Master's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

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Child Abuse in *Matilda*, The *Harry Potter* series and *Goodnight Mister Tom*

Master's thesis in MLSPRÅK

Supervisor: Rhonna Robbins-Sponaas

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Emilie Figenschou,
Oslo, June 2020

Abstract

This thesis explores how the use of language, with specific focus on humor, as well as likeable characters, can affect the child-reader and its understanding of physical and psychological violence inflicted upon a child by their parent or guardian. It will address how Dahl's *Matilda* and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series use humor to mask darker topics such as child abuse and neglect, and how Magorian's use of child-like narration in *Goodnight Mister Tom* may contribute to making it more suitable for children. The thesis briefly discusses children's literature, its history and whether or not an adult writer is a reliable source when depicting the inner lives of children. The text questions whether the use of humor may simplify and play down the seriousness of the abuse Harry and Matilda are exposed to throughout their childhood. It compares the depiction of abuse in *Matilda* and the *Potter* series with *Goodnight Mister Tom* that conveys a more explicit description of violence against a child. The value of family, both foster and nuclear, is discussed, as well as the importance of a mother's attachment to a child and the repercussions of a lacking mother-child relationship.

“God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Violence, sorrow, suffering and abuse are not typical topics we speak to our children about. Yet, these are all issues that have existed in children's literature for generations, some of which are explicitly portrayed while others are quite hidden. To revisit one's favorite children's stories as grown-ups can thus be both a thrilling and disturbing experience. When we are older, most of us are able to more deeply understand the darkness and seriousness that make up the foundation of a great number of books meant for younger readers. These uncomfortable topics are in many cases muffled by humor, exciting adventures, and lovable characters in order to make them appropriate for children. Child abuse is a topic often handled in this manner. Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling apply humor to mask the abuse in *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series, while Michelle Magorian has arguably chosen a more explicit illustration of abuse when writing her novel *Goodnight Mister Tom*. All three works of fiction deal with concepts many would deem inappropriate for children's literature, yet these are books that manage to convey serious matters in a feasible and compelling way to child-readers through each author's didactical approach. In order to figure out why these books are so popular and accepted by society, it is central to explore what way use of language with specific focus on humor, as well as likeable characters, can affect the child-reader and their understanding of physical and psychological violence inflicted upon a child by their parent, guardian and teachers.

Some terms need to be clarified such as "child", "child abuse/maltreatment" and "children's literature". According to UNICEF, "A child is any person under the age of 18" (Unicef). Medicinenet defines child abuse as "when a caregiver either fails to provide appropriate care (neglect), purposefully inflicts harm, or harms a child while disciplining him or her." (Hamblen)

It must be noted that the concept of children and childhood has changed dramatically through time. A beneficial way to explore the development of childhood through history is by looking at the development of the literature meant for children (Hintz & Tribunella 13). The idea of children changed somewhat during the 19th century. They were no longer seen as a nuisance, but in some societal classes, as objects of admiration who should be spoiled. As more and more families joined the middle class, they had more means to dedicate to their children. Books were no longer simply educational or didactical but were written to spark imagination and create entertainment for the child. This was to lead the way to the golden age of children's literature, in which the market for children's books grew and more people had money to buy them (Hintz & Tribunella 68). Although the books were mainly written as

entertainment, they still seem to have an educational element, though possibly not directly in regard to education but moral learning. Lasting from about 1865-1915, the Golden Age contains many of the books we know and cherish today, such as *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling and *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, which are all books that are known and loved by adults as well as children. Fewer and fewer adults read children's literature after the Golden Age, implying that the writing evolves towards something solely meant for children, and not necessarily their parents or adult guardians (Hintz & Tribunella 68). However, the authors mention *The Harry Potter* series and J. R. R. Tolkien's books as valid exceptions.

Peter Hunt claims that children's literature is solely literature that has been "written expressively for children who are recognizable children, with a childhood recognizable today" (Hunt qtd in Grenby 3). Hunt's definition is problematic. He mentions a recognizable child, but not all children meet the typical "childlike" criteria. Take Roald Dahl's Matilda, a five-year old with an exceptional mind who would rather read Dickens and Hemingway than the literature she finds in the children's section of her local library. Even her astonished teacher, Miss Honey, does not fully think of Matilda as a child: "I suppose we might call you a grown-up child, if you see what I mean" (Dahl 189). The same can be said about a recognizable childhood. It is clear that he wishes to emphasize that the notion of childhood has changed throughout history, hence childhood should be recognizable today. Though, for whom should it be recognizable? The concept of childhood not only varies from our parent's generation till today, but also across geographical borders, families and social situations. Thus, it might be necessary to define who decides what a recognizable childhood is. Should it be recognizable for the majority of the western world? A child who takes care of its siblings, is forced to work and worse – is he or she still a child, or "a grown-up child" as Miss Honey would call them? They might not have the same mental abilities or literary interests as Matilda, but their lives probably lack any trace of what the majority of us would recognize as defining aspects of a childhood. Hunt's definition raises more questions than it provides answers.

The field is torn on the subject of what defines children's literature. Some suggest it is simply literature written for children's pleasure excluding all books meant to teach, instruct and educate, while historian Henry Steele Commager provides an almost poetic description of children's literature;

> Is it that literature written especially for the young - the fairy and wonder tales, the nursery rhymes and songs, the dull books of etiquette, and admonition and moral persuasion, the

> stories of school and playing fields or of far-flung adventure? It is all of this, to be sure, but it is far more. It is the whole vast body of literature that children have adopted, commonly to share with their elders, but sometimes to monopolize. It is, quite literally, *their* literature. (Commager qtd. In Hintz & Tribunella 51)

Hunt argues that even though the book is "read by" a child, it is not necessarily children's literature. Not all children choose which books to read themselves but might be pressured to read certain books by their parents or teachers. Some also question whether we can say that children's literature exists at all, and that an adult, who is naturally not a child, can truly be able to write a book entirely for children. Maria Nikolajeva throws light on the fact that there is an uneven power dimension between the child character and the adult author. She questions the argument that any given adult can easily recreate a child character's mind (Nikolajeva 173). In theory, we should all be experts on children as each of us have been children for a period of our lives. However, as we grow older, these memories fade. When asked which character was the most difficult to write, George R. R. Martin, author of *The Song of Ice and Fire* series, was quick to answer Bran. Being only eight, Bran is what Martin calls the youngest "view-point" character in the books (Hart). The author claims he had a hard time entering Bran's mind and communicating it to the reader in a credible way as he himself is way beyond the tenderness and innocence of childhood. He has to imagine how an eight-year-old would see and process certain scenes surrounding him, as well as having to be careful with which words a child would use to describe his thoughts, feelings and experiences. But Martin is no author of children's literature, he is an author of fantasy books meant for an older audience. Others might not find it difficult to write from a child's perspective at all, although it would be naïve to think that one's own adult perspective will not influence one's writing.

Further, it is also important to note that not all children's books were intended as commercial products. Many of the books we love and cherish today did not start as books meant to be sold to children all over the world but were made up to entertain children close to the author. *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien started as a bedside story for Tolkien's children, and *Matilda* was initially a story written for Dahl's granddaughter (Grenby 15). These are both examples of books created for young children, but that have ended up bringing joy to children and adults all over the world. Andrea Immel points to an important explanation as to why children's literature might be exceptionally difficult to define; the meaning of childhood and children has varied based on which time and place is referred to. In a period when children hardly managed to survive their fifth birthday, there was no use in spending time and

resources in educating them about literature, culture, and what is right and wrong in this world. There was simply no market for books aimed at children before the majority of children grew up to a certain age. Immel also assumes that there would be a certain difference in the interest of literature based on which class the child belonged to, arguing that a poor farmer's son in the countryside of England in the middle ages would most likely not be exposed to the same stories and books as the son of a wealthy member of the upper class living in London during the Victorian era (Immel 19).

It would be foolish to believe that children simply read what they want to read without any influence from their parents or guardians. Before we can read for ourselves, we are being read to, which most likely shapes our own literary interests and which books we choose to read when we eventually are able to choose for ourselves. If children truly are *tabula rasa's* such as John Locke suggests, our literary taste arguably lies in the hands of the ones who take care of us when we are children. Lynne Vallone claims that being raised in a loving family grew forth as important in the 1800s (Vallone 185). If a child character is an orphan or lives in an abusive home, the ideal end to the story would be that the character finds a new and better home, far away from the destructive home they grew up in, such as Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*. This tradition is still very much alive today, as seen *in Harry Potter*, *Matilda* and *Goodnight Mister Tom*, all three of which will be explored further in the thesis.

The notion of family is fleeting in the three books. Both Mathilda and Harry grow up in families that are highly different from themselves. Matilda's intellect, her kind heart and magical powers separate her from her shallow minded and petty mother, father and brother. The Dursleys are just as ruthless towards their nephew as the Wormwoods are towards Matilda. Even before Harry is left at their doorstep, the Dursleys loathe him, his world and everything he represents. Until Harry is eleven years old, he believes his parents died in a car crash. Whenever he would ask questions about them or any other part of his family, he would be punished by being locked in the cupboard under the stairs. With his slim figure, messy brown hair and green eyes, he cannot be more unlike his cousin, who is Harry's age, fat and triple his size. While Dudley is the family gem, Harry suffers and is treated like a nuisance by his aunt and uncle throughout his childhood. Even though Harry knows little of his parents until he is eleven, he still grows up with the belief that he had had parents who loved him. He quickly learns this to be true when he discovers more and more about his wizard identity and the wizarding world at Hogwarts. Matilda's story is more bizarre as she lives with her biological parents, whom one should expect to love her unconditionally. *Goodnight Mister Tom* differs from the previous two books as William's mother is not glazed over with any

humor or ridicule. She is a god-fearing woman, abusing William both mentally and physically, breaking him down without him ever retaliating or achieving any satisfying vengeance.

A common feature for the three main characters of the books is that they all find new families and people who love them and take care of them unlike their biological families. Matilda gets to live with her sweet and caring teacher Miss Honey, Harry finds family in his schoolfriends Ron and Hermione, as well as Ron's parents and siblings, and young William finally lives in a safe home with Mister Tom who adopts him after his mother's suicide. All three books contain matters that might not seem fitting for children's fiction such as physical and mental abuse, psychological illness, and death. Though as in most children's books, these issues are covered by other themes such as supernatural adventures and attempts at overthrowing the badly-behaved characters of the book. Both Rowling and Dahl use humor to lessen the impact of these subjects and provide the child reader with the satisfaction of the oppressors being humiliated. William is different than the two other main child characters in many ways. He does not have any magical powers and he is not portrayed as a hero, but as a broken and weak boy who has suffered after years of ill treatment and abuse from his psychologically ill mother. Even though Magorian does not use comedy and amusing stereotypical characters to draw attention away from the serious lack of love and care that both Matilda and Harry suffer from, she still makes it bearable to read for the child reader. Having the child himself narrating much of the story and Mister Tom implicitly assuming what William's life must have been like before he left London makes a softer landing for children who read the book or are being read to.

Kimberley Reynolds reports of a skeptical approach in young adult fiction towards the nuclear family in the last part of the 20th century (203). Magorian and Dahl criticize the main characters' closest families and glorify an external caregiver in their stead. Rowling does the opposite. Even though Harry chooses his new family in the form of friends from his school, his biological parents are still highly praised throughout the series. Blood is regarded as a deciding factor and the sole reason for why Harry had to call Privet Drive his home. As long as Harry lived under the same roof as someone with his mother's blood in their veins, he would be protected by the spell of his mother's blood sacrifice. Rowling seems to elevate the nuclear family also through the depiction of the Weasley family. In the course of the seven books, Harry becomes like an adopted son to Molly and Arthur Weasley. Molly is recognizable as the typical heart-warming mother who cares for her children and their well-being more than anything else, and she leads a stable and loving family even muggle readers

will be able to recognize in the midst of a magical world filled with strange and unfamiliar phenomena. Molly stands in contrast to the neglectful and abusive mothers in *Matilda* and *Goodnight Mister Tom,* as well as Harry's own Aunt Petunia.

As conveyed by Jerrold Brandell and Shoshana Ringell, British child psychiatrist John Bowlby believed the mother to be the most important attachment for a child. He argued that children internalize their mother's moral values and cognitive capacities, more so than from their father (Brandell & Ringel 32). Bowlby believes that a child's relationship with its mother is imperative for how the child will turn out, and which developmental issues the child might face. The role of the mother is important in all three works. *Goodnight Mister Tom* portrays a mother who fails in every single way. She beats her child, mentally breaks him down, and leaves him to die with his baby sister. However, there are other strong mother characters in the book such as William's teacher, Mrs. Hartfield, who becomes a mother figure for William, as well as becoming an actual mother during the novel. Dahl creates a mother figure for Matilda in her teacher, Miss Honey. She sees and appreciates Matilda for the girl she is in ways her own mother has not and never will. She adopts Matilda and becomes her mother by law. For Harry, his own loving mother is such a strong force in him that her love for him protects him against harm. Yet Mrs. Weasley still takes on a mothering part of Harry's life: "Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on his bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother" (GF 714). She is also a fiercely protective mother for her own children, easily depicted in the scene where she fights the Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange who is about to curse her daughter: "Not my daughter, you bitch" (DH 602).

The characters not only experience abuse in their homes, but they are also faced with violence at school. In his report "The Experience of Corporal Punishment in Schools, 1890-1940", Jacob Middleton explores the development of teacher-student violence in UK schools. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, many teachers viewed corporal punishment as something positive, along the lines of encouraging the students and making them interested in their work (Middleton 253). He states that it was believed that students preferred and favored the practice as it was so quick and effective, and usually thought physical punishment to be just and fair. Despite parent's protests, it was decided by High Court in 1889 that caning upon the hand was a reasonable way to punish and motivate pupils in the classroom (Middleton 255). It was believed that a short but intense stab of pain would stimulate the child in the direction of learning; "It acts like a tonic and makes the blood tingle in their veins" (Mangasarian 496). It is also stated that the intention of punishment is to make the child

associate pain with sin (Mangasarian 496). Yet, the premise for this is that the child is only punished when he or she has done something wrong, and not only what the teacher personally believes to be bad. While some students might have deemed it occasionally appropriate with a short blow on their hand with the cane, psychologist Kenneth Hopkins noted that the attitude towards corporal punishment varied greatly among the young, and could report feelings of anger and resentment in the student groups towards teachers who had been violent with them (Hopkins qtd. in Middleton 260). Not many students complained at home if corporal punishment was abused in their schools. The reason for this is two-fold, according to Middleton; the students might come from a home that agrees with the school's use of physical violence and might then risk another beating at home if they complain, and secondly, they simply did not know that adults should not be beating children with sticks (Middleton 262).

While some teachers avoided physical punishment at all costs, others made a spectacle of the act, allowing for the fellow students to watch in horror and delight as he prepared to punish their peer. Some report that it became a sort of theatrical event where the student to be punished had to decide whether to cry out early and perhaps avoid further physical pain, though give the teacher the satisfaction of showing emotion, or be silently suffering, aggravating the teacher even further. James Kirkup educated in Newcastle in the 1920's claims that many teachers took pleasure in punishing their students (Middleton 268), not unlike Dahl's Miss Trunchbull, and Rowling's Mr. Filch and Professor Umbridge. They are portrayed as authorities who despise their students, who seems to have gone into education to strengthen the inequality between student and teacher. The three mentioned above all get their punishment in the end and wind up humiliated in front of the student body. This type of satisfactory and cathartic retribution is highly unlikely to have happened to the tyrannical teachers of the UK schools during the time when corporal punishment was legal and acceptable, making Harry's and Matilda's achievement of justice even more implausible and unattainable for the child reader. Though not spoken much of, Magorian seems to have implemented the traditional schoolteacher who believed fear and threat of violence would be the best way to make his students learn. Even though all three child characters suffer at the hands of their teachers, they also find sanctuary at their schools. Matilda meets Miss Honey who cares for and admirers her, Harry makes friends and learns about his life, and William is finally being taken care of the way he should have been his whole life. He learns how to read and write, he finds his artistic talent, and he finally makes friends.

Childhood is a period of life influenced by protection. Children are often kept away from news about war, violence and terror. We often avoid the whole truth about an

uncomfortable family situation and hold back information about what we deem inappropriate for our children. The same applies for the literature to which we expose our children. It is up the care givers to decide what is fitting for a child to read. Anne Scott MacLeod describes it as the adult's "duty towards children" (31). She reports of a change from the nineteenth century in which moral lessons constituted most of the children's literature. Values, however, were still regarded as a vital part of children's literature. Children were still to be taught moral and social values through their reading; thus, the children's books were published in line with what society saw as proper and suitable. Yet some somber topics were present in children's literature, such as violence. However, the stories would not linger on the violence or provide the reader with detailed depictions of the violence.

The 19th century usually portrayed unrealistic child characters who did not face any sorrow or grief, and who never strayed from their parents' wishes. The 20th century opened up to acknowledging children's faults and mistakes and depicted children who dared to challenge what was expected of them (MacLeod 33). The social upheavals of the sixties brought about change in the children's literature department as well as society as a whole. Where earlier there had been a common consensus between the narrow group of people who had anything to do with books written for children, there were now people asking questions about what message is being carried on to the new generation. Topics that had earlier been viewed as inappropriate was suddenly starting to appear in children's books, such as divorce, single parent families, teenage sexuality and homosexuality (MacLeod 34). However, such a radical change brought about challenges about whether there are things that should be censored out of children's books such as sexism and abuse. Society wanted a more open and honest communication with children while not wishing to promote these issues through children's literature (MacLeod 35). Who should then decide what is to be left out of children's books?

The following chapters will explore how the adult narrator controls the child characters as discussed by Nikolajeva in *Matilda*, the *Harry Potter* series and *Goodnight Mister Tom*. They will also discuss how implementing humor in their depictions of abuse, Dahl and Rowling arguably censor out the unpleasantness of child abuse and neglect in a way that Magorian does not. The chapter on *Matilda* will also touch upon elements from Dahl's book *Boy*, as it arguably includes pointers from the author's past as to why Dahl so often favors the child characters in his books. By rendering the abuse at home and school harmless through absurd exaggerating and satire, the child reader may not recognize the behavior as abuse. The thesis will discuss whether that may be a more harmful outlook and future for the child reader than Michelle Magorian's more explicit description of violence against children.

Chapter 2: *Matilda*

Those who are familiar with Roald Dahl's work will also be aware of Dahl's continuous support of his child characters who are often smarter, kinder and cleverer than their grown-up counterparts. Most grown-ups in Dahl's universe are written about in an unfavorable light. They are seldom supportive of the child-character, they often abuse their power and are, in sum, proper villains of the stories. Dahl's past in the British school system seems to have played a part in his creation of villainous and abusive characters. Dahl provides the child-reader with a utopia where children are in charge, and adults are mainly portrayed as mean, egoistic, and unintelligent, often with unflattering physical appearances. His books have been regarded as controversial by many as they portray and arguably glorify the grotesque action of children and their opposition towards parents and adults.

In 1986, four years before his passing, Dahl wrote *Boy*, a story about his own childhood. Dahl did not call it an autobiography, but simply a collection of unbelievable, but true events experienced by him throughout his upbringing in England and Norway. Much of *Boy* depicts Dahl's school years, which were happy, though overshadowed by authoritative teachers, headmasters and matrons. Every school he attended was ruled by a headmaster eager to use his cane on the next misbehaving boy who was sent to his office, without much care for his possible innocence. The candy shop keeper, Mrs. Pritchett, is a true Dahlesque character and is almost too dreadful to be convincing. Dahl's upbringing was largely influenced by authoritarian adults he was seldom able to oppose. Through his writing, it seems as though Dahl avenges himself by having the children and less powerful overcome the dictatorial characters of his story. It is even possible that writing these stories where justice is so rightfully served was a cathartic experience for the writer. Dahl gets his revenge on his childhood terrors by promoting a cartoonish caricature of authoritative figures such as Miss Trunchbull, and Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood (Rea qtd in Pope & Round 260). They are not depicted in a voice of awe or reverence, but in a tone of ridicule and contempt.

It is not surprising that the author's encounters with numerous authoritarian adults in a period when one should be surrounded by encouraging grown-ups, have worked their way into his writing. After having read *Boy*, it seems clear where Dahl found the inspiration of devoting his books to the "underdog" (Hill qtd in Petzold 186), who rises up against his or her oppressors. His anti-authoritarian tone stuck with him during all his writing years, creating several universes in which the powerless children become the powerful and omnipotent characters of the books. Dieter Petzold reports of psychologists who state that stories involving child omnipotence are "necessary for the development of the children" (191).

However, this element might be exactly what evokes ambivalence in so many adults who have read Dahl as his writing may encourage children to engage in crude behavior without realizing the consequences before it might be too late. Dahl turns the conventional world on its head, leaving the children in charge which threatens the parents' natural authority.

Jonathan Culley describes what he thinks is a general pattern when introducing the less popular characters in Dahl's writing: "They are thoroughly dislikeable with a generous helping of unpleasant characteristics, of which one or two are normally especially prominent" (60). More often than not, these characters are described as being selfish, less intelligent, greedy, power hungry and violent. Furthermore, their appearance is unappealing, thus, there is a risk that children are taught that there is a correlation between being cruel, lazy and dimwitted, and being unattractive. This has been commented upon by Charles Sarland in his book *The Secret Seven vs. The Twits.* He fears that Dahl's ridicule of certain appearances as well as social classes works its way into children's subconsciousness, which he claims to be a "fascist message" (Sarland qtd in Culley 60). Culley created a questionnaire to explore this further. He asked a group of children whether any of Dahl's characters had come to a sticky end and whether or not they had deserved it. Among the expected replies were traits such as selfishness, cruelty and violence. However, one boy replied: "Yes, they were ugly" (61). This single response is not enough empirical evidence to claim that Dahl has influenced children's ability to differentiate between personality and appearance. However, it does reveal the didactical process of a reader, and can potentially be representative for other child-readers as well.

Matilda's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, are described as "the worst kind of parents", those who do not recognize or appreciate how unique and "*extra*-ordinary" (Dahl 4) their daughter is. They are bad parents, full of resentment for anything that differs from them, which includes Matilda. She differs from her family in every manner and is constantly being punished for it. She is polite, bright and has a different view of what is right and wrong. She is neglected by her parents, both physically and mentally as she is left home alone for long periods of time at a young age, as well as being continually underestimated by her father for being a girl. Both of Matilda's parents are sexist. They favor their less intelligent son, Michael, and Mr. Wormwood does not believe a girl could have solved his math question: "No one in the world could give the right answer just like that, especially a girl! You're a little cheat" (49). Matilda's mother is not much better. When Miss Honey visits the Wormwoods to tell them about Matilda's unique intellect, Mrs. Wormwood proclaims: "A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on.

Looks is more important than books" (91). Matilda is verbally abused, falsely accused of being a fraud and she is refused a suitable education, hindering her scholastic development. Even though Matilda is angered by her parents' treatment of her, she realizes that they are wrong; "She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she wasn't" (23). It is impressive, though questionable that a child of Matilda's age would be able to separate truth from reality in this case. In Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom*, William believes and internalizes every bad thing his mother says about him, and arguably represents a more believable victim of child abuse than Matilda. However, it is important to note that Dahl did not create Matilda to be a typical child, or a typical victim of child abuse.

Not everyone is pleased with Dahl's depiction of the Wormwoods. Clementine Beauvais illuminates the fact that Dahl applies typical lower-class habits and features when describing the Wormwoods (278), contrary to their daughter who represent typical higher-class interests and activities. She prefers to read, while her family watches TV and count it as family time. The books Matilda reads also consist of a large part of the western canon, such as Hemingway, Dickens, Orwell, Faulkner and Brontë, typical highbrow literature. She reads all day while her mother leaves her home alone to go to the Bingo every afternoon, another activity that is associated with lower socioeconomic groups. Even though the Wormwoods have money, it has been earned through crime. Mr. Wormwood sells old cars and cheats his way into making them look newer than they are and then selling them at a profit. When Matilda calls her father out for tricking people into buying broken cars, he states "no one ever got rich being honest" (Dahl 17). They are highly driven by money and their wish to show it off. Petzold describes them as "the very image of vulgarity" (189).

School becomes a place of both salvation and terror for Matilda. She makes her first friend and is presented to her teacher Miss Honey. Miss Honey helps Matilda develop her skills by being supportive and attentive. She sees Matilda fully, and provides her with the intellectual stimuli she needs. Matilda's school is haunted by a dreadful headmistress who enjoys harming and frightening her students more than she likes teaching them. She is a true Dahl character, described as a "gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of children and adults alike" (Dahl 61). Dahl quickly dehumanize her, both when calling her a monster and when comparing her to an "enraged rhinoceros in the bush" (61). Though Headmistress Trunchbull is depicted in a comical light, Dahl still wishes to underline the severity of her punishments. Miss Honey tells Lavender to wipe the grin off her face after having been told that Miss Trunchbull can "liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender" (63) if they get on the wrong side of her. Lavender, like the reader, does not

believe that this is a serious threat, but Miss Honey wants to make it very clear that it is. Again, Dahl portrays his villains as physically unappealing: "Her face I'm afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor of joy for ever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes" (77). Miss Honey, however, is described as slim and fair with a lovely oval Madonna face (61), providing the reader with positive and pleasant associations in comparison with the butch and large figure of Miss Trunchbull. Trunchbull shares her animalistic comparisons with Matilda's parents who are both described as ratty and mousy, perhaps to underline their common traits as villains of the story. In Trunchbull, Dahl truly brings out the grotesque, so much so that it becomes absurd and highly unbelievable. She keeps misbehaving children in "the Chokey", a cupboard filled with broken glass and nails, forcing the child to stand straight for hours (98). She throws them out windows for eating licorice, and perhaps the most infamous form of punishment: force feeding Bruce Bogtrotter an entire cake for stealing a piece from the kitchen. When describing why Miss Trunchbull is allowed to keep abusing her students, Dahl yet again throws light on the uneven power relationship between children and adults. Lavender asks Matilda how their headmistress gets away with it, and Matilda simply states: "Your story would sound too ridiculous to be believed…He simply wouldn't believe you" (111). The students are on their own, caught in a situation that is impossible to change because the adults would rather believe the other adult than their own children. This power dynamic is familiar to anyone who has read Oliver Twist, in which the orphanages clean up and feed the children properly whenever they are inspected. No one would believe the children if they were to explain the true conditions of their school.

Even though Dahl is known for his connection with and favor of children, his writing faces the same issues as most children's books: they are written by an adult. As Dahl was in his seventies when he wrote *Matilda*, it can be argued that he was too old to enter the mindset of a five year-old-girl. However, Dahl wrote *Boy* only a few years before, and might have been able to revisit the feeling of being a child more vividly in the process. Dahl had rather clear memories from his own childhood, of experiences, thoughts and sensations, which might have helped him become such an accomplished writer of children's fiction. Though the narrator includes Matilda's thoughts and emotions, it seems to be an adult presence in the story, seeking to make sense of it all. Kristen Guest refers to Noriko Shimoda Netley who believes that the narrative perspective in *Matilda* is inconsistent (255) and argues that "the subject of narration is associated alternately with adult authority, with a child's perspective, and with an inclusive position that encompasses both" (Netley 197). Though this may be explained by the fact that Matilda is not a *normal* child, thus the narration may reflect the

adultness that exists within her. Dahl depicts several other children in his books, and however much Dahl is in touch with his childhood memories, it does not make up for the fact that life experience as well as a development in linguistic skills create a great difference in the adult narrator and the child character, not to mention the child reader's understanding of the story. Nikolajeva refers to this as the "double address" (173).

The narration in *Matilda* is authoritarian and all-knowing who does not leave much open to the subjective mind. There is no doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood are bad parents and that Matilda is a good girl even if she at times is both condescending and naughty towards her parents. There is also no doubt that Miss Trunchbull is the villain of the story, and Miss Honey is a good and loyal person, despite allowing her students to be tortured and physically punished by their headmistress. This type of narration often has a didactic purpose and has long been typical of children's literature (Nikolajeva 174). This is a characteristic trait of Dahl's writing and is different from the *Harry Potter* series and *Goodnight Mister Tom* in which you have fluctuating characters such as Professor Snape and Mrs. Beech, the latter suffering from severe psychological illness.

It can be argued that Dahl has a certain responsibility when writing about children who suffer from abuse and escape their situations. By bestowing children more power in his stories than children might have in reality, the child characters and their actions seem beyond reach. Sadly, most children who are being bullied and abused by their families and teachers never get to avenge themselves. More often than not they are forced to put up with the torment until they are old enough to move away, and even then, can find it difficult to break free. Miss Honey is an example of the sad truth that engraves too many stories about abuse. She remains in Miss Trunchbull's power, even though she is free to move away and start a new life. Matilda represents in many ways Miss Honey's opposite. She opposes her oppressors rather than accepting their tyranny. She secures Miss Honey's future by defeating Miss Trunchbull who caused Miss Honey a great deal of pain while growing up. Even though Miss Honey becomes the first adult who embraces Matilda, she still needs saving by her five-year-old student, thus possibly weakening her position as an adult.

Rest assured, not all grown-up characters in Dahl's books are unfavorable, and Dahl's loving mother seems to have made her way into some of the female characters as well, such as Miss Honey and the grandmother in *The Witches.* Even though Miss Honey is sweet and kind towards Matilda, she might not be the ideal role model for the child. Kristen Guest blames her "mild nature" (247) for why Miss Honey is continuously taken advantage of and overrun by other adults, such as Miss Trunchbull, and Matilda's parents. It is especially

striking that Miss Honey has not rebelled against Trunchbull, allowing her to keep the power she has taken. Her fights are being fought by Matilda who eventually saves her and restores everything that is rightfully hers. Though she provides Matilda with much needed comfort and kindness, Miss Honey still makes several questionable decisions throughout the course of the book. She invites one of her student's home to her private residence only to share her own personal story with her. Guest emphasizes Miss Honey's implicit justification of this: "Although you look like a child, you are not really a child at all because your mind and your powers of reasoning seem to be fully grown-up. So I suppose we might call you a grown-up child" (Dahl 189). Miss Honey's disregard for Matilda's actual age can be damaging in the long run. Even though Matilda is different than people of her age, she is still a child and needs to be treated as such, especially by a care provider.

Dahl's writing seems to be pervaded with the use of comedy and satire in grim and serious situations. It is not unlikely that it has been a necessary and helpful trait to develop in a childhood in which Dahl lost a sister and a father within the course of just a few weeks. In his article, Petzold claims that humor "serves as a distancing device" (192). He mostly refers to the realist plot, such as the story being set in contemporary England, and that Matilda is a seemingly normal child with an extra-ordinary mind. With humor and unbelievable events such as Matilda being able to use her mind not just for learning, but also to move things with her thoughts, and the bizarre situation in which Miss Trunchbull throws a child over the school gates by her pigtails, downsize the seriousness that the acts of violence throughout the book. By laughing at the Wormwoods, the reader is left with the idea that their words and actions are not as harmful as they might actually be. In fact, humor might be the key ingredient that makes the story digestible for young readers. Dahl directly addresses the use of humor in *Matilda* when Miss Honey asks her class whether or not all children's books should have funny bits in them, and Matilda replies "I do, Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh" (Dahl 75). Thus, he arguably defends his humoristic approach to Matilda's situation through the character herself.

Worthington believes *Matilda* can be beneficial for young readers and may help them vent some of their anger and resentment towards unjust adults in their own lives (124). The imagination is a safe space for such a display of emotion, though, the opposite side of the spectrum fears that children are unable to tell the difference between imagination and real-life and might be inspired to wrong-doings and vengeful acts. James Pope and Julia Round argue that Roald Dahl's child characters are hardly ever only good or bad, hero nor villain (258). Thus, his characters are more similar to the stories that were written after the beginning of the

18th century, and not a depiction that portrays the child as a do-gooder who is never unhappy or in disagreement with their parents. Matilda is mistreated and upset with her family however, she does not sit idly by as she is being teased, oppressed and abused by her parents and brother. She takes revenge, thus revealing a less heroic side and exposing traits that many find less endearing in a young girl. It shows that she is strong-minded and makes up her own rules about what is right and what is wrong. However, it is not her actions alone that worry most critics and parents, but her success in getting away with them. She is never caught in her wrong doings which arguably conveys the message that you can indeed break the rules having any negative consequences.

In 2013, James Pope and Julia Round conducted a reader response study among students between the ages seven and eleven. The study had many motives, among them, mapping out the effects Dahl's writing has on his younger readers. Furthermore, the authors sought to challenge the criticism of the books, as the criticism is solely conducted and written by adults. They find it problematic that an adult should comment upon a child's interpretation of a book and its characters written by an adult for children (Pope & Round 258). They question how well adults are able to enter the minds of children and decided therefore to go straight to the source. Thus, James Pope and Julia Round's research mostly seek children's genuine reactions and thoughts regarding *Matilda* with as little adult interference as possible. Pope and Round's study was based on the book written by Dahl in 1989, as well as the movie adaptation from 1996. The researchers did see a difference between the various age groups in which the older students were much more inclined to have a broader understanding of right and wrong and allowed for different heroes who could be both good and bad (Pope & Round 268). They also acknowledged the fact that some of her traits could be regarded as unheroic, such as super-gluing her father's hat to his head and dyeing his hair platinum blonde. These were simple acts of revenge and did not necessarily lead to anything good except her own satisfaction when humiliating her cruel and bullying father. When Matilda uses her powers to terrorize Miss Trunchbull, however, she has a plan with a good motive. She wishes to reunite Miss Honey with her childhood home and possessions that were stolen from her by Aunt Trunchbull and seems a more justified act of naughtiness than simple pranks on Matilda's parents.

Despite believing that some of Matilda's behavior was indecent and punishable, Pope and Round concluded with what they thought was a surprising result: most young readers were able to see "the justice in Matilda's acts" (269). Finally, the authors conclude with the fact that they could not find any evidence that would support the criticism Dahl has received

regarding his intentions and the possible undesirable effects his writing has on children. Further, Pope and Round report that the children in their study had a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, but they also had a sophisticated understanding that people as well as heroes "have to demonstrate a range of attributes and have to deal with their environment in appropriate ways" (270). Pope and Round's research states that most children knew the difference between fiction and reality very well.

Even though the story of Matilda ends happily, it might not have done so if the story was of a real girl having been constantly neglected, bullied and abused by her family from birth. Dahl's Matilda has a psychological immune system that keeps her from breaking down. It makes her realize that her parents are in the wrong, and not she. Although Matilda does not reveal a lot of love for her parents, Dahl still implements some scenes of vulnerability and yearning that remind us that Matilda is just a child: "Matilda longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honorable and intelligent" (Dahl 43). In order for Matilda to bear living with her parents, she starts punishing them every time they misbehave towards her, though in truth Matilda should have asked for help from a trusted adult. It is of course a highly complex situation, and not one which many children would be able to follow through with in real life. However, Matilda seems to have a different sort of mind than others her age. Miss Honey visits the Wormwoods, but she does not attempt to help Matilda in any way in regard to her home situation. The fact that Miss Honey and the other teachers in school sit idly by as the tyrant Headmistress mistreats their students is also in reality a crime against the children. The disturbing image in this book is not that Matilda misbehaves or rebels against her parents and oppressors, but that a five-year-old child has to help herself out of her misery without the aid from anyone but herself. If children believe that they are responsible for saving themselves from abuse and mistreatment, Dahl's writing may indeed be deemed harmful, though not because he glorifies certain entertaining wrong doings, but because he does not provide the reader with a realistic solution for a child who suffers from abuse.

Chapter 3: *Harry Potter*

Since the first book was published in 1997, the *Harry Potter* series has become a literary treasure in most western countries. The books and movies have a special place in the heart of every Millennial who has waited impatiently for the next release. With 500 million books sold worldwide (numbers last updated in 2018), the story of the wizard-orphan has reached children and adults all over the world. The influence of the series could not be ignored when the word *muggle,* a person without magical powers, made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013 (McCaffrey qtd. in Mutz 722). Though many read it as a wonderful story about a child wizard who has been mistreated by his family all his life only to rise to become a hero and save the world from evil, some communities view the series as a threat to their religion and beliefs. Some schools have even banned the books from their libraries and partaken in book-burning on the basis that they teach their children about witchcraft and devil worship. Even though it is not a common belief that Rowling encourages her young readers to dabble in satanism, the *Potter* books do have a serious undertone that goes beyond magic and flying broomsticks. Rowling's undeniable parallel to the rise of Nazism and Hitler's power provides an uncomfortable read. The use of mud-blood, half-blood, and pure-blood functions as references to questions of race and racism that are still prominent in our society today, 75 years after one of the worst genocides in history. An element of the series that has been widely overlooked in the academical research of the books, is the amount of child abuse found in the series. Harry is neglected, threatened and bullied by his foster family since he was left as an orphan at their doorstep. Humor and absurd situations often overshadow much of the negative input Harry is exposed to.

Jordanna Hall claims that "the carnivalesque and grotesque in *Harry Potter* illustrate an appeal to achieve social transformation through the power of laughter" (71). In the first chapter of the first book Rowling makes use of a satirical tone when describing the Dursleys: "Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big beefy man with hardly any neck. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors" (PS 7). One-year-old Dudley is described as a spoiled toddler, having tantrums and throwing his food around the kitchen (PS 8). The Dursleys are threatened by anything abnormal or different from themselves and their lifestyle, and pride themselves on being "perfectly normal, thank you very much" (PS 7). They are prejudiced and narrow-minded to the extent that they do not even approve of imagination (PS 10). The Dursleys are a typical example of someone with power, but somehow seem less so

through parody and comical depictions. Harry often manages to come up with witty replies that leave them ridiculed, however, despite their pitiful depiction, it is important to note that they are still foster parents who continuously threaten and verbally abuse their nephew.

As Harry Potter originated as a children's book, Rowling may have deemed it necessary to implement humor even in the most explicit scenes of abuse as also seen in Dahl's writing. The Dursleys become a parody, narrow-minded and pathetic, while Harry remains the street-smart hero whom the reader immediately sympathizes with. Even though a humoristic style makes the story a lot more approachable for children, it might be problematic if the abuse is played down. As Janet Seden points out, "the reader is invited to laugh at the Dursleys" (299); they become someone ridiculous, thus disarming them and arguably overshadowing their mistreatment of Harry. It leads to people not disliking Harry's abusers, but instead finding them entertaining and funny. During an interview with Sue Lawley in 2000 for the BBC program *Desert Island Discs*, Rowling speaks of the Dursleys and Lawley exclaims: "Ah, I love them!" (Lawley). Lawley is probably not the only one to be fascinated by the Dursleys. They represent such a parody on a middle class, arguably racist and inward-looking family that it becomes comical.

Even though the Dursleys might not seem important or complex enough to be villains in the story, Harry is abused by his aunt and uncle for most of his upbringing. He is constantly reminded that he is unwanted and is "treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly" (CS 5). He is forced to duck when Mrs. Dursley aims a frying pan at his head (CS 10), a comical situation in the book, but a highly serious act of violence from an adult towards a child. Harry's ability to out-wit the Dursleys, as well as the fact that they are so hopelessly dull and un-magical, make them seem less dangerous to the child-reader. Though it is prominent throughout the series, The Dursley's abuse of Harry is not directly addressed and made explicit until book six.

Melissa Wilson and Kathy Short write about the role of the home in children's literature. They note that home has traditionally been a place for the child protagonist to be loved, cared for, and disciplined while waiting to become an adult (Short & Wilson 130). Harry's home in Privet Drive has never been a safe home, but he makes a home for himself at *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*. For the first time in his life, he finds himself among like-minded people. This fits into Short and Wilson's depiction of a postmodern metaplot, in which the child leaves a place he or she cannot or will not consider home, to go to a new home the child has constructed (134). Harry does not even consider number four, Privet Drive a proper home, as made clear in the final book of the series: "But he *was* home.

Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known" (DH 569). Objectively, the house in Privet Drive would be much safer for Harry. Each year at Hogwarts the boy is faced with immediate danger and threat of dark magic. However, the neglect, loathing and lack of love he endured at his aunt and uncle's house felt far more dangerous to Harry. There was never a point when he was in a dangerous situation at school that he wished to be back at the Dursleys. This proves a powerful message: The young boy would rather stay in a place of danger than return to the source of both physical and mental abuse.

Harry also finds a home in the Weasley family who becomes Harry's first meeting with a proper wizarding family. Though they are wizards, they are also recognizable as a normal family with recognizable issues such as worrying about their personal finances, work, future careers and their children's grades and occasional mischief. Mr. and Mr. Weasley embrace Harry as an extra son, despite already having "more children than they can afford" (PS 81). The Weasleys, being including, open-minded, generous and warm, are the opposite of the Dursleys. They provide Harry with what Campion regards as elements of good parenting which among others are "opportunity for cognitive development; stability of close relationships; affection and trust and development of identity" (Campion qtd. in Seden 295). Thus Mrs. Weasley quickly enters the role of mother for the orphaned Harry and shows him how it is to be cared for and about. The Weasley family becomes a role model for Harry, someone he can look to and who teaches him the true meaning of family. They are the ones who teach him about his past, his family, and how to be a wizard.

Professor Dumbledore is the first to directly point out the neglect and cruelty Harry has suffered at the hands of his aunt and uncle. It is also the first time it is addressed without a humorous veil to dampen the blow. The Dursleys as well as the reader are suddenly faced with the seriousness of Harry's childhood and the abuse he has endured. The headmaster arrives at number four, Privet Drive to pick up Harry and quickly reveals his discontent with the Dursley's treatment of Harry: "'You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands'" (HBP 57). This sober attack on the Dursleys is unusual for the series. It functions as a reality check for the reader who may have previously laughed at Harrys misfortune in his foster home in Privet Drive. The reader is no longer comforted by the absurdity and comedy that has so often been implemented in the depiction of abuse, but the readers, along with the Dursleys, are forced to face the reality Harry has been living in for most of his life.

Dumbledore also makes Mr. and Mrs. Dursley aware of the mistreatment they have inflicted upon their biological son, Dudley, though the Dursley's are confused about this

statement: "'Us – mistreat Dudders? What d'you-?' began Uncle Vernon furiously" (HBP 57). They have always given him exactly what he wants, something Janet Seden believes makes Mr. and Mrs. Dursley inept parents for their son. Seden argues that the parents make him unfit for society outside of his home due to their extreme overindulgence (298). Mr and Mrs. Dursley's overfeeding of their son is made apparent in book four, when Dudley has "reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale" (GF 27), and their lavish celebration of Dudley's birthday portrays a set of parents spoiling their child rotten, perhaps beyond repair:

> 'Thirty-six,' he said, looking up at his mother and father. 'That's two less than last year.'
> 'Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mummy and Daddy.'
> 'Alright, thirty-seven then,' said Dudley, going red in the face.
> Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.
> Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger too, because she said quickly, 'And we'll buy you another *two* presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that alright?' (PS 21)

One can argue that his parents breed his narcissistic and spoiled traits, something which will in time make his life difficult, and should be considered as a form of child abuse as well.

"To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever" (PS 216). Dumbledore stated this when attempting to explain to Harry how love saved him from Voldemort during his first year at Hogwarts. It is also a powerful sentiment to how important and determinative love is for a child. In contrast to both Matilda and William, Harry spent his first year being cared for by both parents and living a normal life for a baby. Jerrold Brandell and Shoshana Ringell point to the fact that some attachment psychologists, such as Bowlby, argue that as long as a child has a loving and caring connection with a mother during its first two years of life, it will have an easier life than a child who has never known such a relationship (40). Although Harry was only attached to a caregiver half of what Bowlby stated was the seminal time for a child to have a safe attachment, it may have benefited him more than if he had moved in with the Dursleys at birth.

The mother figure is strong in the series. Lily Potter remains a saint-like figure in the books, being the one who saved Harry at infancy and again during his first year at Hogwarts. Misty Hook points to the fact that the author's mother died at a young age around the same time as Rowling was writing the first book of the series and that she may have transferred a lot of her own grief and sorrow onto Harry's shoulders (91). A mother's love protects Harry further throughout the series. Mrs. Weasley is a substitute for a real mother and provides him with the love, affection and guidance that he has not received from his adoptive mother. Molly's affection for Harry becomes clear in an argument with Sirius about what is best for Harry and his safety: "'He's not your son', said Sirius quietly. 'He's as good as' said Mrs. Weasley fiercely" (OP 83). Molly provides Harry with a safe home, if only temporary. In the final book of the series, Harry is again saved by a mother's love, though quite unexpectedly. Narcissa Malfoy, the mother of his enemy at Hogwarts, lies to Voldemort about Harry being dead in order to save her son, Draco. Even though she has always been a follower of Voldemort, she is willing to sacrifice him and his reign in hope of sparing her own son. Again, Voldemort underestimates the love a mother has for her child and her willingness to give up anything and anyone for him or her.

Blood holds a central position throughout the series, both in reference to which wizards and wizard-families are purely magical (pure-blood) and who might have muggles in their family (half-bloods and mud-bloods). However, Rowling also focuses on blood when referring to Harry's mother sacrificing herself to protect him. As long as her blood runs in his and Petunia's veins, he would be safe from Voldemort, protected by a mother's love and sacrifice. Even though Harry's mother is not present as a living character in the books, she manifests in Harry's imagination and several times through magical elements such as the Mirror of Erised (PS) and the Resurrection Stone (DH). The fact that her blood runs in his veins, keeps her alive within him. Though this may be a comforting thought, it is also desperately tragic. Harry can often see her, but never touch her, an agonizing concept for a young orphan boy.

Harry and his friends are occasionally faced with corporal punishment at school. It seems as though Hogwarts school has had to change their punishment methods over time, like some muggle institutions. The caretaker Mr. Filch, who functions as a comic relief throughout the story, often longs to punish the students with painful and medieval methods. When Harry is forced into Filch's office having left a trace of dirty mud after him, he sees "a highly polished collection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend the students

by their ankles from the ceiling" (CS 125). Again, violence towards minors is depicted comically and less alarming than it actually is. Filch is described as someone pitiable and sad and does not seem threatening to the reader. Even though he is full of bitterness and resentment towards the students and does not think twice when it comes to corporal punishment, he is never taken seriously.

Middleton writes of the ritual of punishment, when the various participants had different roles to play (267). The child who was to be punished should act submissive and would be punished on the basis of how little or much he or she would protest. Middleton reports that if a child quickly gave a cry in the process of being struck, the teacher would perhaps be satisfied and stop the violence. If the student was driven by pride, however, and would refuse to make a noise, the painful experience may last much longer. Rowling has created such a ritual in book five of the series when Professor Umbridge takes over as High Inquisitor of Hogwarts. As a ministry member, she is eager to stop any talk of Voldemort's return, and goes to extreme lengths to stop Harry from speaking his truth. After having been summoned to her office for what he thought would be repeatedly writing the line "I must not tell lies", it becomes clear to both Harry and the reader that as he writes with Umbridge's quill on a parchment, the words are magically etched onto his hand as if by a scalpel. The deeper the cuts, the clearer the lines on the parchment, written in his blood. "Harry did not ask when he would be allowed to stop. He did not even check his watch. He knew she was watching him for signs of weakness, and he was not going to show any" (OP 248). Harry refuses to give Umbridge the satisfaction of showing her that he is in pain, thus participating in the ritual of punishment as described by Middleton. This notion is further enhanced when Harry avoids telling his best friends Ron and Hermione about the torture he faces every day at the hands of his professor. "He felt dimly that this was between himself and Umbridge, a private battle of wills, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of hearing that he had complained about it" (OP 250). Even though Harry has been exposed to uncomfortable situations at the hands of his teachers before, Umbridge's detention represents a new and darker turn in the *Potter* series. It is both painful and highly inappropriate as Umbridge attempts to implement political censorship amongst her students. As Umbridge gains power at Hogwarts, she uses the same punishing method on any student who disobeys her, creating an atmosphere of terror and fear at the school. This is in line with the general development of the books, as the fifth book is the first in the series that depicts a world at war against evil, and where children are being fought by adult wizards who seek to kill them. Rowling has not implemented any humorous undertone or comic relief to make the reading of this segment more comfortable.

Umbridge is truly hated by the readers, the opposite of the Dursleys and the caretaker Mr. Filch, all of whom are portrayed as pathetic more than cruel.

Courtney Strimel in an article about how children read and perceive the terrors occurring in the *Potter* series, claims that children found the books helped them cope with terrors and terrorism in their own lives. The books contain acts of terror and evil against individuals such as Harry himself, but also depict situations that reflects acts of terrorism and war familiar in today's society. Robert Needlman argues that fantasy is a beneficial way for children to learn about dangers, and he claims that books that deal directly with sources for anxiety, might do more harm than good (Needlman qtd. in Strimel 37). The terror and abuse happen outside the child's danger zone, which allows the child reader insight into the scary elements without having to deal with it themselves. Hogwarts as a school under the leadership of Albus Dumbledore, makes the terror even more distant to the reader, as Hogwarts is often a safe place where classes and normal activities keep going however bad it may be in the outside wizarding world. It is said that Dumbledore is the only wizard Voldemort ever feared, and as long as the students are under Dumbledore's protection, they are safe.

Though Rowling uses humor to deflect the abuse and hardship in the series, Strimel argues that magic is what truly makes it psychologically safe for children to venture through the terrors of the story, and to identify them with the terrors of their own lives (37). And the *Potter* series *is* full of terror and darkness. Sally Hook questions whether Harry really needs to endure as much hardship as he does in order to be prepared for the final battle against Voldemort (91-92). She seems to think so, because even though Harry has faced abuse, neglect, dangers and public shaming at the hands of his aunt and uncle and parts of the wizarding world, he still has the ability to love and to be loved. Harry's resilience is strong and may perhaps be so because of the love and care he received from his parents during his first year of life.

To Harry's dismay, Dumbledore continuously states that love is the most powerful piece of magic, whenever Harry doubts whether he can beat Voldemort. Hook further argues that it is not only through nourishing, parental love that Harry has been able to develop as a human being and wizard, but through his grief which is "like a phoenix: it burns him up, only to help him emerge a stronger, better person." (Hook 92) However, grief does not exist without love and vice versa. Thus, Dumbledore turns out to be right all along. Harry does not fully realize this before the end of the last book, when he sacrifices himself for the wizarding world in the same way as Harry's mother did for him sixteen years prior. Despite the abuse

and neglect he has seen, the suffering and hardship, Harry is still willing to die for love, leaving Voldemort mortal once more.

Chapter 4: *Goodnight Mister Tom*

Goodnight Mister Tom is not as widely read as the *Harry Potter* series and *Matilda*. It is a children's historical novel and does not contain any magic or supernatural elements. The author, Michelle Magorian, does not allow for much humor or satire in the book, though it is still an entertaining and child friendly read. It tells the story of William Beech, a young boy who is sent away from the London bombings of the Second World War to the safe and remote village of Little Weirwold in the English countryside. He comes to live with Mister Tom, an old and remote man living with his dog, Sammy. It quickly becomes apparent that William is a nervous child, and gradually evidence of violent past abuse is revealed.

Through the narration of the story, the reader is allowed access to the minds of several of the characters through free indirect discourse, a technique used to convey character's thoughts or speech, in which the narration is written in third person when it normally should have been written in first person (Goring, Hawthorn & Mitchell 368). By customizing a narrator who can enter several of the characters' minds, the reader is exposed to information without it being explicitly stated by an all-knowing narrator. Maria Nikolajeva writes of what she believes is "a dialogical tension between two unequal subjectivities, the adult narrator and the child character" (173). She is specifically speaking of children's literature, and is questioning whether the adult author is truly able to be a non-partisan voice of a child character. In the beginning of the reading experience, the reader knows little about William's childhood. Along with Mister Tom, the reader gets to know William through a narrative voice that speaks both the inner dialogue of William and Mister Tom. The narrative voice speaks from inside the child's head, which can in itself be problematic as the author is an adult and not a child. Thus, the adult narrator has authority over the child character.

In the following excerpt, William's thoughts make it known to the reader that he has been beaten by his mother: "He was such a bad boy, he knew that. Mum said she was kinder to him than most mothers. She only gave him soft beatings. He shuddered. He was dreading the moment when Mr. Oakley would discover how wicked he was" (Magorian 6-7). In this case, Magorian conveys the fears of William, though from a third person as his thoughts about himself is not written in first person, but third person. Magorian uses language to make the inner dialogues more fitting and believable for each individual character. When portraying the thoughts of Mister Tom, the author uses Tom's dialect to underline that it is indeed his thoughts: "S'pose another pair of socks and one of them balaclava things wouldn't come amiss, he thought" (Magorian 33). There is no doubt that these are Mister Tom's thoughts, though again they are being conveyed by a separate narrator.

William has been exposed to continuous abuse throughout his childhood. He has been neglected, verbally and physically mistreated and at times starved. This sort of upbringing usually leads to the victim feeling unsafe in his own body, an inability to regulate one's own feelings and an incapacity to feel closeness to other people (Anstorp, Benum & Jakobsen 24). It also manifests itself in the person's self-image and feeling of self-worth which is clear in young Will. As discussed by Brandell and Ringel, Bowlby argues that a child's view of him- or herself is dependent on the mother's responses to them as a baby. Thus, the mother influences whether or not the child considers itself lovable or bad (44). Brandell and Ringel further state that Bowlby strongly believes that it is the mother more than anyone else who is the most important attachment figure in a child's life, and Will's lack of an attachment to a loving and caring mother might be deemed as catastrophic for the young boy's life and future. Bit by bit, the narrator presents indications of struggles at home and a mother who is not only physically abusive, but who also has a damaging psychological hold on her son, making him believe himself to be bad and worthless. This becomes quite clear through Tom's discoveries of William's bruises and the reader's access to William's thoughts about his mother and himself.

Erik Erikson claims that an infant is less in need of sufficient amounts of food and acts of love than a high-quality maternal relationship to obtain trust, something he deems as a "must" for childcare (249). We know little of William's infancy, but judging by his mother's treatment of Baby Trudy, William's little sister, it is not unlikely that she may have treated William in the same way. When he is forced to return to London, his mother is given a face and her own point of view for the first time in the book. When she sees that Will smiles at her, she seems afraid of losing the control that she's always had on her son, a common trait among abusive parents (Bruneau & Karlin 5): "The smile frightened her. It threatened her authority" (Magorian 211). William is afraid when he realizes that she has not changed as much as he has during their months of separation. "Willie was growing more and more confused, it was as if he was drifting into some bad dream" (214). His months in Little Weirwold has shown William how most parents treat their children, and he starts to recognize that his mother is not, and never has been, a good mother to him. During his stay with his mother in London, is the first and only time Magorian describes an explicit scene of violent abuse which is perhaps too graphic for young children. The severity of abuse that has been assumed by Mister Tom and the reader is finally confirmed.

In 1889, the *Children's Charter* was passed; "This enabled the state to intervene, for the first time, in relations between parents and children. Police could arrest anyone found ill-

treating a child and enter a home if a child was thought to be in danger" (Batty). Even though a simple beating might have been accepted by many in England during the 30's, it is clear that Mrs. Beech should have been reported early in Will's childhood. However, in the first part of the book, Magorian does not explicitly portray the abuse that William might have suffered at the hands of his mother. The reader is eased into Will's background as the author presents it through Mister Tom's guesses and William's thoughts of the past and future. This arguably leaves the reader knowing more about what Will has suffered than Will himself, as he does not recognize his treatment as abuse until the end of the book. He then realizes that his mother had not cared for him the way mothers do or should do, something that is not an uncommon trait among children who have suffered from an abusive childhood.

As corporal punishment was normal in the 30's, Mr. Barrett, Will's former school master in London, works as a stereotype of that educational philosophy: "He spent all day yelling and shouting at everyone and rapping knuckles" (9). William does not seem to be aware of the fact that adults should not hit children, not for disciplinary reasons or punishment, yet he is frightened of hos school master: "He dreaded school normally" (9) Sadly, that was the case for most children growing up with teachers who hit them (Middleton 261). When William arrives in Little Weirwold, his attitude towards school gradually changes. Initially, he cannot read or write, despite having attended school in London, and he is apprehensive and nervous at the thought of a new school. Ross A. Thompson states that children who have suffered from severe stress over a long time, are biologically inhibited when it comes to concentration, memory and focus (45). The result can often be that children who already suffer at home, suffer at school as well. Though, upon meeting Annie Hartridge who is to become his teacher, he seems calmer with the prospect. The fact that Magorian does not describe any corporal punishment at the school in Little Weirwold is arguably odd and unlikely, as it was regarded a normal method of discipling a child at school as well as home during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Middleton 255). It reflects a new and humane way of educating children which slowly became the norm. The author might have wanted to create a completely safe space for William in order for him to thrive academically. She may also have been influenced by the time she was writing in, as the 80's was a period of time in the U. K. when many worked hard to eliminate corporate punishment in schools. Magorian was a sympathizer for the abolishing of physical punishment and may have created the utopian school in Little Weirwold as a nod to her support of the cause.

According to Johan Cullberg's overview of Erikson's developmental stages for children, abuse between the ages 0-1 will damage the child's general trust in people

surrounding it. If the abuse continues to age 1-3, the child will develop an unhealthy amount of shame and self-doubt (Cullberg 26). A child who is continuously abused to age 8-9, as is the case for Will, will be embossed with guilt as well as inferiority. Even though the author does not relay a particular age that the abuse started, it can be argued that Will has been abused his whole life, as he shows signs of all the traits mentioned by Cullberg. When Will moves in with Mr. Tom, he is anxious, afraid and believes everything he does to be bad and wicked. He does not trust Mister Tom and believes the man will punish him with even more force than his own mother. He mistrusts the village doctor and most of the adults he meets. William is continuously gripped by feelings of shame and inferiority, which according to Johan Cullberg, is evidence that damage has been done to Will during the critical periods systematized by Erikson (26). He does not want people to see his bruises, not because he is ashamed of having a violent mother, but because he believes that they are symbols of *his* sins. He is self-deprecating and constantly filled with guilt towards his mother.

When being fed a normal meal, Will vomits as he does not seem to be used to a healthy amount of food. Thompson argues that infant's metabolism often slows down fairly quickly after birth if they are not provided with sufficient amounts of food. This is to prepare the infant for a life with unpredictable food resources (43). Will, who has lived in poverty with an unstable mother, has probably never gotten used to a constant food supply. The doctor of Little Weirwold seems to agree with Thompson's sentiment when Mister Tom brings him in for vomiting; "'Malnutrition,' the doctor remarked. 'Probably used to chips. All that good food might have been too much of an assault on his stomach'" (Magorian 42). Thus, Will does not only have to psychologically adapt to his new life in little Weirwold, but he needs to physically acclimate as well.

Slowly child-like impulses seem to appear in Will: "He had always been good at keeping still. It was wicked not to, he knew that, but he felt a desperate desire to leap and jump" (Magorian 96-97). Winnicott argues that if a child plays and has an urge to play either by himself or with others, the child will eventually be fine and become "a whole human being, wanted as such and welcomed by the world at large" (130). William suddenly wants to play with other village children and stops worrying about getting beaten if he gets his clothes dirty. A change happens in William as his life is gradually rebuilt with the help of his friends, Mister Tom and the rest of the village who all came together to help the sickly boy. He is being fed properly and starts to grow. He eventually stops wetting his bed, and without the stressful environment of potential physical violence and bullying, he learns how to read and write. He is exposed to what Thompson defines as "good stress", which leads to positive

development and behavior outcomes as they provide him with coping skills (46). An example of this is when Will plays a part in the school play. He is nervous and feels stress but achieves praise from his teachers and peers, something that leads to a feeling of accomplishment for young Will. He prospers in the right environment, and realizes he is not the one who is stupid or slow, but that he has been surrounded by the wrong people and care, however, he never states this explicitly. This works so perfectly that one might say the book is a propaganda for a certain view on life

There are several elements to the story that the author uses to show Will's development. Firstly, the change of his name seems to be a conscious component that Magorian uses for Will to "shed" his old self. "Willie", which is his mother's name for him, is associated with bullying and abuse for Will. When Will returns to London, he is again addressed as Willie, which is an example of how the author uses different names for William depending on the situation he is in. In this case, the use of Willie might be seen a symbol that order has been restored in the relationship between him and his mother, and that he again is under her control. Thus, when Zach, Will's new and outgoing friend, gives him the nickname Will, it is like a lifeline to a new time without the horrors of his past. It represents a stronger William who is not controlled by his mother, but who gains confidence and feelings of self-worth. William believes himself to consist of two people: Willie and Will. Upon seeing his mother when he returns to London, he reports: "He knew she wouldn't accept the Will part of him, only the Willie" (215). In other words, his mother would not tolerate Will if he was not completely submissive and insecure. Through the name change, it seems as though Will is able to leave a piece of the past behind. The bad and evil things happened to Willie, but not Will. It is perhaps a coping mechanism he has developed to remove himself from his mother and the life he led with her. The names can also reflect William's change of personality, with Willie perhaps playing off the word "willing", his willingness to be good and please his mother. As can the name Will point to William's new-found free will.

An important milestone in Will's development happens towards the end of the book when he visits his schoolteacher who has just had a baby. During this segment, William learns more about how a relationship between a mother and child ought to be. He witnesses a mother in awe of her child, giving her all the care and warmth Will's mother lacked. Initially, it seems as though Will seeks a sort of redemption by visiting his teacher and her newborn baby. When he sees that the new mother is soothing her child and stopping her sudden crying by breastfeeding her, William realizes that he would never have been able to provide baby Trudy with what she truly needed: "It wasn't his fault that she had died. He was still saddened

by her death but the awful responsibility that had weighed on him had now lifted" (Magorian 284). However, he does not seem to blame his mother either, which truthfully is a beautiful sentiment from an abused son to his mentally ill mother.

Will's relationship with his abuser, is different from that of Rowling's Harry Potter and Dahl's Matilda. While the two choose to ridicule and punish their oppressors, William is much more prone to follow his mother's orders and she is much respected by him throughout the story. Even after William has experienced what it is to be loved and cared for by his surroundings, he is still optimistic about seeing his mother. He does not confront her about his upbringing and how he has treated her. Neither William or Mister Tom ever speaks badly about Mrs. Beech, not even after she left Will and his baby sister locked in a cupboard to die. After her suicide, she is described as mentally ill, never as evil or bad. In this aspect, Magorian differs even more from Rowling and Dahl. While they portray the abusers of the story in an objectively bad light, Magorian seems to have a more neutral approach to the story's abuser, leaving the reader to make up his or her mind about Will's mother. For the child reader, however, it can be difficult to accept that her wickedness came from psychological disorder, and not conclude with the fact that she is simply an evil and irresponsible woman who detests children. Yet, this understanding of the human mind is also important to convey to children.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how child abuse has been depicted in children's literature with specific reference to Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom*. It has explored how the use of language in reference to humor, as well as likeable characters, can affect the child-reader and their understanding of physical and psychological violence inflicted upon a child by their parent, guardian and teachers. Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling apply humor to mask the abuse in *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series, while Michelle Magorian has chosen an explicit illustration of abuse when writing her novel *Goodnight Mister Tom*.

As discussed by Victoria Immel, children's literature changes and develops in line with the changing and development of the concept of childhood, a perception that has evolved greatly throughout the years (Immel 19). Thus, a children's book written in the early 19th century, may not be regarded as a suitable book for children today. The history of children's literature is briefly examined, as well as whether any books written by adults can be regarded as children's literature.

Maria Nikoajeva's article is discussed in the thesis, in reference to whether an adult author can truly enter the minds of his or her child characters. Nikolajeva believes there is a great discrepancy between what an adult author may believe a child might say, think or feel, and how a child truly acts. All three of the authors included in this thesis are adults writing about child characters, and their plausibility is therefore questioned. The three books/series contain a certain censorship of abuse. Rowling and Dahl chose to implement humor and satire in order to make the abuse and neglect easier to stomach for young readers, while Magorian has largely chosen the use of thoughts, and implicit memories to relay the abuse William has seen at the hands of his mother. Even though there are some extenuating factors in *Goodnight Mister Tom*, the book contains a much more explicit portrayal of child abuse than the two other books. A turning point happens in the middle of the book when Will returns to London to see his mother. That is the first and only time Magorian directly describes a violent beating from Will's mother.

The mother figure is central in all three books. It is perhaps the most prominent in the *Harry Potter* books and *Goodnight Mister Tom* but is also present in the shape of Miss Honey in *Matilda*. Harry is the only one with a caring and loving biological mother, and even though she was killed before the story started, she has a presence in all seven books. As Harry had experienced a healthy parent-child relationship in his first year of life, it seems to have helped

him withstand some of the abuse he saw and received at the Dursley's hands. Miss Honey is the first to see and acknowledge Matilda's exceptional talent, and she quickly takes on a motherlike role for the young girl. However, whether Miss Honey is a good role model for Matilda is questionable as she seems unable to care for herself without the help of her young pupil. The mother character is key in *Goodnight Mister Tom,* though in a different way than the two other novels. In accordance with Bowlby's idea that the mother is the most decisive factor in how a child perceives itself later in life, Will is a slave to his mother's image of him. Will is full of shame, guilt and has low self-worth, all in which are directly correlated with abuse in his childhood, according to Cullberg (26). However, Magorian includes another mother character in the shape of Mrs. Hartridge who eventually shows Will what a loving and caring mother looks like.

Humor and satire often muffle and even overshadow much of the violence and abuse that happens in *Matilda* and the *Harry Potter* series. The reader does not fully take in the hardship of these child-characters as they are often smarter, wittier and more sensible than their parents and guardians. The Dursleys and the Wormwoods are disarmed early in the stories as their younger counterparts regularly outsmart them. Magorian has not implemented any humor in her story, making it a heavier read than the other two. Even though she at times uses child-like narration to depict the abuse, it can be painful to read. While we laugh at Harry and Matilda's abuser, we fear Will's mother, and the adult reader may even pity her after it is stated that she is mentally ill. Mental illness as a source of cruelty may be difficult for the child reader to fully fathom, and most will arguably believe she is mean and evil.

Corporal punishment in schools is also humoristically depicted in Dahl's and Rowling's books. With characters like Miss Trunchbull and Argus Filch the violence and abuse in school become absurd and unbelievable. Potter's Professor Umbridge and Magorian's Mister Barrett are different in that their depictions are stripped of any comic relief and reflect the threat of violence in schools.

Harry and Matilda manage to stand up against their oppressors on their own and do not show any signs of developmental disturbances. The hero-like traits that are to be found in both Harry and Matilda are enhanced when one realizes that they both come from families who bully, neglect and abuse them. Arguably, Magorian describes a much more realistic life for an abused child. William needs help and luckily receives it, but is not portrayed as a child hero like the other two characters. He is much more vulnerable and is likely a lot more relatable for a child who may have suffered abuse and neglect at the hands of a close family member. Magorian has depicted a complex abuser compared to the two other literary works.

Will's mother is a religious fanatic as well as mentally ill, while the Dursleys and the Wormwoods are depicted as one-dimensional bullies who are objectively bad. However, the child reader may read Will's mother in the same way as it might be difficult for them to understand how mental illness can drive someone to do bad things. Thus, *Goodnight Mister Tom* may be a good source to talk to children about abuse and how it might originate. Though speaking to our child readers about what is actually happening to Harry and Matilda behind the veil of laughter and comic relief is vital.

The work on this thesis has revealed that there is limited research on the depiction of child abuse in children's literature. Many young readers do not recognize Harry and Matilda's childhood as abusive. The authors arguably convey that if your parents or guardians are showing violent or threatening behavior, not much can be done, and it is up to the child itself to get him or herself out of the situation. As the *Harry Potter* series and *Matilda* are both highly popular among children and young people, it is certain that the notion of saving oneself reaches victims of child abuse. Both Harry and Matilda emerge stronger after their hardship which is not necessarily a healthy message to suggest to children.

Further research could focus on how children react to some of our most popular children's books, and how they respond to much of the hardship the child characters are exposed to. It could delve into whether children read them as pure entertainment without thinking more about it, or whether they have thoughts and musings around Harry and Matilda's childhoods.

End Notes

As I have included all seven books from the Harry Potter series, I refer to the first initials from the books in the text. An overview can be seen here:

Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone - PS

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets - CS

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban - PA

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire - GF

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix - OP

Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince - HBP

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - DH

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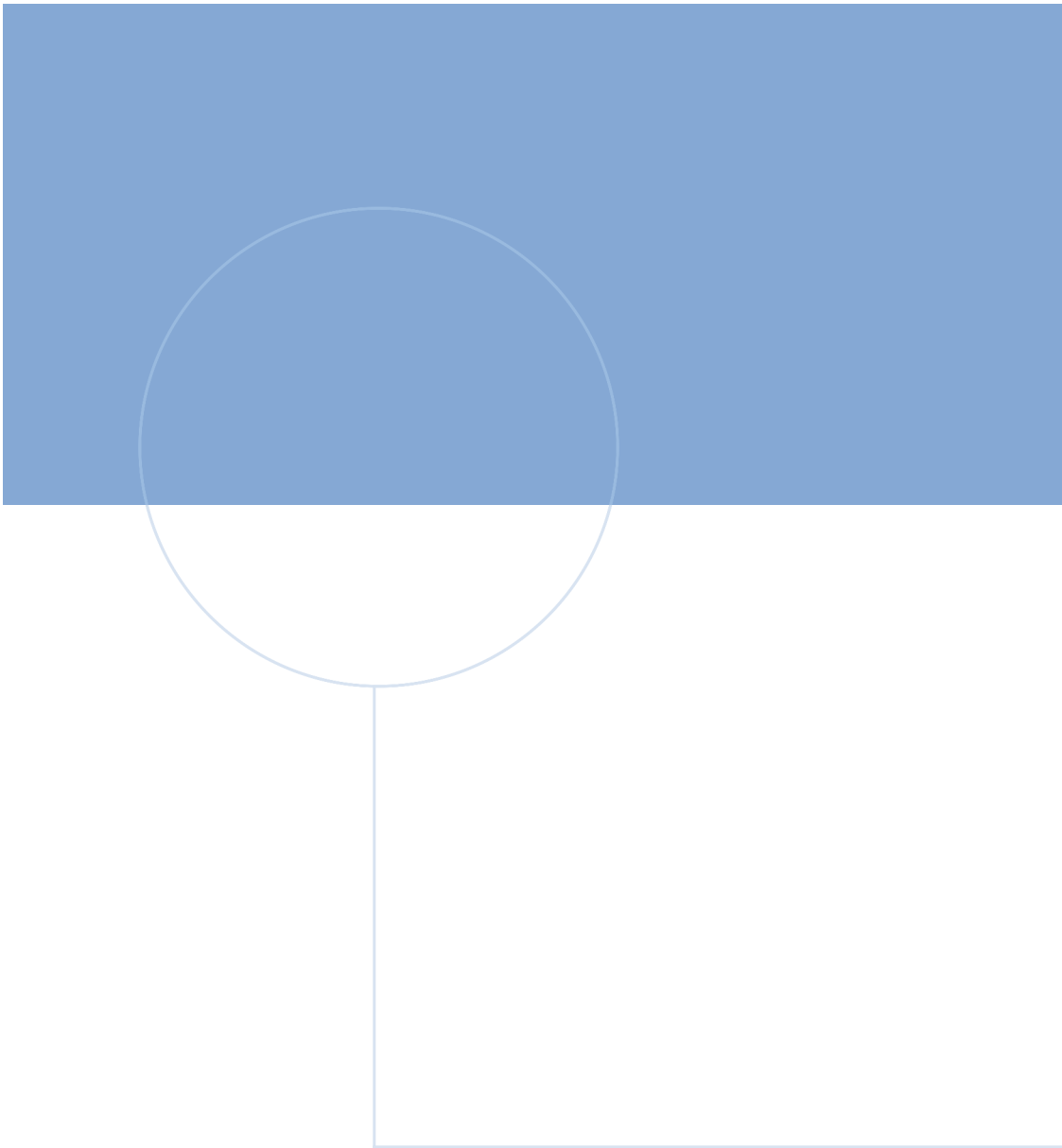
Appendix

The relevance of this thesis to my work in the Norwegian educational system

Most of my future students will most likely be familiar with the works of Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling, whose books can be useful to discuss and analyze. Looking at how various authors choose to depict child abuse can lead to an interesting discussion as to how one might perceive things differently, depending on how the abuse is communicated. It is important for the students to understand how much power the communicator is in possession of, and how the author can easily control the reader's view and opinion about a cause. It may be harmless when reading a children's book meant to entertain, however, it is vital that a reader is made aware of the influence they may be under.

As the thesis touches upon psychological aspects as well, its content may be useful in the psychology classroom in addition to the English classroom. It can be an interesting gateway into discussing attachment and attachment deficits in children, especially Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom*. Using literary characters as case studies may help motivate students, and perhaps increase reading in schools.

Additionally, it is important for a teacher to never shy away from the topic of child abuse even if it is uncomfortable or perhaps triggering. By discussing it openly in a classroom, it may give an abused student the strength to seek out a trusted adult. The worst thing an educator can do is to look the other way when it comes to their students being in need or pain. A discussion like the one in this thesis, may be a channel into such a conversation. Many students may not even be aware that they are living in an abusive home, and even less what to do to get help. By using loved children's books to start a conversation about abuse, students may be more prone to listen and contribute to the conversation. It may be a safer way for many to think and speak about violence and psychological abuse against children than speaking of actual cases of abuse.



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