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「砍掉她的頭！」：羅爾德·達爾的《反叛的童謠》(1982) 及其電影
改編 (2016) 中對暴力的表達與分析

“Off with Her Head!” :

A Comparative Study of Violence in Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes*
(1982) and Jakob Schuh and Jan Lachauer’s *Revolting Rhymes* (2016)

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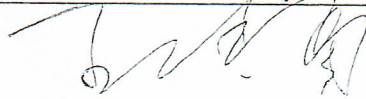
本論文係黃淑祺君 (R08122010) 在國立臺灣大學外國語文學系、所完成之碩士學位論文，於民國 111 年 8 月 19 日承下列考試委員審查通過及口試及格，特此證明

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張弘潔



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I heard about Roald Dahl's *Revoltin' Rhymes* for the first time when I was a freshman at The Open University of Hong Kong (now Hong Kong Metropolitan University). It was briefly mentioned by a Professor in an introductory course. But something about the work has stuck to me since, and today, I am completing my master's degree at National Taiwan University, with *Revoltin' Rhymes* as the centre of my dissertation.

Along the journey of completing this research, I would like to first acknowledge the generous support and instruction from my supervisor Professor Manuel Herrero-Puertas, whose genuine passion and dedication to literature never cease to motivate me to always try to achieve more. I am also immensely grateful for all the love and care from my classmates and friends. In particular, the companionship of May Lim, Sinead O'Connor, Adrienne Chung, Fu-hsuan Hsu, and Minnie Rangsimakarn have blessed me with encouragement and laughter.

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摘要

本論文從敘事和視覺呈現的角度分析及比較了羅爾德·達爾 (Roald Dahl) 的《反叛的童謠》(1982) 及由雅各布·舒 (Jakob Schuh) 和簡·拉肖爾 (Jan Lachauer) 執導的同名動畫電影改編作品。有關暴力在兒童文學作品中正當性的討論長期處於兩極分化，在此背景下，本論文的分析提供了一個有助於克服兩極分化的新角度。暴力長期以來一直是兒童文學不可或缺的元素，在批判童年研究的理論框架下審視暴力，可以對「兒童」在兒童文學中的地位及媒介價值進行新的解讀。

關鍵詞：兒童文學、暴力、童謠、童話、批判童年研究

Abstract

This thesis examines Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and its animated-film adaptation *Revolting Rhymes* (2016), directed by Jakob Schuh and Jan Lachauer, in terms of their narrative and visual presentation of violence. In times when opinions on the legitimacy of violence in Children's Literature are polarized, such analysis offers a new analytical axis that helps to overcome polarization. In this thesis, it is argued that violence has long been an indispensable element in Children's Literature, and examining violence under the theoretical framework of Critical Childhood Studies allows a new interpretation on the role and agency of "children" in Children's Literature.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Violence, Nursery Rhymes, Fairy tales, Critical Childhood Studies

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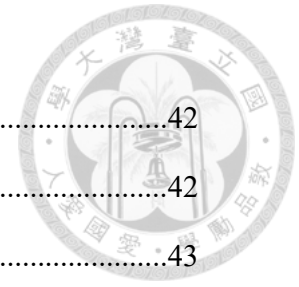
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Chapter One

Introduction

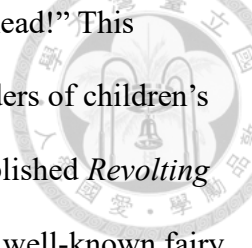


"Most writers are old farts who quickly become pompous and adult in their views. If only children could write well themselves, but they can't. It takes an adult who can still think as a child with half their personality. Someone like me, a jokey old bastard."

– Dahl (qtd. in Toynbee 17)

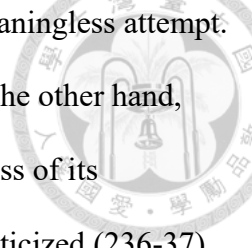
“Off with Her Head” alludes to that famous scene in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) in which the Queen of Hearts ruthlessly orders the beheading of anyone she dislikes. Interestingly, actual beheadings were left for readers to imagine on their own. The action is never executed or described visually in Carroll’s novel, as Gryphon – a character in the novel – points out to Alice: “It’s all [the Queen’s] fancy, that: they never executes nobody, you know” (139). Such an omission of explicit violence in Children’s Literature calls for no questioning. During the Victorian era (1837-1901), when *Alice* was published, literary production was dominated by moral tales. *Alice* was deemed unconventional with its less emphasis on obvious moral lessons and stronger emphasis on entertaining children. People’s idea of both children and childhood was then similarly directed towards a natural innocence that should be preserved at all costs. Such conception can be seen when Henry Cole initiated the practice of including color illustrations in children’s books in order to unleash children’s free imagination and natural qualities. Cole disliked the “traditionally violent climax” in “Little Red Riding Hood,” and created instead “an alternative happy ending in which the virtuous heroine is rescued by her father” (Butts 89), as if it were “unnatural” for children to be amused by a “violent climax.”

A century later, Roald Dahl executed and presented the beheading to children audiences – except it was performed on Cinderella’s stepsisters, and was ordered not by



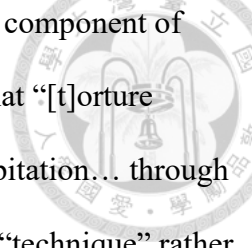
the Queen of Hearts but the Prince, who too dictated: “Off with her head!” This variation shares with the original the unexpectedness it brings to readers of children’s books, likely to be both children and adults. In 1985, Roald Dahl published *Revolting Rhymes*, a collection of six nursery rhymes, each one adapted from a well-known fairy tale. This work received much praise and criticism, with the beheading plot often as a bone of contention. The two extreme ends of the debate can be aptly summarized by Maureen Nimon’s statement concerning our contemporary time: “There is no time like the present [late twentieth century] to seek to exclude violence from children’s literature or to permit its inclusion only in ways of which we approve” (4). Worthy of attention, the visual presentation of the beheading was kept in the collection’s animated version in the 1990s as well as in its 2016 film adaptation without any omission or alteration, denoting the irreplaceable quality that violence has in children’s literature and its continuous appearance in various adaptations and media forms. I propose that the plot carries such significance not because it is the most vividly gruesome part of the story, leaving a stark visual impression on readers’ minds, but because it precisely exhibits the story’s central moral that violence and misfortunes randomly occur in life. Given such arbitrariness, it is thus deceptive to assume violence takes place *only* with the good intention to stimulate our resilience. In fact, an objective, realistic view should be adopted in witnessing violence, and focus should be placed on how one’s resilience and resourcefulness are the sole resolution to confront life’s misfortunes and violence.

In order to understand how Dahl utilizes violence in his works, it is serviceable to look back at how violence was previously perceived. In his “Critique of Violence” (1921), Walter Benjamin states that there are two dominant categories of violence: natural law and positive law. From the perspective of natural law, which is mostly adopted by legal philosophy, violence is a natural product, a “raw material” of the



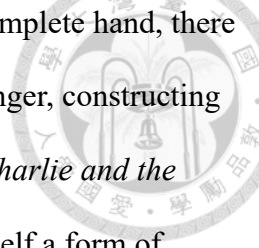
human race, therefore, trying to frame it as moral or immoral is a meaningless attempt. Instead, its effectiveness as a means should be the only concern. On the other hand, positive law regards violence as fundamentally problematic: regardless of its justifiable—or not—ends, all means involving violence should be criticized (236-37). Their ostensible differences notwithstanding, the two views both agree that “just ends can be attained by justified means, [and] justified means used for just ends.” Yet Benjamin finds the resolution erroneous and distracting because it not only fails to define violence, but also excludes likely circumstances in which the “justified” means and ends can appear in “irreconcilable conflict.” Benjamin believes in the undefinable nature of violence, and the futility of naming it moral or immoral. He proposes to narrow the focus to the “justification of certain means that constitute violence” (237). By employing the lens of legality, we can avoid the contradiction between “violent means as a natural pursuit of humans” and “the maintaining of a legal system,” in which the latter seeks to constraint humans’ initial drive to adopt violence. However, as the concept reveals to Benjamin how man-made law monopolizes violence as a tool to eliminate an individual’s hold of violence in order to perpetuate the law itself, he turns to consider his initial statement a potential dogma too (238-9). Instead of trying to locate violence in a humanistic context and define it, looking at violence’s nature guides us to acknowledge its randomness.

While Benjamin claims that the “means that constitute violence” should be scrutinized, Michel Foucault’s observation on violence confers us a means to do so. Concerning humans’ maneuvering of violence and its multifaceted effects, Foucault further examined, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), the violence allowed and imposed by man-made law as a means to sustain violence itself. His detailed account of the many forms of capital punishment included in the 1670



regulations of general penal practice in France emphasizes the visual component of violence in public spectacles of torture. The account also mentions that “[t]orture constitutes an accurate calculation of pain and hierarchy, “from decapitation... through hanging, the stake and the wheel... to quartering.” Torture, thus, is a “technique” rather than “an extreme expression of lawless rage” (33-34). In particular, torture harnesses a long-lasting effect on both the tortured individual(s) and the beholders, and resultantly establishes those punished as wicked individuals. Compatible with this effect is the fear of being grouped as punishable by the establishment. Unlike other punishments such as deprivation of property and imprisonment, violent punishments are designed to be witnessed and linger in witnesses’ memories. For Foucault, “torture does not reconcile”; it imprints on “the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced; in any case, men will remember public exhibition, the pillory, torture and pain duly observed” (34). This means that torture’s power relies on being witnessed and feared. I contend that the idea of construing violence as a deliberate, calculated act in which designed visual and contextual components answer meaningful purposes endows us with an insight beyond the physical reach of violence. Instead, we are able to see violence at the center of a web of impact, and how it reflects the dynamics among the executors, sufferers, and beholders.

With the discussion including the intangible effects of violence, violence can thus be interpreted as a mode of representation, which reveals deeper connotations. To put this observation into Dahl studies, the affordance of deconstructing violence as a symbol would then be discovering the complex role violence plays in limning life’s misfortunes. Much of Dahl’s children’s fiction portrays violence on a wider scale. In *The Witches*, Grandma’s missing finger is a recurring indication of an unfinished episode of violence. While she fails to hunt down The Grand High Witch, Grandma lost



one of her fingers in an encounter with the witches. Just like the incomplete hand, there is now a notch in the little boy's surrounding that signals pending danger, constructing the world they are in as one pervaded by potential violence. As for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the impoverished state of the Bucket family is itself a form of violence that causes versatile effects. Poverty strikes them without any just reasons, and them without the power to fight back. The Buckets are left to passively endure deficiency and malnutrition, in which Charlie most starkly shows such violence's gradual effects: "Every day, Charlie Bucket grew thinner and thinner. His face became frighteningly white and pinched. His skin was drawn so tightly over the cheeks that you could see the shapes of the bones underneath. It seemed doubtful whether he could go on much longer like this without becoming dangerously ill" (Dahl 40). The versatility of violence in Dahl's works delivers that violence comprises phenomena toward which life guides people, and focusing merely on its physical level proves inadequate to encapsulate violence's irrationality and intangibility. Violence pervades life, as can be seen in the opening of almost all of Dahl's works: nothing is blissful; stories always commence with some degree of tragedy taking place.

Dahl was an ex-fighter pilot who almost died in World War II during an excursion in the Libyan desert. Later in his life, he lost his seven-year-old daughter to measles. Unsurprisingly, Dahl developed the conviction that physical violence exhibits only a small particle of the wide spectrum of life's violence, which comes into being and lingers more ubiquitously. Life's cruelty and pitilessness emerge vividly in Dahl's writing, in which he starts blissfully only on rare occasions, and even if they do, "readers familiar with his other works would be waiting for the inevitable tragedy. Dahl would only start out uplifting to make the inevitable fall more poignant" (Held 2). Unlike torture's physical violence, which aims to maintain a system's power structure,

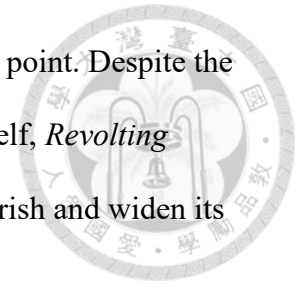
life's violence is harsher in the sense that it occurs without the slightest hint and serves the heaviest blow, a phenomenon that corresponds to a common Dahl-theme: life is inextricable from "the absurdity of human existence, the fact that there is an unbridgeable gulf between what we demand of this world and what we know to be true" (Held 2). Simply put, violence saturates life in both tangible and intangible forms.

Focusing on the intertwined dynamics between violence and Children's Literature, I shall demonstrate how these dynamics inflect Dahl's morals, and how his treatment of violence reflects his construction of "children."

This study examines Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and its animated-film adaptation *Revolting Rhymes* (2016), directed by Jakob Schuh and Jan Lachauer. The former is a collection of six nursery rhymes that adapt six well-known fairy tales: "Cinderella," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf," and "The Three Little Pigs." As for the latter, its plot weaves five of these nursery rhymes, excluding "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." Taking these two works as my primary case studies, and examining them in terms of their narrative and visual presentation, I attempt to show that violence is indispensable to Children's Literature because, through this notion, children learn not just about the uncontrollable sides of life, but also where they stand in face of radical uncertainty. Especially in times when opinions on the legitimacy of violence in Children's Literature are polarized, the debate that takes place in the following pages offers a new analytical axis that helps us overcome polarization.

Polarized opinions on this matter mark a split between prudent, virtue-improving works and violent, inappropriate works, with the one thing the two categories have in common being the acceptance of violent punishment for the wicked. That being said, violent works nonetheless managed to secure their growth and dissemination in Western

culture, with *Revolting Rhymes*'s long-lasting popularity as a case in point. Despite the controversial status of the author and comments against the work itself, *Revolting Rhymes*, just like other debatable children's works, continues to flourish and widen its readership.



Folklore and fairy tales were greatly enjoyed by both adults and children around the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were often deemed one and the same thing. Around the end of the nineteenth century, though, similar to the end of the eighteenth century, the genre was neglected by adults on account of great scientific discoveries. Consequently, these stories were considered trivial inventions unworthy of attention in the face of empirical truths. That being said, “scientific” and “precise” adults exhibited an unaffected enjoyment when telling stories to their children, who listened eagerly, possibly because of the storytellers’ “unwitting intuition into the symbolical language of the bizarre and seemingly very cruel scenes [which] had not dried up completely” (Heuscher 26). The nineteenth century meant to a mass majority a time when

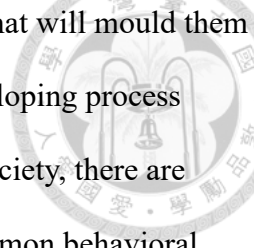
there was no electricity and when many people had never learned to read. The storytellers’ tales were entertaining and brought color into the population’s everyday, rather drab, simple existence that only became exciting when a war or illnesses brought about unwanted changes. Thus, these stories were fascinating and entertaining by opening up ever new worlds; their portrayals dealt with the struggles of growing up and suggested ever-new potentials that could suddenly become available even to the poorest of the poor. (Heuscher 26)

In other words, compared to the turmoil of the real world, the unusual violence and cruelty unfolding in the stories (and their many versions) represented manageable unexpectedness and remained a prominent source of excitement and novelty for readers

and listeners to indulge in and tailor according to their own needs.

People's less publicly-advertised acceptance of violence in stories is reflected and supported by the many gruesome plots – elements that adults know children would react to and remember above all else. For example, regarding the origin of “Little Red Riding Hood,” Barbara Ehrenreich explains how the story “grew out of encounters with real animal predators and served as a means of fear management as well as a means to ready the group for future encounters” (qtd. in Tatar, *Classic* 6). With such a context in mind, unpleasantries such as Little Red Riding Hood being in danger, or the vulgarity of her accidentally consuming “meat” and “wine” (Tatar, *Classic* 7) that are actually the grandmother's flesh and blood, appear as purposeful designs aimed to raise caution among children after catching their attention. Regardless of how violence is portrayed in stories, those who create them understand their immediate effect on children. If so, why would some claim that keeping children shielded from violence, or to be more precise – violent representations in stories – is necessary in preserving children's natural innocence? Is that innocence natural? Or assumed to be natural by adults?

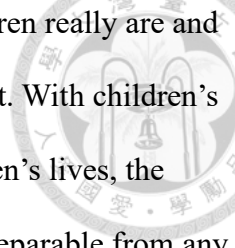
To dig deeper into these questions, one must first locate the long-established position of children within the two traditional fundamental units of family and school. The traditional Western perspective views “childhood” as a “familialized” and “scholarized” concept, a stage which individuals go through in order to imitate their adult companions in the future as functional members of society (Alanen 54). As Alanen states, this concept “presents the (Western) child not as (yet) part of her society, but condemned into a curiously non-social existence – ‘a family life sentence’ (Billy Bragg: ‘The Home Front’, in: *Talking with the Taxman about Poetry*) – described as a period of lack of responsibility, with rights to protection and training, but not to autonomy” (54). In this context, children are deprived of individual independence; rather, they are

The logo of National Taiwan University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with a central bell and a book, surrounded by the university's name in Chinese and English.

deemed incomplete beings who await the regulations and guidance that will mould them into complete, fully-transformed adults. To secure that a child's developing process answers the ultimate purpose of building contributing members of society, there are many presuppositions set for children in the name of protection, common behavioral regulations that prevent children from certain dangers: they should always be in adults' company; they should not enter the kitchen; they should stay away from the pool, etc. These strictures seem legitimate and useful, but to assume this the foundation and postulate that children require thorough physical and mental protection resulting from their natural fragility, the narrative becomes complicated by children's true nature, as children being naturally innocent and virtuous is a socially constructed belief which potentially goes against the true nature of children.

Behavioral regulations are necessary because children face larger physical limitations in comparison to adults, but to set the tone for an entire narrative extending from this acknowledgement is questionable. Debates on the matter mainly revolve around how adult-centered this perspective is, and how children end up deprived of their own voice and discourse. Of course, there are scholars who argue otherwise, suggesting that, specifically in the nineteenth century, children were upheld to a position so sacred that they became viewed as "priceless, lovable, vulnerable innocents to be cherished for their own sakes" (Neustadter 71). Thus, childhood constituted a period that needs to remain untinged by adults. However, such "maintaining" efforts also signify an intentional attempt to shape children into a status deemed appropriate by adults. Once there exists a standard through which to determine if a child is good or bad, there is not much freedom or autonomy granted for the child to be "natural."

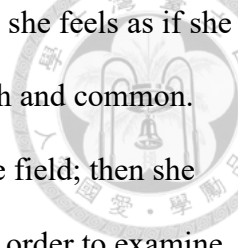
The pervasive myth of childhood innocence stems from this circumstance. Scholars have challenged the postulation that children's innocence is a natural



phenomenon that demands safeguarding. The questions of who children really are and whether their agency needs reassessing have become more prominent. With children's books and entertainment being a signal cultural component of children's lives, the reexamination of childhood innocence and identity becomes then inseparable from any critical exploration of Children's Literature.

Around the late twentieth century, "Children's Literature" emerged as a discipline that has gradually gained a mature stand as an academic field, sparking numerous theoretical and critical discussions. Critical approaches to studying and teaching Children's Literature proliferated in academic English departments, especially since the early 1970s, when various journals and associations (*Children's Literature*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, and the Children's Literature Association) appeared and confirmed the field's growing significance (Stahl 5). When it comes to analyzing Children's Literature, traditional approaches stem from "librarianship, educational studies and reader-response criticism" – disciplines established upon the existence of a "universal child," who signifies the essential qualities of every child – regardless of their differences in terms of cultural background and experiences – that they all possess the same need, and can benefit from the same "good" (Valle 5-6). Traditional approaches assert a certain arrogance on adults' end, as the concept of the "universal child" allows them to know *all* children and what is good for them.

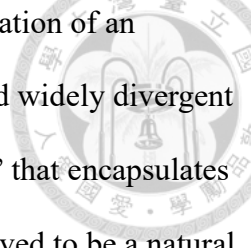
More recently, this and similar assumptions, which have pervaded the academic study of Children's Literature, have given way to new reflections and counteractions, since the scrutinizing gaze that adults and scholars place on the field gradually leads the genre to deviate from children's voices – which in actuality ought to be the main focus. In Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* (1986), the protagonist, Vinnie, is a Professor of Children's Literature, just like the author. She



has a bad conscience about her profession.... At times she feels as if she were employed in enclosing what was once open heath and common. First she helped to build a barbed-wire fence about the field; then she helped to pull apart the wildflowers that grow there in order to examine them scientifically. (235-36).

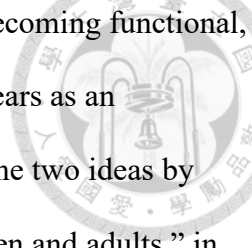
Vinnie criticizes approaches that examine Children’s Literature on an overly “scientific” basis, a basis that neglects and even subdues the imagination, randomness, and illogic that contribute to the uniqueness of Children’s Literature. Furthermore, adults’ and scholars’ search of practical merits in children’s books, such as what social morals do the works deliver, and whether they teach children readers to conform to society better, even overshadows the works’ creativity.

In the twenty-first century, once the field of Children’s Literature has considerably developed and expanded, childhood innocence emerged as one of the crucial notions to be reassessed by scholars. The debate built up along the further classification of disciplines in the genre, especially with the establishment of Critical Childhood Studies – an interdisciplinary field that directly challenges the supposition of childhood innocence and advocates a new approach to interpreting Children’s Literature. Unlike traditional approaches that take childhood for granted and rely on archetypes, Critical Childhood Studies contends that “[w]hat has long been ‘hidden’ and naturalized in children’s lives could now be seen as socially and historically constructed, therefore always also ‘political’” (Alanen 147). This has meant that elements that were intuitively associated with children are now brought into a new investigation which looks into the social construction of “children.” In other words, traditional disciplines that touch on Children’s Literature rest their arguments on the premise of what children *should be*, yet recent scholarship in Critical Childhood Studies shifts the focus to what children *are*



and how children are *constructed*. Although the mainstream interpretation of an “innocent child presumes its universality across historical periods and widely divergent cultures,” with the “presocialized child exist[ing] in a state of nature” that encapsulates human potential (Jenkins 15), childhood innocence is no longer believed to be a natural product that a child innately embodies. For example, the beliefs in children being naturally innocent, fragile, and moral, as suggested in William Blake’s famous *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789), in which a child is constantly presented as a meek, gentle lamb that carries biblical virtue, are likely to be reexamined under the frame of Critical Childhood Studies.

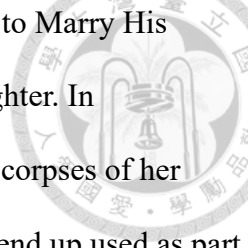
In *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1965), Philippe Ariès notices that the conceptual “child” resonates with the fragility of children that our modern society endorses. He contends that the “idea of childhood was bound up with the idea of dependence,” with “sons,” “varlets,” and “boys” operating inside structures of “feudal subordination.” Ariès also mentions that a child “could leave childhood only by leaving the state of dependence, or at least the lower degrees of dependence” (26). Whether the long-lasting ideology of childhood innocence was first incited by the seeming fragility of children or a collective belief in it (or both), it is obvious that power defines the adult-child relationship, the decisive factor turning the imaginary constructions of childhood into a visible, material reality. Power belongs to adults, who can fit an ideology into an everyday scenario, and have it self-perpetuated by having people speak and conduct themselves according to the dictates of that ideology. This observation is similar to Alanen’s that “children” and “childhood” have been traditionally viewed in a “familialized” sense, in which the power hierarchy of adults/parents being the authority and children the dependents is presented. Joining Ariès’s discussion regarding children-adults power dynamics with Alanen’s discussion



on children being deemed incomplete individuals in the process of becoming functional, contributing adults, we see how “children” or “childhood” often appears as an inseparable item from adults. Classical concepts tend to understand the two ideas by focusing “on the relationship between children and parents, or children and adults,” in which the “duality of children and adults refers to a social, developmental and future-oriented dimension” (Honig 70). Yet, unlike traditional approaches that proclaim only one universal possibility, Critical Childhood Studies adopts a wider perspective to interpret childhood.

According to Martin Woodhead, Childhood Studies affords an extension beyond “critical, interdisciplinary research” on children and childhood (19). It sees childhood innocence as constructed under social conventions and expectations which demand to be perpetuated in order to fuel a complex social structure that relies on individuals automatically falling into identity categories at different stages. To put this new perspective into use, Critical Childhood Studies evaluates Children’s Literature on the premise that childhood is culturally and socially constructed, as the critical category “childhood” encompasses “a more historical, cultural and social constructionist – as opposed to naturalized – valence than ‘child,’ ‘children’ or ‘child development’” (Thorne 149). This perspective has also been reiterated in a more modern context in John Wall’s *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy* (2022). Critical Childhood Studies aims to see children with a perspective unaffected by the social expectation of a normal child – a vision aligned with Dahl’s rebellious stories, in which much of his defiance comes across via graphic descriptions of violence.

In order to investigate violence’s role in childhood, it is essential to examine the portrayal of violence or disturbing, taboo-ish plots in children’s books, plots that some suggest have been a defining feature of Children’s Literature. Examples can be found in



well-known stories and popular animations. “The King Who Wished to Marry His Daughter” revolves around a father’s morbid obsession with his daughter. In “Bluebeard,” the newly-wed bride enters a secret room and finds the corpses of her husband’s previous wives. In “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” children end up used as part of a revenge scheme and permanently removed from their village. In “Aschenputtel” (more commonly known as “Cinderella”), both evil stepsisters end up lame and blind because they cut off parts of their feet in order to fit in the shoe, and are later punished by doves that peck their eyes out. Examples persist until the modern era. In Disney movies, antagonists usually meet vivid physical punishments that are welcomed by modern society. In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Ursula dies after Prince Eric stabs her stomach with the bow of his ship. She is then struck by lightning. In *The Lion King* (1994), after losing to Simba in a fight, Scar falls to the ground from a cliff and is devoured by hyenas. In *Tangled* (2010), mother Gothel dies of rapid ageing, vanishing into a puff of dust.

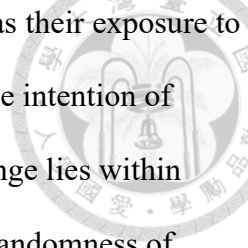
Despite vividly gruesome plots and endings, the examples mentioned have not faced much backlash for being too violent. Rather, they continue to flourish as household titles in many countries over generations. Let us not forget that violence performed against villains – embodiments of evil and immorality – tends to be justified. Similar to the claim raised by Benjamin, the one perspective to compromise the very different views on violence as held by natural law and positive law is that “just ends can be attained by justified means, [and] justified means used for just ends” (237). Although Benjamin later points out the limitations of this perspective, it serves to explain why certain violence in children’s entertainment continues to be kept, that is: as long as the punishments are imposed on figures that challenge dominant moral values and civic order, punishments become an acceptable practice that gratifies humans’ desire to

maintain “respect for dignity, the value of all human life” (Held 28). Hence, punishments that contain violence are acceptable as just means, as long as they align with the public expectation, the just end, that wrongness is to be corrected or eliminated.

In some cases, violence is also justified, even if inflicted on the protagonists, as long as it contributes to the process of guiding the protagonist to betterment. For example, in *Little Red Riding Hood* (1697), the little girl experiences losing her grandmother and encountering the wolf in order to learn not to talk to strangers. In *Hansel and Gretel* (1812), the two children are abandoned and starved by their parents, only to embark on a rewarding adventure. In *King Thrushbeard* (1812), the princess is exiled and forced to marry a minstrel only to realize that the minstrel is a king who wishes to marry her despite her spoilt temperament.

The above examples evince that violence indeed existed long ago, however, it is as much obvious that violence is justified and accepted only when portrayed either as a turmoil pushing the protagonist toward betterment or a punishment for the wicked. As Nimon suggested, society only anticipates violence under certain conditions, deeming violence unjustified and harmful once it deviates from the expected track. On the contrary, this study refers unjustified violence to the presentation or reflection of the misfortunes, cruelty, and hardships that starkly mirror violence in real life, a violence that bears no *raison d'etre* and does not convey stereotypical, readymade moral lessons.

By focusing on random misfortunes and violence in Dahl’s texts and their adaptations, this study has no intention to encourage violence, rather to highlight that violence and life lessons are not bound by a poetic law in reality. Even with the primary texts all suggesting the opposite—that, through violence, all characters mature in the end, the decisive factor of the improvements actually lies in characters’ willingness to cope and progress, but not violence itself. This willingness arises from the characters



themselves rather than being learned from external conditions, such as their exposure to dangers and threats. Just like in real life, violence happens without the intention of forcing a positive change, and the ability to conjure that positive change lies within individuals themselves. In *Revolt Rhymes*, Dahl foregrounds the randomness of violence, a randomness that characterizes later adaptations too.

Politically-incorrect violence has long existed in children's entertainment. Prior to the emergence of technologies such as cartoons and video games, violence was mainly presented through books, spoken tales, chants, and nursery rhymes. In *Gorgias*, Plato referred to orally delivered stories, which later became fairy tales, as "old wives' tales," usually told by nurses to "amuse or frighten children" (Tatar, *Classic* xvi). Therefore, together with the origin of "Little Red Riding Hood," we can assume that violence has featured in children's stories from an early time, and that stories often stem from real-life situations used as symbolic tools to overcome difficulties. Children learn to cope with the dangers of life by being exposed to a modicum of violence and coarseness. Through his subversive retellings of well-known fairy tales, Dahl counters the mainstream morals promoted by canonical versions of fairy tales and proposes that violence in life is random in nature, therefore it is fallacious to suppose that humans are fully capable of managing all catastrophes in life.

Chapter Two

Revolting Rhymes (1982)



Roald Dahl has always taken pride in his affinity with children, claiming in multiple occasions that being able to remember distinctly what it was like to be a child contributes greatly to his stories. Dahl's emphasis on *what it was like to be a child* starkly differs from *what a child should be like*. The difference is made evident in the macabre, yet entertaining, plots he creates. Regarding childhood and children's tolerance for violence and gruesomeness, Dahl once said that children are "only half-civilised," that they are actually much "tougher, coarser and they laugh at things that make [adults] squirm" (qtd. in Toynbee). The author's belief in children's higher ability to appreciate ghastliness is corroborated by his young readers. In a survey, conducted by Nicholson, of children's comments on Dahl's children's novels, a girl expresses:

I think Roald Dahl is on top because he is disgusting. If you delve into our minds you must find something somewhere that is disgusting and we think disgusting things are funny. I am not saying that I am rude but to read a Roald Dahl book you can get away with a little bit of rudeness and that will make me laugh. (322)

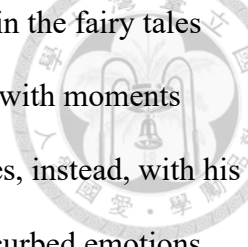
The funny, disgusting elements that constitute this "rudeness" can be summoned under a more sophisticated term – "revolting." The girl's knack for the rude, disgusting bits of Dahl's works is not a single case, as can be seen by the titles of collections either co-authored or inspired by Dahl: *Revolting Recipes* (1994), *Even More Revolting Recipes* (2001), and *Completely Revolting Recipes* (2009).

According to evidence stored in the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre archive, the typescript of *Revolting Rhymes* was originally titled "Fairy Rhymes" in April 1981 ("RD/2/18/4"). Later, in October 1981, in a letter from Tom Maschler to Murray

Pollinger, the publication is to be called *Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes*, after discarding other suggestions such as “repulsive” or “rude” (“RD/1/4/11/20”). “Revolting” seems to be the word choice indisputably in Dahl’s favor, one that represents his eccentricity, as revolting stories revolt (in the sense of disgust) but also rebel and revolutionize.

A majority of Dahl’s works for adults and children is made of twisted, dark, and haunting plots that contest more predictable, conventional narrative conventions. In Dahl’s short stories for adults, namely “Lamb to the Slaughter,” instead of that classical magical moment when the detectives suddenly discover the murderer and bring her to justice, we witness the detectives obliviously devouring the lethal weapon. In “Vengeance is Mine, Inc.” and “The Umbrella Man,” instead of a story with foreseeable ups and downs, we witness a series of crimes that end with the offenders steering away from legal consequences. As for his children’s stories, in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970), a sly fox protagonist supports his family by lying and stealing – behaviors which he defends in the story. In *Matilda* (1988), instead of featuring a vulnerable child who upholds prudence and patience as her weapons, Dahl introduces a clever protagonist who deals with her difficult surroundings exacting tit-for-tat revenge and enjoying the mischievous pranks she designs. Even the trailer for Netflix’s 2022 musical adaptation of *Matilda* includes lines that repetitively use the word “revolting”: “We are revolting children, living in revolting times. We sing revolting songs, using revolting rhymes. We’ll be revolting children, till our revolting’s done. It is 2L84U, we are revolting!” (00:28-00:44). Given the connotation of “revolutionary” and “circular” in “revolting,” and its frequent infiltration in Dahl’s works, it is evident that “revolting” serves as an ongoing ethos in line with Dahl’s unceasing attempt to challenge accepted norms.

Dahl’s unconventional aesthetics intensify whenever he targets a younger

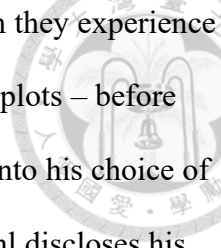


readership. Thus his revolting style emerges, somewhat culminating in the fairy tales and nursery rhymes in *Revolting Rhymes*. *Revolting Rhymes* is filled with moments when Dahl discards an adult narrator's patronizing tone and converses, instead, with his child readers with complete honesty, an honesty that involves the uncurbed emotions which typically arise when encountering unpleasant events. Instead of didactically promoting obedience and patience, Dahl demonstrates that anger, foolishness, or even cruelty, are natural – not necessarily bad – emotions.

Out of the many available genres, Dahl chooses to converse with his child readers through nursery rhymes, partly because the read-aloud element of nursery rhymes allows children to better remember the verses, and partly because Dahl has declared himself an ardent fan of Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales for Children* (1907). At the Singapore Puffin Book Fair in 1989, Dahl said:

I knew every one of those Belloc tales by heart by the time I was 8, 9, 10... when about 60 years later, er, I wanted to do something a bit funny like that I remembered those tales. And I copied the metre he used because it was a very easy one for children to say... you use the basic theme of the plot [of the fairy tales] and, er, um, just muck about with it... It's just sort of fun, that's all. ("RD/6/1/6")

Even if Belloc's *Cautionary Tales for Children* introduces heavy morals through explicit punishments of disobedient children, Dahl just picks up the structural merits and violent bits of the tales, and turns them into his own use in creating "fun." The act of getting inspiration from moral tales' structure and characteristics – only to "muck about" with them for fun – exemplifies Dahl's embrace of revolting endeavors and rebelliousness. The way he copies Belloc's metre but twists it into a new work with almost opposite morals is a violent act in a literary sense. In alignment with the meaning of circularity in

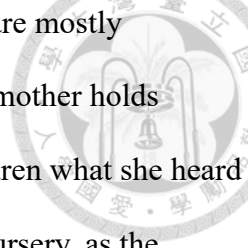


revolting, Dahl leads his readers on a full circle journey during which they experience some changes – which is his partial appropriation of the well-known plots – before returning back to the same point. The following section digs deeper into his choice of genre and how, through this apparently children-exclusive genre, Dahl discloses his unorthodox take on violence in children’s books.

Nursery Rhymes

The earliest printing of nursery rhymes in England can be traced back to 1570, when the printing technology at that time enhanced the production of more affordable books and pamphlets. The various printed products include chapbooks, “a Medieval equivalent of a Child’s comic – documenting funny rhymes and folklore.” The contents in chapbooks are mostly different “accounts for some variations in the lyrics and words of some Nursery Rhymes” (Alchin 6). The prototype of nursery rhymes were ballads and songs composed for the entertainment of adults. They tended to contain nonsensical words that later were considered a creative gesture for the enjoyment of children, yet, in fact, the illogical compositions often came from drunken people mumbling in inns and taverns (Iona and Peter Opie 3). Avery and Kinnell note that, despite sporadic attempts to advocate wholesome and gentle rhymes, old nursery rhymes were “full of violence, disaster, and slapstick, all of which make a strong appeal to the juvenile mind: Cock Robin dies, Jack and Jill fall down the hill, a duck eats the love-sick frog. They reflect the real world; not a version of it filtered for juvenile consumption” (63).

The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes defines “nursery rhyme” as, “by tacit and universal consent, [something] either said or sung, ...by the mother for the soothing and amusement of her child without thought of its origin, except in that usually she remembers it from her own childhood” (Iona and Peter Opie 3). The contextual linkage



between nursery rhymes and children indicates that nursery rhymes are mostly introduced to children when they are with their mother, whereas the mother holds flexible, unrestrained access to a corpus of texts by repeating to children what she heard elsewhere. Nursery rhymes also circulate more widely, beyond the nursery, as the mother changes the rhymes according to her own experiences, meaning that the many violent variations of some nursery rhymes are possibly the slices of harsh reality adults find worthy of sharing with children. Roald Dahl finds in nursery rhymes, therefore, an apt vehicle to convey his experience learning harsh realities.

The ensuing textual analysis of *Revolting Rhymes* divides the collection into three stages. The first stage analyses “Cinderella,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The second stage analyses “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” The third stage analyses “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf” and “The Three Little Pigs.” As much as this grouping ostensibly appears to take direct reference from the order in which the rhymes appear published, I reject this overly simplistic assumption, and claim that both my sorting and the rhymes’ publishing order are the result of deliberate consideration.

The grouping primarily revolves around Dahl’s narrator voice and its transformation along the collection. I contend that Dahl starts off with a narrator voice that complies with the expectations of an orthodox, omnipresent narrator, then gradually transforms to one who incorporates stronger hints of personal opinion. Finally, in the third stage, Dahl blurs the boundary between reality and the imagination by completely overthrowing the designated role of the narrator as being a “hidden” figure. Dahl becomes a character in the rhymes, yet considering how he is obviously a real person, readers’ minds are then guided to surmise if the characters in the rhymes are in fact real individuals. Through such intentional confusion, Dahl foregrounds and explores the

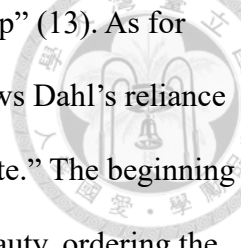
notion of nursery rhymes as an extension or variant of personal experiences.

The belief that the juxtaposition of the rhymes serves a purpose is also underpinned by a documented typescript of the collection. In the 1981 typescript of *Revolting Rhymes*, the original order goes from “Little Red Riding Hood” to “Cinderella,” “The Three Little Pigs,” “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and, finally, “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” The “Contents” page has been renumbered before reaching the final order of what we see in the official publication (“RD/2/18/4”), meaning that the sequence of the rhymes is the outcome of careful authorial consideration, thus having a significant role in the gradual reveal of Dahl’s critique of pedagogical violence in Children’s Literature. Based on the sequence of the rhymes, we perceive a path that goes from traditional plots to random occurrences, which resonates with the arbitrariness foregrounded by Dahl.

Stage One: Reacting Towards Traditional Plots and Violence

I contend that the three rhymes in Stage One share the same mechanism, which is being more plot-oriented as compared to the rhymes in Stage Two and Three. Despite being nursery rhymes, the three works stick to a typical plot outline involving the stages of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

As each rhyme begins, Cinderella (or Cindy), Jack, and Snow-White appear in a passive position in which their fragility as children is emphasized. For example, in “Cinderella,” the protagonist is described as “darling little Cinderella/ Was locked up in a slimy cellar,/ Where rats who wanted things to eat,/ Began to nibble at her feet” (5). In “Jack and the Beanstalk,” Jack speaks in a childlike tone that strongly contrasts his mother’s sharp, spiteful words. Feeling proud of having sold their old cow, Jack says to his mother: “Oh mumsie dear, guess what/ Your clever little boy has got,” to which his



mother replies: “You little creep,/ I’ll bet you sold her much too cheap” (13). As for Snow-White, she is even deprived of an official entrance, which shows Dahl’s reliance on the readers’ familiarity with the traditional version of “Snow-White.” The beginning of the rhyme features the evil Queen, infuriated by Snow-White’s beauty, ordering the Huntsman to kill the girl: “Listen, buddy!/ You drag that filthy girl outside,/ And see you take her for a ride!/ Thereafter slit her ribs apart/ And bring me back her bleeding heart” (23). The protagonist enters the text only after the Huntsman follows suit: “The Huntsman dragged the lovely child/ Deep deep into the forest wild./ Fearing the worst, poor Snow-White spake./ She cried, ‘Oh please give me a break” (23).

The cases of Cindy, Jack, and Snow-White all feature a child’s vulnerability in the face of greater forces. Cindy is oppressed by her stepmother and stepsisters; Jack is verbally (his efforts in selling the cow downplayed and vilified) and physically (beaten by his mother with the handle of a vacuum cleaner) abused by his mother; Snow-White is left with no other options but to beg for mercy. Here, a child’s situation of having no power to fight back or bargain with is centered. Noteworthy, although the predicaments of young protagonists generally are deemed conventional part of these plots, the difficulties associated with Cindy, Jack, and Snow-White here are significant indicators of violence that children often deal with – but seldomly discussed. To apply Alanen’s and Ariès’s theory of child-dependency and adults-children power dynamics, we are offered insights to re-examine the subtle, structural, and even taken for granted violence that children face. This observation is reinforced when Dahl blends the violence faced by the three protagonists into recognizable plots of a fairy tale.

Through presenting a familiar plot, Dahl guides his readers to interpret his nursery rhymes with a subtle expectation about an impending climax and a resolution indicating victory that will close the tale. Regarding Dahl’s role in navigating and influencing his

readers throughout the book, Dahl's presence as a narrator is obscured in the first three nursery rhymes; his role is only slightly indicated when he commences "Cinderella":

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

In this metacomment, Dahl's almost underrating tone when mentioning the well-known versions of "Cinderella" manifests his contempt for children stories created "[j]ust to keep the children happy." Extending this attitude to the violent elements of *Revoltin' Rhymes*, Dahl contends that stories can achieve more than to simply entertain, and to do so is through cruelty and violence. Given his revelation of a supposedly true version of "Cinderella," we can see Dahl prefers to offer children honesty over feigned bliss, despite the former's high levels of unpleasantry.

The first adversity in "Cinderella" surfaces when Cindy is left behind by her ugly stepsisters. Frustrated and desperate, she throws a tantrum in front of the Magic Fairy, and discourteously demands expensive ball-attending attire. The Magic Fairy then sends her to the ball in a glamorous gown. The rhyme follows a predictable storyline until one of the stepsisters replaces Cindy's shoe with her own "long and very wide" shoe (9), and screams with joy when she pretends to be the shoe owner in front of the Prince. Then things take a revolting turn. The infamous scene that has stirred heated debate among parents and educators goes like this:

The Prince went white from ear to ear.
He muttered, "Let me out of here."



“Oh no you don’t! You made a vow!
“There’s no way you can back out now!”
“Off with her head!” the Prince roared back.
They chopped it off with one big whack.
This pleased the Prince. He smiled and said,
“She’s prettier without her head.”
Then up came Sister Number Two,
Who yelled, “Now *I* will try the shoe!”
“Try this instead!” the Prince yelled back.
He swung his trusty sword and *smack* –
Her head went crashing to the ground. (11)

Cindy is shocked by the Prince’s brutality. She thinks, “My Prince! ...He chops off *heads!* How could I marry anyone/ Who does that sort of thing for fun?” (11-12).

Adding to the controversy, the Prince notices Cindy looking out from the kitchen, and says: “Who’s this dirty slut?! Off with her nut! Off with her nut!” (12). The appalling effect of the word “slut” has led to a ban on *Revolt Rhymes* in supermarket chain Aldi. In 2014, a customer posted a complaint on Aldi’s Facebook page, exclaiming that the book has “an unacceptable word in it for kids!!! Not ok!” (qtd. in Safi). Aldi consequently removed *Revolt Rhymes* from all its Australian stores. The decision met with approval and opposition, but the publishing company found a way to prevent further controversy, which was to replace “slut” with “mutt,” as can be seen in the book’s subsequent edition in 2016.

When the Prince sees Cindy and diverts his murderous whims to Cindy, the Magic Fairy appears again and Cindy, softening her attitude, makes a more cautious wish:

Cindy answered, “Oh kind Fairy,



“This time I shall be more wary.

“No more Princes, no more money.

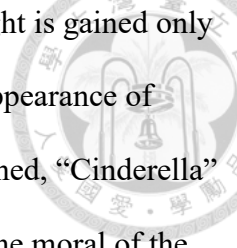
“I have had my taste of honey.

“I’m wishing for a decent man.

“They’re hard to find. D’you think you can?” (12)

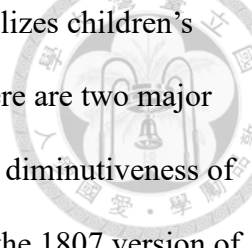
In the blink of an eye, Cinderella ends up marrying “a lovely feller,/ A simple jam-maker by trade,” and “they were happy ever after” (12). This ending departs from the fairy tale’s typical ending, in which the female protagonist leaves her unfortunate past behind and is aggrandized by marrying the Prince. It signifies the unpredictability of real life. The change from the Prince to a jam-maker denotes an entrance from the built-up fantastical tradition to reality, as the latter suitor has a more down-to-earth occupation. Such change captures the journey Cindy goes through, in which her self-determination is what matters.

Instead of narrating the journey of a perfect, angelic girl eventually rewarded for her consistency, Dahl’s “Cinderella” features a protagonist who starts off being imperfect and flawed, then matures as she faces and overcomes difficulties. The Prince beheading the two stepsisters constitutes the peak of violence in the entire rhyme, and represents a major revelation to Cindy, through which she deepens her understanding of the world—a place unlike the one found in ideal fairy tales. Except at the ending and the very beginning, when Dahl introduces the protagonist, the rest of the rhyme refers to the character as “Cindy.” Oscillating between the rather juvenile “Cindy” and “Cinderella” – an emblematic figure for sweet gentle girls, signals Cindy’s achieving real gentleness after encountering cruelty; she identifies what is truly desirable by being exposed to the undesirable, and learns that sometimes the popular notions pursued by everyone might not be optimal for herself. Her preference for a “decent man” contrasts against her



previous cravings for luxury and the Prince’s attention. Such an insight is gained only by witnessing the Prince’s brutality and learning to see beyond the appearance of wealth. With personal imperfections and unexpected calamity combined, “Cinderella” invokes a reality where misfortunes and tragedies randomly occur. The moral of the rhyme lies in Cindy’s epiphany that, despite a situation having unexpectedly worsened, one has the ultimate power in reaching realizations and making choices.

Like “Cinderella,” “Jack and the Beanstalk” portrays a child who encounters and overcomes catastrophe. However, before divulging the peculiarity of the second rhyme and enumerating its violent elements, we should consider the commonplace expectation readers have for the stock character “Jack.” “Jack and the Beanstalk” can be categorized under the broad category of “Jack Tales.” “Jack Tales” comprise traditional, highly recognizable narratives featuring a protagonist named Jack or John—the former a diminutive of the latter. John (Jack) is a common name in both English-speaking cultures and other European languages; for instance, “in Grimms’ tales, Hans – a diminutive of Johann or Johannes – is a common hero’s name.” Even today, “Jack is the most popular name for folktale protagonists in much of the English-speaking world” (Lindahl 394). The earliest instance of “Jack” being the name of a protagonist can be traced to “a northern English-rhymed tale [called] ‘Jack and His Stepdame,’” from the early 1400s. In this tale, Jack is a child mistreated by his stepmother. After sharing his food with a stranger, Jack is granted three wishes that allow him to punish her (Lindahl 394). The familiar association of Jack with giants can be traced back as early as 1734, when “The History of Jack and the Bean-Stalk” – one of “the oldest surviving printed Jack-and-giant tales” first appeared (Lindahl 395). Therefore, Jack bears much cultural weight in terms of representing a staple boy-character with which children can easily identify.



Jack is welcomed as the common protagonist because he symbolizes children's fragility in the face of stronger, oppressing, cruel forces – giants. There are two major paths that delineate the relation between the two; both accentuate the diminutiveness of Jack and the enormousness of the giant. The first one can be seen in the 1807 version of “Jack and the Beanstalk,” in which Jack's father was a wealthy man who was robbed and murdered by the giant. Jack, his brave son, exacts righteous revenge on the greedy, cruel giant (Tatar, *Off* 197-98). This version frames Jack's theft as an act of revenge, justifying Jack's ostensible moral failing. The second path refers to Joseph Jacobs's 1898 version, in which Jack steals out of poverty, although he shares his loot with his poor mother (Tatar, *Classic* 272), an act that neutralizes the ethical problem of Jack being a thief. Although the two versions of the fairy tale show a different take on Jack's thievery, efforts are made to rectify the harm this act might cause. In both, Jack is a clever and brave little boy who outwits the overpowering giant by embracing child-like qualities. For example, his tininess allows him to hide behind the beanstalk's leaves.

Based on the wide circulation of these antecedents, Jack's popularity among parents and children is evident. But what happens when Jack is an unorthodox character who presents qualities unapproved of by parents? Will children identifying themselves with Jack become problematic? Dahl's “Jack and the Beanstalk” elaborates on this discussion as the nursery rhyme threads a violent plot in which Jack's mother is eaten by the giant soon after being challenged to climb up the beanstalk. To complicate things further, Jack, who has witnessed the whole incident, reacts rather calmly. Jack's reaction to suddenly being orphaned can be considered cold-hearted, especially when readers discover that Jack's mind during this episode is occupied by the idea of taking a bath.

After realizing the giant smells people out and eats them, Jack hurries down the beanstalk and tells his mum, who replies:



‘I’ve told you every single night
To take a bath because you smell,
‘But would you do it? Would you hell!
‘You even make your mother shrink
‘Because of your unholy stink!’
Jack answered, ‘Well, if you’re so clean
‘Why don’t *you* climb the crazy bean.’
The mother cried, ‘By gad, I will!
‘There’s life within the old dog still!’ (17-19)

The mother climbs up the beanstalk, and after a while:

From somewhere high above the ground
There came a frightful crunching sound.
[Jack] heard the Giant mutter twice,
‘By gosh, that tasted very nice.
‘Although’ (and this in grumpy tones)
‘I wish there weren’t so many bones.’
‘By Christopher!’ Jack cried. ‘By gum!’
‘The Giant’s eaten up my mum!
‘He smelled her out! She’s in his belly!
‘I had a hunch that she was smelly.’ (19)

Jack then decides to take a bath, which allows him to escape the giant and collect
the gold:

Jack waited till the Giant slept,
Then out along the boughs he crept
And gathered so much gold, I swear

He was an instant millionaire.

A bath,' he said, 'does seem to pay.

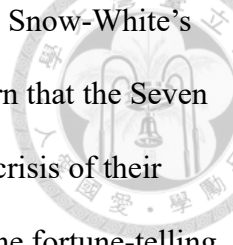
'I'm going to have one every day.' (20)



The rhyme ends unfittingly with Jack enjoying rewards neither justified nor remedied by generosity. Jack is not avenging anyone, he simply steals from the giant. He does not share his treasure with anyone—he enjoys it by himself. Although the rhyme includes the complete sequence from exposition to resolution, its sudden turn of events is peculiar because it fails to elicit conventional reactions. Contrary to the prototypical “Jack,” Dahl’s little boy displays a distinctly revolting nature: his unfeeling reaction does not reflect what a child *should* be like. Jack resolutely cuts ties with a child’s dependent state and survives by using his wits (“He was an instant millionaire” [Dahl 20]). From another perspective, it can be said that Jack takes charge of his own destiny and is freed from the need to abide by any parents or social institutions.

This atypical portrayal of a child achieving independence and growth might appear extreme, yet if we recollect that one of Dahl’s tools to connect with children is that he is willing to team up with them against mean, bossy, tyrannical adults such as Jack’s mum, this depiction makes more sense. Dahl’s obituary, written by William Honan in 1990, recalls how Dahl once mentioned in an interview: “the path to their [children’s] affections... may be simplistic, but it is the way. Parents and schoolteachers are the enemy” (qtd. in Honan). It is obvious that parental and other forms of authority were Dahl’s least concern, for centering the child and speaking to the child’s innermost voice or thought (in other words, addressing what a child *is*) remained his primary task. Therefore, Jack, who is now an “instant millionaire” willing to take a bath every day, is not the ideal child protagonist, yet he is an honest, independent one.

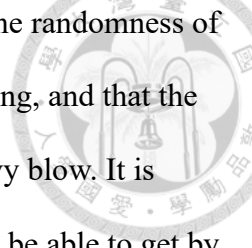
Financial difficulties and the means to secure instant riches also underpin the



nursery rhyme that follows. In “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Snow-White’s dilemma resembles the canonical version of the tale until readers learn that the Seven Dwarfs are horse-racing gambling addicts. To alleviate the financial crisis of their household, Snow-White volunteers to return to the Palace and steal the fortune-telling magic mirror, so they can know which winning horse to bet on. Snow-White’s remarkable return to the Palace, which symbolizes her past traumas, is narrated plainly and without a trace of moral commentary:

That very night, at eventide,
Young Snow-White hitched another ride,
And then, when it was very late,
She slipped in through the Palace gate.
The King was in his counting house
Counting out his money,
The Queen was in the parlour
Eating bread and honey,
The footmen and the servants slept
So no one saw her as she crept
On tip-toe through the mighty hall
And grabbed THE MIRROR off the wall. (26)

The specific allusion to the King and Queen reminds us that Snow-White is returning to her past dilemma, directly facing those once mightier than her, from whom she was incapable of defending herself. However, as she decides to return willingly and grab the mirror, part of her upsetting past can now ameliorate her present life. She takes up an active role managing her own life, which is to declare independence from her past. Like Jack, Snow-White also steals, and not for any justifiable moral cause, but for



gambling. Interestingly, the very nature of gambling resonates with the randomness of violence, as chances and unpredictability are what constitutes gambling, and that the state of deprivation that results from losing one's money lands a heavy blow. It is evident that, for Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, the priority is to be able to get by. Hence, the crux of Snow-White's behavior is her gradual ability to survive despite her past and present ordeals. By the ideological overlap that is shown on Cinderella, Jack, and Snow-White, it can be seen that a child's association with being a survivor is deeply embedded in Dahl's philosophy.

Stage Two: Commenting and Reflecting on Traditional Plots

"Goldilocks and the Three Bears" is a peculiar work in the collection because it is not a "story-rhyme" like the previous ones, rather Dahl's metacommentary on the fairy tale. In this rhyme, Dahl's presence stretches beyond the omnipresent narrator, as he exhibits a sound detestation of Goldilocks. What is more, this commentary-rhyme is the outlier in the book in the sense that Dahl slowly erases the boundary between the imaginary realm of fantasy and the reality of his readers, consistently inviting his readers to imagine what would happen if the events took place in reality: "Now just imagine how *you'd* feel...I say again, how *would* you feel... I say once more, what *would* you think..." (29-33).

The rhyme begins:

This famous wicked little tale
Should never have been put on sale.
It is a mystery to me

Why loving parents cannot see
That this is actually a book
About a brazen little crook.
Had I the chance I wouldn't fail
To clap young Goldilocks in jail. (29)



Although the rhyme synthesizes the well-known plot of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Dahl’s opinion prevails, emphasizing the protagonist’s misdeeds. As he revisits the plot, Dahl’s personal remarks are sewn in every gap that follows each of Goldilocks’s actions. Some supplementary information provided by Dahl along his narrative causes readers to view Goldilocks’s intrusion as one happening in real life, to think of it as an actual intrusion into their homes. This gesture further justifies Dahl’s serious tone, odd in a supposedly childish piece, since the dividing line between fantasy and reality is wiped out.

Dahl’s prolonged commentary opens up a conversation with his readers, as the pronouns “I” and “you” are used repetitively:

I say again, how *would* you feel
If you had made this lovely meal
And some delinquent little tot
Broke in and gobbled up the lot?
But wait! That’s not the worst of it!
Now comes the most distressing bit.
...[Goldilocks] bellows, ‘What a lousy chair!’
And uses *one* disgusting word
That luckily you’ve never heard.
(I dare not write it, even hint it.

Nobody would ever print it.)
You'd think by now this little skunk
Would have the sense to do a bunk.
But no. I very much regret
She hasn't nearly finished yet. (30-33)

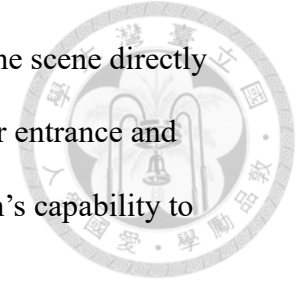


Asking readers to imagine having their homes intruded by Goldilocks, Dahl offers an alternative ending he deems far better and more just, which is Big Bear telling Baby Bear: “Your porridge is upon the bed./ But as it’s inside mademoiselle,/ You’ll have to eat *her* up as well” (34). This gruesome alternative ending generates interesting dynamics in the context of the original plot. The liberty Dahl takes in creating this subversive turn in the original plot’s tone reflects, once again, the arbitrariness of violence, as Goldilocks’s invasion of the bears’ house is equally random and purposeless. By suggesting another ending, Dahl reinforces the possibility of unexpected violence, which paves the way for the ensuing two nursery rhymes.

Stage Three: Breaking the Fourth Wall

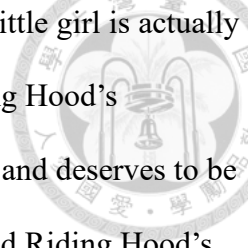
“Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf” and “The Three Little Pigs” signal the last stage of Dahl’s gradual erasure of the fantasy-reality dichotomy, presenting to children how unlikely, exaggerated cruelty is, in fact, not exclusive to the imaginary realm but also our real world outside the book. Dahl prominently edits the two rhymes, to the extent that they feature new endings and are linked by the character of Little Red Riding Hood (or Miss Riding Hood). Dahl’s attempt to emphasize the randomness of life’s adversity is shown when he deliberately occludes the plausibility of the events in the rhyme. He opens his version with the Wolf eating Grandma and planning to eat Little Red Riding Hood. Unlike in the familiar versions, Dahl’s Little Red Riding Hood does not disobey

her mother's rule about not talking to strangers; instead, she enters the scene directly from her stroll and sees the Wolf in her Grandma's clothes. Upon her entrance and unexpected reaction, Dahl conveys his idiosyncratic take on children's capability to handle atrocity:



In came the little girl in red.
She stopped. She stared. And then she said,
'What great big ears you have, Grandma.'
'All the better to hear you with,' the Wolf replied.
'What great big eyes you have, Grandma,'
said Little Red Riding Hood.
'All the better to see you with,' the Wolf replied.
...Then Little Red Riding Hood said, *'But Grandma,*
what a lovely great big furry coat you have on.'
'That's wrong!' cried Wolf. *'Have you forgot*
'To tell me what BIG TEETH I've got?
'Ah well, no matter what you say,
'I'm going to eat you anyway.'
The small girl smiles. One eyelid flickers.
She whips a pistol from her knickers.
She aims it at the creature's head
And *bang bang bang*, she shoots him dead. (38-40)

Dahl's parody becomes obvious as the dialogue between the Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood turns self-referential. It is satirical when the Wolf – a staple figure of evil – corrects the girl for not following the story's conventional script. As a traditional representation of overpowering force against children, the Wolf feels entitled to follow



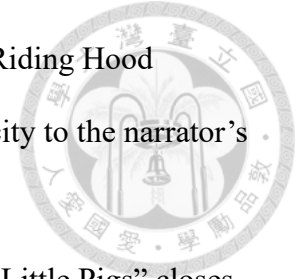
the conventional plot, while being completely oblivious of what the little girl is actually capable of. Given that readers have not been introduced to Red Riding Hood's personality (whether she is a naughty girl who disobeyed her mother and deserves to be taught a traumatizing lesson), the sole available hint for readers is Red Riding Hood's reaction during and after the incident. In other words, readers have no knowledge of the plot but Red Riding Hood's farcical measure (shooting the Wolf) in dealing with the equally absurd calamity (Wolf having eaten her grandmother). The seemingly incomplete sequence shatters the postulation that people are vulnerably at a passive end whenever struck by life's violence, and that the sufferer's resilience is to be honed by catastrophe. The unusual strength, both mental and physical, demonstrated by the little girl easily overthrows the assumed fragility of children, which, according to Ariès, defines a child's fragility and mandates his or her subordination to adults.

The inversion of power roles at the end also reflects Red Riding Hood overcoming vulnerability. According to Dahl,

A few weeks later, in the wood,
I came across Miss Riding Hood.
But what a change! No cloak of red,
No silly hood upon her head.
She said, 'Hello, and do please note
'My lovely furry WOLFSKIN COAT.' (40)

The replacement of "Little Red Riding Hood" with "Miss Riding Hood," together with the posh tone in which the girl greets the narrator, has entirely reconfigured readers' knowledge of a character whose fragility called for external rescue. Also of signal importance is the narrator's interaction with Miss Riding Hood at the end of the rhyme. As established in the previous rhyme ("Goldilocks and the Three Bears"), Dahl acts as

the narrator in full control of his material. His encounter with Miss Riding Hood illuminates the latter as a real-life individual, hence adding authenticity to the narrator's account, while merging fantasy and reality.



Following “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf,” “The Three Little Pigs” closes the collection. It follows the familiar development of the fairy tale, until the Wolf arrives at the third little pig's house:

‘If I can’t blow it *down*,’ Wolf said,
‘I’ll have to blow it *up* instead.
‘I’ll come back in the dead of night
‘And blow it up with dynamite!’
Pig cried, ‘You brute! I might have known!’
Then, picking up the telephone,
He dialled as quickly as he could
The number of Red Riding Hood. (44)

Despite the multiple variations on “The Three Little Pigs,” Red Riding Hood's cameo in this rhyme disrupts the typical understanding of this fairy tale, opening space for Dahl to convey his interpretation of the little pig's feebleness.

When the little pig is exposed to a violent threat, he acknowledges his vulnerability and seeks protection from Red Riding Hood, who has taken on another Wolf through violent means:

A short while later, through the wood,
Came striding brave Miss Riding Hood.
The Wolf stood there, his eyes ablaze
And yellowish, like mayonnaise.
His teeth were sharp, his gums were raw,

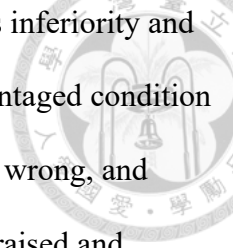


And spit was dripping from his jaw.
Once more the maiden's eyelid flickers.
She draws the pistol from her knickers.
Once more, she hits the vital spot,
And kills him with a single shot. (46-47)

Red Riding Hood is prefaced by the sophisticated "Miss" here, indicating her superior strength when compared to the little pig's incompetence. Commensurate with Dahl's belief that the agency of rescuing and the agency of being rescued are two separate categories, in which one does not necessarily lead to another, Red Riding Hood's action and the little pig's consequence reiterate that vulnerability in the face of threat does not guarantee rescue

Pig, peeping through the window, stood
And yelled, 'Well-done, Miss Riding Hood!'
Ah, Piglet, you must never trust
Young ladies from the upper crust.
For now, Miss Riding Hood, one notes,
Not only has *two* wolfskin coats,
But when she goes from place to place,
She has a PIGSKIN TRAVELLING CASE. (47)

The rhyme ends with the unsettling image of the little pig turned into a travelling case, a luxurious accessory Miss Riding Hood exultingly flaunts. Dahl adopts a neutral tone when narrating this incident; he neither pities the little pig nor criticizes Miss Riding Hood. For Dahl, life's forms of violence occur randomly and often can be overcome only via greater violence – as shown by the fact that Little Red Riding Hood carries a concealed gun at all time – yet it is also possible that greater violence might lead to



another predicament. The third little pig stops at the realization of his inferiority and seeks protection from a higher power, believing that his own disadvantaged condition justifies his deserving being rescued. The ending proves the little pig wrong, and testifies to the absurd notion that innocence and fragility should be praised and presented as virtuous weapons, while a real weapon (Miss Riding Hood's pistol) easily outweighs all wishful ideals.

To close this chapter, it seems suitable to bring back Foucault's interpretation of violence's lingering effect. Little Red Riding Hood shooting the third little pig does not mean a fragmentary episode. The physical act of pulling the trigger, yes, a momentary movement; but the consequences of the physical act do not face constraints of time. Little Red Riding Hood's murders linger on through the material representation of wolfskin coats and pigskin travelling case. The disturbing effect of her act of violence further disseminates through others', in this case, Dahl's, the narrator's, witnessing of the material evidence of her murder. Again, the power of violence exceeds a physical level and relies a great deal on being witnessed and feared. Through the narrator's word of caution addressing the readers at the end of the nursery rhymes collection, the influence of violence lingers on after closing the book.

Chapter Three

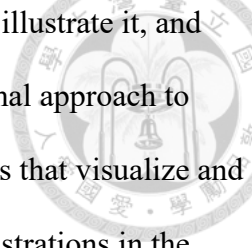
Illustrations and Animated Videos by Quentin Blake



Quentin Blake and Roald Dahl share a long history of collaboration that began in 1978, when Blake illustrated Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile*, and lasted until the end of Dahl's life in 1990. Popular perception of Dahl's books seems inseparable from Blake's iconic illustrations, including those for *Revolting Rhymes* as well as six animated videos of each rhyme. The illustrations for the book and the animated videos contain slight variations but mostly remain loyal to Dahl's humorous, gruesome words. According to Blake, illustrations are different from an animated film or strip cartoon, in which the former features a moment and the latter a consecutive plot. In Blake's words, to illustrate is to

choose a moment. It's something you can only do in illustration. It's to have that split second... and you can keep it. You don't necessarily have to read the whole story but you revisit it. You own that moment again for whenever, for as long as you like. (qtd. in *Power of Illustration* 06:00-06:31)

Interpreting Blake's illustrations means, therefore, interpreting why and how he chooses to visualize a certain "moment." According to Beth McIntyre, senior curator of "Quentin Blake: Inside Stories" (a Blake exhibition at the National Museum of Wales), there never was much communication between Dahl and Blake when it came to creating the characters. Dahl would finish the books and Blake would read them without receiving any instructions from Dahl. Blake would create the characters and Dahl would then comment on them (*Inside the Roald Dahl Story* 01:30-01:51). In short, even if some characters had already been given notable descriptive traits, the initial images or prototypes of the characters came from Blake's imagination.



However, the argument that Blake is able to select a “moment,” illustrate it, and consequently help viewers understand the plot might not be the optimal approach to analyze *Revolting Rhymes*, since Blake also drew the animated videos that visualize and tell the entire plot of the six rhymes. I rather propose that Blake’s illustrations in the published *Revolting Rhymes*, in particular those on the covers, convey Dahl’s role and identity as an unconventional storyteller – especially amidst the popular belief that the narrator should be a knowing, conscious adult who holds the measure of good and evil and unveils violence only for didactic purposes. Blake’s illustrations for the animated videos show him joining forces with Dahl in a rebellious attempt to redefine the assumed role models for child readers. Also, Blake challenges the mild, wholesome visual presentations pursued by adults via creating graphic illustrations of violence for the already unconventional, gruesome words of Dahl.

In early literature, folklore, and fairy tales, wolves signify menace, danger, and other unwanted qualities such as cruelty, deception, and greed (Boitani 293). In stories such as “The Wolf and the Lamb,” by Aesop; “The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats” (1812), and the well-known “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs,” the association between wolves and threats has been engrained in the minds of many. Wolves receive in particular acute criticism and reproach in Christian cultures due to their undesirable traits as presented in these non-Christian traditions (Hunt 319). Yet, on the front cover of *Revolting Rhymes*, the Wolf is depicted as the storyteller, with two kids sitting on his lap. The three of them are reading *Revolting Rhymes*. The Wolf seems exultant in his storytelling role, whereas the two kids appear appalled and scared (Fig. 1). Since Dahl’s role as narrator is made known to readers at the beginning of the first rhyme, Blake is drawing a connection between Dahl and the Wolf. A revised cover came out later, mostly repeating the cover of the first edition (Fig. 2). Despite some changes

in the background, major elements such as the Wolf reading *Revolting Rhymes* to the two children and their contrasting facial expressions remain unchanged.

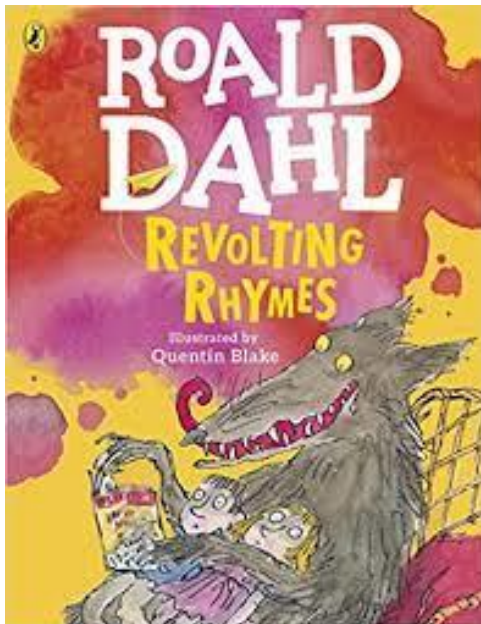
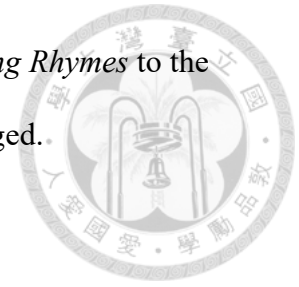


Figure 1. Front cover of *Revolting Rhymes*, 2016.

(Source: Wong Shu Qi, Alice)

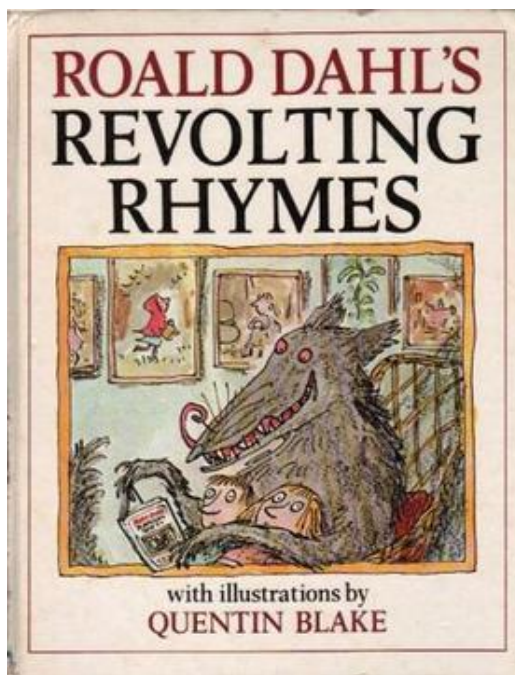


Figure 2. Front cover of *Revolting Rhymes*, 1982.

(Source: National Taiwan University Library)

Blake's twist on the conventional image of a benign storyteller highlights the oddity of Dahl's association with the Wolf. Storytelling has long been considered a traditional ritual that takes place in the intimate sphere of a nursery or a child's bedroom, where the mother and the child enjoy closeness and transmission of values and imaginations. Such an archetypal scene is vividly depicted in Joseph Highmore's "Pamela Tells a Nursery Tale" (1744) (Fig. 3), in which the maternal figure occupies the central position, surrounded by her children and a baby. The only male is a boy sitting next to the storyteller, and by the direction of his gaze toward the storyteller, he is grouped as one of the child listeners rather than a male, whose gender might potentially disrupt an all-female scene. Another pictorial example of women's conventional status as orthodox storytellers is "Grandmother's Story" (1875), by Pietro Saltini (Fig. 4). An old lady sits in the center of the painting, surrounded by inquisitive children listening to her. Together at the back are two gentle-looking women doing house chores while listening. Both paintings epitomize the qualities of a stereotypical storyteller. Great differences can be found when compared to Blake's analogous presentation of Dahl and the Wolf.



Figure 3. "Pamela Tells a Nursery Tale," painted by Joseph Highmore in 1744.

(Source: The Fitzwilliam Museum)



Figure 4. “Grandmother’s Story,” painted by Pietro Saltini in 1875.

(Source: Art.com)

By presenting Dahl, a male author, as a Wolf and the storyteller of *Revolting Rhymes*, Blake reverses the gender dynamics of such a role as well as its expectations. Not only does the storyteller defy the generally linked traits of femininity and gentleness, the content of the stories he tells also rebels against the expectations of an “appropriate, wholesome” subject. It is important to notice the consistent component of revolt in the covers of both the 1982 and 2016 editions, as they highlight the mutual celebration of entertaining violence by Dahl and Blake – which broaches the controversy of whether violent story plots can be suitable, even amusing, to children. On the back cover of the 1982 edition (Fig. 5), the Wolf is sitting alone in the chair, his eyes closed and the book in his folded arms. The image immediately prompts the question: Where are the two children? The description below the illustration describes Dahl as the “master of the comic and blood-curdling,” inviting us to consider a fatal, blood-curdling incident that has happened to the two children—most likely the Wolf having eaten them. Since this possibility cannot be corroborated, the Wolf’s, as well as

Dahl's, image is left as that of an ambiguous storyteller. The staple figures of a gentle female storyteller and an evil Wolf are challenged by Blake, who underlines the unconventionality of Dahl's nursery rhymes and his role as a narrator.

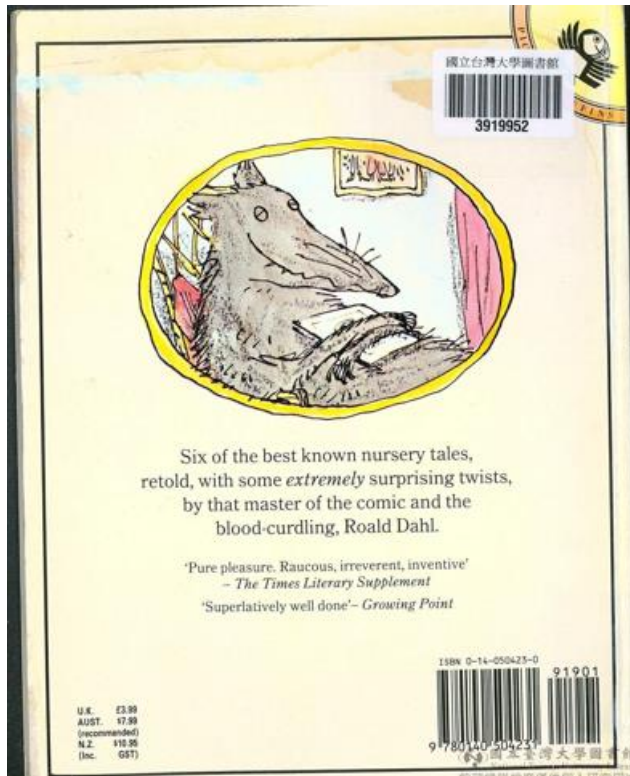
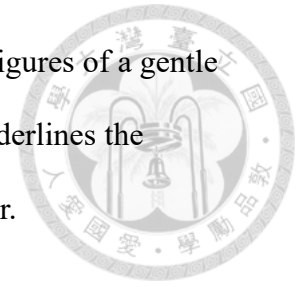
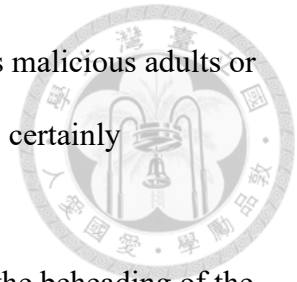


Figure 5. Back cover of *Revolting Rhymes* (1982).

(Source: National Taiwan University Library)

Regarding the visual presentation of the characters, Blake sets out to distinguish his characters from their stock images in the popular imagination. Unlike the prototypical images of fairy tale protagonists depicted in the European tradition, which mostly accentuate the children protagonists' innocence and fragility, especially when compared to other foil characters, Blake's Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White are rather mature in terms of their physique, wear sophisticated attire, and display brazen manners. As for the illustrations in the animated videos, it is evident that Blake has his very own idea of what the characters should be like. Although the characters in fairy tales would normally be assumed to be children or juveniles, and

therefore, prone to being victims of greater forces or dangers such as malicious adults or threats from wild nature, Blake's initial idea of the characters proves certainly unorthodox.



Indeed, many scenes feature notoriously violent sights such as the beheading of the second stepsister, Cindy running away from the ball in her underwear, Jack being beaten with the handle of a vacuum cleaner, and Little Red Riding Hood shooting the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf” and “The Three Little Pigs.” These scenes are all omitted from the illustrations in the book, but visualized in the animated video. Such discreet treatment can be a sign of Blake's concerns over readers' unduly attention paid to the specific scenes, in lieu of the rhymes' overall content. Recalling how Blake deems illustrating as capturing a split second, it is possible that he foresees the potential challenge that might occur if those grim scenes were chosen to be the representative “split seconds” taken for the whole. He thus may have wished to avoid them. Blake leaves out those revolting scenes from the book, and instead chooses to illustrate other relatively mild moments, such as the Prince picking up Cindy's shoe, Jack trading off his cow for a bean, and the Huntsman shopping for meat at the butcher's shop. Blake does so to prevent readers from reaching the hasty generalization that the book's sole asset is its blatant exhibition of violence. Once again, the “split seconds” conveyed by illustrations must be carefully selected because they need to maintain a harmonious coexistence with the text, whereas animated videos possess higher flexibility in presenting more details of the plot. Illustrations and animated videos function differently, but despite their differences, Blake expresses an inclination coherent with Dahl's challenge of established images of role-model child protagonists.

In the animated video of “Cinderella,” there are moments when Cindy is outright demanding and materialistic. She does not weep over her unfortunate situation, but

angrily thumps the wall (Fig. 6) and lists out her desired luxuries (Fig. 7). What is more, the scenes in which Cindy presses herself against the Prince's chest and runs away in her underwear add to the presentation of Cindy as an eroticized protagonist. Although, at the end of the rhyme, Cindy is exposed to lessons about the valuable qualities of a person, her "before" status is never really criticized. Cindy's tantrums and vanity would normally be deemed negative examples for child readers, hence likely to be lampooned by an omniscient narrator. Yet in the animated video, Cindy's temper and desires are not vilified but depicted in a neutral way, indicating that Blake and Dahl intend to deliver an honest rather than an ideal image of children.

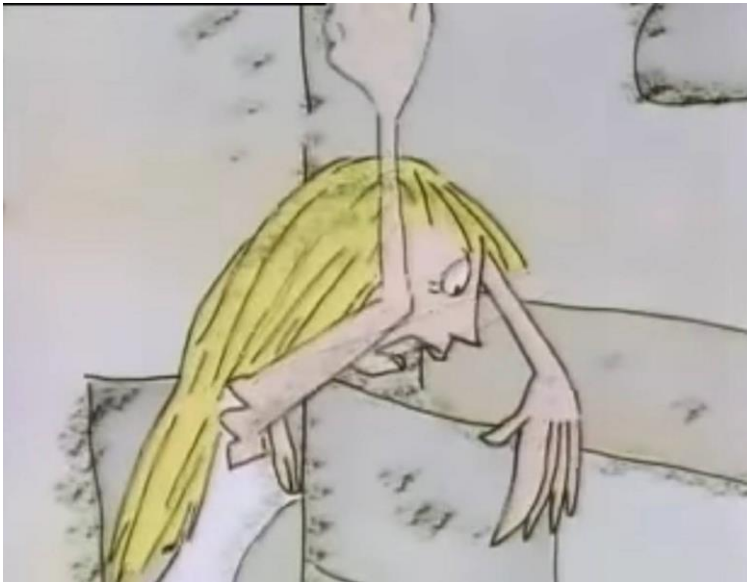


Figure 6. Cindy angrily thumps the wall.

(Source: YouTube – “Revolting Rhymes_Cinderella”)



Figure 7. Cindy demands luxury from the Magic Fairy.

(Source: YouTube – “Revolting Rhymes_Cinderella”)

Snow-White signals another attempt by Blake to portray an unconventional child protagonist. Although still regarded by Blake and Dahl as a likeable protagonist who demonstrates a model of personal growth children can learn from, Snow-White is unconventional in the sense that she is judged for her attitude and achievements, but not her behavior. Her transition from a victim, whose only form of agency is her pity-inducing vulnerability, to a resourceful heroine is accompanied by bits of debatable actions, such as her means of escape (she easily hitches a ride by flaunting her beauty [Fig. 8]). She also develops and executes a plan for stealing the magic mirror so that the seven dwarfs can bet on the winning horses and improve their financial situation. Additionally, in the scene in which they have nothing for dinner, Snow-White’s dominating position in the household becomes evident when she sits at the center of the table proposing a solution (Fig. 9). This visual presentation signals her change of role from an unpaid maid to a pivotal figure in the house, which again, emphasizes her increased personal autonomy. Like Cindy, Snow-White defies the traditional journey of a child protagonist who is rewarded for being obedient. Instead, how Snow-White turns

to her resourcefulness and breaks through difficulties is presented as a laudable quality. Blake's illustrations for Snow-White in the animated video echo Dahl's endorsement of such a controversial protagonist.



Figure 8. Snow-White hitches a ride.

(Source: YouTube – “Revolting Rhymes_Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”)

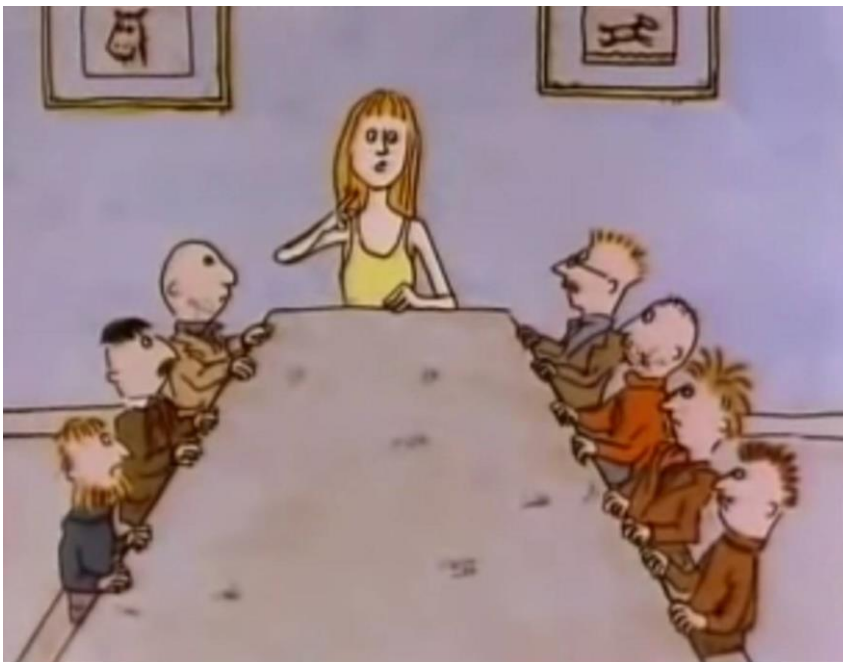


Figure 9. Snow-White proposes a solution.

(Source: YouTube – “Revolting Rhymes_Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”)

Little Red Riding Hood stands perhaps as the most representative embodiment of

Dahl's "revoltingness," which Blake takes pleasure to visualize through various details. One element that differentiates Red from stereotypical Red Riding Hoods is her physique. When confronting the wolf, Red is notably tall, only slightly shorter than the wolf when both are standing together (Fig. 10). The structure of the scene sharply contrasts other illustrations of the fairy tale (Fig. 11), where the wolf embodies an overpowering threat and Little Red Riding Hood's fragility is also conveyed through her body features. The location of the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood within one frame reveals their disparity of strengths, and especially the association of innocence to helplessness. Blake's Riding Hood follows no such protocol. Given that illustrations for videos allow minute details to be visualized, Blake uses that flexibility to animate Riding Hood's subtle actions, such as the flickering of her eyelid, the deepening of her smile, and her aiming of the pistol, which draws the focus to what Riding Hood is capable of, her agency, and challenges conventional threat-and-vulnerability dynamics.



Figure 10. Little Red Riding Hood confronts the wolf.

(Source: YouTube – “Revolting Rhymes_Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf”)



Figure 11. Jessie Willcox Smith’s illustration of “Little Red Riding Hood” in 1911.

(Source: World History Encyclopedia)

Blake’s animated videos confirm the illustrator’s endorsement of Dahl’s rebellious attempt to question existing stereotypes. By establishing Dahl’s identity as an atypical storyteller on the book cover, Blake prepares readers and viewers for animated characters that are created as equally atypical. The characters’ attitude and behaviors permit no easy verdict from a common standard, yet they nonetheless reflect what Dahl and Blake consider worthy qualities for children to learn when reading and watching *Revolting Rhymes*.

Chapter Four

Revolting Rhymes (2016)



Although unconventional in their attitudes toward violence in children’s entertainment, *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and the movie *Revolting Rhymes* (2016) starkly differ in their respective treatment of violence. While Dahl’s book displays violence as one of the random absurdities in life that one encounters and learns to manage, the film adaptation uses violence as a vehicle to unveil deeper personal sentiments such as hatred, grief, and doubt. In this adaptation, violence is depicted less as an illogical occurrence and more as a channel for viewers to investigate why and how violence is induced from and executed by the characters. Through this channel, viewers are brought to develop a critical awareness of violence, and in particular, to witness how violence is often entangled with hatred and grief. As Jakob Schuh, one of the two directors, explains in a behind-the-scenes documentary, he is intrigued by the brutality exhibited by Little Red Riding Hood in the book. While the other characters (except Goldilocks, who is excluded from the adaptation) all have a clear arc of development, “we don’t know why [Little Red Riding Hood] is this tough, murdering girl who just shoots wolves and makes bags” (*Documentary* 03:45-04:15). Exploring the cause of this violence and explaining why Little Red Riding Hood embodies it to such an extent therefore became a major focus of Schuh’s adaptation.

The film keeps key violent scenes such as the beheading of the two stepsisters, the shooting of the wolves, the death of Jack’s mother, and the display of the travelling case made from the third little pig. The two most unfathomable instances of violence, which are the ones carried out by Little Red Riding Hood, are given a thorough backstory to elucidate their existence. Before she kills Rolf, the wolf who ate her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood was playing with Snow-White, suddenly, the huntsman appeared and

kidnapped Snow-White. During the chaos, the huntsman dropped his gun, and Little Red Riding Hood picked it up. But, after a short hesitation, Little Red Riding Hood lost sight of the huntsman and her friend before she could pull the trigger (Fig. 12). This sudden catastrophe shocks Little Red Riding Hood, and she is entrapped in guilt and helplessness, for she has had the means to stop the kidnapping, but for the fear of executing violence, she loses her friend (Fig. 13).



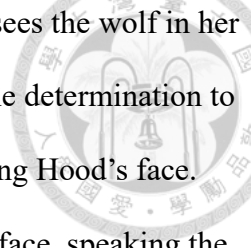
Figure 12. Little Red Riding Hood's hesitation.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])



Figure 13. Little Red Riding Hood left in guilt and helplessness after huntsman disappeared with Snow-White.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])



Her realization is further solidified when she returns home and sees the wolf in her grandmother's clothes. The transition from shock and confusion to the determination to adopt violence as self-defense is presented clearly on Little Red Riding Hood's face. She is paralyzed for a few seconds, then she blinks and puts on a sly face, speaking the familiar lines: "What great big ears you have, Grandma..." (11:40-13:00). Both times before the girl kills a wolf, the original book mentions how her eyelid flickers – a movement that is emblematic of the ambiguity of Little Red Riding Hood's murder. Now, with the girl's backstory revealed, the acts of violence are given significance. She resolves to violence because she learns that vulnerability will not cope with wickedness. Under this context, Schuh de-randomizes and imposes a rational frame on violence, which Dahl presents as gratuitous. The first killing of the wolf also signifies Little Red Riding Hood's embrace of violence, to which she resorts again throughout the rest of the plot.

However, her violent behavior should not lead us to believe that the adaptation is encouraging violence, since violence is a major but not the sole notion of the film. If we analyze the other two murders by Little Red Riding Hood, which are equally mysterious in the book, we can see that they both in fact contribute to inviting reflection and discussion over the meanings and legitimacy of violence. Violence allows viewers to comprehend the change of emotions and temperament in Little Red Riding Hood, but viewers also witness how violence turns into a form of agency that, to a certain degree, controls the characters and fuels the entire plot. While Little Red Riding Hood's first killing of Rolf is an act of self-defense, she murders Rex and the pig primarily out of hatred and revenge. After killing Rolf, Little Red Riding Hood self-proclaims a wolf hunter, eager to kill any wolf even if it is a total stranger to her.

Little Red Riding Hood's hesitation on utilizing violence gradually vanishes.

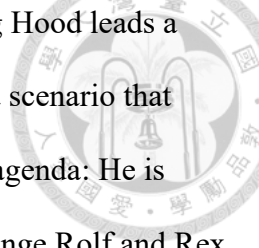
Instead, violence becomes her answer to all sorts of predicaments. Audiences anticipate escalating violence to be performed by her, as can be seen when she murders the pig after finding out that the pig – as the owner of the bank – stole all her savings. When Little Red Riding Hood decides to leave the sad town where she loses her friend and grandma, the pig tells her there was a bankruptcy and all the money was gone. However, as she was invited by the pig into his luxurious suite as a thank-you gesture for killing the wolf, she sees her piggy bank broken in half, together with a room full of other piggy banks. She furiously turns around, and from the outside, we know she shoots the pig (Fig. 14). At this stage, it has become clear that violence is a tool at Little Red Riding Hood's disposal: she has left her naïve past behind.



Figure 14. Little Red Riding Hood furiously turning around with her broken piggy bank.

(Source: *Revolt Rhymes* [2016])

As much as Little Red Riding Hood's wolf skin coats and pigskin traveling case emerge as an ostensible victory over cunningness and deception, the adaptation does not end on those exterior, immediate effects of violence. Consequences of violence and its influence on a person's inner sentiments are a key driving force in the film. After



moving to the city and reuniting with Snow-White, Little Red Riding Hood leads a pleasant life. Yet the consequences of her violent acts lurk over her, a scenario that brings us back to the opening of the film and unveils the wolf's real agenda: He is planning to eat Little Red Riding Hood's two children in order to avenge Rolf and Rex, his two nephews. This characterization tackles a central mystery Dahl left unsolved in the book: where does Dahl really stand as a narrator? Is he an unconventionally blatant narrator who means well for his readers, or is he the malicious-looking wolf on the cover who is likely to eat up the two children, and possibly even his audience? As presented in the adaptation, the wolf is our unreliable narrator. By no means is he interested in serving the role of a sanctimonious narrator. He is motivated by anger and hatred, which leads him to err on violence. Unlike Dahl, who omits the rationale of violence and focuses on its mere existence, in the adaptation, the moment when the wolf is presented as a character with a story, such story becomes inextricably linked to his own perspective, which guides the viewers' attention to his character development, and paves the way to unravel the emergence of violence.

While Little Red Riding Hood represents the process of being gradually seduced by violence as a problem-solving mechanism, the wolf epitomizes the process of breaking the hatred-violence cycle, by realizing an individual's power in moving beyond hatred. When the two children open the door for the wolf, his cruel intentions are obvious: he brings the boy to the kitchen, cooks onions and potatoes, and sets the clock for cooking the "main ingredients." Sensing danger, the elder sister makes a Scheherazade move and buys more time by demanding the wolf to tell them two stories, which are the wolf's improvised versions of "Cinderella" and "Jack and the Beanstalk." During the course of this narration, the wolf cannot but be moved by the two children's reactions. When the boy refers to "Cinderella" as a boring cliché and the girl tears up

after learning of Cinderella's misfortunes, the wolf alters the well-known plots. The ensuing variations spark off more interactions between him and the children (Fig. 15). Perhaps the wolf improvises his own "Cinderella" in the first place to mock the boy's know-all attitude on the fairy tale, but it becomes visible that, later, the wolf modifies the stories in a way that pleases and reassures the children. In the new version, Cinderella is rescued by the fairy and forms a happy family with Jack in lieu of being beheaded by the prince.



Figure 15. The wolf claiming he knows the real versions of fairy tales.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])

By the time the stories are over, and the alarm previously set has gone off, the wolf faces the crucial dilemma of whether or not to kill the two children (Fig. 16). The inner dilemma is visualized on screen, with two contrasting shades projected onto the wolf's face, leaving half his face in dark shadows, the other half in light (Fig. 17). Since the wolf's whole journey is motivated by the desire to avenge his two nephews, giving up on the violent solution (killing the two children) would be to shatter the meaning of his journey. Yet, it is necessary to point out that the wolf's value builds on a revenge scheme, and that until meeting the two children, his value system operates in a hatred-violence cycle. Of course, he can execute his revenge, given that the scenario offers

every advantage he needs (Little Red Riding Hood away from home, the children asleep, the vegetables cooked), but to do so would perpetuate the cycle that he and Little Red Riding Hood are both entrapped in, and gradually forfeit the power in determining what life one wishes to live. Another potential factor that plays into the wolf's inner struggle is the delight he experiences while telling stories to the two children (Fig. 18). Not only does the interaction allow the wolf to escape from the pressing dominance of hatred and revenge by being imaginative, it also conveys to him that life is more than just hatred and revenge – even if violence, the means to achieve revenge, lies within grasp.



Figure 16. The two children asleep after listening to the stories.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])



Figure 17. The wolf in dilemma.

(Source: *Revoltin' Rhymes* [2016])



Figure 18. The wolf appearing to enjoy telling stories to the children and catching their attention.

(Source: *Revoltin' Rhymes* [2016])

As revealed in the adaptation, the wolf chooses to break the cycle by forgiving the children. Instead of killing them, he waits around for Little Red Riding Hood and bids her goodbye (Fig. 19). The juxtaposition of characters and objects in the scene

reinforces the cyclic nature of violence, as Little Red Riding Hood, despite being physically away from the town where she killed Rolf, Rex, and the pig, is still not immune to the consequences of her violent acts. Besides the external factor of the wolf seeking revenge on her, Little Red Riding Hood is still living in her past – she is still wearing the wolf skin coat and the same pair of boots when she killed Rex. From her shocked expression and unchanged attire, it is apparent that she remains vulnerable to the influences brought by violence and hatred. In this context, her face-to-face encounter with the wolf stresses the latter’s self-driven liberation from violence and hatred. The wolf looks Little Red Riding Hood in the eye, tips his hat (Fig. 20), and says: “Goodbye, Red” (01:27:30-01:27:43). The farewell signifies the wolf’s last encounter with Little Red Riding Hood, as much as him overcoming past anger and resentment.



Figure 19. Little Red Riding Hood meets the wolf again.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])



Figure 20. The wolf tipping his hat and saying goodbye to Little Red Riding Hood.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])

Regarding overcoming resentment and laying a distinguishing line between past and future, the last scene of the adaptation is in no small measure symbolic. After leaving Little Red Riding Hood's house, the wolf takes the bus and gets off in front of a quiet, remote forest. Before completely vanishing into the woods, the wolf takes off the human clothes he was wearing (Fig. 21) and descends from walking on two to all fours (Fig. 22). This last scene marks the wolf's regaining his own life, no longer restricted by the affairs in the human world, hence able to return to his natural form – a state in which he is not controlled by the hatred-violence cycle.



Figure 21. The wolf taking off the human clothes he is wearing.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])



Figure 22. The wolf turning to walking on all fours.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])

While the last rhyme of the collection ends with an ambiguous conversation between the narrator and Little Red Riding Hood, which blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy, the adaptation's ending exhibits a clear division between the audience's reality and the film's imaginary realm. By watching the wolf disappearing

into the woods (Fig. 23), audiences are reassured that the two spheres shared by themselves and by the fantastical world are separated, but to achieve this balance, we must remember not to fall into the hatred-violence cycle.



Figure 23. The wolf returning to the woods, as well as where he belongs.

(Source: *Revolting Rhymes* [2016])

Despite their obvious differences, one thing that the adaptation loyally shares with the book is its uncritical, objective attitude towards displaying violence. Although attempted to thoroughly convey the forming of violence by supplementing the missing bits in the book, the adaptation retains all the violent elements of the original, and manifests an equally neutral acknowledgement of the existence of violence. To be more precise, violence in the adaptation is not altered or euphemized, but further explored to an extent that its inextricable relationship with humans, how violence and humans influence each other, and how humans ultimately are capable of being free from its control, are displayed.

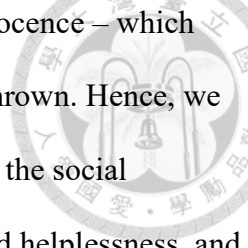
Chapter Five

Conclusion



In this thesis, I have explored the significance and indispensability of violence in Children's Literature, especially in the context of the rise of Critical Childhood Studies. My primary texts have been Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (1982), Quentin Blake's illustrations for both the book and the animated videos of *Revolting Rhymes*, and the animated *Revolting Rhymes* (2016), directed by Jakob Schuh and Jan Lachauer. Before analyzing and comparing both works' textual and visual components, I offered an historical examination of several crucial notions: violence, Children's Literature as a genre, Childhood innocence as a popular belief, and Critical Childhood Studies. I also included prominent works on the topics to underpin my discussion, including: Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921), Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1965), Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), and researched more contemporary work in Critical Childhood Studies, such as *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (2009), and on how it differs from traditional approaches. They all fortify my argument that violence plays an irreplaceable role in Children's Literature, especially at a time when Critical Childhood Studies urges a reexamination on our understanding of children. A transition from focusing on what children should be to what children are takes place and guides us to reassess children's nature as well as cultural constructions of childhood.

Once the expectations and standards imposed on children (what children should be) are no longer the main navigating force in related studies, the artificiality and performativity of the ideal or universal child appears obvious as a social construction. Without such pretexts, Critical Childhood Studies turns to seek the honest, untinged voices coming directly from children, through which children can regain their own

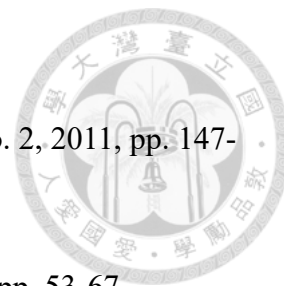


agency. By having their own agency, their supposed fragility and innocence – which stem from their state of dependence as incomplete adults – are overthrown. Hence, we can also discard the need to censor elements that do not contribute to the social construction of an ideal child, such as the critique of vulnerability and helplessness, and appreciation of unorthodox resourcefulness.

By interpreting and comparing the book with its adaptation, it can be seen that the adaptation's directors share both similarities and differences with Dahl in terms of presenting violence to children. Dahl focuses on violence's plain existence in the world and invites us to acknowledge violence's randomness, whereas the adaptation investigates the reasons why violence and cruelty appear. All in all, it is safe to say that the adaptation picks up where Dahl leaves off. Through bridging connections between violence and the characters' individuality, the adaptation adds complexity to the book, and demonstrates a perspective that further foregrounds a child's position amidst the changes and misfortunes in the world.

Much is left to further delve into regarding violence's significance in Children's Literature and its interaction with the expanding discourse of Critical Childhood Studies, however, I hope that my discussion on *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and its adaptation can excite interest on the topic and inspire relevant research concerning the representation of violence in contemporary children's entertainment, its influence in the debate of a child's nature, and last but not least, the marvelous legacy of Dahl and Blake, beloved by so many generations.

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