
Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, Reading and Class in 1980s Britain

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Abstract

For *Matilda*, reading is an act of rebellion. However, this article argues that the portrayal of reading experiences in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* actually conforms resolutely to the British class system. Drawing heavily on the work of Clémentine Beauvais, I examine the interplay between class and reading ability, distinguishing between the petty-bourgeois – a new, emerging class in 1980s Britain – and the traditional intelligentsia. Next, using Q.D. Leavis and John Carey as guides, I investigate the extent to which earlier 20th-century preconceptions about reading and class remained culturally relevant when *Matilda* was published. Finally, I discuss how the book's portrayal of classed reading relates to its wider publication context, and how reading Dahl in general might affect a child's class consciousness. The article concludes that, both textual and metatextual reading experiences in *Matilda* uncritically defend the cultural hegemony of middle-class taste.

Key Words

Matilda; Roald Dahl; class; petty-bourgeoisie; Thatcherism

Introduction

Class is rarely made explicit in literature for children. Indeed, of the extant critical material on Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), Clémentine Beauvais is the only scholar to discuss in detail the class dynamics within the text. Building on Beauvais' work, this article will interrogate specifically the association between class and reading experience, both in and around *Matilda*, addressing how these relate to historical and contemporary class prejudices within

print culture. First, I will provide an overview of *Matilda*'s plot and publication, as well as the class dynamics within reading culture during the 20th century. Next, I will explore the dependent relationship between reading ability and taste, before highlighting the function of the reading recommender. Finally, I will assess how the portrayals of reading and class in *Matilda* relate more broadly to contemporary concerns about children's reading and the relationship between reading and class in 1980s Britain.

Plot, publication, politics

Matilda is the story of a prodigiously clever little girl, ignored and maligned by her family, the Wormwoods. Using the library, Matilda teaches herself to read, assisted by kindly librarian Mrs Phelps. She ends up reading not only all of the children's books but also many canonical adult novels, and when she starts school, Matilda's ability earns her the admiration of her teacher, Miss Honey. The two become friends, united against the cruel headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, whom it is later revealed extorted Miss Honey for money and forced her into poverty. Lacking intellectual stimulation, Matilda develops telekinetic powers, which she eventually uses to remove Miss Trunchbull and restore Miss Honey to her former means. In the absence of the headmistress, Matilda is moved to the top class, where her mind is finally challenged. In trouble with the law, the Wormwoods are forced to flee the country. However, Matilda refuses to join them, instead moving in with Miss Honey as an adoptive daughter (Dahl, 1988). The first edition was published in hardback by Jonathan Cape in 1988.

By the 20th century, literacy levels had risen such that almost everybody could read. However, 'good literature' – that which Q.D. Leavis terms 'the significant work in fiction' – was defined by the taste of a 'critical minority' (Leavis, 2019, p. 94). The middle-class 'intelligentsia' read literary novels; the 'masses', pulps and detective stories (*ibid.*). The distinction was so marked that by the 1930s, as John Carey identifies, there was a clear 'gulf' between the two classes (Carey, 2002, pp. 8–9). By the 1980s, however, a disruptive new class had emerged. As Beauvais identifies, out of Thatcherism's promotion of social mobility came the 'petty-bourgeoisie', or 'managerial/professional' class (Beauvais, p. 280). This group, Beauvais explains, is 'equal or superior to the middle class in economic power but dissimilar in lifestyle and values' (*ibid.*). Thus, while the middle class take a 'post-materialist' view of education, as Michael Argyle observes (1994, p. 289), the petty-bourgeois privilege 'practical approaches to education and training' (Beauvais, p. 280). Thus, even into the 1980s, there remained a clear association between class and reading. With this in mind, I follow Beauvais in identifying the Wormwoods among the petty-bourgeoisie. As a second-hand car dealer, Mr Wormwood's economic capital allows the family to 'own quite a nice

house with three bedrooms upstairs' (Dahl, p. 22). Yet, this house contains no books except a cookbook: a means to a practical end, not an end in itself (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Reading taste and ability

Building on the work of other scholars (Guest, 2008, p. 246; Petzold, 1992, p. 185; Cumming, p. 88), Beauvais asserts that *Matilda*'s innate giftedness represents a peculiarly middle-class 'wish fulfilment' fantasy (Beauvais, p. 277). I will go further and suggest that this effect is created specifically by the book's portrayal of reading, and depends on two signifiers of classed reading experiences from the earlier 20th century: taste and ability.

A simplistic approach to analysing reading experiences in *Matilda* might be that those who read are middle-class and 'good', and those who do not are working-class and 'bad'. However, Leavis articulates that 'it is safe to say that everyone does read' but 'the more interesting question' is 'What do they read?' (Leavis, p. 93). Mr Wormwood, for example, does read, but his choice is 'the *Autocar* and the *Motor*' magazines (Dahl, p. 96). When Miss Honey asks if the couple 'love good literature', Mr Wormwood responds: 'you can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading story-books' (*ibid.*). As Bourdieu argues in *Distinction*, 'tastes' function as 'markers of class' (1984, p. 1). Thus, it is Mr Wormwood's lack of taste for 'good literature' that defines his reading experience firmly outside of the middle-class intelligentsia to which Miss Honey evidently belongs. Instead, his capital-driven attitude signifies a characteristically petty-bourgeois reading experience (Argyle, p. 289).

Rather than acting alone, however, cultural taste as a class signifier seems to operate in tandem with ability. When Mr Wormwood rips up *Matilda*'s book, *Matilda* believes he is jealous that she can read it: 'How dare she, he seemed to be saying with each rip of the page, how dare she enjoy reading books *when he couldn't?*' (Dahl, p. 41, emphasis mine) This implies that Mr Wormwood lacks not just the taste but also the ability to read books. The 2010 musical adaptation emphasises this further. Mr Wormwood sings: 'why would we waste our energy/Trying to work out *Uh-luh-ses?*',¹ the word 'trying' suggesting he is unsuccessful (Minchin, 2010). As Beauvais identifies, this implication betrays extreme class essentialism. *Matilda*'s petty-bourgeois parents 'appear congenitally incapable of acquiring a love of reading', her father 'essentially unable to relate' to it (Beauvais, p. 282). In contrast, their daughter's innate giftedness seems to earmark her as naturally 'belonging' to the middle class, a suspicion that is validated at the end when *Matilda* is adopted by a teacher (*ibid.*, p. 290). Yet, Beauvais' use of the general term 'giftedness' implies ability but does not give appropriate weight to Leavis' 'more interesting question': the role of taste. Both *Ulysses* and *The Red Pony* (Dahl, p. 41) align *Matilda*'s taste with the Modernist

¹ A bastardisation of *Ulysses*.

movement, which was notoriously – or even intentionally – prohibitive, in order to reserve good taste for the middle class (Carey, p. 21). Dahl's differing depictions of reading taste and ability in *Matilda*, therefore, are heavily reliant on class signifiers from the earlier 20th century, suggesting that reading experiences in the 1980s were still deeply classed.

The role of the recommender

As this article has established, *Matilda*'s reading ability is presented as innate and separate from her upbringing. However, the same cannot be said for her taste. Beauvais highlights that, when the protagonist first begins to read books, 'no book that falls into *Matilda*'s lap is of her own choosing' (p. 292). Yet, while Beauvais argues that *Matilda* naturally 'belongs' to the middle class from the beginning, under Leavis' jurisdiction this would surely require innate possession of both ability and taste. Instead, *Matilda*'s taste is deliberately shaped by recommendations from Mrs Phelps, whose authority is never questioned (Beauvais, p. 279–80). I argue that this too mirrors early 20th-century conceptions about reading and class: specifically, who has the authority to recommend, and who does not.

Describing the 'circulating library', Leavis states that most customers were 'prepared to have their reading determined for them' by staff. (p. 94). 'Where criticism is offered' of these recommendations, she continues, 'it almost invariably betrays a complete ignorance of values' (*ibid.*). Evidently, then, librarians were believed to have objectively superior taste to their customers, and therefore the right to recommend to them. This has clear class implications, as Janice Radway (2019) extensively examines. Truthfully, recommendations from education professionals tend to reflect middle-class taste because education is a distinctly middle-class profession (Argyle, p. 16). Yet, Radway argues that they believe themselves 'independent critics capable of perceiving the truth and value inherent in real literary art', giving them the right to dictate reading materials to those supposedly lacking taste (Radway, p. 111). This belief was evidently still held in the 1980s: as Beauvais notes, '*Matilda*'s strict reading list seems to be coming straight out of Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*' (p. 288; *cf.* Dahl, p. 18). According to Quentin Blake's illustrations, the library is even laid out like a 1930s bookshop, with every title spine-out, requiring a guide to navigate. By presenting Mrs Phelps' recommendations uncritically, Dahl reinforces the myth that middle-class taste is objectively superior.

The effect is reproduced in Mrs Phelps' *protégée*. *Matilda* acquires not only taste from the librarian's recommendations, but also belief in her right to recommend to the tasteless. Her recommendation to Mr Wormwood of *The Red Pony* bears no resemblance to the car magazines he already reads, nor is it made on the assumption that he would enjoy it. The

modernist novel is simply presented as an objective cultural good. This belief is not deterred even when her father rips up the book. Instead, *Matilda* claims that:

All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that [her parents] had never seen. If only they would read a little Dickens or Kipling they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television. (Dahl, p. 29)

Matilda's outright admission that better taste is aligned with being better in general confirms the Leavisite prejudice that those possessing middle-class taste are inherently superior. Arguably, there is also a degree of cultural imperialism here. Presenting Kipling as a key to 'discover[ing] [...] more to life' has particularly colonial overtones, as is the suggestion that a dominant class can 'improve' an 'inferior' one by imposing hegemonic culture upon it (Matheson, 2006, p. 51).

The middle-class recommending function also operates on a metatextual level. As Beauvais states, presenting books as inherently better than 'television' is a 'transparently middle-class value' (Beauvais, p. 282). Indeed, it precisely mirrors Leavis' elitist attitude to the 'talkie' (Leavis, p. 100). Yet, from a publishing studies perspective, this cannot be fully understood on a purely textual basis: the extent of the recommender's role in perpetuating class divisions extends beyond the text into the book form itself. Beauvais touches briefly on this: not only does *Matilda* believe that books are better than television, '[t]he reader, having a book in hand, is already implicitly aligned with [her]' (Beauvais, p. 282). With this in mind, I argue that the book-as-object not only depicts class divisions in-text but also actively enforces them in the real world. The first page of the first edition paratextually recommends other works by Dahl. Further, the narrative voice implicitly recommends *Great Expectations* to the reader by expounding upon 'the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham and her cobwebbed house and [...] the spell of magic that Dickens the great story-teller had woven with his words' (Dahl, p. 16). This relationship casts the (child) reader as the *protégé* with reading ability but no taste yet, and the book as the education professional, whose recommendations fulfil that want. In this way, the book-as-object both perpetuates and gatekeeps the transmission of 'good literature', keeping middle-class culture within a select in-group. After all, those who do not pick up the book – perhaps preferring to watch television – may not access these recommendations. Thus, I argue that the book of *Matilda* as a recommender itself plays an active role in perpetuating early-20th-century conceptions about class and reading in 1980s British society.

Class and reading in the real world

This article has so far discussed the emergence of the petty-bourgeois and its relation to the traditional middle class; the equal importance of taste and ability in classed experiences of reading; and the role of the recommender – textual and metatextual – in perpetuating the superiority of middle-class taste. But to what extent do these dynamics in *Matilda* relate to real experiences of class and reading in 1980s Britain?

Cathy Nutbrown *et al.*, writing about literacy education in the UK, state that in 1989 – just a year after the publication of *Matilda* – the Rumbold Report was published by the Department for Education. This report ‘identified parents as the “first educators” of their children, arguing that what children learn at home, with their families [...] was a crucial part of a child’s learning experience’ (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2016, p. 557). As has been explored, this is evidently not the case for *Matilda*, whose reading skill is nurtured instead by an education professional, Miss Honey. Yet, Miss Honey is not only *Matilda*’s teacher; by the end of the story, she is also her adoptive parent (Dahl, p. 240). In light of the Rumbold Report, this does seem to lend support to Beauvais’ theory that *Matilda* really ‘belonged’ to the middle class all along (Beauvais, p. 290). However, I argue that this arrangement sheds less light on the family’s role in reading education than on contemporary Thatcherite ideas about individual responsibility for success. As discussed in the first section, Thatcherism ardently promoted social mobility, and its approach to education was no different. The manifesto that won Thatcher the premiership states: ‘We must restore to every child, regardless of background, the chance to progress as far as his or her abilities allow’ (Conservative Party, 1979). Due to her lack of taste at the beginning of the book, I argue that *Matilda* does not represent a traditionally middle-class child. Instead, she represents exactly what she is: a petty-bourgeois child who possesses the educational receptiveness necessary to transcend her initial class and join her teacher among the ranks of the traditional intelligentsia. Like Thatcher herself, who attended a grammar school, *Matilda* ‘outwits’ the social forces of class by taking personal responsibility to ‘earn’ a middle-class education. This context suggests that it is therefore *Matilda*’s proactivity in acquiring taste, rather than her ‘giftedness’, that makes her story a ‘wish fulfilment’ fantasy (Beauvais, p. 277).

Not only does *Matilda* reflect a dominant contemporary perspective on reading and class, there is also evidence that the reverse is true: reading Dahl’s books actually forms children’s early ideas about class relations. Jonathon Culley interviewed child readers in 1991 about whether Dahl’s villains deserved their ‘sticky ends’. One child simply wrote: ‘Yes. They were ugly’ (Culley, 1991, p. 61). Charles Sarland (1983) argues that the constant conflation of ‘ugly’ and ‘bad’ throughout Dahl’s work is a ‘fascist theme’. Though of course physical attractiveness is not empirically linked to class, Dahl’s villains contribute to a long history of physiognomy: the belief in ‘facial ugliness [...] as an embodied signifier of class-based distinction that set the lower classes apart from the elites’ (Woods, 2017, p. 148). This has worryingly eugenicist class implications. As Carey identifies, in the 1930s, the language

of eugenics was directly related to reading and class: W.B. Yeats declared that 'the principal European nations are all degenerating in body and mind', and that 'sooner or later we must limit the families of the unintelligent classes' (Carey, pp. 13–14). Evident from Culley's interview, Dahl's contemporary readers were making active links between 'ugliness' and 'deserving' a sticky end. Taking physiognomy into consideration, therefore, Sarland's concern that Dahl may teach children a 'fascist' attitude to class is reasonable.

Conclusion

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* illustrates that reading and class remained deeply linked in 1980s Britain. However, the book offers no critique of the class dynamics associated with reading, between the petty-bourgeois and the traditional intelligentsia. In fact, it uncritically accepts and propagates classist ideas dating back to the early 20th century: the equation of good literature with middle-class taste, the suggestion that the lower classes are essentially less able to read, and the right of education professionals – including the book-as-object itself – to recommend reading material. Following Beauvais, I agree that the depiction of *Matilda*'s reading culminates in a peculiarly 'middle-class wish fulfilment', but I believe this is particularly rooted in *Matilda*'s receptiveness to acquiring taste via education. Challenging contemporary policy that privileged the family's role in learning to read, *Matilda* is actually a poster child for Thatcherite social mobility, achieving success by taking individual responsibility for her learning.

Though the character of *Matilda* is widely used today to promote literacy education, her story ironically maintains that reading is the domain of the middle class. It is clear, then, that there remains deep-seated elitism within reading culture. If literature does not make a concerted effort to uproot this, as Carey and Sarland demonstrate, it could even lead to fascistic implications.

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