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She Can Do It: Messages of Female Empowerment in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Roald Dahl's *Matilda*

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She Can Do It:
Messages of Female Empowerment in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*
and Roald Dahl's *Matilda*

by

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Abstract

This research evaluates notions of empowerment, agency, and feminization found in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Roald Dahl's *Matilda*. Current conversations about these texts fail to address the three-pronged relationship between author, character, and reader. Through close readings of the source texts, applying feminist theory to the texts, and examining the complex power relationships between author and character and author and reader, the research concludes that both *Alice* and *Matilda* are empowering stories.

Acknowledgements

To Henry and Clara: Thank you for being the best distractions

And to Matt: Thank you for everything else

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The relationship between children and adults has always represented an imbalance of power: an imbalance where adults are expected to educate, protect, nurture, and generally look after children's well being. Children are expected to defer to adults until they become adults themselves. Historically speaking, the relationships between men and women closely align with that of adult and child; there was a time in Western culture when women were expected to defer to the men in their lives for major decision-making and protection. Given the similarities between women and children in these basic power dynamic explanations, what social necessity would there be in empowering little girls? Both Roald Dahl and Lewis Carroll have solidified their place in literary history with pieces written explicitly about children for an assumed audience of children. In their respective pieces *Matilda* and *Alice in Wonderland*, each author creates stories about female children and their adventures, which illustrates a rather unorthodox literary paradigm for their respective times. So, given that Carroll and Dahl were willing to bend the unspoken rules of children's literature, did they, as adult men, write feminist stories about girls for an assumed audience of little girls? By thoroughly examining the source materials through a feminist lens, and carefully applying the selected theory I was able to discern that *Alice* and *Matilda* do indeed have themes designed to empower their audiences.

These pieces are just two examples of men fashioning texts about and for young female audiences. While the relationship between author and character and author and reader is not a new concept, the analysis of power between an adult male author and young female characters and readers presents a new element to discussions of children's literature and feminism. In this new view there are men who, by many social definitions,

are powerful and find it relevant to write stories about empowering female children. By creating such stories they inspire their audiences to carry the embedded feminist ideals into the real world.

Both Carroll and Dahl were white men from backgrounds that provided them some social status, and in their respective socio-political times were in positions where their rights and ideas wouldn't be challenged. Their audience, however, being both female and juvenile did not share these same advantages given that children, particularly little girls, are often not seen as powerful. There is a serious division of power at work here already, one that could easily be used to maintain the gender role binary that existed in each of the author's respective times. Carroll and Dahl could have written stories about girls who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances and require rescue from a male hero, or where the girls end up hurt, maimed, or dead, the lesson being that girls belong at home and not on adventures. But neither author took that route. They wrote their characters as strong, capable, and resilient girls who get themselves out of the situations they don't like.

Given that there is a certain didactic element to all hero stories, one that leaves audiences thinking they should take care of those weaker than themselves and find the power to do good things, these authors take this inherent expectation and use it to empower their protagonists. By writing characters that are strong, young, and female it stands to reason that the assumed audience of little girls could carry these lessons over into their own lives. Whether or not Dahl and Carroll set out to create empowering feminist texts for children is not really the issue because the texts speak clearly enough; through the texts Dahl and Carroll use their powerful positions in society to empower the young girls they share that society with.

Both Dahl and Carroll have themes in their works that suggest they are in favor of female equality, which is the definition of feminism I will employ throughout this piece. Their encouragement of knowledge-based self-empowerment, the perseverance of their characters, and the clear acceptance of upsetting established power dynamics provide ample illustration for these feminist leanings. In her work, *Breaking the Angelic Image: Woman Power in Victorian Children's Fantasy*, Edith Honig explores the gap between how Victorian women were represented in literature and how women in the twentieth-century were characterized:

Victorian women in adult fiction were submissive and repressed, or if independent and assertive, mad and bad. Twentieth-century fiction for adults saw the emergence of the liberated female. Where did she come from?... Familiarity with Carroll's bright and independent Alice first suggested to me that Victorian children's fantasy might provide the strong, liberated females who would forge that missing link. (3)

If Honig's idea that entertaining texts, especially children's texts, can be powerful and inspiring to audiences holds true, then we can assume based on critical acclaim and sheer lasting power that *Matilda* and *Alice* fit Honig's criteria. Therefore, intentionally or not, Carroll and Dahl act as feminist mentors for their audiences. Close readings of the texts, as well as the incorporation of feminist literary theory and children's literature theory will illustrate these points.

For the purposes of this project I will apply Foucault's definition of power as an agreed upon set of systems, rules, and norms that work with and against themselves. Foucault's discussions of how he understands and interprets power are quite loquacious

and somewhat difficult to narrow into workable definitions. In *Understanding Foucault*, Tony Schirato and his colleagues try to concisely define Foucault's notion:

For Foucault, power is not a thing, nor is it possessed by individuals or groups. Rather, it is both a complex flow and a set of relations between different groups and areas of society that changes with circumstances and time. Another important point Foucault makes about power is that it is not solely negative (working to repress or control people)—it is also highly productive. Power produces resistance to itself. Power produces what we are and what we can do, and influences or determines how we see ourselves and the world. (xxv)

This understanding of power works well for my purposes here in that those who begin the stories with power don't need to maintain it throughout the text. According to Foucault, the nature of power is fluid. Power can shift through knowledge, circumstances, and time, which is precisely what happens with both Alice and Matilda in their stories. Both girls start their texts in positions that are far from powerful. Alice finds herself in a strange land with impossible creatures, and Matilda has never been regarded as anything more than an inconvenience in her family home. However, both characters are able to glean knowledge about themselves, their abilities, and the beings that hold power in their current surroundings, and through their experiences that they are able to use this new awareness to shift power dynamics.

In *Alice* we see that she is fully under the expectation of being able to demonstrate her knowledge. She is supposed to be able to recite poems and figures, but is also not supposed to think for herself. The Caterpillar and the Duchess both chastise Alice for

thinking, 'I've a right to think,' said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried. 'Just about as much right,' said the Duchess, 'as pigs have to fly...' (Carroll 72). The creatures of Wonderland do not give Alice much in the way of respect or power. They expect her to do as they say and to tolerate their nonsensical nature. If taken at face value, this exchange may seem like Carroll wants Alice to adhere to the expectations of obedience and diminutive social standing. However, the fact that Alice says anything contrary to the Duchess, in addition to her retorts to the Caterpillar's incessant line of questioning, Carroll shows his audience that some situations warrant questioning, regardless of your size or gender.

Matilda provides us with a clearer guide of what is expected of her. Mr. Wormwood tells his daughter that she is not supposed to bother herself with thoughts of business or with reading. Education is not something either Wormwood parent prizes; they can't understand why their daughter would want to expand her horizons. Matilda's social expectations are also defined by her experiences with the tyrannical headmistress Miss Trunchbull. At school Matilda is exposed to severe physical displays of power imbalance. Miss Trunchbull runs the school, aptly named Crunchem Hall, solely by instilling fear of her physical abilities into the hearts of students and faculty. In Miss Honey's first day of school introductions she is sure to mention the terrifying Headmistress, "Never argue with her. Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side of Miss Trunchbull she can liquidise you like a carrot in a kitchen blender" (Dahl 69). Miss Trunchbull has a type of power that no creature in Wonderland has; she is able to terrify people into compliance with just her reputation. Early in each of the texts both Alice and

Matilda are expected to fall into their prescribed, less-powerful places in life without thinking too much about it.

Thinking is precisely what Alice and Matilda do in order to change their circumstances though. The second element to Foucault's theory of power that I will employ is that power and knowledge are infinitely linked, an idea that he explains in *Discipline and Punish*:

Power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault 2005:27) (Schirato 48)

In both texts, knowledge gained through formal education or life experiences helps each of the protagonists develop their own self-empowerment and eventually change their circumstances. Understanding that power and knowledge require one another helps shape our understanding of the intricacies of the power relationships in both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Matilda*.

Carroll encourages Alice to work through her problems and to find personal strength all while gaining knowledge and striving for more of a voice. She wants to be taken seriously, in a place that refuses to see her as someone with agency. As discussed in Honig and in *Men in Wonderland*, the ideas that Carroll presents are forward thinking for his time. The expectations for Victorian girls were domestically focused, and their voices were seen as unimportant. Evidently Carroll disagreed.

All of Dahl's stories present an element that bucks social trends and *Matilda* is no exception. Written in the 1980s, a time when the feminist social climate was quite different

than the Victorian era, as women were working outside of the home, had the right to vote, and were no longer relegated to a life decided upon by men. However, gender equality was not fully realized and the feminist fight continued.

In his article “Male Feminism”, Stephen Heath presents an alternate definition of feminism: “Feminism is a subject for women who are, precisely, its subjects, the people who make it, it is their affair. Feminism is also a subject for men, what it is about obviously concerns them; they have to learn to make it their affair, to carry it through into our lives” (201). The idea of men writing feminist works isn’t all that unusual; men are, in fact, allowed to be feminists too. Given what is known about both Carroll and Dahl’s affinities for women, how their sympathies for children and young girls came to be, the evidence suggests that they did indeed have feminist qualities. Heath’s suggestion that men have to make a conscious effort to understand and embrace feminism coincides with the evidence presented about both authors examined here.

Alice and *Matilda* are a couple of the ways that these authors took up a feminist torch. The characters provide examples of empowered female children who carry on to shape their worlds to be more suitable. The texts and Heath’s second quote seem to be in direct conversation with each other. Perhaps Carroll and Dahl saw that they had a responsibility as members of society, quite powerful members of society, to somehow influence other parts of the population into a more sympathetic mindset. There is a difference between domination and influence, though. Children’s literature can’t be forcibly consumed; parents and teachers can read to kids, or assign readings, but these adults cannot force children to understand or heed any messages in the books.

For example, when readers see Alice standing up for her right to think, or Matilda saying that she felt just as capable as a pocket calculator to do complex math problems, it might be easy to take these scenes at face value. However, applying theory, these events are more weighted, more feminist.

Annette Kolodny claims that reading is a socially motivated experience, meaning that people learn to read from their own unique experiences, our lives color how we read, and as a result we seem to read what we know and enjoy.

“Literary criticism matters to feminists because they insist that literature embodies social beliefs, conventions, attitudes, and ideologies that operate powerfully throughout the whole of society” (Kolodny 2145). While this may be true, that feminist critics hold that the mainstream society that authors are writing in colors their works, doesn't it also stand to reason that subversive ideas in society could also influence a writer? Perhaps the tricky part with that is not that it could happen, because clearly there has always been literature that bucks social norms, it's just that usually these texts were secret. Here, these moderately subversive texts are popular. Not only are these particular pieces popular, but they are canonical classics (in the Children's Literature canon), and they are written for children. Kolodny continues her argument about the intricate relationship between literary criticism, writers, and readers by saying:

The continuing result...has been nothing less than an acute attentiveness to the ways in which males wield various forms of influence over females- are inscribed in the texts (both literary and critical) that we have inherited, not merely as subject matter, but as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged given of the culture. Even more important than the new interpretations of individual texts are probings

into the consequences (for women) of the conventions that inform those texts (2148-49).

So, it stands to reason that if literature is influenced by all of the things that make up a society, whether consciously or not, then literature would also provide a safe space to dissent in an author's current social climate. Much like Carroll and Dahl did in their respective pieces. While Kolodny's expression here isn't meant to be positive in that her argument suggests that theorists either become complacent or set out on a hunt for meaning that may or may not exist in a text. If her argument is that texts have no independent meaning, I counter with a suggestion that there are, at least in *Alice* and *Matilda*, authorial planted ideas. Maybe this message doesn't fall into Kolodony's definition of "meaning" but I argue that there is most assuredly a powerful intent. These pieces aren't typical social propaganda; this is children's literature, with subtle messaging intended on empowering young female audiences.

Perhaps the most important dynamic at play in both texts is that between author and audience. By the nature of creation an author is in control of situations in their piece, they maintain the control over the characters that they create, and they exert their almost god-like power to enforce their will on the characters. The fact that both Dahl and Carroll, as grown men, would feel comfortable enough to write from a perspective that they would have no direct experience with could show how perfectly unfit they were for the task.

Roderick McGillis suggests in his essay, *The Delights of Impossibility: No Children, No Books, Only Theory*, "Children are non-existent because the notions of childhood we have are constructions of adults who cannot recall precisely what it was like to be a child..." (202). Here McGillis essentially denies any agency a child may have, whether real or

fictional, to convey ideas about the time and experiences they have while they are young. Since children are not in a socially powerful position they are unable to express what their lives are like in a way that adults will take to heart. By removing agency from the children, he gives all of the power to the adults, which is generally what authors of children's literature would do. Adults have the power, hardly ever know what to do with it, and oftentimes misuse and abuse it. McGillis' sentiment is particularly pertinent when considering that while grown men have experienced being children, since according to him we are unable to suggest that they have experienced childhood at all, these grown men have not experienced life from a young female perspective.

Catherine Robson explores the idea of men writing of female childhood in her book *Men in Wonderland*. Robson explains:

The idealization and idolization of little girls, long acknowledged features of the Victorian era, cannot be thought of without reference to a pervasive fantasy of male development in which men become masculine only after an initial feminine stage. In this light, little girls represent not just the true essence of childhood, but an adult male's best opportunity of reconnecting with his lost self. (3)

While Robson's research focuses on Victorian writers, including Lewis Carroll, it stands to reason that the idea applies to later authors such as Dahl. As Robson suggests that childhood is indeed a feminine experience, regardless of the sex of the child, then perhaps the best way for any author to relate to a juvenile audience is to write from the perspective of the epitome of childhood: the young girl. The idea that the young girl's perspective provides the perfect paradigm for the childhood experience might alienate the young male audience, however. That being said, we must infer, based on both title and subject matter,

that Carroll and Dahl fully intended these pieces for a young female audience, as opposed to a more general one.

In both *Alice* and *Matilda*, the authors position themselves in a literal control over the lives of these little girls, as the men are responsible for creating the fantastic worlds. Additionally, the men assign both traditional and non-traditional gender roles to young girls while simultaneously creating a sense of self for these characters, which eventually carries over to the audience. These men have filled their texts with social and gendered commentary and created an interesting and often shifting role of power that spans age, sex, and literary role, be it author, character, or reader.

For most adults it would not make sense to give children all of the power in text because it would not translate to real life. However, both Carroll and Dahl encourage their readers to buck this tradition. Dahl is blatant in his lack of regard for established, powerful entities. Several critical texts refer to Dahl as an anarchist since he fails to adhere to the paradigm of maintaining control over the children he writes. Knowles and Malmkjaer suggest that “Dahl allies himself with the child reader against the world of adults, which is why many saw him as subversive; but he none the less exercises his own control over the reader” (Knowles 125). As an author Dahl is willing to share his power with his characters but not so much with his readers. The way that he uses language as a signal of power has also been examined, “In a child’s world power rests with parents and teachers and Dahl is helping them to get their own back for the small injustices every child experiences” (138). Knowles and Malmkjaer provide extensive evidence about the language patterns in *Matilda* with particular regard to the descriptions of adults, as well as their dialogues with children (133-41). This detailed approach to the language in *Matilda* suggests that perhaps Dahl

believes that through language children can gain some power that both he and audience think children should have.

There are volumes written on the language in Carroll's texts; his wordplay and mocking tone of his contemporaries is notorious. Knowles and Malmakjaer explain, "...in Carroll's case the overriding theme which the puns reinforce is his preoccupation with the nature of language...he plays on the meaning of *dry*- both 'not wet' and 'ininterestingly expressed'- in order to reinforce his criticism of Victorian educational practices..." (232). Regarding the correlation to Dahl and the topic of power dynamics within the text, it may prove useful to turn to the text itself for examination. Alice frequently finds herself in conversations that she must redirect or try and reason her way out of. For example, while having tea with the Hatter and the March Hare, "Alice did not at all like the tone of this remark, and thought it would be as well to introduce some other subject of conversation" (Carroll 50). Carroll allows Alice a great deal of agency with regard to her language as she frequently attempts to recall her lessons, both academically and socially, and when she runs into difficulty she is not above suggesting that she is not herself.

Both Carroll and Dahl encourage their female characters to work through their issues, never accepting what it seems that many children would be unable to change. In this their pieces have an almost universal audience; what reader does not wish to see their hero succeed? And to take this idea one step further, what function does a little girl have as a 'hero' in a text? Margery Hourihan discusses the inverting gender norms in the traditional heroic tales in her book *Deconstructing the Hero*. Hourihan suggests that in many historic tales where women or girls are presented as heroes, the perception of these female characters comes about because they aren't actually presented as possessing feminine

traits. The example of Joan of Arc illustrates the idea that in order for Joan to be a hero she must first be engaged in the more engrossing, and thus more important, happenings in the male realm. Secondly, Joan must be stripped of anything even remotely feminine; she wears men's armor and rides with a male army. Hourihan states, "The inference readers are likely to draw from such a story is that, if they wish their lives and deeds to be worthy of notice, women must strive to behave as much like men as possible" (206). However, both *Matilda* and *Alice in Wonderland* fail these requirements. Neither title character is expected to behave as anything other than a young female on an adventure. Hourihan specifically mentions Alice in her work, "She is unequivocally both a child and a girl, but her sense, benevolence and self-possession make her a worthy representative of humankind despite her youth and her femininity" (207). Alice is a hero in her text, even though readers expect nothing masculine from her; while there are no swords or murders she still has a rather startling adventure.

With *Matilda*, Dahl writes his heroine to function outside what her immediate family deems important. She is encouraged, through her author, to read, to excel in academia and essentially to right the wrongs that she is forced to suffer. While *Matilda* realizes that her circumstances are extraordinary, she does not fear what makes her different, and she feels that it is her duty to not only explore how far she can take her talents, but also use them to protect people. *Matilda* is at once a traditional girl groomed to take care of others, even adults, while being rather unique in that she has superior intelligence and a need to express her gifts. She also puts herself in a position where she can take control of her response to the abuses she is forced to suffer at the hands of her father and headmistress. She punishes them. She scares them. There might not be an element of a power dynamic so inherently

compelling as that of fear. By creating fear in the hearts of her enemies, Matilda is able to change the power structure in her world to something that suits her better.

Matilda's punishments are for the most part pretty harmless and are essentially designed to embarrass her parents, particularly her father. This dynamic between Matilda and her father, and eventually the very masculine Miss Trunchbull, illustrates an interesting dichotomy at work in the texts. Dahl here is willing to allow his character to maintain her inherent feminine traits, but also to acquire and act on more masculine traits. At the same time, Matilda has distrust and severe disdain for masculine adults; they have failed her in the most important ways, especially regarding her most valued asset, her education.

In looking at Alice one finds many similarities to Matilda. Each character struggles for power, however, Alice's power is different from Matilda's. Matilda is empowered in a very academic way; she is inclined to explore how *her mind* will take control of a situation, and she uses her *powers* in this way. Alice is also encouraged to use her mind, but in a more imaginative sense. When Alice attempts to recall her figures, lessons, or poems she gets them horribly wrong. Intelligence is not stressed for Alice to the same degree that it is for Matilda. When Alice attempts to figure out whether or not she is indeed herself, she compares her intelligence and physical attributes to those of other girls that she knows,

'I'm sure I'm not Ada,' she said, 'for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn't go in ringlets at all and I'm sure I can't be Mabel for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh! she knows such a very little!' (Carroll 13)

Carroll gives Alice the authority over her intellectual faculties in a way that she is able to differentiate herself from her peers; however, she also uses the shallow and more feminine

comparison of physical attributes. Alice's power, while present, is almost always matched with a socially acceptable reminder that she is a young girl.

Alice is also more likely to react poorly to a situation than Matilda is. When the Queen of Hearts orders Alice beheaded, Alice gets into a huff, kicking cards and telling them that they are nothing to be feared. This scene is of particular interest though in that Alice essentially asserts her power over the situation *by* throwing a tantrum. Here again Carroll matches Alice's power with a suggestion of typical behavior for young, spoiled girls. Although the idea that Alice's behavior is actually a fit as opposed to an acceptable, more mature, response to severe frustration is debatable, especially if you consider that Alice must take immediate control over her situation. All in all, Matilda is more calculating in her use of power, and Alice is more reactive.

The power presented in each of the texts is also present when considering the education of each of the girls. Regarding education and intellectualism Alice and Matilda are almost opposites. There is little or no imagination to Matilda's education once she gets to Chrunchem Hall, unless you count the creativity behind the punishments dealt out by Miss Trunchbull. However when Alice has her discussion with the Mock Turtle, we learn that in Wonderland all education is a joke, at least when compared to traditional modes of education. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Alice has a very difficult time remembering her lessons when pressed to recite them, which may lead readers to the assumption that Alice simply has no mind for school. This assumption may only be strengthened if readers remember that Alice begins her adventures as a result of boredom with her sister's book. "...once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or

conversations?” (Carroll 3). Matilda simply can't help herself when it comes to inhaling great works of literature, another stark contrast to Alice.

Alice and Matilda face similar situations when trying to assert themselves to those who wish to prevent them from thinking. Alice must justify herself to the Duchess, while Matilda has to defend her intelligence with her father. This provides a very interesting similarity between the girls in that they each feel that they should be able to assert themselves and that they each have a right to power and intelligence within a conversation. Perhaps the most interesting thing about these particular scenes though is how each character is written. Readers are led to feel that Alice's happenings are little more than fantasy and there is little weight associated with them. However Carroll at least alludes that Alice wants power, even if he may not expressly write it for her. On the other hand, Dahl encourages Matilda to explore her capacities. There is no room for Matilda to quit; she just doesn't have that mindset.

With regard to the general feel for each of the pieces, Carroll writes Alice in a very whimsical way, while Dahl writes Matilda in a way that seems almost fantastic and instructional at the same time. That is not to suggest that Carroll has no didactic themes in his *Alice* pieces; they are just more cleverly disguised than those in Dahl's work. Perhaps this difference is so prevalent because Dahl intends for his authorial voice to be heard.

Dahl's voice...is loudly audible everywhere, speaking directly to the reader...He is always stirring the pot, complicating the oppositional and confrontation dialogues between child and adult, conspiring overtly with the child reader but also needling the child with indirect and discomfiting exposures of childhood shortcomings and support for chosen adult values. (Hollindale 275)

Dahl, as an author, positions himself in the text. Carroll takes a more hands-off approach.

However, each author seems fully aware of their power, and they distribute other powers as they see fit. In this particular case they share their power with two young girls. Here though the authors don't relinquish their control, they simply strive to share it. Through these stories, the audiences are educated and empowered to recognize what they might perceive as power imbalance in their lives and to make the requisite changes.

Chapter 2: Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland*

While there is no Charles Dodgson or Lewis Carroll autobiography, the basic events of his upbringing and early life are well documented. Charles Dodgson was born the 27th of January 1832. He came from a large family with ten siblings (seven sisters, three brothers) and married parents. All evidence suggests that Dodgson's childhood was nice and unremarkable in any sense. Additional well-documented facts about Dodgson include his time at Oxford, his relationship with the Liddell family, and his predilection for relationships with young girls. Dodgson's life was an important one, and his history is worth noting. However, by examining Victorian ideas of childhood and innocence, as well as recent research into the relationships between Dodgson and his young, female friends, and a close reading of *Alice in Wonderland*, I aim to continue the discussion of male authors empowering their girl characters, and subsequently, their audiences.

During Dodgson's upbringing, the idea of childhood was overtly feminized regardless of the child's sex, perhaps in part because the responsibility of carrying, birthing, and raising children was a woman's role. It could be argued that modern childhood is still a generally feminine part of life. Women and children are often, if not always, categorized together. The words we use to define childhood, motherhood, and the entire infant and toddler experience certainly carry weight with how we perceive this formative part of life. Catherine Robson explores the feminized vocabulary surrounding childhood in the introduction to her text *Men in Wonderland*.

After all, here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world of infancy and young childhood is still largely perceived as a female domain. Not only does the care of little children continue to be primarily woman's

responsibility, but the terms with which the early period of childhood is characterized – a time of “softness” and “vulnerability”, requiring “gentleness” and “protection” - remain resolutely feminized. (4)

By understanding that childhood has, at least in the last two hundred years or so, been a rather feminine experience, perhaps we can allow Carroll some latitude with his taking on the role of writing stories from a little girl’s point of view. In fact, when examining what childhood might have looked like for Dodgson, Robson states, “Young boyhood crossed the line and actually looked more like girlhood” (5). This idea comes on the heels of a discussion of how boys were dressed like their sisters, educated like their sisters, and essentially immersed into an integrated childhood with their sisters up until the age that boys were sent off for more structured education. At this point, they would then be dressed in more masculine clothes, and be educated by male professors as opposed to female governesses, while their sisters were left at home to continue their schooling in the domestic arts (4-5). Robson aptly notes, “Trousers and school thus marked the end of the first phase of existence for boys” (4). If the Victorian male existence has already undergone a rather abrupt metamorphosis by the age of six, it is no small surprise that much of the male dominated society was preoccupied with images and ideas of all things innocent and childlike. Perhaps young boys were not emotionally equipped to be ripped from the comfort of their feminized early years, only to be thrust into a rigid and rule-bound existence as a Victorian man.

Victorian girls, on the other hand, had no such change in their childhood, and were intended to spend their days in the home, learning the ways of running a household and raising a family. This childhood paradigm translated to adult life, where men held positions

of authority and women were the less powerful domestics. With this societal understanding of power, the relationships that Dodgson struck up with his child-friends seem a bit more ordinary.

There is much controversy surrounding Dodgson's photographs of child models, both nude and clothed. The purpose here is not to make value judgments about Dodgson's predilections toward young girls, nor to determine whether or not he had pedophilic tendencies. The purpose here is to examine the very real power dynamic between Dodgson, as photographer and author, and the young girls that modeled for him, both in life for photographs and in fiction as a main character. By examining Dodgson's photography and its relationship to his real life friendships with young girls, we can better understand how he came to create such an innovative character as Alice.

Catherine Robson devotes a great deal of time to the discussion of Dodgson's photography in *Men in Wonderland*. Robson's interests lie not only with Dodgson's exploration of a new artistic medium, but the duality that he explores, and the power dynamic at play. Remembering Foucault's notion that power is a fluid relationship and Kolodny's ideas regarding the symbiotic association of art and life adds depth to the investigation of Carroll's photography.

Although the pictures are obviously the result of an unequal partnership between Carroll and his models, it will never be possible to say exactly how wide that inequity may have been...it certainly appears that Carroll had no wish to represent within these photographs any trace of his own dominant role (144). Not all of Dodgson's models were nudes, not all of them were individual young girls, and not all of them were presented in what might be perceived as eroticized poses. Even the most mundane photograph presents

an interesting dilemma in that the photographer must maintain control over the composition and creation of the image. The fact that Dodgson had no desire to “represent...any trace of his own dominant role” is of very interesting note. His goal, then, was to create an image where there was simply a little girl (or girls), arranged in a way that could be perceived as natural, so that he could capture a moment that may have looked like childhood incarnate. Granted, not all of his photographs fit this bill, but a majority of them, even those where girls are nude, or dressed as characters, seem to strive for an unobtrusive look.

This perception that Dodgson could at once be in complete control and simply capturing a candid moment translates to his role as Alice’s author. While Alice appears to be on her own through her adventures in Wonderland, the man writing her is always behind the scenes creating her experiences and her reactions to them.

The notion that something could be both contrived and natural creates an interesting duality. With the composition of the Dodgson photographs, Robson explores another duality: that in which the girl models are both little girls in life, but also posed in powerful and erotically charged ways. “...Because she herself lays claim to adult power, the little girl is never diminished, or otherwise defined, by a relationship to an adult presence that stands outside of her” (144). Here Robson claims that Dodgson empowers the girls in the photographs by embracing their “little girl-ness”. The idea that a Victorian man would be able and willing to empower young girls, simply by celebrating what they were, is very modern, and some might even argue, feminist in nature.

In Victorian society Dodgson was in a respectable and influential position; he was a member of the clergy, a professor at a prestigious university, and a male. Given this

knowledge, and what is known about Dodgson's affinities for all things childhood, especially girlhood, it seems that he may have been uncomfortable with his situation in the larger scheme of Victorian societal power structure. That said, he was confident enough in his powerful position that he could indeed take on a different persona, and create worlds where he perhaps didn't retain all of the power as outlined by Foucault.

In the Alice texts Dodgson is not present as a character, and the stories are very clearly not told from a male perspective. These traits seem a bit unusual for the accepted power-holding establishments in Victorian England. The pattern of inverted power only continues throughout the text as Alice becomes more aware of the absurdness of the creatures and societal practices of Wonderland (which are likely modeled after personalities in Dodgson's real world). During Alice's adventures she not only becomes aware of the ludicrous injustices in Wonderland, but she becomes confident in her abilities to change the situations she faces there. Alice eventually takes all control, at the end of her time in Wonderland, and in her statement "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (Carroll 97), she perfectly illustrates that having such a rigid power structure is really quite nonsensical.

In his story Dodgson not only removes himself from the Wonderland power dynamic, but he gives (for lack of a better term) the power to Alice. She acts as his proxy for the duration of the story, and she is the one responsible for changing the power dynamic in that world. Translating this shift into Dodgson's world isn't all that difficult considering Dodgson held quite a powerful position in his society. While he might not have carried enough clout to conduct feminist rallies in Victorian England, he did have enough sway to publish a rather revolutionary text. The message is just subversive enough to be hidden

under the guise of a fantasy children's dream narrative. But for anyone looking hard enough, or for those impressionable enough, the principle of an adventurous, powerful, independent girl is something that would undoubtedly work its way into their psyche.

While Foucault's ideas of power don't allow for one person to actually possess the power, as all power is regarded in terms of relationships and dynamics, we must allow that there are powerful people, with regard to the systems set in place. Dodgson was one of these people. In creating Alice he is bringing someone new into his area of the power structure, and he can do that based on his position.

In the text, Alice finds herself on the powerful side of the social equation because she refuses to sit idly by and let things happen to her and to the other less powerful creatures of Wonderland. This perfectly illustrates Foucault's notion that knowledge and social revolution can shift the power of a society. Through education, Alice's "street smarts" acquired in Wonderland, and Dodgson's feminist themes hidden in his story, the character and her target audience learned just enough about power injustices to plant seeds of revolutionary thinking.

When Dodgson, as Lewis Carroll, created his Alice stories, his immediate audience was in fact the three Liddell girls. The girls, Dodgson, and another member of the Oxford faculty were all on a canoe trip, when Dodgson was asked to pass the time with a story. Knowing this, the assumption is that his authorial intent was to entertain his young, female gathering, and not to indoctrinate them with didactic themes, or even to encourage budding feminist ideals. But simply because Carroll did not intend for his story to be political doesn't mean that his feminist sympathies don't show through. Just as an author's personality will seep into a piece, readers will inherently bring their own experiences to a

text, and since the Alice text is of an age where it has seen many social revolutions, many readers can apply different backgrounds to their reading of the story. In fact, the symbiotic relationship between a text and a reader, and whatever the political implications either may have on its own carries little weight unless they are regarded as one. According to Wolfgang Iser in his text "Interaction Between Text and Reader",

What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said 'expand' to take on a greater significance than might have been supposed. (1676)

While there are many stated instances of whimsy, adventure, and Alice coming in to her own as a maturing young girl during her adventures in Wonderland, the notion that she is able to do these things on her own and conduct her own business occupies the "unsaid". Carroll does not explicitly state that he feels that Alice is capable of being on her own, in fact he often portrays her struggling with the situations and company in Wonderland, but the fact that she is doing these things provides a solid base for analysis.

Carroll gives us many clues that he is sympathetic to the plights of young Victorian girls. Some researchers suggest that this understanding exists because there was such a heavy feminine influence in the author's young life (Honig 30). But it stands to reason that through his relationships with young girls, and his appreciation for all that was Victorian girlhood, Carroll felt comfortable enough to create a character as complex as Alice; a character who walks the very fine line between child and adult.

The power struggle between adulthood and childhood is something that all Alice researchers must address. In the Wonderland adventures, Alice, the child, is often put in

the authoritative and logical role. The adults, or supposed mature beings (as many of them are not human in Wonderland) are often rude, nonsensical, dangerous and impulsive, which are many attributes that would apply to children left to their own devices. So, in Alice readers see a child acting as the adult, creating an interesting power dynamic between the perceived adult/childhood dichotomy.

Robson addresses this notion through a conversation about Dodgson's photography. Photographs "combine past and present" much like the model's "simultaneous existence with the realms of childhood and adulthood" (144). Here again we see Dodgson's desire to not only meld two aspects of a life, childhood and adulthood, but to attempt to capture them in a moment or story.

What Carroll does in *Alice* is different than what he achieves with his photographs, and not simply because the medium has changed. He allows Alice to grow up a little. Alice begins her adventures innocently enough, and she is presented with several supposed adult characters throughout her time in Wonderland. However, it is Alice the child who must provide the logic, wisdom, and rules to the adults in her encounters. Perhaps it is the presentation of Alice's adventures as a journey through Wonderland and the growth that our protagonist undoubtedly undergoes that lead the text to have such a universal appeal; all audiences can identify with some aspect of growing up.

Initially, Alice attempts to address all of the strangeness that is Wonderland by being polite and applying her formal educational tools. However, she is not above throwing the occasional crying fit when things fail to go her way, which we see almost immediately upon her arrival in Wonderland, "...she tried her best to climb up one of the legs of the table, but it was too slippery; and when she had tired herself out with trying, the poor little

thing sat down and cried” (Carroll 12). As her adventures progress, Alice learns that she must handle her strange encounters with the beings of Wonderland differently than before. “She learns to deal with new situations by acquiring new weapons— not only defensive weapons, but at times aggressive ones as well. She learns to be independent, resourceful, daring adventurous, and even assertive” (Honig 77). Honig continues to provide the example of Alice standing up for herself while on trial, and going so far as to kick the Queen’s soldiers, as they are nothing more than “a pack of cards” (77).

A deep examination of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* provides ample evidence for my claims that by writing an empowered young, female protagonist Carroll sets the stage for inspiring his audience. Given that the text is not so lengthy, the pace of Alice’s development is quite quick, and rather staccato. Perhaps Carroll respected the fact that for many children attention is not long lasting, and he worked to make his points in short order. Even though many instances of Alice’s growth, be it physical or emotional, are quickly stated, by careful reading and linking together the ideas, the underlying themes of power and feminism come to light.

The first point of note happens as Alice falls down the rabbit hole. At this juncture Alice has taken it upon herself to follow a waistcoat-wearing rabbit and undertake whatever adventures lie ahead. During her fall, Alice attempts to bolster her belief in her decision by considering how brave she’ll be when she gets home.

“Well!” thought Alice to herself. “After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!” (Which was very likely true.) (Carroll 8)

We learn quite a lot about Alice's life in this brief statement. Firstly, like many children, she's clumsy. We've already seen her fall down the rabbit hole, and now we know that it's not unlikely that she's fallen down a flight of stairs at home. Secondly, we learn that Alice has a history of getting herself into precarious situations. That she mentions falling from the roof of her home suggests that it is not completely outside the realm of possibility that she'd find herself in a position where she could fall from the top of her house. How many of her female peers would be allowed to roam enough to find themselves on the roof of their house? According to Edith Honig, "(Victorian) Girls were expected to be religious, serious, moral, intellectual in a refined, socially acceptable way, and above all, obedient to parents and older brothers" (65). While parental expectations and reality are often at odds, given this rather extensive list of suggestions for female propriety it seems rather unlikely many young Victorian girls found themselves on the roof. By introducing this passage so early in the text, Carroll sets the stage for readers to understand that their heroine is unlikely to adhere to the typical Victorian expectations for little girls.

Alice is very keen on applying her schooling and logic to many of the situations that arise during her time in Wonderland. This point is noteworthy because most of the time there is no one around for Alice to discuss her knowledge with. She is independent in her intelligence, which fails Honig's list of expectations mentioned above. How could Alice's intellectual achievements be both refined and socially acceptable if there is no society for her to share it with? Victorian female intellectualism, as presented by Honig, was more for drawing room entertainment, with things like "...sketching, music, language, botany, and history. Girls were never to compete with boys in their studies, and they were always to place domestic duties before scholastic ones" (65). Early in the text readers find that Alice

is keen to apply her schooling, and though she is often her only audience, she talks her way through her trials. The first examples of this are when Alice finds herself at the door to the garden, by the three-legged table with the “Eat Me” and “Drink Me” goodies.

The scene begins with Alice realizing that she is too big to fit through a little door that leads to a beautiful garden, and her wishing that she could “...shut up like a telescope!” (Carroll 10). Instead of getting instantly frustrated, as many little girls might do, Alice uses her wits to reexamine the table for any additional keys or instruction on how to get through this hidden door. When she finds a bottle marked “DRINK ME” she gives herself a rather thoughtful talking to. Alice decides that she should check the bottle for any markings that indicate the contents might be poisonous:

...for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them...she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked “poison” it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later. (10-11)

Here we see that Carroll sets Alice apart from other, more typical children in her age group. Where other kids might hastily chug the contents of friendly looking bottles, Alice has the wisdom to, at the very least, check for any obvious indications of poison. Carroll allows Alice to be more than what is expected of her. This is the first time readers see Alice questioning the face value of things, and trying her best to dig deeper. With Carroll encouraging Alice to think critically he makes a rather bold statement; he believes that children, young girls specifically, are capable of critical thought. This type of thinking,

especially in the Victorian era, was mostly reserved for adult men, thus the reasoning outlined by Honig that young females should obey their elders and older brothers.

Secondly, Alice applies lessons learned from others so that she may make her own decisions. The natural progression of critical thinking is to eventually come to a conclusion, and apply it to the situation at hand. This is another illustration of the power that Carroll gives Alice. She is able to decide for herself and not blindly follow the direction of someone else. Granted, some might suggest that Alice's partaking in the strange drink is precisely her doing what is instructed. However, she comes to her own conclusion, after careful consideration, to drink. She is the creator of her own adventure, so to speak.

Alice has several more occasions to apply her knowledge, and her assertiveness, as she interacts with the habitants of Wonderland. The first of these interactions happens while she's floating in her pool of tears and meets a mouse, which she promptly offends by speaking of her cat Dinah, and a farmer's dog that she knows. But the real interactions begin when she encounters the rest of the members of the caucus-race: "a Duck and a Dodo, a Lory and an Eaglet, and several other curious creatures" (Carroll 20). Readers are treated to the details of an interaction that Alice has with the Lory:

Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, 'I'm older than you, and must know better.' And this Alice would not allow, without knowing how old it was, and as the Lory positively refused to tell its age, there was no more to be said. (21)

This argument proves important not only because of Alice's ease and familiarity with creatures of Wonderland, but also because she is politely standing her ground. There is no

indication of the subject of the discussion, but given the nonsensical tendencies of Wonderland, we can assume it was trivial. Instead of getting frustrated and throwing a tantrum, as many Wonderland creatures do later in the text, we see Alice behave rather maturely in that she applies the logic that since the Lory won't share its age, it cannot prove how old it really is. And instead of furthering the argument like a petulant child, Alice lets it drop. While this act seems rather unimportant, since it really is a non-act as she's not taking any action, we see that Alice has the maturity and rather adult capability to let a subject go.

When Alice has her discussion with the Caterpillar, we see her address her personal growth while in Wonderland. With phrases such as "...I know who I was what I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then" (35), and "'I-I'm a little girl', said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through, that day" (43). Here Alice is not only discussing her physical changes as the result of the consumption of the food and drink in Wonderland, but also emotionally. She has already begun to understand that she is not in an environment that is familiar to her and negates much of the social instruction she's received in life thus far. Alice also understands that her sense of self has been in constant flux since her arrival in Wonderland. Part of this understanding manifests itself in Alice as her temper.

In the scene with the Caterpillar, Alice finds herself getting rather frustrated as their discussion of her size becomes more than she can bear "Alice said nothing: she had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper" (41). Alice's temper is certainly worth noting, simply because Carroll allows her to have one. From previous discussions of Victorian expectations regarding the behavior of

young girls readers can quickly conclude that Alice's temper is atypical for the period. While Alice's interactions with the population of Wonderland up to this point in the text have all been irksome in one way or another, this conversation with the Caterpillar illustrates Alice feeling self-assured enough to assert herself with a Wonderland native. Alice is becoming independent. Through her growing confidence and knowledge of her surroundings Alice is becoming empowered. And, as Foucault suggests, this knowledge and empowerment will serve Alice in her (unknown to her) mission to gain power in Wonderland.

Shortly after her conversations with the Caterpillar, Alice happens upon the home of the Duchess. While attempting to engage the footman in a dialogue about how to gain entrance to the house, Alice is again met with an infuriating situation: the footman is "perfectly idiotic!" (46). Given Alice's temper and her developing sense of autonomy, the glimpse of her maturity we get in this scene is not surprising. After the Duchess has thrown her baby to Alice she carries the child outside.

"If I don't take this child away with me," thought Alice, "they're sure to kill it in a day or two. Wouldn't it be murder to leave it behind?" She said the last words out loud, and the little thing grunted in reply (it had left off sneezing by this time).

"Don't grunt," said Alice; "that's not at all a proper way of expressing yourself." (49) After all of the changes seen in Alice during her time in Wonderland, she is now willing to sacrifice her independence in order to save this child's life. She can no longer be the little girl she's been claiming to be; she would become a mother. Alice would be responsible, and in charge. However, this maternal action is not at all atypical for what her parents and peers would expect of Alice's actions later in her life. This scene fits perfectly with

Kolodny's suggestion that life is reflected in art; had the baby not transformed into a pig Alice's story would have been a cautionary tale, one where a girl went on an adventure and eventually became a mother before she was ready.

The Mad Tea Party puts Alice in a new position. Much like the entirety of her adventures, while at the table with the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and the Dormouse, Alice is initially treated as a peer but it becomes increasingly evident that she has grown up a bit. The party carries on with stories and riddles that all seem to be on the same level as there is no real authority at the table; nobody is in charge. The result of the lacking leadership is chaos with interruptions, shouting, messes and spills, and a bit of physical abuse aimed at the Dormouse. The whole scene reads like children playing at having a tea party, and for readers provides entertaining imagery. Dialogue in this passage is quick and sharp, albeit not always intelligent, and sometimes rude.

"Really, now you ask me," said Alice, very much confused, "I don't think---" "Then you shouldn't talk," said the Hatter.

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off... "At any rate, I'll never go there again!" said Alice... "It's the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!" (60-61)

Alice's unwillingness to suffer the company of that motley crew reads very much like a child's tantrum, and is an illustration of Alice exercising her temper once again. However, her maturity shows in her ability to remove herself from the situation. Instead of standing by, shouting, and stomping her feet, Alice realizes that her best option is to leave, and she does just that.

Alice carries her refusal for extreme nonsense over into the Queen's croquet party. She even says to herself, "Why, they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" (63). As events continue the King and Queen attempt to control Alice and the other members of their court, but Alice will have none of it. After the first time the Queen of Hearts calls for Alice's beheading, our heroine responds with, "Nonsense!" said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent" (64). Alice is brave now. And she is standing up for herself. Whether her bravery and self-assuredness comes from her growth during her adventures, or out of fear for her life, her actions are certainly unexpected for typical Victorian girls. Alice seems to walk the line between adhering to the attributes outlined above and bucking them. According to Edith Honig, "Girls were expected to be...above all, obedient to parents and older brothers" (65). Since there are no appropriate adults for Alice to defer to, she again takes on the role of the rational person in control.

While this isn't the first time Alice has taken on the role of responsible party, it is the first time her attempt succeeds. After the gardeners who try rather unsuccessfully to change the color of a rosebush are sentenced to beheading, they "...ran to Alice for protection" (65). Her self-assured reply, "You sha'n't be beheaded!" said Alice, and she put them into a large flower-pot that stood near" (65). Not only does Alice offer the gardeners comfort, she remedies the situation for them. Does Alice become a pseudo-mother for these gardeners? Mothers are often looked at by their children as the ones who will fix things, be it skinned knees or broken toys. Mothers are also often looked at as a strong force of comfort in a child's life, a truth that holds true for many long into adulthood. Seeing Alice in this role shows that she has matured enough to convince others that she is able to care not

only for herself, but she's capable of caring for them. She takes control of the situation at hand and ultimately saves the gardeners' lives.

Another situation we see Alice attempt to gain control over is her conversation with the Duchess. While walking arm in arm, much to Alice's chagrin, the two are having an odd conversation where the Duchess tries to attach a moral to every aspect. During these exchanges Alice sometimes gets lost in her thoughts, which the Duchess declares rudeness:

"Thinking again?" the Duchess asked, with another dig of her sharp little chin.

"I've a right to think," said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried.

"Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly..." (72)

The creatures of Wonderland throughout the story have attempted to control every aspect of Alice's being. She's grown and shrunk, she's had to adjust her speech and recite lessons, and now she's being ordered to not think. That seems to be the beginning of the end for Alice. After this small assertion that she not only should be allowed to think, but that she has a right to, Alice seems much more confident that the silliness of Wonderland is just that, and she has little to fear.

Another right of Alice's is called into question during the trial of the stolen tarts. As everyone in the court is seated Alice realizes she's beginning to grow:

"I wish you wouldn't squeeze so," said the Dormouse, who was sitting next to her.

"I can hardly breathe."

"I ca'n't help it," said Alice very meekly: "I'm growing."

"You've no right to grow here," said the Dormouse.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” said Alice more boldly... (88)

Again, an element of Wonderland attempts to suppress Alice, and again, she becomes more confident and self-assured. While Alice is physically growing and taking up more space in the courtroom, she has also grown emotionally and intellectually. Alice’s understanding of her agency and her abilities to impact the world around her, especially in the context of Wonderland, have become clearer at this point in the text. This is the first time that Alice’s growth is unexplained: she hasn’t eaten or drunk anything to adjust her size. She’s just growing. And, remarkably, Alice seems to be perfectly at ease with this unexplained and seemingly inevitable growth.

Alice’s exit from Wonderland is the perfect illustration of embracing her power and personal growth. After evidence in the trial of the stolen tarts has been presented, and execution threatened several times, Alice is called to the stand. After some ridiculous lines of questioning Alice eventually bursts out, “‘Who cares for *you*?’ said Alice (She had grown to her full size by this time). ‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’” (97). As the entire deck of cards leaps at her, Alice finds herself waking up on the very same bank we found her at the beginning of the text.

Alice’s personal growth through her adventures in Wonderland is nothing short of extraordinary. Not only because the story itself is fantastic, and wildly entertaining, but also because Carroll writes Alice in a way that she does not grow up a victim of the Victorian female paradigm. He grants her a degree of autonomy that is welcome in such a creative story, but that also is not completely outside the realm of possibility in his society. Readers experience Alice’s growth, and watch her grow into a self-assured and rather

forward young woman. Perhaps the most interesting part of the text happens in the final paragraph of *Alice*, when Alice's sister imagines what Alice's future holds.

Lastly, she picture to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (Carroll 99)

At first glance, it seems that Carroll has sentenced Alice to a life of domesticity and mothering, with no adventures of her own. In fact that would be a very tidy, traditionally happy ending to the story. So, while it could be a nice way to sum up who Alice becomes, it seems that the story ends this way, because readers might be inspired to buck this notion. How could Alice, the reader's Alice, who they have watched grow into an independent, self-reliant, worldly, and more mature female, be consigned to a typical life? Alice may have matured and grown-up during her adventures in Wonderland, but there it seems unlikely she would ever become a typical grown woman, living a life without adventure. Through her escapades she gains knowledge about herself and her abilities, and with this knowledge she becomes self-empowered. Much as Foucault's power theory suggests, with this knowledge there has been a power shift, one where Alice, as a young female in a Victorian children's book is empowered and self-reliant. With this empowered sense of self, Alice is

equipped to make decisions for herself, decisions that might buck the social norms of her time.

Chapter 3: Roald Dahl and *Matilda*

Most children in Western civilization have had some contact with a Roald Dahl text. Whether they've read one of his books for school or for fun, seen trailers for movies based on his works, or even used words like Oompa-Loompa or snozzberry, Roald Dahl's legacy is pervasive throughout our culture. Given his popularity and lasting power, Dahl's impact on children is nothing short of amazing. Child audiences find an ally in Dahl, someone willing to empower them and show them how they don't have to accept things as they are. This camaraderie, coupled with the pure entertainment value of Dahl's works illustrates elements certain to contribute to his enduring popularity.

According to Jeremy Treglown, "By the end of his life, every third British child, on average, bought or was given a book by [Dahl] each year" (9). In his biography of Roald Dahl, Treglown continues his conversation of Dahl's writing career, suggesting that the writer's success gave him a great deal of power.

Dahl's readers would number in the millions. His work is a common point of reference all over the world...In Britain alone, between 1980 and 1990, over eleven million of his children's books were sold in paperback form—considerably more than the total number of children born there in the same period (8-9).

With such success, Dahl's power as an author is clear. In having reached so many people with his stories, Dahl's ideas regarding right and wrong, power and weakness, and hero and villain, have undoubtedly laid the groundwork for many a reader and storyteller alike. Taking this understanding of Dahl's wide readership, we can examine his life and the many discussions about his work to apply them to our investigation of power dynamics between adult male author and young female protagonist.

Many pages have been devoted to Roald Dahl's life. For those who care to look, his history is well documented and quite colorful. Some researchers paint Dahl as a loveable old grump and others would have readers believe that he was a calculating and arrogant businessman (Treglown 10). While my purposes here do not demand a thorough investigation of all details of Roald Dahl's illustrious history, there are some facts and ideas that are pertinent to this conversation of power and feminism; ideas that become all the more important when considering Kolodny's claim that, "The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance...reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large" (2149).

Dahl was born to moderately wealthy Norwegian parents and raised in Wales. After the deaths of his eldest sister and his father, Dahl became the sole male in the household, as his elder half-brother had been sent to boarding school; Dahl was four years old (13-14). While Dahl was always very fond of his mother, Sofie, and she of him, the warmth between mother and son did not always satisfy the emotional needs of the young boy. Treglown writes,

His nickname at home was "The Apple," because he was the apple of his mother's eye. ...Much was expected of him, and although he never lacked for either encouragement or material rewards, his mother showed him little physical warmth. The bereaved boy was both the center of attention and very lonely. (15)

Dahl understood that his mother was simply too busy to give him every bit of attention that he wanted as a child. In his first autobiography, *Boy*, Dahl's recollections of his mother

paint her as a saintly, strong, and fiercely independent woman. In a passage after explaining the loss of his sister and father Dahl says,

She had five children to look after, three of her own and two by her husband's first wife, and to make matters worse, she herself was expecting another baby in two months' time. A less courageous woman would almost certainly have sold the house and packed her bags...But she refused to take the easy way out. (Dahl 22)

There is sadness to Dahl's words about his mother, but instead of resentment readers find reverence. During the recollection of his first encounter with corporal punishment at school, for having put a dead mouse in a chocolate jar at the local sweet shop (35-48), Dahl paints his mother's reaction as such: "She went downstairs and put on her hat. ...She was walking very quickly, with her head held high and her body erect, and by the look of things I figured that Mr Coombes was in for a hard time" (50). Every child knows the body language of a parent on the warpath, and it is often a relief to know that someone else will be on the receiving end of the coming punishment. Here Dahl's deep respect for his mother is evident, and hers for him. While Sofie might not have been the most affectionate of mothers, she clearly expected her children to be respected and cared for at school, and not in a way that resulted in them taking a beating.

This story of corporeal punishment can be taken as a literal example of art imitating life, given that Matilda and her classmates face similar and worse punishments at school. Dahl also sows the seeds for an adult savior, a character type that does not always appear in his works but certainly does in *Matilda*.

In the last pages of *Boy*, Dahl explains how he was to be sent off to Africa for three years while working for the Shell Corporation. His excitement about an African adventure as a young adult is clear, and he seems to vividly remember the conversation he had with his mother about his leaving for so long.

I was her only son and we were very close. Most mothers, faced with a situation like this, would have shown a certain amount of distress. Three years is a long time and Africa was far away. There would be no visits in between. But my mother did not allow even the tiniest bit of what she must have felt to disturb my joy. (158)

Again we see the deep respect between mother and son. Knowing this relationship existed, it seems all the more unusual that Dahl featured so many horrible mothers and mother figures in his tales. Sofie was not the only female role model in Dahl's life, but she was certainly the anchor for his sense of self. Dahl's self-empowerment eventually became rooted in his ability to tell a good story.

While never particularly good in school he did find solace in stories: reading them, writing them, and telling them. Dahl always had an active imagination, and his stories often got more elaborate with each telling (Treglown 21). After a rather adventurous stint as a pilot in the Royal Air Force during WWII, Dahl began trying to sell his stories. At this point his works were often geared toward adult audiences and generally had elements of sex, murder, and sordid affairs. However, there was almost always a hit of humor or playfulness in his stories. Dahl seemed to simultaneously not take his work too seriously but was very serious about it.

Many theorists have closely examined the power dynamics in Dahl's works for children. Most often the power relationships examined are those between children and adults, with Dahl frequently allying himself with the children. Chen-Wei Yu claims that Dahl's character creation is a thinly veiled way for the author to put himself into the story:

If his alignment with well-behaved child characters against authoritarian figures is an attempt at subversion...then his punishment of those ill-behaved characters also seems emblematic of a position he adopts from those adults who used to oppress him (Yu 157).

Yu's claim here that Dahl is simultaneously a powerful and oppressive adult, and a willful oppressed child, presents an instance where the author is on both sides of the power dynamic. If the claim that Dahl wishes to be present in his text is true, then the entire notion of empowering the audience through empowering his characters becomes very complex, as the author is attempting to also empower himself through the text. Perhaps Dahl's desire to be on both sides of the power equation come from the impact of the traumatic events of his childhood.

Dahl, much like Matilda, was forced into maturity early in life. Treglown states, "Arguably, he never grew up. Much of his behavior seems like that of someone who had been forced into a premature but permanent, and rather unconvincing, show of adulthood" (11). Dahl's alignment with his child protagonists rings all the more true with the suggestion that the tragic events of his early childhood rendered him somewhat stunted in his maturation from childhood to adulthood. But even if Dahl never fully matured he did eventually become an adult and possessed all of the power that adulthood brings, though

perhaps he never reached an understanding of how to balance his life with a child-like spirit in an adult body.

Power dynamics and struggles riddled Dahl's life and subsequently influenced his writings. Dahl did understand that there were grey areas for the relationships he wrote about. During an interview Dahl stated, "although the child loves her mother and father, they are subconsciously the enemy. There's a fine line, I think, between loving your parents deeply and resenting them" (quoted in Talbot 98) (Yu 156). We see Matilda struggle with this "fine line" in the beginning of the text; it doesn't seem that she loves her parents so much as she wants them to be people deserving of her respect.

Matilda's is constantly told and shown by her parents that she is supposed to be the less powerful element in the relationship. She quickly learns, by being left home alone at the age of three while her mother plays Bingo in the next town over, that she has a great deal of inherent power. She is capable of taking care of herself, and she eventually ventures out in search of more books to fill her afternoons with. Early on we see Matilda faced with problems and her having enough agency to solve them on her own.

In applying the Foucauldian theory that power only exists when there are two parties willing to adhere to an established dynamic, readers quickly see that any sort of established pattern in the text will be challenged.

Matilda's family falls into traditional, heterosexual, nuclear family categories. During a scene where her father explains the family business to his children, he fails to address Matilda, assuming that since she is a girl she has no business in business and certainly not with vehicles. The same is true when there is a family discussion about arithmetic, the father expects that because Matilda is a girl that she can simply not do figures in her head.

Matilda does not take lightly to these oversights and subsequently punishes her family. By allowing Matilda to engage in such retaliation does Dahl then condone this behavior from a little girl?

Matilda's punishments are for the most part pretty harmless and are essentially designed to embarrass her parents, and mostly her father. This dynamic between Matilda and her father, and eventually the very masculine Miss Trunchbull, illustrates an interesting dichotomy at work in the texts. Dahl here is willing to allow his character to maintain her inherent feminine traits, but also to acquire and act on more typically masculine traits. At the same time Matilda has distrust and severe disdain for masculine adults, as they have failed her in the most important ways, especially with regard to her education which Matilda values very highly.

Foucault suggests that power shifts happen when those who have less power become knowledgeable and self-empowered. *Matilda* perfectly illustrates these requirements and the intended power shift. By closely examining the text we are able to identify Dahl's overt messages about relating knowledge and kindness to self-empowerment, and to uncover his points to empowering young girls.

In the early pages of *Matilda*, readers are treated to introductions to Matilda's parents who are described as inattentive, self-absorbed, and emotionally and verbally abusive to their daughter. One early description reads, "The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen and not heard" (Dahl 11). Additionally, Matilda learned to read at the age of three, and by the time she was four she was able to read "fast and well and she naturally began hankering

after books” (11). Thus begins Matilda’s adventures with literature, and her journey to self-empowerment.

In one scene at the public library, where Matilda goes every afternoon, the librarian inquires as to the parent’s involvement in Matilda’s reading adventures. When Matilda reveals that she walks by herself, even taking the busy roads and crossing streets, the librarian suggests that Matilda should ask her mother for permission. Matilda’s response is perhaps one of the most empowering lines in the entire book, “I’d rather not...She doesn’t encourage reading books. Nor does my father...She doesn’t really care what I do” (16). While this scene is sad, illustrating the blatant neglect that Matilda faces at home, it is also empowering in what Matilda has discovered about being left to her own devices. Since her parents don’t care what she does in the afternoons, she has decided that reading and expanding her worldview through literature is how she would like to spend that time. Additionally, Matilda realizes that by not asking for permission her parents can’t accuse her of breaking any rules or doing anything wrong. In this scene, Matilda is four years old; at this very tender age she already understands that her home and parents won’t provide the stimulation or support she clearly desires. Instead of sitting idly by and waiting for her parents to wake up to her extraordinary abilities, Matilda takes responsibility for creating the change she wants and needs.

The theme of Matilda creating change is carried throughout the text; first we see it in the library scene, then we see Matilda carrying out punishments for her parents, and eventually taking revenge on Miss Trunchbull. Thankfully, Dahl explicitly defines Matilda’s power dynamic in the text.

Being very small and very young, the only power Matilda had over anyone in her family was brainpower. For sheer cleverness she could run rings around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told, no matter how asinine the orders might be. (49)

Here we see Foucault's notion that power has to be a relationship. Matilda's parents are the more powerful people by default, and based on age, size, and order in the family, Matilda has less power. However, in the one area that Foucault suggests can instigate power shifts, knowledge, Matilda is far superior to her family. Dahl sets his audience up for major power shifts very early in the text.

There are two prominent scenes with Mr. Wormwood where Dahl suggests that Matilda possesses attributes that he does not. The first of these is when the father rips pages out of Matilda's library book: "There seemed little doubt that the man felt some kind of jealousy...how dare she enjoy reading books when he couldn't? How dare she?" (41). According to the author, Mr. Wormwood is unable to read well. His illiteracy doesn't come about out of sheer laziness, though that might be a contributing factor; he simply can't read.

The second of these scenes with the father is when he tries discussing the daily profits for his business. After a particularly successful day, Mr. Wormwood comes home and sits his son down to discuss business affairs. Matilda happens to be in the same room as her father and brother, and while not directly addressed during the conversation, she is privy to the discussion. While her father rattles off several large numbers, and asks his son to figure out the total profit, Mr. Wormwood admits to requiring a calculator. Matilda, without hesitation quickly comes to the correct answer doing mental math. Instead of

praising his daughter and being awestruck by her abilities, Mr. Wormwood becomes defensive and begins calling her names and spitting accusations of cheating “No one in the world could give the right answer just like that, especially a girl! You’re a little cheat, madam, that’s what you are! A cheat and a liar!” (55). This particular scene illustrates another instance where Matilda’s abilities cause her father to feel inferior to his young daughter, but it also provides an interesting gender argument that we had yet to see in the text.

Readers have clearly seen, up to this point, that Matilda is an extraordinary young girl, but we hadn’t seen her suffer any blatant gender biases. Matilda generally suffers the wrath of her parents simply because she isn’t like them and prefers to do things that they don’t, not because she’s a girl. But here we see Mr. Wormwood explicitly state that there is no possible way a girl could do such figures, especially in her head. We don’t know if he means that girls can’t do figures, or if girls shouldn’t be able to participate in any conversations pertaining to business; either way his message is that Matilda is less capable than her brother due to her sex. Thankfully, Dahl creates a text where Matilda does not require her parents for much other than food and shelter; she certainly does not need their acceptance or guidance. This inherent independence is her first step into self-empowerment.

Matilda’s ability to learn things on her own serves her well in the early pages of the text. It isn’t until we meet Miss Honey that we see an adult take an interest in Matilda’s well being and intellectual growth. When Matilda is able to recite advanced multiplication tables and read long sentences, she tells Miss Honey that she taught herself, and gives her parents no undue credit. This particular exchange allows readers to see another example where

Matilda has an inherent power; she is able to learn things, and learning is certainly something that all children can relate to.

Up to this point in the text no other characters have tried to relate to Matilda. However, Miss Honey is able to have an open and honest relationship with the small girl about her abilities and opinions. When questioned about her mathematical skills Matilda plainly states, "I've always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?" (74). This line is a perfect illustration of Matilda's self-empowerment. She refuses to rely on a calculator, instead opting to figure out math problems mentally; she wants to do it on her own.

The desire to do things on her own continues as the conversation between teacher and student progresses. When asked about reading, without any sort of pretense or snobbishness, Matilda politely explains how she's read all of the children's stories and several adult novels at the public library (80). Not only has Matilda read these books, she's formed opinions about major themes in the literature she's consumed, "Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?" Miss Honey asked. "I do," Matilda said. "Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh" (81). This exchange is the first scene where Matilda's opinions have been asked. Miss Honey not only asks what Matilda thinks, she also respects the child's answer. Respect is something new for Matilda, especially mutual respect, and it clearly impacts the way she feels about Miss Honey for the rest of the text.

Matilda's self-empowerment is contagious. Miss Honey is able to confront the tyrannical Miss Trunchbull on Matilda's behalf, "Normally Miss Honey was terrified of the Headmistress and kept well away from her, but at this moment she felt ready to take on

anybody” (82). The meeting does not go well. Miss Honey’s request that the girl be placed in a higher, more challenging class falls on deaf ears. But the mere fact that she is empowered by Matilda, a huge role reversal from anything even remotely traditional, illustrates the point in Foucault’s power theory that power shifts begin with small movements and through knowledge.

Another character inspired by Matilda is her friend Lavender, “Matilda liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous. She liked Matilda for exactly the same reasons” (102). Up until this point Matilda hasn’t had any real friends. In Lavender she not only has a friend, but an ally. They are in this mission to survive school together. When Lavender is tasked with procuring the water jug for Miss Trunchbull’s weekly visit to the classroom, she finds inspiration from her friend. Matilda had shared her successes in punishing her family with Lavender. These stories inspire Lavender to take on Miss Trunchbull in her own way; she finds self-empowerment “It was *her* turn now to become an heroine if only she could come up with a brilliant plot” (136). Lavender’s plan involving a newt, Miss Trunchbull’s water pitcher, and a little luck, works as a brilliant vehicle for the power shifts which inevitably happen.

While being blamed for Lavender’s newt stunt, Matilda discovers her blinding hatred of all things unfair and unjust. Through this discovery, she is able to harness her extra sensory powers and tip Miss Trunchbull’s water glass. Firstly though we see the small girl yell at the gigantic headmistress in her own defense. This seemingly inane exchange is a change for Matilda. While she has stood up to her parents, in her own way, she has never yelled at them. By shouting at Miss Trunchbull, we see that through her first week at school she has been empowered enough to feel justified in doing so. Foucault’s notions of power

suggest that the first step to changing power dynamics is noticing that there is an imbalance that needs to be rectified. Here Matilda sees that the imbalance is directly impacting her character and quite probably her personal safety.

School provides a host of new experiences for Matilda, after the instance where she tips the glass using only her eyes, Matilda realizes that something extraordinary has happened and asks to speak with Miss Honey. The only other person we've seen Matilda ask for help from is Mrs. Phelps, the librarian. Granted, needing help is a rarity for the small child, but she sees Miss Honey as someone that she can trust. When Matilda approaches her teacher with something so seemingly unbelievable, Miss Honey is skeptical but does not dismiss Matilda's story. There is a mutual respect between the two, which is something new for both of them. Miss Honey and Matilda find power within each other, "...Matilda all of a sudden became wildly animated. It seems as though a valve had burst inside her and a great gush of energy was being released" (177). Now that Matilda has found a willing audience she has a lot to say; up to this point in her story Matilda has been very quiet, essentially only speaking when spoken to and never revealing her own ideas or opinions.

Given that Miss Honey allows Matilda to feel important and respected, Matilda in turn feels a certain duty to protect her teacher and friend. When Miss Honey reveals that the evil aunt who tormented her throughout her childhood is in fact Miss Trunchbull, Matilda takes it upon herself to settle the score. While Miss Honey is telling her story the language is not terribly subtle in illustrating that she needs help, "Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now, all of a sudden I have a sort of desperate wish to tell everything to somebody" (195), "The voice she [Matilda] was hearing was surely crying out for help. It must be" (196), "You must understand I [Miss Honey] was

never a strong character like you” (198). The expected power dynamic between adult and child and teacher and student is inverted here. Miss Honey needs the type of support that she provides for Matilda, and the girl provides that for her. Miss Honey is vulnerable and shares her secrets with Matilda, who takes it in stride, and almost immediately begins planning her revenge against Miss Trunchbull.

The mere idea that Matilda is willing to stand up to Miss Trunchbull illustrates how empowered the child feels. When readers meet the headmistress, she is described as, “a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster...[she had] an aura of menace...she marched...long strides and arms aswinging” (67). Dahl immediately uses almost every negative and terrifying description available in the English language when describing Miss Trunchbull. These descriptions come on the heels of Miss Honey’s introduction where she possesses more traditionally feminine traits, “She had a lovely pale oval madonna face with blue eyes...Her body was so slim and fragile...like a porcelain figure...a mild and quiet person” (66). These two women are clearly created to be polar opposites.

Miss Honey embodies all traditionally female traits, and both the children in the text and readers will quickly align with her. Perhaps this alignment comes simply from the fact that she is a nice person, but it might also have something to do with the fact that she possesses recognizable gender traits. Miss Trunchbull, on the other hand, is an incredibly unpleasant and rather terrifying person, and she wants it that way. There is no attempt on her part to exude any warmth, kindness, or softness. Dahl spends a great deal of time painting a clear picture of how this tyrannical headmistress should be seen, but perhaps the most interesting line in all of that description is that, “She was above all a formidable female” (82). Couldn’t it be argued that most females are indeed formidable, especially if

given the right circumstances? Granted, most females don't possess the large physical attributes that Miss Trunchbull does, "...the bull-neck...the big shoulders...the thick arms...sinewy wrists...powerful legs" (83), but is physical prowess the only marker for intimidation? Clearly not, as we see Matilda, a small and young girl, in clear victory over Miss Trunchbull at the end of the story.

We firstly see Mrs. Wormwood coloring her hair, wearing makeup, and doing all of the things she finds feminine and fashionable. At one point she even tells Miss Honey, "A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later on. Looks is more important than books..." (97). As far as Mrs. Wormwood's definitions of womanhood go, she fulfills every one of them. But readers still aren't meant to like her.

Miss Honey is the very antithesis to Mrs. Wormwood; she is small, beautiful in a natural, plain sort of way, and more focused on intellectual development than physical markers of wealth. Miss Honey is kind and caring, but also typically soft spoken and frail. She needs to be cared for and protected, as her way of caring for herself is not sustainable. Miss Honey doesn't need a man, but she needs someone, and this is just one of the traits that lead readers to feel sympathetic toward her; we want to protect her.

Mrs. Wormwood and Miss Honey are essentially opposites. Ann Alston suggests, "Miss Honey is the thin, frugal, virginal, intelligent character, as opposed to Mrs. Wormwood who has an 'unfortunate bulging figure' and is rude, unintelligent, and implicitly immoral" (Alston 107). In this text the idea that the best solution to Matilda's parenting problem is for her to leave her dysfunctional but, for all intents and purposes, nuclear family, and instead live with a single, yet caring, woman. "Miss Honey is domestic in

every good sense and has routines and rules- everything an ideal family would have except a husband" (65-66).

Rounding out the triumvirate of women in the text is the anti-female, Miss Trunchbull. She plainly takes pains to not embody any classically feminine traits, though she isn't exclusively masculine either. Readers are lead to believe that her stature and demeanor would cow most men, as well as women and children. Miss Trunchbull is essentially an asexual monster. Even though readers could be confused by her inability to adhere to one side of the simplified gender binary, there is no question that they shouldn't feel any sympathies toward her. She is evil embodied, and we don't like her.

She seems to care very little for Dahl's intended audience too, "I don't like small people...I cannot for the life of me see why children have to take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose" (151). The irony of a headmistress of an elementary school who hates small children isn't lost on Dahl's readers. Though, there is no need to rely on Miss Trunchbull's telling of her disdain, her actions provide enough evidence. Whether she is twirling a small girl by her pigtails, hanging a boy from his ears, or forcing a child to eat an enormous chocolate cake in front of the entire school, none of Miss Trunchbull's scenes do anything to inspire even the faintest glimmer of sympathy or likeability.

Miss Trunchbull's hatred for pretty much everyone in the book is especially concentrated on little girls. She says, "...a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What's more, they're much harder to squash...Nasty dirty things, little girls are" (85-86). The headmistress seems to put great stock into the abilities of little girls; if they didn't possess some element of power, or some *je ne sais quoi* that seems to frighten the hulking woman then she wouldn't hate them so much.

Another element of power throughout the text is that of reading and education. Readers initially see Matilda finding solace in books and at the public library. Dahl's appreciation for literature and the power that knowledge and reading can give a person are evident throughout the text. There is a scene in the public library where Dahl provides instructions on how public libraries work, through a conversation with Matilda and Mrs. Phelps:

“Did you know”, Mrs Phelps said, “that public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?”... “Could *I* do that?”... “When you have chosen the book you want, bring it to me so I can make a note of it and it's yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.” (19)

Here Dahl provides a multi-faceted conversation about library policies. On the face of it, the conversation is between two characters, and Matilda is learning how she can continue devouring literature without having to come to the library as often. But with the slightest amount of interpretation, Dahl is also informing his audience that things such as libraries exist, and they will let you borrow any book you wish for up to two weeks, for free. This is the type of information that could start a knowledge based, Foucauldian power shift. Dahl's audience now knows that most any information they desire is accessible at the public library, safe spaces that have almost any book one could want and are welcoming to children.

Matilda's self-empowerment directly correlates to her love of books. And Mr. Wormwood's deep-seated inferiority complex is worsened by his daughter's literacy. Dahl mentions more than once that Matilda's enjoyment of books is something powerful when compared to her family, “Perhaps his anger was intensified because he saw her getting

pleasure from something that was beyond his reach" (38-39), "How dare she, he seemed to be saying with each rip of a page, how dare she enjoy reading books when he couldn't?" (41). Matilda doesn't seem to realize just how much power her literacy gives her. She understands that the texts are pleasurable to read, and that through books she has been on many global adventures without leaving her house (21), but she doesn't seem to realize that her reading makes her father feel inferior to her, and it contributes to his wrath.

Foucault's theories about power and how the dynamic requires both a relationship to define those with power and those without, and his notions about how power can change through knowledge are clearly outlined throughout *Matilda*. Just as Dahl found great comfort and power in writing, Matilda finds both in her ability to read. Through Matilda's adventures, Dahl very much wishes to inspire his audience to turn to books in order to find their own self-empowerment, regardless of their gender, size, or circumstances. The lessons that *Matilda* teaches are wide reaching; Dahl's message of empowerment and founded self-righteousness are clearly intended to inspire all readers. Matilda, a small child, was able to take on both her parents and Miss Trunchbull, all very intimidating adversaries, so shouldn't Dahl's audience take heart in that, and apply the lessons to their own lives?

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This project set out to be an examination, to see what there was to see when looking at men writing for and about young girls, and I was able to do that by reviewing *Alice in Wonderland* and *Matilda* through a feminist lens. The power dynamics at play there, essentially the most powerful people creating literature for some of the least powerful (i.e. adult, white men writing for female children), could have worked to maintain the status quo of power in society. However, instead of suggesting that their protagonists were powerless and should train themselves up for a life of domestic dullness, the authors in these examples took an alternate route. Carroll and Dahl wrote stories about young girls that embarked on adventures, and through educational experiences were self-empowered enough to change their surroundings. Applying Foucault's notions of power being a fluid relationship and Kolodny's theory that art and life have a symbiotic relationship, it became more and more clear that these texts are generally perceived as empowering to young female audiences.

Alice's adventures lead her to stand up for herself when creatures of Wonderland suggest that she has the same right to think as a pig has to fly, or that she should submit to their will, like when the Queen of Hearts orders Alice beheaded. Alice asserts herself in a way that was unexpected for girls in the Victorian era, and by doing so she represents an early example of an empowered female who successfully navigated an adventure on her own.

Matilda's story is a different, more domestic adventure. The most exotic place she visits is her school, and the people she must stand up to are all human adults. Given the 120-year difference between publishing dates, *Matilda's* initial audience had a different

perception of how girls should behave and what their aspirations should be. That said, the 1980s did not provide a perfectly gender-equal environment for adults or children, and *Matilda* gives an additional push toward the empowerment of girls. One of the earliest elements on Matilda's path to self-empowerment is her ability to read. Armed with this knowledge she realizes that she must take control of her surroundings in order to fashion a life that is safe and nurturing. Early in her adventures, Matilda realizes that in order to survive her horrible parents she must punish them for bad behavior, and she later discovers her extraordinary powers that help in the battle against her tyrannical headmistress.

By incorporating some biographical information into the project, I was able to get a clearer picture of what each author brought to the proverbial table in the way of experiences with the females in their own worlds. Removing any notions of blatant authorial intent, but keeping in mind the idea that art imitates life, it was important to investigate what relevant relationships the authors had with women in their lives. Based on the biographical research and close reading of the source texts, I can confidently conclude that there is a strong message of female empowerment within each story. And with Foucault's notions of power this message of empowerment and shift in power doesn't end with the last page of the text. *Alice* and *Matilda* offer their audiences the type of empowerment that goes beyond the page; they allow the children who read the texts to carry that message into their own lives, and become empowered people in their own right.

The conversation regarding adult men writing to empower both young female characters and a young female audience is something relatively new. Existing research on power dynamics in children's literature and feminist literary theory are typically binary in

nature: children and adults, authors and readers, and men and women. Current conversations in these fields, according to my research, seem to lack interest in the intersection between author/character/audience. These intersections are increasingly important, as feminism becomes a broader topic, one that regularly includes men and their thoughts on empowerment.

Just as power is defined here as an ever changing relationship, the current definitions of feminism are also fluctuating. Messages of gender equality are more prevalent in modern society than in the times that Carroll and Dahl lived in. This expanding ideal makes more room in the conversation for those who agree with gender equality and for the empowerment of girls. By allowing for more people to participate in the ongoing discussion, feminists can add this new element of men empowering young girls to a growing list of theoretical perspectives.

Roald Dahl and Lewis Carroll wrote stories of empowered girls and their adventures. By sharing these stories with the world these authors could be considered feminist mentors for their audiences; whether or not they set out to be seen as such is debatable, given the socio-political climates of their respective times. Regardless of their intent, I can confidently say that the messages in their texts empower their characters, and hopefully, by proxy, their readers.

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