

The social construction of childhood: explored with reference to Danny the
Champion of the World by Roald Dahl

Childhoods are socially constructed and differ depending on the type of society a child is raised within (Coster, 2007, p.3). As James and James (2004, p.13) explain, the way childhood is regarded “varies considerably across and between cultures and generations.” Therefore, childhood cannot be viewed alone since “it is deeply intertwined with other factors in society” (Norozzi and Moen, 2016, p.79).

The period of time in which a child grows up significantly impacts their experience of childhood, as societal views change. This is evident when comparing childhoods in the past to the current day, since there is remarkable difference. For example, in history children were expected to work in factories, whereas today “governments must protect children from economic exploitation and work that is dangerous or might harm their health, development or education” (Unicef, 2010).

This essay aims to explore the social construction of childhood, beginning with a discussion surrounding its historical context and the changing perceptions of society. The work of Ariès and the impact of the industrial revolution will be addressed. Throughout this section links will be made to discourses in relation to historical views of childhood.

Next, an analysis will be carried out on the children’s book “Danny the Champion of the World” (2013) by Roald Dahl. This story was first published in 1975 (Dahl, 2018) and reflects the time and context in which it was written. In relation to the story the romantic and puritanical discourses will be discussed. Consideration will be given to

the social context of the story and the time in which it was set. To end, the key themes and author's messages within the story will be explored.

Finally, a conclusion will be provided to consolidate the content of the essay. This will sum up the different aspects which contribute to the construction of childhood and influence the discourses present. A summary of what has been learnt will also be provided along with a reflection on the impact of childhood discourses on current practice.

Childhood is a complex topic; its meaning is difficult to define. Throughout history views surrounding childhood have changed dramatically. As stated by James and James (2004, p.25), over time we can see reoccurring changes in people's understanding and beliefs about children's lives. Several factors such as culture, environment and the media influence attitudes towards childhood.

Society's beliefs around childhood are presented through discourses. In the words of Foucault (ND., cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p.17) discourses define what is "normal". Therefore, the dominant discourses present in society greatly affect how children are viewed and treated as they create perceptions around what is right and wrong. It is important to recognise that changes in society influence the discourses present.

Historical perspectives of childhood greatly differ to the views of twenty first century Britain. During the middle ages it is believed that there was no concept of childhood. Ariès (1962, cited in Heywood, 2001) suggests that medieval society saw children as mini adults and made no distinction between childhood and adulthood. At this point

in time children entered "adult society" once they were no longer reliant on the continuous care of their mother (Ariès, 1996, p.125).

According to Frijhoff (2012, p.23), Ariès (1962) believed childhood did not exist in the middle ages as many children died before reaching adulthood. Therefore, adults limited their involvement in their children's lives and avoided building attachments as a way of "protecting themselves from a life of grief" if their child passed away.

However, criticisms have been made in relation to Ariès' work since his evidence was seen as unreliable. As Smith (2009, p.31) tells us, Ariès main supports for his theory were selected pieces of medieval art which did not feature children. The fact that limited sources of evidence were used by Ariès suggests that his beliefs about childhood during the middle ages may be inaccurate.

The work of Ariès (1962, cited in Valkanova, 2014, p.23) also suggests that the concept of childhood was created in "the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." McDowall Clark (2016, p.17) would agree, explaining that the seventeenth century saw the emergence of products specifically created for children, such as clothing and toys. This is important evidence of society recognising childhood, showing a distinction between children and adults.

Despite the fact that childhood became more apparent during the seventeenth century, the general views of children in British society were not positive. At this point in time the Puritanical perspective was very evident, with many believing that children were full of sin and needed firm discipline to make them good (Stone 1977, cited in Clarke, 2010, p.6).

Moreover, the eighteenth century marked the start of the industrial revolution in Britain which generated many changes for childhoods. As White (2009) explains, due to new technology poverty levels increased so many people moved to the cities to seek work in the new factories. However, it was not only adults who were employed in these factories, poor children were also taken advantage of for “cheap labour” (Lowe, 2009, p.27).

During the industrial revolution there was an exceptional increase in the percentages of children in work, it was common for those younger than the age of ten to be involved in factory jobs (Humphries, 2013, p.416). Children would be expected to work long hours in poor conditions on a very low wage, representing a view of children which lacked care or concern.

Exploitation of children within the industries continued into the early 1800s. However, issues became apparent with the physical health of many children deteriorating due to the laborious work and factory conditions (Heywood, 2001, p.134). In response, the Factory Act 1833 was put into place, making it illegal for children under nine to work as well as reducing the hours children could work by enforcing a requirement for part time education (McDowall Clark, 2016, pp. 21-22).

The implementation of the Factory Act 1833 demonstrates a change in attitude towards children by showing recognition of the problems caused by child labour and a need for change. The new laws created were based around ideas of protecting children and reducing their contributions to the adult world, demonstrating the emergence of the romantic discourse in society.

To follow on, the second half of the nineteenth century saw an exceptional transformation in society's view of childhood. At this time Britain "witnessed the growth of movements and specific agencies to claim children back from the streets" (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.49). A rise of philanthropy came about, with aims to improve the lives of street children. The work of Lord Shaftesbury and Thomas Barnardo made a huge contribution to change (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.51).

Furthermore, the work of Mary Carpenter was extremely influential in changing childhoods in Britain, post industrialization. Gehring and Bowers (2003, p.116) tell us that by 1849 Carpenter was organising the "Ragged school movement" which involved setting up schools for disadvantaged and delinquent children. Challenging the systems in place, she believed that these children needed care and respect with minimal corporal punishment, implementing these beliefs in her practice (Gehring and Bowers, 2003, p.117).

Overall, the rise of philanthropy provides additional evidence of society gravitating towards a more romantic view of children. Furthermore, the creation of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act 1889, represented a "step forward in the humane treatment of children and in their protection" (Hendrick, 1997, p. 45). At this point, we can see reflections of Rousseau's (1762, cited in James, Jenks and Prout, 1998, p.13) view of the child as a person "with needs, desires and even rights."

Finally, The Education Act 1870 presents the introduction of utilitarian perspectives of childhood in Britain. The utilitarian discourse is based around what children will become as adults, presenting childhood as a period of preparation for later life

(Uprichard, 2008, p.303). This links with the Education Act as it reinforces a need for education to enable children to become successful workers as adults.

The dominant discourses in British society at the end of the nineteenth century present an attitude towards children which has continued and developed further within the modern day. Although, ideas surrounding children may still differ between different families. By looking at the story 'Danny the Champion of the World' (Dahl, 2013) an insight into the life of a child growing up within a certain social context can be explored further.

From the beginning of the story 'Danny the Champion of the World' (2013), Dahl creates an immediate sense of the romantic discourse in the relationship between Danny and his father, William. As Danny explains, his father makes up bedtime stories for him every night (2013, p.3). This shows an aspect of romanticism, as story-telling demonstrates the belief that children are innocent beings. The idea of story-telling relates to Rousseau's (1762, cited in Madge, 2006, p.48) belief that "childhood has a way of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself." Therefore, it is clear that Dahl understands that children are able to imagine, which is closely related to the concept of innocence.

The romantic discourse becomes more apparent when Danny reveals that William walks him to school (Dahl, 2013, p.17). The fact that William accompanies Danny reflects fears for his safety, enforcing the idea of Danny needing protection from the adult world. Here, Dahl is proposing that Danny is not yet capable of facing the outside world alone, returning to ideas of innocence.

However, as the story progresses, we encounter some challenges to the romantic perspective as William leaves Danny alone at night to go poaching (Dahl, 2013, p.26). It could be argued that William avoided telling Danny his plans to go poaching to protect him from the reality of the adult world. The fact that William does not answer Danny's question when he asks, "Where did you go, Dad?" (Dahl, 2013, p.29), shows that this theory is possible. This attitude reflects Rousseau's (1762, cited in Heywood, 2001, p.24) view that "nature wants children to be children before being adults."

Although, later in the story Danny's father tells him about poaching which goes against the idea of childhood being "pure" and "innocent" as this is an adult subject involving unlawful acts. Further events also go against the general notion of the romantic discourse such as Danny driving a car (Dahl, 2013, p. 55) and his father allowing him to go poaching (Dahl, 2013, p.102). These events greatly contradict the romantic perspectives of childhood shown in the novel as they see Danny involved in dangerous activities. By providing these challenges to the discourse, Dahl appears to be questioning whether children are as innocent and in need of protection as the romantic discourse suggests.

Furthermore, the puritanical viewpoint is presented through the words and actions of a couple of characters within the story. The puritanical discourse was developed around the beliefs of Puritans, it involves a negative stance towards children and childhood. This discourse follows the idea that children are sinful and need to be "controlled and corrected" in order to become respectful adults (McDowall Clark, 2016, p.19).

Firstly, Dahl (2013) uses the character Mr Hazell to represent a view towards children and childhood which fits aspects of the puritanical perspective. This can be seen clearly as Hazell threatens Danny, stating "I'll step right out of this car and give you a good hiding" (Dahl, 2013, p.45). Moreover, there are obvious elements of the puritanical discourse in Captain Lancaster's attitude towards children. Within the story Captain Lancaster canes Danny, as Dahl explains from Danny's perspective "the long white cane went up high in the air and came down on my hand with a crack like a rifle going off" (Dahl, 2013, p.122).

Although neither of these characters make statements about children being sinful, their behaviours reflect puritanical beliefs about children needing discipline and punishment to make them good. In relation to Captain Lancaster's use of corporal punishment within the school environment, it is important to recognise that during the 1970's it was still legal for corporal punishment to be used in schools. According to Hendrick (1997, p.78), the use of corporal punishment in state schools was abolished in 1986. This shows that although the puritanical discourse was not dominant in society during the twentieth century, elements of it still remained.

Within the story Dahl attempts to challenge the puritanical discourse through the romantic views of Danny's father. For example, in response to Mr Hazell's threat, William states "you had no reason to threaten him" (Dahl, 2013, p.45) and "I suggest you pick on a person your own size" (Dahl, 2013, p.45). These statements show a protective attitude emphasising Danny's innocence and putting across a negative view towards the idea of punishing children.

Furthermore, Danny's father responds in a similar way when finding out that Captain Lancaster had beaten Danny. He made a threat aimed at Lancaster, stating "I will kill him" (Dahl, 2013, p. 122) along with remarks such as "he had absolutely no right to do this to you" (Dahl, 2013, p.122) and "it's revolting" (Dahl, 2013, p.123). Again, a protective attitude is evident here demonstrating that Danny's father strongly disagrees with punishing children. This reflects Rousseau's (1762, cited in Valkanova, 2014, p.28) romantic beliefs that children need love and freedom to bring out the good in them rather than punishment.

To continue, in order to understand the story further in relation to the time and context it is set within, identifying and analysing key themes can be useful. One key theme evident within the story is family structure. It is significant that Danny's mother passed away when he was a baby leaving just Danny and his father. This family structure differs to that of the 'typical family' in Britain during the twentieth century. During this time period gender roles in the family were evident. As Chambers (2012, p.21) explains, the male was expected to go out to work and earn the money whilst the female stayed at home meeting the needs of the family.

Therefore, the fact that Danny lived in a single-parent household challenges the stereotypical gender roles of parents which were a feature of many families at the time. Danny's father had to take on the mother's and father's role, as Danny explains "my father washed me and fed me and changed my nappies and did all the millions of things a mother normally does for her child" (Dahl, 2013, p.2). This statement demonstrates that it was not typical at the time for the father to take on the role of caring for his child.

However, the fact that Danny lived in a single parent household and was raised by his father may explain why their relationship throughout the story is so strong.

Although it was more typical for children at the time to build a close bond with their mother as she would be their main caregiver, Dahl is putting across the message that this bond can be developed with a father too. There is potential that through the story, Dahl is aiming to promote the involvement of fathers in their children's lives.

Another key theme which featured within the novel is inequality. Dahl makes the difference between the social class of the characters in this piece of work very clear. We can deduce that Danny and his father come from a working-class background as his father is a mechanic (Dahl, 2013, p. 15). It is obvious that they were not wealthy since they "lived in an old gipsy caravan behind the filling station" (p.2). In great contrast, Mr Hazell is portrayed as a character of high social class, this is made very apparent as he is described as "rich beyond words" (Dahl, 2013, p.44). Dahl also uses a metaphor to compare William's possessions to Mr Hazell's, expressing that the land which William owned was "a little island in the middle of the vast ocean of Mr Hazell's estate" (Dahl, 2013, p.44).

It is clear that this inequality within the community leaves Hazell's in a position in which he feels superior. Hazell shows this through his lack of empathy in his attitude towards Danny and William. This can be seen in the way he acts towards Danny and his father (Dahl, 2013, p.45), as though they are beneath him. This reflects views of the conservative party during the 1970's in relation to the poor. As told by Potter and Brotherton (2013, p.6), the idea that social and economic problems were the result of "individual failings and the outcome of poor choices" developed at this time.

However, Dahl challenges this attitude as he portrays William as a hard-working man, yet he is still economically deprived as reflected by his limited possessions (2013, p.2).

As the story progresses, Dahl focuses more on the poaching storyline in which a clear sense of community can be derived. For example, Mrs Clipstone stores and delivers the pheasants (Dahl, 2013, p.166) and many people know about Hazell's plan yet do not tell including the Doc Spencer (Dahl, 2013, p.175). Here, the involvement of many characters in the plot to sabotage Hazell's shooting party, opposes the idea of his high social status giving him power over others.

Subsequently, Dahl puts across the message that social class does not define people and should not be used to determine their abilities.

Overall, this essay has explored the socially constructed nature of childhood. The impact of the context of childhood and the time in which it is experienced has been analysed throughout history and in relation to 'Danny the Champion of the World' (Dahl, 2013).

Upon reflection it is clear to see that key historical events have impacted the ways in which we view children today. To conclude, the emergence of the utilitarian view of childhood became evident with the implementation of key legislation. In practice today, this discourse is still seen clearly as shown through laws of compulsory education and the implementation of a curriculum which aims to educate children to enable them to have successful futures.

Additionally, an ever-growing influence of the romantic discourse within modern society can be perceived. This can be seen in practice as there is a large focus on

safeguarding children, risk assessment and ideas around nurture and care particularly in early years. The fact that this discourse is dominant within 'Danny the champion of the World' (Dahl, 2013) provides an example of how romantic perspectives of childhood have continued to develop since their initial influence during the nineteenth century.

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