

ROALD DAHL'S NONSENSE POETRY: A METHOD IN MADNESS

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ABSTRACT

Following on the footsteps of writers like Louis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Dr. Seuss, Roald Dahl's nonsensical verses create a realm of semiotic confusion which negates formal diction and meaning. This temporary reshuffling of reality actually affirms that which it negates. In other words, as long as it is transitory the 'nonsense' serves to establish more firmly the authority of the 'sense.' My paper attempts to locate Roald Dahl's verse in the field of literary nonsense in as much as it avows that which it appears to parody. Set at the brink of modernism these poems are a playful inditement of Victorian conventionality. The three collections of verses Rhyme Stew, Dirty Beasts, and Revolving Rhyme subvert social paradigms through their treatment of censorship and female sexuality. Meant primarily for children, these verses raise a series of uncomfortable questions by alienating the readers with what was once familiar territory.

KEYWORDS: Roald Dahl's Poetry, Subversion, Alienation, Meaning, Nonsense

INTRODUCTION

The epistemological uncertainty that manifested itself during the Victorian mechanization reached its zenith after the two world wars. "Even signs must burn." says Jean Baudrillard in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*(1981).The metaphor of chaos was literalized in works of fantasy and humor in all genres. The last one to be effected was perhaps poetry which was considered least compatible with the newly spun fantastic narratives.¹ It was in poetry however, that the true potential of the chaos was realized. Nonsense verse in a unique unsentimental and subversive style took the literary world by storm. Edward Lear's *The Book of Nonsense* (1846) and Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* (1871) set the tone for all future nonsense verse and theirs is the legacy that Roald Dahl claims and fashions in his own way. This paper considers Roald Dahl's poetic works of 1980s namely *Revolting Rhymes*(1982), *Rhyme Stew*(1989) and *Dirty Beasts*(1983) to show how in their whimsical subversion of normativity, nonsense may be deeply meaningful.

The more famous of these, the *Revolting Rhymes* are based on tradition fairy tales and derive their titles as well as a part of their plot from them. His retelling these however is a parody of the original with his trademark unpredictability of plot and content. In it, Dahl parodies six popular tales in his own humorous fashion. The very title of his first collection of poems *Revolting Rhymes*² plays upon the reader's presuppositions. The instinctive association of the word 'rhyme' to the texts like "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" consists of a play on words, which are pleasing to the ear with a twist of nonsensical elements loaded with significance. With this, the poet juxtaposes the word "Revolting" which suggests horror and disgust. The language is colloquial with smatterings of swear words. It is a style that ". . . clashes with the sentimental tone of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Perrault..." (*The Greenwood Encyclopedia of*

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Tzvetan Todor says, ". . . metaphoric nature of poetry makes it inimical to the fantastic."

² Encountering Sutherland's 1985 *Politics of Attack*

Folktales and Fairy Tales 249). Most of these are a critique on the “bourgeoisification of fairy tale” as the narrator explains that the adults censure the truth into “sappy” versions of the story “just to keep children happy” (*The Greenwood Encyclopedia* 249). The second in the series is *Dirty Beasts* is a collection of animal tales that consist of nine unusual tales of unsuspecting animals. These animals are grotesque exaggerations of the traits that they are known for and the stories revolving them are uncanny. In other words they are the perfect recipe to feed a child’s imagination. These small verse-fables are made deliberately coarse to cater to a child’s love for the unsophisticated. Dahl’s last and perhaps more serious collection, called *Rhyme Stew*, is as the name suggests a concoction of rhymes on various subjects. It contains fairy tales, nursery rhymes as well as Dahl’s original rhymes and it is set apart from the rest of his collection by the use of explicit sexual references that render the work unsuitable for children of a certain age. On one hand, by adding a sense of vulgarity that attracts children, Dahl deliberately alienates adult readers from his corpus of rhymes. On the other hand the sexual undertones of his verse compel a deeper reflection into the boundaries that divide children and adult literature.

The familiar title of the poem like “Cinderella” is immediately followed by a disclaimer “you think you know this story. You don’t . . .” (*Revolt Rhyme* 2) Dahl immediately unfamiliarizes the familiar and ensures that the reader is in no way a passive recipient but an active participant. The absurd composition and the alienating style of verse is what Bakhtin would have called “grotesque” owing to the fact that it is so near to the familiar and yet evokes an unsettled sense of unfamiliarity. This distancing or ‘othering’ serves to place a distorted mirror in front of the original. This mirror like that in the *Through the Looking Glass* unsettles the idea of identity and of a concrete individual.

The excited horror or ecstasy comes from the Greek idea of *ecstasis* which literary means ‘being out of’ or ‘beside’ oneself. Along with pleasure comes a degree of displeasure; an individual’s identity is simultaneously reaffirmed and fragmented. As with the works of Lewis Carol, the fragmentation is only momentary, however even as one moves away from the mirror, one’s perception is altered ever so slightly. In dealing with traditional fairy tales common to children all over the world (“Jack and the Beanstalk”, “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Little Red Riding Hood”, etc.) and then subverting all conventions of those fairy tales, Dahl engages in the modern epistemological problems – what is reality? Does it exist at all?

This epistemological uncertainty is perhaps central to understanding Dahl’s verse. In many ways they are ‘dialogic’ in their constant engagement with all that existed prior to them. Bakhtin speaks of Dostoevsky’s novels when he says:

nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future. (Bakhtin 166)

In other words, multiple realities mean more than mere fragmentation of self, they indicate that the reality is a dynamic construct constantly being restructured and redefined. Dahl creates a similar world in his three collections of verse. *Revolt Rhyme* being Dahl’s first collection shows his power over words and his ability to manipulate rhymes to deviate from norm all the while strengthening the message that the seemingly nonsensical verse hides- reality is a construct and one must be shocked into seeing beyond it. His use of colloquial language is instrumental in creating a confiding and private tone, as if drawing the readers into a sequestered space where all rules are suspended.

In “Cinderella”, the values that a female protagonist is known for, i.e. servitude, kindness, genteelness, beauty etc. (‘marriageable-ness’) are subverted and new values are added in their stead. Cinderella of the poem is ‘Cindy’ who, we are

never told is beautiful. She runs out of the ball in her underwear and speaks in the common coarse tongue. Little red riding hood is not the hapless victim that we come across in Grimm's version. Dahl's Red Riding Hood carries a pistol in her knickers and shoots her oppressor. On a later encounter with the narrator she gives him the following greeting, "Hello, and do please note /'My lovely furry WOLFSKIN COAT.'" (*Revolt Rhyme* 19) She even masters her wolf hunting skills to a height where she is called in for assistance by the third little pig in "Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf". She promptly kills the wolf and goes on to kill the pig too. She fashions a second wolf skin coat and a pigskin travelling case. Dahl succinctly sums up in moral two lines – "Ah, Piglet, you must never trust /Young ladies from the upper crust." (*Revolt Rhyme* 22) Women in Dahl's Fairy Tales are therefore, not damsels in distress but empowered pistol wielding, outspoken individuals with agency.

In *Rhyme Stew* the women are sexually empowered and express their libido openly, much to the discomfort of others. In "Dick Whittington and His Cat" Mrs. Hellespont is not only adulterous but also after being shot on her 'rump' by her husband, scandalously asks the pantry-boy Dick to run away with her. In "The Emperor's New Clothes" some of the queen's ladies gaze at the emperor who was essentially nude, and enjoy the sight of the 'royal treasures.' The use of a metaphor in place of the phallus indicates among other things the mature contents of the poem. Women are not threatened by a display of male sexuality, rather they enjoy it. "Hey Diddle Diddle" appears to be a celebration of prostitution as the women who are all in a 'fiddle' "work by the light of the moon" and "only take cash." "Hot and cold" is yet another poem about a sexually experienced woman and an equally inexperienced man. In "Mary, Mary" being asked how her garden grows, Mary replies that she was a single mother living in an crowded apartment and has no idea about gardens. Dahl's women therefore, especially those in *Rhyme Stew* are urban dwelling, defiant, sexually promiscuous and outspoken.

Dirty Beasts like the name suggests, does not deal with people, rather it deals with an assortment of various animals that are vicious and unnatural. The order of the world as we know it turned topsy turvy in a carnivalesque celebration of the lesser species. Hunter become hunted in "Pig" as the very learned and precocious pig end up eating the farmer who would have had him turned to bacon.³ "Lion", "Crocodile" and "Scorpion" are similar poems, each preying on the adolescent fear for the uncanny animals. The poems speak of fear with a levity that is atypical of children's literature where even though the content suggests grimness, the style only reassures the child of the fictional nature and transience of danger. The exaggerated beast fables where the animal consumes the spoilt child may be a disciplinarian or didactic approach to parenting and child nurture. Dahl, even in the most rudimentary works does not forget to play with semantics of the English language; in the "Ant-Eater" the creature ends up eating the relative of his owner as it unable to lexically distinguish between 'ant' and 'aunt'. "The Tummy Beast" is by far the most Kafkaesque of Dahl's rhymes. The poem is about an obese child who complains that he has a beast living inside him that makes his over eat. What initially appears to be childish banter is later turned into grotesque and uncanny horror as the person in his stomach makes his presence felt. Dahl brings into our attention just how unnerving children's tales can be if they were indeed true; if cows could sprout wing; if one were to encounter a giant frog in the depth of a forest. It is Dahl's genius that makes the rhymes so unpredictable, he places them in the liminal space between the real and the fantastic, and thereby the reader's willing suspension of disbelief is frequently subjected to scrutiny and dissolution.

³ It may perhaps be interesting to compare the poem with Dahl's short story of the same name. The short story ends with the death and consumption of the protagonist as he is slaughtered in the slaughterhouse to make the very meat pie that he had come to admire.

The rhymes, despite being exclusively for children are explicitly postmodern adult literature. Written upon the palimpsest of the works of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson and Charles Perrault, these poems engage in free play of meaning within an existing structure. Each rhyme is written with a disclaimer – ‘this story has been narrated before, however *my* version is the true version’ says Dahl. The true versions of the stories, thus far hidden, “to keep children happy”, Cinderella and Snow White fall from their former fairy tale grace and while the former is referred to as a ‘slut’, the latter aids her seven dwarf friends in gambling. Goldilocks is no longer the flaxen-haired girl who escapes the home of the three bears, she is a trespasser portrayed in a ruthlessly unflattering light - a ‘freak’, a ‘little beast’ etc. here Dahl reminds us time and again that his work is a parody (‘in the book...’ and ‘the famous story’). In the same poem, Dahl makes a subtle reference to the absurdity of censorship:

And uses *one* disgusting word
 That luckily you’ve never heard.
 (I dare not write it, even hint it.
 Nobody would ever print it.) (*Revolting Rhyme* 15)

Dahl spends four lines dealing with a word that he cannot deal with. Vulgarity and debauchery are absent presences in the verse, Dahl treads around them, even toes the line, all to keep a child’s intrigue. Dahl makes children’s fairy tales and fables the center of his work, but around this center he allows a considerable amount of free play.

a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered (Derrida 224)

The adult world is always already there and inescapable, Dahl’s work acknowledges it and in the process of doing so ameliorates some of the tension felt by a writer for children.

Dahl speaks of perverse sexual practices (or at least hints at them). In “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”, “Open Sesame” is a magical spell that opens not just the entrance to the cave and to all the mythical treasure that every child is familiar with, it opens all doors. Ali Baba is a gentleman turned voyeur as he travels through expensive hotels and gets an insight into the dirty underbelly of the rich and powerful. People are allegedly in their underwear with a goat asleep beside them.

Such oblique references to bestiality are easily missed by a child but an adult is quick to frown upon the mature content of what the words imply. These unusual sexual practices lead the observer with a loss of faith in humanity, especially the richer classes. Bestiality and voyeurism are casually strewn across such verse in *Rhyme Stew*. Human beings are likened to animals whereas animals in the collections *Dirty Beast* and *Revolting Rhyme* are highly humanized. The wonderfully clever “Pig” who contemplates the meaning of life in *Dirty Beast* and the starved “Ant-Eater” in the same collection, who makes a very human mistake by confusing ‘ant’ and ‘aunt’, are more human than some grotesque humanoid people that the rhymes deal with. It is this semblance to human nature that makes these animals uncanny and familiar, it is also this semblance that remind us of ritualistic cannibalism when they eat a farmer or an aunt. The French people in “The Toad and the Snail” resemble the “Tummy Beast” of the eponymous poem in their omnivorous nature. The beast inside the little boy’s tummy forces him to eat, the French come to the streets with knives and forks as they see a giant magic frog and do not feel dissuaded when the frog turns into a giant snail as after all escargot is one of their

delicacies. Uncanny, as Freud tells us is only disconcerting because of its close relationship with that which is familiar. It is an unsettling reminder that the slightest alterations in reality and bring us face to face with an altogether unfamiliar world.⁴

Dahl frequently makes a reference to the act of writing itself, often contrasting the approach of the earlier writers with his own. In doing so, he effectively breaks down the fourth wall. We are made distinctly aware that he is not telling a story, rather he is retelling it. Especially interesting is "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp"⁵. Dahl's Aladdin is a supplement to the eastern folktale of a petty thief with a magic lamp that grants wishes. Aladdin, contrary to the popular Disney version, did not wish for a romanticized fairy tale and a 'happily ever after' with the beautiful princess, instead he asked to be a genie too. Aladdin is now not the one with the wishes but the one who grants them. He is the divine inspiration, or the heavenly muse that overlooked and inspired artistic geniuses like Mozart and Shakespeare. Dahl's own creative genius is brought into question as he may be one of the wanderers who stumble upon the lamp and make a name for themselves. The text speaks directly to the reader and whimsically suggests that someday 'you' might be the one who comes across this lamp.

Dahl's ideology is reflected in his treatment of the fairy tales. Despite being meant for children, the diction sets his work apart from the rest of the genre even as his colorful word play leads to deferral of meaning and even meaninglessness. All tropes of the classic folk tale and fairy tale, like the image of the hero/ heroin, order of the food chain, moral transparency etc. are suspended. Even the verses that have a two line moral at the end of them, in the style of classic fables only project Dahl's own twisted value system. The story of Jack teaches the kids that bathing every day is a good idea, but Snow White tells us that "Which shows that gambling's not a sin / Provided that you always win.", the Little Pig is taught a lesson in how one must never trust girls from the upper crust. Some lessons are more poignant than the others, Dick Whittington is finally made aware that London is not a city of dreams with pavements of gold; it is in fact a dystopia of swindlers. "In London no one tells the truth!" Another poem that deals with the lesson of caution while dealing with people is "The Tortoise and the Hare" where they are both ripped off by a rat. "The Price of Debauchery" deals with a protective mother's instructions to her daughter about "some foul disease" which could only be a reference to a sexually transmitted disease.

Sutherland in his work on children's literature states that the ideology expressed in children's literature is usually generalized and universal in nature; it does not generate new ideas and persuade the readers to agree with them, rather it "simply affirms ideologies generally prevalent in the society." (Carrington 149) Dahl's texts deconstruct themselves, his carefully worded fairy tales only help to reaffirm the absence of truth in them. The portrayal of heroes and heroines the happy ending is finally exposed to be too good to be true. It makes a promise:

Come follow me, you troubled things
 I'll take you on my silver wings
 To safety, to a lovely place
 Where you can live in peace and grace!

⁴ Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" (German Unheimlich, simply means unfamiliar)- this essay speaks of a phenomenon very similar to what this paper talks about.

⁵ It is interesting to compare this with Dahl's short story, "The Great Automatic Grammatizator"

And soon after breaks it. In the place we travel to, our willing suspension of disbelief falters as it encounters glimpses of reality. Intertextuality leads to the creation of a new reality. By conjoining several tales and myths, Dahl takes a stride in the direction of myth making and poetic free play.

What Thomas Schultz in his incongruity theory of humor calls “nonsense” is the same as Ludwig Wittgenstein’s sinnlos (senseless); it is one of the governing aspects of Thomas More’s Utopia and it is one of Postmodernism’s central concerns. As Baudrillard says, “If we could accept this meaninglessness of the world, then we could play with forms, appearances and our impulses, without worrying about their ultimate destination...” This is exactly what Roald Dahl goes on to do in his verse. Linguistic elements are manipulated and logic is suspended to give way to temporal anarchy. Dahl’s portrayal of children’s fables is more realistic to a child’s everyday life and more accurate to their daily experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Beneath the veneer of nonsense, Roald Dahl’s poetry hides a deeply philosophical commentary on life during his times and life in general. The “madness” of the poems is extremely deceptive and so is the common assumption that Dahl’s target audience was children. Much of children’s literature stands for a shared cultural experience, for these are the stories that most people belonging to a certain class are familiar with. Roald Dahl challenges the complacency provided by such shared, similar experiences by taking such tales that one has grown up with and altering a single detail so that the story becomes an uncanny semblance of its former self. By doing so, Dahl unfamiliarizes and alienates his audience and often causes a sense of shock and alienation. Such subversion serves to make the audience active participants in his tales rather than passive readers. Nonsense serves as a methodical commentary on life through the collective attributed meanings given to it by the reader.

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