 'The Way Up To Heaven'. There is also an important number of stories told in first person. These are 'Man From the South', 'Taste', 'My Lady Dove, My Love', 'Gallopig Foxley', 'Poison', 'Neck', 'Nunc Dimittis', 'Georgy Porgy' and 'The Champion of the World'.

## 2.1. First person narrators

Starting with the first-person narrators, it must be pointed out that their level of intrusion in these stories varies. Some first-person narrators are merely eyewitnesses to the story; they keep to the background reporting what is happening without taking part in the action. This is what happens 'Taste', 'Poison', 'Neck' and 'Man from the South'. The events are filtered through an observant narrator who remains detached from the development of events, hardly intervening and letting the characters speak for themselves very often in what Hunt calls 'direct free thought' (1991:115):

"I'm not joking," Richard Pratt said.  
 "It's ridiculous," Mike said. He was off balance again now.  
 "You said you'd bet anything I liked."  
 "I meant money."  
 "You didn't *say* money."  
 "That's what I meant."  
 "Then, it's a pity you didn't say it. But anyway, if you wish to go back on your offer, that's quite all right with me."  
 "It's not a question of going back on my offer, old man. It's a no-bet anyway, because you can't match the stake. You yourself don't happen to have a daughter to put up against mine in case you lose. And if you had, I wouldn't want to marry her."  
 "I'm glad of that, dear," his wife said.  
 ('Taste', 1954/1970:14-15).

Direct speech creates the illusion that the narrator is absent and has relinquished control. The lack of tagged speech-acts ('his wife said') and the narrator's comments leaves quite a lot of room for reader deduction about the character of Richard Pratt and Mike and the nature of their relationship. These first-person eyewitnesses would be omniscient narrators were it not because the observations they make are introduced by an 'I' which reminds the reader that they are actually a character in the story. Their role as mere spectators and onlookers of the unravelling events can be appreciated in the static actions they are associated with. Hence, 'Taste' and 'Man from the South' are full of: 'I saw', 'I noticed', 'I could

see', 'I felt sure', 'I was conscious of', 'I thought', 'I stood watching them', 'I had the feeling'.

However, not all first person narrators in these short stories are eyewitnesses. There are also those narrators who are protagonists of their own story and in that case the intrusion tends to be more overt. They address the implied reader, making comments aside and seeking for the reader's support and understanding. It is in instances like these that the narrative voice is reminiscent of the narrators in Dahl's children's books. Lionel in 'Nunc Dimittis', for example, writes down his own story in a confessional tone, ashamed of his behaviour towards a friend. As he puts it: 'My idea –and I believe it was a good one– was to try, by a process of confession and analysis, to discover a reason or at any rate a justification for my outrageous behaviour towards Janet de Pelagia' (1954/1970:167). Lionel needs somebody to sympathize with him and looks at the reader for support: 'an imaginary and sympathetic listener, a kind of mythical *you*, someone gentle and understanding to whom I might tell unashamedly every detail of this unfortunate episode' (167). Similarly, the narrator in 'My Lady Dove, My Love' seeks to justify himself in front of the reader in what regards his hen-pecked attitude towards his wife:

Mind you, I don't want to give the impression that I do not love her- I worship the very air she breathes - or that I can't manage her, or that I am not the captain of my ship ... You must remember that I am a man who is built rather small, and a gesture like this, when used to excess by a person like my wife, is apt to intimidate. I sometimes find it difficult to convince myself that she is not an overbearing woman (59).

These first-person narrators and protagonists seek most of all understanding from the reader. They try to make readers see their point of view, their reasons for acting in a particular way. In this sample, the narrator and protagonist clearly tries to win the reader's sympathies.

The narrator's comments between brackets, so common in Dahl's children's books, are reduced in number in the short stories so that it is rather rare to find the narrators adding an extra touch. Nevertheless, if this occurs, it tends to be the first person narrator rather than the third who places emphasis on a particular point that he finds significant. For example in 'Neck', when Sir Turton, the rich heir of a paper business, finally marries after being pursued by many women, the narrator says: 'You can imagine that the London ladies were indignant, and naturally they started disseminating a vast amount of fruity gossip about the new Lady Turton ('That dirty little poacher,' they called her)' (134). In 'Gallop Foxley', William Perkins remembers his caning days at school when he thinks he recognizes his old school torturer in his train compartment companion. Suddenly the details of the pain come back: 'The stroke itself is merely a loud crack and a sort of blunt thud against your backside, numbing you completely (I'm told a bullet wound does the same)' (94).

In Dahl's other adult books, his collection of stories *Over To You* (1946) and *Switch Bitch* (1974) and his novel *My Uncle Oswald* (1979), the first person narrator predominates. In *Over To You*, a collection of flying stories set in World War II, the stories explore the psychological state of the fighter pilots before and after flying a mission. The first-person narrative voice is, therefore, a choice that brings the experience of war closer to the reader so that he/she will presumably get into and share the pilots' feelings, anguish and fears. In other instances, like in 'An African Story', the 'I' voice helps to make the story more convincing. This is a technique that also appears in *My Uncle Oswald* and in 'Bitch' and 'The Visitor' in *Switch Bitch*. These last three stories in particular are introduced by the protagonist's nephew following the Chinese box device. Thus, Oswald's adventures are presented as extracts selected by the nephew from his uncle's private diaries to create the illusion that the events narrated are 'true'. The Chinese box structure is taken to the extreme in 'The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar'.

Perhaps it is the narrator's voice in *My Uncle Oswald* that most closely resembles the narrative voice in the children's books. The narrator's overt control of the story deciding what to include or leave, echoes the intrusive third person narrator of the children's stories. The sex scenes between Yasmin and the great artists, for example, are skipped over by the narrator, either because he does not wish to offer details: 'I am not a voyeur ... I had not intention of peeping through the window at Yasmin and Puccini ... I walked away' (1979/1980,164), or because Yasmin herself, Oswald reports, refuses to give him any details: '... although I longed for salacious details, Yasmin remained mute' (137). At some points the narrator guesses that the reader might find some parts of the story 'boring' (157): 'At this point in my narrative, just as I was about to describe our trip to Switzerland to find Nijinski, my pen suddenly came away from the paper and I found myself hesitating. Was I not perhaps getting into a rut? Becoming repetitious?' (157). This thought decides Oswald to speed up the narrative and offer summaries of what happened in the following weeks without giving much details. Furthermore, Oswald addresses the reader very frequently either demanding attention or clarifying issues: 'Listen carefully and you'll see what I mean' (1979/1980:9); 'And that, my friends, is almost exactly what happened' (203); 'Girton, in case you don't know it, was and still is a ladies' college' (89). He also makes guesses about the reader's reactions, just as it happens in the children's books: 'But a bit of a dirty trick, some of you may be thinking?' (195); 'I may seem, to a reader of these diaries, like a pretty casual sort of fellow ... but I promise you that when my own most important interests are at stake I am capable of some concentrated thinking' (76). Also, the narrator overtly acknowledges that he is digressing, as we have seen happening in *The Twits* or *Esio Trot*: 'I keep digressing. I must get on' (19), 'I have wandered again. I must get back to my story' (38), 'I promised at the beginning of this diary to tell you how I became a wealthy man. I have taken a long time to tell you how I did not succeed' (203). Chapter Eight, in particular, is a long digression

on food and anecdotes that have nothing to do with the main line of the story. This is because Oswald is a gourmet who indulges in the description of meals and wine and likes commenting how much he enjoys or dislikes the meal he is having. As we can see, many of the narrative strategies employed in Dahl's children's books appear in *My Uncle Oswald* too.

## 2.2. Third-person narrators

Dahl's third-person omniscient narrators are characterized for their restraint. The third-person narrator stays 'invisible' as much as possible so that side comments or direct addresses to the reader are extremely rare. In general, it is only the first person narrator who openly addresses the reader, mostly looking for sympathy and support.

In the introductory paragraphs of 'Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat', we can find one those rare instances where the omniscient narrator overtly addresses the reader. He introduces the story as something that may serve of consolation to the cuckolded male reader, a story where tables are turned and the betrayed husband gets his own back: 'It is extremely popular with twice- or thrice-bitten males in search of solace, and if you are one of them, and if you haven't heard it before, you may enjoy the way it comes out' (1959/1985:87). The narrator asserts that the story of Mrs Bixby 'has the merit of being true' and not just another of 'those wishful-thinking dreamworld inventions' (87) that disappointed husbands swap in bars and clubs for comfort.

Similarly, the omniscient narrator in 'The Way Up To Heaven' confides to the reader his opinion that it is not very clear that Mr Foster acted the way he did towards his wife on purpose. Mrs Foster had 'an almost pathological fear of missing a train, a plane, a boat ... It was really extraordinary how in certain people a simple apprehension about a thing like catching a train can grow into a serious obsession' (47). Mr Foster seems to enjoy making his wife wait unnecessarily, but the narrator has his reservations:

Mind you, it is by no means certain that this is what he did, yet whenever they were to go somewhere, his timing was so accurate –just a minute or two late, you understand– and his manner so bland that it was hard to believe he wasn't purposely inflicting a nasty private little torture (47).

Sometimes the third-person omniscient narrator disappears to let a character in the story speak directly to the reader. This device is especially employed when the story includes some fantastic element. I have already mentioned 'The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar', 'An African Story' and the Oswald stories where the first person voice of the character helps to make the bizarre seem convincing. This is also what happens in 'William and Mary'; it begins and ends with an omniscient narrator which at a

certain point in the story becomes replaced by the voice of William. This character leaves a long letter addressed to his wife (which the readers also read) explaining with all kinds of details the experiment he has agreed on.

I would like to emphasize (I am now including both first and third person narrative stories) that unlike in the children's stories, where the implied reader is usually overtly constructed as a child, in these adult short stories (except perhaps in 'The Way Up to Heaven') the implied reader appears to be an undefined sexless ageless addressee. Also, it is important to bring to notice that in Dahl's adult books there is no flattery of the kind 'You and I', where the narrator overtly tries to establish complicity with the reader. That patronizing conspiratorial attitude of the narrator, showing himself superior in knowledge, is here transformed into a need to share his story with a sympathetic reader instead, as we have seen. These narrators sometimes anticipate the reader's thoughts, as in the children's books, but this happens more rarely and it serves them to justify their actions or to reflect on them:

You may think that perhaps I forced the invitation a bit, but I couldn't have got it any other way ... No doubt you think that I should never have started bargaining with the butler in the first place, and perhaps you are right ('Neck' 1954/1970:136/139);

A curious way to behave, you may say, for a man such as me; to which I would answer – no, not really, if you consider the circumstances ('Nunc Dimittis', 178).

Something which differs widely from the children's books is that often the reader knows more than the narrator and protagonist. At the end of 'Nunc Dimittis', for instance, the narrator and protagonist does not know why he is feeling suddenly ill after eating a couple of spoonfuls of caviar sent to him by Janet de Pelagia, the woman he has embarrassed in front of all of his friends. She has sent him a jar of caviar with a note saying she forgives him and still considers him a friend: 'It is even possible that I took a shade too much, because I haven't been feeling any too chipper this last hour or so. ... You know – now I come to think of it, I really do feel rather ill all of a sudden' (189). Similarly, at the end of 'Georgy Porgy', the vicar insists that he is in 'the primary section of the duodenal loop, just before it begins to run vertically downward in front of the right kidney' (153). Though the word 'psychiatric' or 'doctors' is never mentioned, this is where the vicar actually is, but this is left to the reader to guess:

... they all wear white coats, and they bustle around pretending to be very busy and important ... But there is one oldish man - he comes in to see me every morning after breakfast - ... I imagine he is lonely because he likes nothing better than to sit quietly in my room and listen to me talk (154).



Likewise, in ‘Parson’s Pleasure’, the reader’s knowledge is superior at the end of the story. Mr Boggis, an antique dealer disguised as parson, cheats three ignorant farmers buying a commode worth millions for almost nothing. Once they make a deal, the protagonist goes to fetch his car, but the three farmers at the last minute decide to cut off the legs of the commode because Boggis has assured them that all he is interested in are the legs. The last lines read:

‘I’ll tell you one thing,’ he [one of the farmers] said, straightening up, wiping his brow. ‘That was a bloody good carpenter put this job together and I don’t care what the parson says.’  
 ‘We’re just in time!’ Rummins called out. ‘Here he comes!’ (85).

The twist in the tail is a very Dahlian feature in his adult short stories. The reader participates in the unravelling of the events with endings that always turn to be unexpected. The closest that this twist in the tail strategy comes in the children’s books is in his modern fairy tale versions of *Revolting Rhymes* and *Rhyme Stew*. However, the narrator’s intrusion and control of the narrative in the children’s books as well as the overt acknowledgment of superior knowledge over the reader creates a significant difference with these adult tales of the unexpected.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored the narrative voice in Dahl’s books for children and for adults pointing at common features and dissimilarities. The analysis has revealed that the narrator’s voice tends to be much more visible and intruding in Dahl’s books for children than in his adult short stories. In the former, we find an authoritative, all-knowing voice who predisposes the reader for or against certain characters and attitudes. This voice frequently addresses the readers and tries to establish a bonding with them, demanding their attention and participation in the story. In Dahl’s adult work, however, the level of intrusion of the narrative voice varies. It moves from an overt and intrusive narrator on the line of the voice in the children’s books, to a first-person narrator seeking not the readers’ active participation but their sympathy and understanding, to an omniscient third-person narrator who remains detached from the scene as mere eyewitness. There is a gradation, therefore, in the prominence and intrusion of the narrative voice throughout Dahl’s oeuvre but it is in the children’s stories where the narrator becomes most visible. The analysis seems to thus support the idea that there is continuity between Dahl’s adult and children’s narrators and that this author should not be regarded as a two-headed writer writing separately and differently for children and adults. Gradation is what eventually defines his books for children or for adults, as Dahl understands them to be.

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Roald Dahl wrote stories for adults, too, and they offer the same pleasures as his children's books, David L. Ulin writes. "Roald Dahl's stories for adults are vivid and funny, and worth more of our attention—not least for what they share with the author's other work. Photograph by cbs photo archive / getty. I first encountered the work of Roald Dahl in third grade, by playing a character in a classroom adaptation of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." Not long after that, I read "James and the Giant Peach." I was not a child who particularly cared for children's literature, but even as an eight- or nine-year-old I was captivated by the way Dahl's fantasies took on their own logic, their own momentum, and were dri