The Social Construct of Childhood: explored with reference to Matilda by Roald Dahl (2010)

When childhood is regarded as a social construction, it suggests that childhood is not a fixed or general stage of human life, but instead is shaped by societal norms, values and historical contexts (Coster, 2007, p.7). This viewpoint contests the notion of childhood as a universal, biologically determined stage. As a result, everyday structures like family, education, work, and play can vary across different societies and time periods (Leonard, 2016, p.24). Coster (2007, p.7) suggests that childhood must be examined in terms of how it is 'assembled', in order to do this, it is necessary to inspect how various social, cultural, and institutional factors come together to define what childhood is and what it entails. This involves considering how different societies define the roles, expectations, and experiences of children. This becomes apparent when we observe the drastic change in the way childhood is viewed from the past to the present day. For instance, Cunningham (2005, p.89) expresses that the industrial revolution is increasingly viewed as a dark chapter in the history of childhood where children frequently began working before the age of 10. Although the family unit survived the industrial era, many children suffered significant hardship. This contrasts the twentieth century view of childhood which James and Prout (2015, p.1) refer to as 'the century of the child', where children today are protected by laws such as the *Children and Young Persons Act* (1933) and *Employment of Children Act* (1973) which prohibits the employment of children under 14 and introduced stricter regulations on the working hours and conditions for young people, particularly those below the school-leaving age. In fact, the twentieth century saw the highest volume of legislation concerning children, surpassing that of all preceding centuries combined (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.27).

Additionally, children's literature provides valuable insight into what different societies across time have considered desirable and distinctive about childhood (Hall, 2003, p.139). In the eighteenth century, this included granting children access to a wide range of texts, including 'chapbooks filled with tales of magic, courage, cunning, strength, and endurance'. Although often dismissed by the polite world, such stories played a significant role in shaping the imaginations of many young readers (Cunningham, 2005, p.67).

This essay begins by examining historical constructions of childhood, starting with Aries' interpretation of medieval society and extending through the enlightenment and industrial revolution. It then explores the development of childhood as a socially constructed concept, with particular attention to the contrasting romantic and puritanical discourses that have influenced educational and societal attitudes. The

discussion later turns to Roald Dahl's 'Matilda' (2010), analysing how characters such as Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull represent opposing views of childhood. Through this analysis, the essay demonstrates how historical perspectives continue to shape contemporary understandings of childhood and child development.

Psychologist William Kessen suggested that 'the history of child study is a history of rediscovery' (Heywood, 2018, p.37) this suggests that the field of child study has undergone numerous cycles in which ideas, theories, or approaches are revisited over time. It underscores how fundamental concepts regarding childhood are frequently re-evaluated or rediscovered as the field develops. This pattern reflects the continual process of revisiting and reconsidering previous ideas in response to cultural changes.

Aries was among the first to underscore the socially constructed nature of childhood through his historical research. He argued that in medieval society, childhood was not recognised as a distinct developmental stage; rather, once children were weaned, they were integrated into adult society and engaged in social life according to their abilities, without being accorded a unique social status (James and L. James, 2004, p.12). Although children may have been cared for and shown affection, Aries (1996, p.125) believed that there was a general absence of a clearly defined concept of childhood as a distinct stage of life, characterised by an awareness of the unique qualities that separate children from both adults and adolescents.

However, one notable criticism of Aries' 'Centuries of Childhood' is his reliance on a limited and potentially unrepresentative body of evidence, particularly early medieval art (Smith, 2010, p.21). Aries notes the relative absence of children from this visual record and interprets this absence as evidence that the concept of childhood did not exist in the medieval period in the way it does today. This interpretation has been challenged for drawing broad conclusions from a narrow and specific type of source material.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, child labour was rarely questioned and was largely viewed as a necessary and beneficial aspect of upbringing, which was believed to foster economic, social, and moral values (James and Prout, 2015, p.33). In addition to economic necessity, employment was regarded as a suitable means of ensuring that young people remained productively engaged and were deterred from engaging in undesirable behaviour (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.20). This perspective aligns with Pierre de Berulle's seventeenth century puritanical view, where childhood represented a developmental stage defined by weakness and insufficient spiritual maturity, rendering it the lowest condition of human existence short of death (Heywood, 2018, p.9). At this time in history,

society did not view children as innocent or pure like we do today, but rather as beings in need of discipline and moral guidance.

However, the enlightenment period saw a shift in these perspectives, particularly with the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is arguably the central figure in the redefinition of childhood during the eighteenth century (Heywood, 2018, p.28). Rousseau emerged as a highly influential figure during this period, advocating that education should be guided by the child's natural interests, as he believed that innate human development would lead children to acquire necessary knowledge (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.23). His philosophy significantly shaped the foundations of what is now known as the early years tradition, with many core principles of twenty first century early childhood education traceable to his ideas (Bruce, 2011, p.4). Rousseau rejected the puritanical view of children as inherently sinful, portraying them instead as naturally innocent beings whose development should be guided through appropriate education. This romantic view contrasted with the lived experiences of most children in eighteenth century Western Europe (Leonard, 2016, p.51).

In direct contrast to Rousseau's idealistic vision, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, authorities often supported industrialisation as a means of providing employment for disadvantageous women and children. Historians agree that industrialisation expanded child labour and introduced more intensive work conditions, culminating in the widespread exploitation of children in mills, mines, and factories during the industrial revolution (Heywood, 2018, p.141). As a result, many families, driven by economic necessity, were compelled to depend on their children's labour in factories as an essential contribution to household income. For governments, the extensive use of child labour in industrial contexts represented an unprecedented social challenge, leading to the development of new regulatory measures and governmental responses (Cunningham, 2005, pp.89-90).

Cunningham (2005, p.89) highlights that it is not surprising factory work played a major role, if not the most important one, in changing how childhood was understood, shifting it from a time of preparing for work to a stage focused more on education and schooling. James and Prout (2015, p.33) argue that, during these discussions, a new understanding emerged. By the end of the period, the wage-earning child was no longer considered as typical behaviour. As concerns about child labour began to emerge, the transformation of childhood experiences intensified in the after math of the industrial revolution (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.29). The role of working-class children shifted from economic contributors to dependents, reflecting changing societal values that prioritised protecting childhood from labour and hardship (Cunningham, cited in Kehily, 2015). This marks the beginning of a significant shift from the puritanical to the romantic conception of childhood.

Romantic and puritanical discourses offer fundamentally opposing constructions of childhood. Within romantic ideology, the child is idealised as inherently innocent and in need of protection from the corrupting forces of society. In contrast, puritanical discourse conceptualises the child as morally corrupt or innately sinful, requiring rigorous discipline and formative intervention to ensure proper moral development (Pressler, 2010, p.19).

Romanticism aimed to reclaim the imaginative freedom of childhood, which was seen as suppressed by the rise of utilitarian values. Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, strongly criticised the practical and utilitarian approach to education that had become popular, describing it as a corrupting force imposed on children and as an 'evil' capable of draining one's physical and spiritual vitality (Cunningham, 2005, pp.67-68).

Nevertheless, by the close of the nineteenth century, the Forster Education Act of 1870 marked a pivotal moment in the development of educational policy in England (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.25). James and Prout (2015, p.33) highlight that childhood came to be recognised as a distinct developmental stage that required protection and nurturing through formal education. This view aligns with the utilitarian idea that the 'becoming' child represents an investment in the future workforce and potential of the nation (Uprichard, 2008, p.303). McDowall Clark (2013, pp.25-26) emphasises that the act made elementary education accessible to all children up to the age of 10, describing it as a 'landmark piece of legislation in regard to educational provision.' However, financial barriers continued to prevent many poor children from attending school until the Education Act of 1891, which made education free for all. These changes reflect the increasing understanding of childhood as a crucial developmental phase and support the utilitarian view that education benefits both individuals and society.

The romantic portrayal of childhood in the book 'Matilda' (Dahl, 2010) aligns with the broader historical shifts in the perception of childhood itself. The cultural and industrial changes at the close of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century contributed to a redefined conceptualisation of childhood, with progressive education playing a significant role in this transformation (Valkanova, 2018, p. 26). Within this evolving framework, children came to be seen not merely as miniature adults or burdens to be controlled, but as individuals in need of protection, care, and opportunities for growth (Aslanian, 2015, p.153). Dahl's depiction of characters such as Mrs Phelps and Miss Honey reflects this shift, with both women represent the progressive, romantic ideal of the emotionally attuned adult who fosters a child's inner potential.

In the story of 'Matilda' (2010), Dahl begins to present the romantic discourse through the character of the librarian, Mrs Phelps, who has a kind and protective nature towards Matilda. Romanticism idealises the child as innocent and naturally good, deserving of emotional care and protection from the corrupting influences of society (Gabriel, 2010, p.143). This is evident in the quote: 'Mrs. Phelps, slightly taken aback at the arrival of such a tiny girl unaccompanied by a parent, nevertheless told her she was very welcome' (Dahl, 2010, p. 16). Mrs Phelps's immediate acceptance of Matilda, despite her being alone and neglected, reflects the romantic ideal of nurturing the child's inner purity. Her maternal and compassionate response contrasts with the harsh indifference of Matilda's own parents, positioning Mrs Phelps as a symbol of the emotionally supportive adult who safeguards the child's natural goodness.

Similarly, when Miss Honey is introduced into the story, she brings an immediate warmth into the environment with her soft and caring nature. This is shown in the narration: 'She seemed to understand totally the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders' (Dahl, 2010, p.81). Like Mrs Phelps, Miss Honey responds to not only Matilda, but children in general, with empathy, patience, and emotional sensitivity. Both women serve as guardians of Matilda's innocence and intellect, reinforcing the romantic discourse that views children as vulnerable, emotionally rich individuals who thrive in environments of understanding and care (Aslanian, 2015, p.153). Their presence stands in direct contrast to the harshness of the adult world represented by Miss Trunchbull and Matilda's parents.

This romantic discourse continues throughout the book, most notably when Miss Honey expresses her desire to adopt for Matilda when her family are trying to run away: '"I would love to have Matilda," Miss Honey said. "I would look after her with loving care, Mr Wormwood, and I would pay for everything. She wouldn't cost you a penny"' (Dahl, 2010, p.292). This moment at the end of the book powerfully concludes the romantic discourse of Miss Honey, a nurturing adult who acknowledges and responds to the emotional needs of a child and offers unconditional love and protection (Noddings, 1995, p.676). Miss Honey's willingness to provide a safe and affectionate home reinforces the central idea that children flourish in compassionate and supportive environments (McDowall Clark, 2013, p.23).

As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Dahl uses the characters of Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull to symbolise two conflicting discourses of childhood: the romantic and the puritanical. Miss Honey represents the romantic ideal, offering Matilda a nurturing and emotionally supportive environment (Dahl, 2010, pp.80-99). In direct opposition, Miss Trunchbull follows the puritanical discourse, viewing children as burdens to be controlled and punished (Dahl, 2010, pp.100-109). This

idea aligns with the notion of childhood as a unique and vulnerable phase of life, fundamentally different from adulthood (James and Prout, 2015, p.33), as Dahl encourages readers to favour Miss Honey's empathetic approach while discouraging the fearful, strict tactics of Miss Trunchbull.

Dahl introduces Miss Trunchbull as a representation of the puritanical discourse, which emphasises strict discipline, fear, and control over nurturing and emotional support (Pressler, 2010, p.19). This is vividly illustrated in Hortensia's description of the Trunchbull's infamous form of punishment known as the Chokey: "'The Chokey," Hortensia went on, "it is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you can't sit down or squat in it. You have to stand. And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over, so you can't lean against them. You have to stand more or less at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It's terrible!'" (Dahl, 2010, p.127). The Chokey is more than just a way to discipline children; it represents both physical and emotional punishment aimed at breaking a child's spirit. By showing how Miss Trunchbull abuses her authoritative position, Dahl highlights a negative view of childhood that focuses on forcing obedience rather than supporting children's emotional growth (Lowe, 2009, p.23).

More characters which embody the puritanical discourse within the book are Matilda's parents, Mr and Mrs Wormwood. The narrator highlights their dismissive attitude toward her, stating, 'The parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick it away' (Dahl, 2010, p.12). This metaphor of Matilda as a 'scab' illustrates how her parents view her not as a unique individual deserving of care and attention, but as an undesirable burden to be tolerated until she no longer serves a purpose. This reflects the puritanical discourse, which positions children as inherently sinful and burdensome, requiring correction and strict discipline rather than a nurturing environment that fosters emotional and intellectual growth (Coster, 2007, p.8).

Throughout the story of 'Matilda' (2010), Dahl critiques and challenges traditional gender stereotypes, particularly through the contrasting expectations placed upon Matilda and her brother, Micheal. Matilda's parents, Mr and Mrs Wormwood, favour their son and believe he should receive an education to secure a good job, reflecting the utilitarian discourse that prioritises practical knowledge and economic success (Uprichard, 2008, p.303). As Mr Wormwood tells Matilda, 'You're too Stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining me in the business one day' (Dahl, 2010, p.28). Matilda's academic talents are completely overlooked, with her parents dismissing her abilities and believing she should simply conform to traditional gender roles (Jones, 2020, p.2). When Matilda asks for Mr Wormwood to

buy her a book, he responds with 'A *book*?... What d'you want a flaming book for?' whilst Mrs Wormwood insists that Matilda should focus on looking pretty rather than pursuing intellectual pursuits. Dahl challenges these stereotypical expectations by presenting Matilda as an exceptional girl who defies societal norms. Through her journey, Matilda thrives at school, excelling academically and proving that girls can be just as intellectually capable and successful as boys.

In conclusion, the concept of childhood has undergone significant transformation, shaped by evolving historical, cultural, and social discourses. This essay has explored how constructions of childhood have shifted over time, from the absence of a distinct childhood in medieval society, as argued by Aries, to the recognition of childhood as a protected and emotionally significant stage in the modern era. By examining historically conflicting discourses such as the puritanical, romantic, and utilitarian, it becomes evident that childhood has never been a fixed or universal experience. The puritanical discourse viewed children as inherently sinful and in need of strict discipline, while romantic thinkers such as Rousseau reimagined children as innocent beings requiring nurturing, emotional care, and the freedom to explore. The utilitarian perspective positioned children as future economic contributors, valuing education for its practical and societal benefits. These ideological shifts have directly informed contemporary educational practices and policies.

Rousseau's influence remains significant in today's educational practices. His view that children develop best in supportive environments, where their innate abilities unfold through discovery and imagination, underpins many modern pedagogical approaches (Jackson, 2018, p.131). By the late twentieth century, policy developments began to reflect this romantic perspective, recognising the public responsibility to protect and nurture childhood through education, safeguarding, and children's rights (Jackson, 2018, p.139). Therefore, the romantic discourse continues to shape current practice, reinforcing the importance of emotional care, individual development, and child-centred learning.

The analysis of Dahl's 'Matilda' (2010) illustrates how these historical discourses continue to manifest in modern representations of childhood. Characters such as Miss Honey and Miss Trunchbull symbolise opposing pedagogical approaches, reinforcing the enduring tension between nurturing and disciplinarian ideals. Through this lens, 'Matilda' (Dahl, 2010) exemplifies how past ideologies still shape present-day understandings of childhood and child development. Overall, the construction of childhood remains deeply embedded in historical ideologies that continue to inform how children are understood, represented, and supported today.

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