



REALISM AND FANTASY IN ROALD DAHL'S CHILDREN'S FICTION

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Abstract. This article examines Roald Dahl's children's fiction, which is distinctive because its fantastical elements are often closely intertwined with the everyday experiences of childhood. His novels contain giants, magical powers, impossible inventions and strange transformations, but they also deal with poverty, neglect, bullying, loneliness, inequality and the unequal distribution of power between adults and children. This article examines the relationship between these two dimensions in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The BFG* (1982), and *Matilda* (1988). Using qualitative close reading, the article considers characterisation, setting, conflict and plot in order to show how realistic situations prepare the ground for fantastic events. The analysis suggests that Dahl does not use fantasy simply to help children escape from reality. Instead, the fantastic often grows out of a realistic difficulty and changes the child's position within that difficulty. In *Matilda*, telekinesis gives visible form to a child's resistance to oppressive authority; in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Wonka's extraordinary factory turns character flaws into memorable consequences; and in *The BFG*, the world of giants and dreams allows a vulnerable orphan to become an active participant in solving a serious threat. Fantasy therefore works together with realism to make emotional experiences and social conflicts easier to recognise, imagine and remember.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, children's literature, realism, fantasy, childhood, child agency, moral values, narrative technique.

Introduction. Roald Dahl is often remembered for the sheer strangeness of his stories. His books contain enormous chocolate factories, friendly giants, children with supernatural abilities, unusual creatures and adults who seem to belong to another world. Yet the worlds in which these things happen are not completely detached from everyday life. Dahl's children still have families, schools, teachers, rules and fears. They experience problems that young readers can recognise even when the circumstances are exaggerated. This mixture is one of the main reasons his fiction remains distinctive.

The three novels considered here - *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG* and *Matilda* - show this mixture particularly well. Charlie is a poor boy whose life changes when

he enters Willy Wonka's extraordinary factory. Sophie is an orphan whose loneliness and fear lead her into the world of the BFG. Matilda is an exceptionally intelligent girl who is ignored by her family and intimidated by an abusive headmistress before discovering that she possesses a supernatural ability. In each case, the fantastic becomes meaningful because the reader has already been given a reason to care about the child's situation. The earlier version of this research mainly separated the realistic and fantastic elements in the three novels. That distinction is useful as a starting point, but it does not fully explain Dahl's technique. A poor family is clearly realistic, while a chocolate river is clearly fantastic; however, the more interesting question is why Dahl puts them together. What does the chocolate river mean because Charlie comes from a family that can barely afford food? Why does Matilda's supernatural power appear after a long period of frustration and injustice? Why is the BFG important to Sophie not simply because he is a giant, but because she begins the story as a child who has very little control over her own life?

These questions are also relevant to scholarship on children's literature. Nikolajeva (2005) argues for analysing children's fiction through its genre, characters, composition, narration and relationship with the reader. Such an approach makes it possible to see realism and fantasy not merely as labels, but as parts of a larger narrative structure. Mendlesohn (2008) likewise draws attention to the ways fantasy is introduced and communicated to readers. Dahl often moves from the familiar to the impossible without requiring a completely separate fantasy world. The effect is that the fantastic feels surprising while remaining connected to the emotional reality of the child protagonist.

Studies focused specifically on Dahl also support this direction. Pope and Round (2015), in their research on children's responses to Matilda, show that young readers can admire Dahl's child heroes because they resist adult authority rather than simply accepting it. Hassan and Jassim (2023) examine the combination of realism and magical elements in Matilda in relation to child abuse, while Hissan (2012) discusses the moral qualities of the children in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. These studies suggest that fantasy in Dahl is closely connected with questions of power, morality and childhood experience. The central argument of this article is therefore that realism and fantasy in Dahl's fiction should be understood as interacting rather than separate modes. Realism establishes the emotional or social problem; fantasy then changes the range of possible responses to it. Sometimes it gives a child agency, sometimes it exaggerates a moral weakness, and sometimes it makes fear or vulnerability easier to represent. The fantastic does not replace reality. It gives reality another language.

Realism and fantasy are often treated as opposites. Realist fiction generally works with recognisable people, places and social relationships, while fantasy allows events that cannot be explained by the ordinary rules of the physical world. In children's literature, however, the boundary between them is often flexible. A story can present an ordinary family problem and then introduce an impossible event without abandoning the social world established at the beginning. This is particularly important in Dahl's fiction. His stories do not normally ask readers to forget the real world. Instead, they take familiar experiences and make them larger.

A cruel teacher becomes almost monstrous; an ordinary chocolate factory becomes an impossible landscape; a child's feeling of helplessness becomes a supernatural ability. The exaggeration is part of Dahl's humour, but it also carries meaning.

The term magical realism has sometimes been used in discussions of Matilda. Hassan and Jassim (2023), for example, argue that Dahl places magical events inside a recognisable social environment and connects them with the protagonist's confrontation with abuse. The present article does not classify all three novels as magical realism because *The BFG* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* construct much more openly fantastic worlds. The broader term fantasy is more appropriate for the whole corpus. What matters here is not the label itself but the way the impossible is connected to the possible. Dahl's treatment of adult authority is also important. His children often occupy a weak position in ordinary social terms. They cannot simply leave home, dismiss a teacher or change the rules of an institution. This creates a tension that fantasy can temporarily transform. The child may not have institutional power, but the story can give the child another kind of power. In this sense, fantasy becomes closely connected with agency.

At the same time, Dahl does not suggest that magical powers automatically make his children admirable. Charlie is important because of his choices, not because he possesses magic. Sophie's contribution to *The BFG* depends heavily on her intelligence and courage. Matilda is already intellectually strong before she discovers telekinesis. Fantasy enlarges qualities that are already present rather than creating character from nothing.

Methodology. The research uses qualitative textual analysis and close reading. The corpus consists of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The BFG* (1982), and *Matilda* (1988). These novels were selected because each presents a vulnerable child in a recognisable social situation and then introduces a distinctive form of fantasy.

The analysis focuses on four closely related aspects: the child's social position, the realistic conflict, the fantastic event or setting, and the change that follows the introduction of the fantastic. Attention is also given to characterisation and moral development. Rather than counting fantastic elements, the study asks what they do in the narrative and why they matter at the point where they appear.

Results. *Matilda* offers perhaps the clearest example of the relationship between realistic conflict and fantastic intervention. At the beginning of the novel, Matilda is a very young child living in a family that does not appreciate her abilities. Her father is dismissive of books and education, while her mother shows little interest in her intellectual development. At school, the situation becomes even more difficult because Miss Trunchbull rules through fear and physical intimidation.

Dahl exaggerates these adults, so the novel cannot be called realistic in a strict documentary sense. Nevertheless, the emotions behind the situations are recognisable. A child can understand what it means to be ignored, underestimated or treated unfairly by an adult. The realism of *Matilda* therefore comes less from ordinary probability than from the social and emotional experience at the centre of the story. Matilda's love of reading is

significant before the supernatural events begin. Books give her access to knowledge and imagination while her family tries to keep her within a narrow understanding of what a child should be. She already possesses an internal freedom that her social environment does not recognise. Her later supernatural ability can be read as a continuation of this tension: her mind and will are larger than the role assigned to her.

The turning point comes during the newt incident. Miss Trunchbull wrongly blames Matilda, and Matilda becomes intensely angry. Dahl emphasises the difference in physical power between the child and the adult. He writes that it is ‘not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up’ (Dahl, 1988). This moment is important because the realistic imbalance of power comes immediately before Matilda discovers that she can move objects with her mind. The telekinetic event therefore feels connected to the emotional pressure that has been building throughout the novel. It is not simply a magical gift inserted into the story for entertainment. Matilda’s anger has reached a point at which the narrative gives it physical force. Hassan and Jassim (2023) similarly connect the fantastic intervention in Matilda with the protagonist’s experience of abuse and unjust treatment.

After discovering her ability, Matilda does not immediately become all-powerful. She experiments with it and learns to control it. This detail makes the fantasy more closely related to her intellectual development. Just as she teaches herself to read and think independently, she learns to understand and control her new ability. Magic is therefore connected with effort and self-knowledge.

The final confrontation with Miss Trunchbull gives the ability its strongest social meaning. Matilda uses the supernatural to intervene in an injustice that affects Miss Honey as well as herself. The message on the blackboard is particularly significant because it reverses the normal direction of authority. For much of the novel, adults speak and children are expected to listen. At this moment, a child speaks in a way that the adult cannot ignore. What makes Matilda convincing as a character is that her supernatural power does not replace her other strengths. She remains intelligent, observant, curious and morally aware. Fantasy gives these qualities a new reach. It turns an internal capacity for resistance into something that can act on the outside world.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory begins with economic hardship. Charlie lives with his parents and four grandparents in a small house, and food is often scarce. Chocolate is not an everyday luxury for him. This background becomes important when the story introduces the Golden Ticket and the world of Willy Wonka.

The Golden Ticket is a simple but effective bridge between the realistic and fantastic sides of the novel. It is an ordinary object connected with a commercial product, yet it gives Charlie access to a place that seems to operate outside ordinary physical laws. Because Charlie is poor, his entry into this world has a different emotional meaning from that of the other children. Inside the factory, fantasy becomes much more visible. Chocolate rivers, edible landscapes, extraordinary machines and impossible inventions create a world in which

almost anything seems possible. Yet the factory is not simply a playground. It also functions as a place where the children’s existing behaviour is exposed.

Augustus Gloop is greedy, Veruca Salt is demanding, Violet Beauregarde is obsessed with winning, and Mike Teavee is fascinated by television. Their traits are not created by the factory; the factory exaggerates them. Greed becomes an encounter with a chocolate river, entitlement becomes a confrontation with Wonka’s rules, and obsession becomes a source of danger. The fantastic environment turns personality into plot. This is why the factory can be understood as a kind of moral testing ground. Wonka does not give the children long lectures about how they should behave. Instead, he allows their actions to produce consequences. The consequences are comic and impossible, but the underlying idea is familiar: behaviour has results.

Wonka’s description of the child he wants at the end of the visit makes this purpose clear. He says that he wants ‘a good sensible loving child’ to whom he can entrust his secrets (Dahl, 1964). Charlie’s eventual success is therefore linked to his patience, humility and ability to resist temptation. Charlie’s poverty also creates an important contrast with the factory’s abundance. At home, the family worries about having enough food; inside the factory, food appears to be unlimited. Yet the children who have the greatest access to material things are not necessarily the happiest or most admirable. Dahl does not simply say that poverty makes a person good or wealth makes a person bad. Rather, he places different social backgrounds inside the same fantastic environment and lets the characters reveal themselves through their choices.

The fantasy is therefore doing more than entertaining the reader. It makes moral differences visible. A realistic story could tell readers that greed or selfishness has consequences, but Dahl turns those consequences into unforgettable scenes. The absurdity makes the lesson less like a classroom rule and more like an experience.

The BFG begins with Sophie, an orphan who lives in a children’s home. Her situation establishes a sense of vulnerability before the giant appears. She is alone, young and awake at night, so the sight of a huge figure outside her window naturally seems frightening. The fantastic element is therefore introduced through an emotional situation that is immediately understandable. Dahl then plays with the reader’s expectations. The BFG is enormous, but he is not the monster Sophie expects. Other giants are dangerous, while the BFG is gentle and protective. Physical size is separated from moral character. The story uses fantasy to question an assumption that seems obvious: that the largest and strongest person must also be the most powerful. The world of dreams makes this contrast even stronger. The BFG catches dreams and describes them as ‘little wispy-misty bubbles’ (Dahl, 1982). The image is impossible in a literal sense, but it gives a physical form to something that is normally invisible. Dreams can be caught, carried and used to help sleeping people. Dahl turns an abstract experience into something concrete and imaginative.

Sophie’s development is also important. At first, she is mainly trying to survive a frightening situation. Gradually, however, she becomes active. She asks questions, thinks

about possible solutions and helps the BFG develop a plan. The fantastic world does not simply protect her; it gives her a chance to participate. This makes *The BFG* different from *Matilda*. *Matilda*’s fantasy is strongly connected with individual power, while Sophie’s story moves toward cooperation. Sophie cannot defeat the giants through physical strength, and the BFG cannot solve the problem through strength alone. Their different abilities become useful when they work together.

The story therefore challenges the realistic assumption that a vulnerable person must remain powerless. Sophie begins as an orphan with very little social authority, yet her intelligence becomes important to the outcome of the story. Fantasy changes not only her surroundings but also the way other characters respond to her.

When the three novels are considered together, a clear pattern emerges. Dahl normally establishes a recognisable problem before the fantastic element becomes central. In *Matilda*, the problem is the misuse of adult authority and the neglect of a gifted child. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, it is the contrast between Charlie’s poverty and the behaviour of children who have more material advantages. In *The BFG*, it is Sophie’s vulnerability and fear. The fantastic then changes the situation. *Matilda* gains a way to act against authority. Charlie enters a world where character is tested through extraordinary events. Sophie moves from being a frightened orphan to becoming part of a plan that requires intelligence and cooperation. The exact function differs, but the structure remains similar: the impossible becomes meaningful because the reader understands the problem that comes before it.

This also explains why Dahl’s fantasy often feels emotionally close to reality. Readers do not have to learn an entirely new system of values before they can understand what is happening. They already know what fear, unfairness, greed, loneliness or embarrassment feel like. Dahl simply gives these experiences a larger imaginative form. His exaggeration is especially important. Mercedes del Fresno Fernández (2009) notes that Dahl combines fairy-tale elements with realism, satire and exaggeration, and that this exaggeration can create comic distance from fear. This is useful for understanding why Dahl can write about serious subjects without making the stories unbearably dark. Humour does not remove the problem; it gives the young reader enough distance to approach it.

Another important feature of Dahl’s fiction is the way fantasy changes the relationship between children and adults. In ordinary life, adults have authority because of their age, social position and institutional power. Dahl repeatedly asks whether authority deserves to be respected when it is used badly.

Matilda is the strongest example. Mr Wormwood and Miss Trunchbull have adult authority but behave irresponsibly or cruelly, while *Matilda* and Miss Honey have less formal power but show greater moral awareness. Fantasy helps expose this contradiction. The child’s supernatural ability does not simply make her stronger; it makes the unfairness of the existing power structure visible.

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory approaches morality differently. The adults are not all presented as oppressive, but the children are constantly being observed through their

behaviour. Wonka’s factory becomes a place where selfishness and self-control have consequences. Hissan (2012) similarly highlights the moral qualities of the children in the novel. The fantastic setting makes those qualities easier to see because every choice is amplified.

The BFG separates physical power from moral power. The dangerous giants are bigger than everyone else, but they are not morally superior. Sophie is physically small but intellectually capable. The BFG is also enormous, yet his kindness distinguishes him from the other giants. The novel therefore asks readers to judge characters by what they do rather than by how powerful they look. These patterns support Pope and Round’s (2015) argument that Dahl’s child heroes can be attractive to young readers precisely because they challenge adult authority. The appeal of the fantastic is connected to this challenge. It creates an imaginative space in which children can imagine that their voices matter and that unfair authority can be questioned.

Discussion. The findings suggest that the most useful way to understand Dahl’s realism and fantasy is not to ask where one ends and the other begins, but how they cooperate. The realistic side of a novel gives the reader a familiar emotional starting point. The fantastic side then stretches that starting point. In *Matilda*, helplessness becomes supernatural agency. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, personality becomes physical consequence. In *The BFG*, fear becomes the beginning of cooperation. This interpretation is consistent with Mendlesohn’s (2008) emphasis on the way fantasy is rhetorically constructed. Dahl’s impossible events are powerful partly because they interrupt situations the reader already understands. A child is bullied, and then something impossible happens. A poor boy enters a factory, and the familiar idea of a workplace becomes an impossible landscape. An orphan meets a giant, and the frightening figure becomes a companion. The contrast produces both surprise and meaning.

The approach also adds a useful dimension to existing work on Dahl. Research on magical realism in *Matilda* highlights the connection between supernatural events and child abuse (Hassan & Jassim, 2023). Research on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* highlights its moral dimension (Hissan, 2012). Studies of children’s responses to *Matilda* emphasise the appeal of a child who resists abusive authority (Pope & Round, 2015). Considered together, these observations suggest that fantasy is not a decorative feature added to Dahl’s stories. It is one of the main ways through which the stories think about childhood. At the same time, Dahl’s use of fantasy should not be reduced to a simple formula in which good children receive magic and bad children are punished. Charlie does not have supernatural powers, and Sophie’s success depends on collaboration. *Matilda*’s ability does not solve every problem. What matters is the relationship between the fantastic event and the character’s existing qualities. Dahl’s children become effective when imagination is joined with intelligence, courage, patience or moral judgement.

Conclusion. Roald Dahl’s fiction is often described as fantastical, but the novels examined here show that fantasy is most effective when it remains closely connected to ordinary human experience. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG* and *Matilda* all place children in situations involving vulnerability, inequality, fear, neglect or unfair authority. The fantastic then changes the meaning of those situations without making the original problems disappear.

In *Matilda*, supernatural power gives a child a means of responding to adults who misuse their authority. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, an impossible factory turns everyday weaknesses into visible consequences and makes moral choices memorable. In *The BFG*, giants and dreams create a world in which an orphan can move from fear to participation and cooperation. The three novels therefore demonstrate that realism and fantasy are not competing elements in Dahl’s writing. They depend on one another. Realistic experience gives fantasy its emotional force, while fantasy gives realistic experience a form that is easier to imagine, exaggerate and remember. This is particularly effective in children’s literature, where difficult subjects can be approached through humour, adventure and imaginative distance.

Dahl’s distinctive achievement lies in this ability to make the impossible speak about the possible. His giants, magical powers and extraordinary machines may not belong to the everyday world, but the fears, desires, injustices and choices behind them do. For this reason, the fantastic in Dahl should be read not simply as an escape from reality, but as a way of looking at reality from a different angle.

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