**Child Giftedness as Class Weaponry: The Case of Roald Dahl’s *Matilda***

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**R**oald Dahl’s *Matilda* (1988) is a tale of restorative justice. Matilda, it is clear, was born into the wrongfamily; it would be logical to think that, like the noble children stolen by trolls in Scandinavian lore, she was never actually engendered by Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, for no one could reasonably expect such a prodigious child to be born of those “gormless” people, “so wrapped up in their own silly little lives” (Dahl 12–13). Yet, despite the heroine’s wishes, she was incontrovertibly born a Wormwood, and since she cannot make her parents love her and value her extraordinary qualities, she fetches for herself, using her intelligence, the education she deserves—punishing, in the process, her goofy persecutors.

The fairy tale feel of this aspect of the novel has been thoroughly explored by Deborah Thacker, who highlights Matilda’s “fairy godmother” role (23). Several scholars—namely Kristen Guest (246), Dieter Petzold (185), and Peter Cumming (88)—have independently labeled *Matilda* a “wish-fulfilment fantasy” for its particularly efficient method of retributive justice. As such terms suggest, the use of critical vocabulary connected to fairy tales and to fantasy has tended to eclipse the social-realistic aspects of *Matilda*’s system of justice, particularly in the first half of the novel, before what could be called its magical-realistic turn. Specifically, the corpus of secondary literature on *Matilda* (which remains relatively small for such a classic text) has not, so far, paid attention to two central and strongly interconnected aspects of the novel’s system of restorative justice: class prejudice and child giftedness. As this article argues, the efficiency of *Matilda* as a wish-fulfillment story largely depends on the condemnation of a specific socioeconomic category—the Wormwoods’ petty bourgeoisie—and that condemnation is rendered transparent by the novel’s particular portrayal of the gifted child.

That Dahl’s works are infused with class prejudice is hardly a revolutionary insight; moreover, despite the author’s legendary support for child powerment against adults, Pat Pinsent notes that his works for children exhibit a conservative political agenda, associated with respect for canonical authorities and the transmission of a literary heritage (71). As Jackie Stallcup puts it, “In his subversive use of humour and disgust, Roald Dahl delineates specific—and often conservative—social boundaries for his young readers” (46). Yet precisely this subversive use of humor, and its associated celebration of child rebellion against adult authority, greatly complicate claims about conservatism—as does what Catherine Butler calls Dahl’s tendency to “[parody] his own intolerance by presenting it in absurdly inflated terms” (4). The difficulty in reaching consensus on the political undertones of Dahl’s works must lead to a necessarily cautious evaluation of their ideological makeup. Furthermore, Dahl is often accused of many evils: by adding classism to the more common accusations of racism and sexism, one is simply contributing to a scholarly corpus already well stocked in hermeneutics of suspicion.

However, the dynamics of class prejudice in *Matilda* nevertheless represent a problematic blind spot in the critical literature on the novel. The Wormwoods, who are two-dimensional characters, only ever appear in this literature as archetypal villains; Dahl’s best defense, as Jonathon Culley notes (63), is that his stories mostly rely on fairy tale tropes, painting a gallery of grotesque, larger-than-life, and above all comical characters. But the couple’s clear connections to a larger referential system—the British social classes—have not been probed. Petzold does mention that he has “heard Dahl accused of snobbishness because the decidedly lower-class habits of Matilda’s parents appear in a negative light,” but he immediately dismisses that claim: “I suspect, however, that what people really object to is Dahl’s radical siding with children against adults” (185), no doubt a much more palatable critique. Yet “objecting to” Dahl’s portrayal of the Wormwoods, as this article does, need not overshadow the more positive aspects of the child-adult conflict in the novel.

If the class tensions of *Matilda* have been and continue to be overlooked, it is largely, I argue, because they lean on a portrayal of child precocity that is likely to be particularly seductive to a secondary audience of middle-class parents, caregivers, mediators, and professional readers of children’s literature. Matilda, perhaps literature’s most famous precocious child, condenses many ideological problems within what is known as the essentialist or conservative construct of giftedness. In Dahl’s novel, giftedness, tangible and naturalized, is not just the property of an individual “lucky” child, but also a property of its rightful social category, the middle class, and this property can be used as a weapon against seemingly less deserving categories. Due to the slippery narrative voice, and the implied reader it constructs, the class prejudice associated with this vision of giftedness remains unobtrusive. Exposing it does not entail dismissing the novel altogether, but instead calls into question, on a critical as well as a metacritical level, the ideological alignment of readerly and scholarly positions on *Matilda* with a middle-class, liberal humanist ethos, profoundly concerned with children and with reading, but unwilling to accept alternative lifestyles and parenting practices.

**“Parents like this existed all over the place”: The Wormwoods and Class Caricature**

*Matilda*’s portrayal of the Wormwoods goes beyond archetypal villainy to constitute a specific class caricature, visible when the novel is considered within the British socioeconomic context of its time of publication. Britain’s social structure remains one of the most explicitly and implicitly class-divided in the Western world (Roberts 1). In 1994, 95 percent of the British population not only expressed the opinion that their society was divided into classes, but could also locate themselves within a social class (Argyle 8). In the late 1980s, when *Matilda* was published, 73 percent of the population considered “class to be an inevitable feature of modern society,” recognizing it as informing and constructing their social identity (Marshall et al. 145). Class distinctions may remain incomprehensible for many years to foreigners immigrating to Britain, but newspapers, television shows, political parties, advertising campaigns, and supermarket branding provide further reinforcing and subdividing of these groups.

However, the concept of social class is not straightforward. For sociologists, there is no clear categorization, but rather a series of indicators based on income, wealth, occupation, lifestyle, or education, all in constant evolution. When *Matilda* was published, the official census used the Registrar General’s class schema, which categorized Britons into five occupational categories: professional occupations (such as doctors, lawyers, or university teachers); intermediate and lower professional occupations (schoolteachers, nurses, or police officers); non-manual and then manual skilled occupations (secretaries, electricians); semi-skilled occupations (postal workers); and unskilled occupations (garbage collectors). This skills-based and economic division made few allowances for differences observed in lifestyle and voting orientations; sociologists John Goldthorpe and Keith Hope proposed a parallel division, which has now become standard, based on distinctions between the salariat (encompassing both professional and intermediate occupations), routine non-manual jobs, foremen and technicians, the working class, and the petty bourgeoisie.

Within *Matilda*’s socioeconomic landscape, however, the working classes and “routine non-manual jobs” are absent. Extreme poverty is sentimentalized: Miss Honey, temporarily fallen from economic comfort, lives like Snow White in a little cottage in the woods. The upper class, namely the aristocracy, is not explicitly mentioned, but Miss Trunchbull perhaps exhibits some caricatured traits of this category; she looks like “a rather eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the stag-hounds” and lives in a mansion (Dahl 102). Teachers, librarians, and medical doctors, representatives of what the Registrar General would characterize as the professional and the intermediate sections, and Goldthorpe and Hope as the salariat, are the incontestable hero(in)es of the narrative. Such people also constitute what in the UK usually would be called the middle class, which refers less to economic power than to values and lifestyle: as Michael Argyle explained in 1994, “Middle-class people value work for its own sake, education, ‘post-materialist’ goals” (289). Those employed in “education, health and welfare,” in particular, may earn less than other occupational categories, but “have a lifestyle which is stronger on health and culture” (16). In *Matilda*, the middle class appears exclusively represented by health and, more prominently, education professionals (and not, say, accountants, pilots, or engineers). The novel therefore foregrounds middle-class individuals who have not just a personal but also a professional interest in the celebration and the transmission of knowledge.

The Wormwoods, meanwhile, present a mixture of British class stereotypes that in the 1980s would have been likely to resonate as antagonistic to middle-class values and lifestyle choices. As a used-car dealer, earning enough money for a comfortable home, Mr. Wormwood belongs to the petty bourgeoisie. This social category, equal or superior to the middle class in economic power but dissimilar in lifestyle and values, is composed of small-business owners and self-employed individuals. Argyle notes that the petty bourgeois are “in some way outside the class system, in that they combine manual work with ownership” (17). The petty bourgeoisie had been in decline in the 1970s, but the 1980s witnessed its sharp revival. Politically speaking, the petty bourgeoisie is the most Conservative of all classes except the upper class, and its self-employed members have, as Ken Roberts says, a “distinctive set of values,” including being “individualistic, and proud of it” (126), privileging traditional families, accumulating capital, and taking practical approaches to education and training. The Wormwoods’ political inclination emerges throughout the novel: they value their son Michael more than they do his sister Matilda, and Mr. Wormwood repeatedly stresses his own status as a self-made man.

There is a historical link between the rise of the petty bourgeoisie and the presence in power, from 1979 to 1990, of Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Guest notes that *Matilda*’s Miss Trunchbull can be read as a Thatcher figure. But the denunciation of Thatcherism perhaps reaches its pinnacle in the portrayal of the Wormwoods. Thatcher had pronounced the class system dead, and celebrated individual success to the detriment of class solidarity. The petty bourgeoisie became a considerable part of the Conservative electorate in the 1980s, giving rise, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn observe, to less than flattering portrayals in the media and in cultural productions. The Wormwoods can be understood as one such popular dismissal of Thatcherite mentality.

Mr. Wormwood, in particular, corresponds to a central figure of such cultural caricatures: the “Essex Man,” a recurrent portrayal, in jokes and political cartoons, of an individual associated with what Biressi and Nunn call “the stereotypes of tastelessness, unreconstructable Thatcherism and rampant materialism” (26). His clothes identify him as a Cockney subtype, an East London working-class identity; in the British musical adaptation first staged in 2010, *Matilda, the Musical*, all of the Wormwood family apart from Matilda have East London accents. However, the Wormwoods do not live in East London, but in a residential suburb close to a rural area—perhaps a dormitory town on the fringe of a mid-size city. This indicates that Mr. Wormwood has successfully climbed the social and economic ladder from a working-class origin to his present petty bourgeois lifestyle. And he has done so through dubious means: as a second-hand car dealer who wears loud, flashy, checked suits and hats with feathers, Mr. Wormwood is the embodiment of a “spiv,” a crook who relies on tricks to push up the value of the goods he is selling. The derogatory hodgepodge of allusions to his working-class origins and his current petty bourgeois identity indicates a dislike for the type of upward social mobility that Mr. Wormwood represents.

Biressi and Nunn note that the “Essex Man” stereotype was not necessarily negatively received among the very communities it caricatured; it found, they say, sympathy and recognition within the petty bourgeoisie and the working class. But from the perspective of the middle classes, “Essex Man” was a way “in which an often humorous or comical disgust is publicly expressed for the working class, and especially for those who seem to be rising above their social station” (23). The narrative voice in *Matilda* firmly expresses this disgust. By name and by appearance, Mr. Wormwood is presented as essentially parasitic, “a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty moustache” (28). The repeated adjective “ratty” finds itself later echoed in his wife’s coiffure, “mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots” (33). Further dehumanized by being repeatedly described as “beastly,” the Wormwoods, it is understood, are social leeches, dirty and undesirable.

Thanks to the father’s petty criminality and his small business, the Wormwoods are well off. Mrs. Wormwood can afford not to work and instead plays bingo all afternoon—according to Argyle, a stereotypical working-class activity in the late ’80s (106).[[1]](#endnote-1) Their house is a detached “modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy,” as Miss Honey notes when she visits them (Dahl 113). Miss Honey, whose father was a doctor, seems to have little direct experience of this type of family. Her perspective on the Wormwoods is aligned with that of the implied reader, who has been given time since the beginning of the story to ponder an important question: Are the Wormwoods an isolated case of “beastly” people and parents, or are they representative of a larger group of people? An answer is explicitly given: “Miss Honey could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and drop-outs, but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh” (121). The vague phrase “like this” leaves open to interpretation the question of whether Miss Honey is here referring to their class or to their indifference regarding their daughter’s education. In either case, the sentence functions as a way of “shocking” the reader, too, by telling us that the Wormwoods are not unique, but that people “like” them exist “all over the place”—with the added suggestion that they usually produce nasty children instead of miraculous Matildas and wimpy Michaels.

The process whereby the description of a few characters is explicitly turned into a judgment upon a whole category of people has been well described by Culley as a recurring strategy in Dahl’s work (51). And it certainly works; Petzold states that “Matilda’s parents are the very image of vulgarity. It is an image which is depressingly real while it is also scathingly funny” (189). The classist baggage of the word “vulgarity,” and the assertion that the image of the Wormwoods is both “real” and “funny,” provide evidence that Dahl’s text allows the reader, even the professional reader, to slide out of individual caricature and into problematic social-realistic judgments.

The Wormwoods, a materialistic petty bourgeois family, make choices as to how to spend their money and their leisure time that Dahl clearly expects the reader to perceive as incomprehensible. When Matilda asks her father for a book, he calls her a spoiled child: “We’ve got a lovely telly with a twelve-inch screen and now you come asking for a book!” (15). The narrator does not need to explain that this is an absurd thing to say. The reader, having a book in hand, is already implicitly aligned with Matilda in the conclusion that Mr. Wormwood’s words make no sense. But there is indeed no reason, from the point of view of someone who does not value reading and does not enjoy it, to agree to buy a book when a supposedly better and more costly source of entertainment is already available. Mr. Wormwood’s reaction is presented as unreasonable solely on the basis of the implicit assumption that books are indeed intrinsically better than television. It goes without saying that such an idea carries the transparent values of the middle classes. Argyle reports that in 1994, the working and the lower-middle classes watched two-and-a-half times more television than did the middle and upper-middle classes (102), and that a majority of working-class and lower-middle-class families never bought books; fiction-reading, in particular, was a leisure occupation mostly enjoyed by the upper and middle classes (105). If Matilda’s preference for books over television does not trouble the young reader (and indeed the text does not anticipate that it should), it signals that the reader, too, already subscribes to or sides with a middle-class view of how leisure time and money ought to be spent.

It is thus implied that Matilda is, somehow, always already middle class. Going back to my comment that she carries hints of the legendary “stolen child,” I suggest that the reader is made to understand that Matilda has always been robbed of the privileges of another social class—privileges that are, importantly, not economic but intellectual. In stark contrast to her brother Michael, who is said to “have inherited his father’s love of crookery” (29), Matilda has seemingly “inherited” nothing from her biological parents. Conversely, her parents appear congenitally incapable of acquiring a love of reading. One evening, Mr. Wormwood, in a rage, rips up Matilda’s book. The text suggests, “Perhaps his anger was intensified because he saw her getting pleasure from something that was beyond his reach” (47). The narrative voice’s tentativeness is disingenuous; this assertion is decidedly didactic. Matilda’s father, the text suggests, is essentially unableto relate to her reading, and this incapacity arouses in him a fearsome jealousy that leads to physical violence. It is not just that Mr. Wormwood does not valuesuch occupations but also that he can “feel,” deep down, that he is missing out on something important which he will never be able to experience. His only refuge in the face of this realization lies in violence and overt anti-intellectualism.

Nowhere does the war against anti-intellectualism in *Matilda* appear more clearly than when Miss Honey visits the Wormwoods. When she hints that Matilda should be prepared for university, Mr. Wormwood “bounc[es] up in his chair”; university, he declares, only teaches people “bad habits” (122). What follows is, arguably, Miss Honey’s only assertive tirade in the novel: “If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor, that doctor would be a university graduate. If you got sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car, you’d have to get a lawyer and he’d be a university graduate, too. Do not despise clever people, Mr Wormwood” (122).

This moralizing explanation establishes a clear distinction between Mr. Wormwood and “clever people,” whom Miss Honey characterizes unquestioningly as “university graduates.” It also alludes to Mr. Wormwood’s dependence on these people; his resorting to a lawyer seems the necessary outcome of a lifetime of petty crime.[[2]](#endnote-2) As for his potential heart attack, Miss Honey might be referring here to health issues stemming from a diet of TV dinners. More than giving child readers a sense of what university is for, the speech hints that, should they become doctors or lawyers, they will spend their time rectifying the lifestyle mistakes of the masses.

Rather than doctors or lawyers, however, it is teachers who are the uncontested protagonists of the rectification of social evils throughout the novel, with Matilda as the most eminent teacherly figure despite her young age. The narrative implies that Matilda is not solely punishing her parents, but also trying to educate them, by retaliating each time they are “beastly” to her. The expression “to teach a lesson” recurs in the first half of the novel, and the Wormwoods, especially Mr. Wormwood, prove difficult to educate: “it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson” (45). However, the words “punishment” and “punishing” are even more frequent, uncontroversially associating the homemade educational enterprise with a no less homemade system of retributive justice. The heroine is allowed by the narrative to both “educate” and “punish” her petty bourgeois parents principally because she is more clever than they are. The narrative voice is insistent that Matilda’s legitimacy is due to her extraordinary intelligence: although she is smaller, “for sheer cleverness she could run rings around them all” (59). Later on, her canniness in devising “punishments” for her parents is extolled: “her wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising yet another suitable punishment for the poisoned parent” (50).

It is worth looking at what Matilda considers to be grave enough offences for her parents to deserve her punishments. The first lesson she chooses to teach her father, by putting Superglue in his favorite hat, follows his refusal to let her go to her bedroom to eat her supper alone while reading. He insists, instead, that “Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it’s over!” (34)—even though, of course, the Wormwoods are having a TV dinner. Despite Matilda’s annoyance, it is questionable whether such an admonishment makes one deserve to lose one’s hair and scalp. Mr. Wormwood’s second crime is more serious, at least from the perspective of book-lovers fearful of librarians: he defaces a library book. Punishment extends to the whole family: Mrs. Wormwood and Michael, too, are targets of Matilda’s lesson. Finally, Mr. Wormwood becomes “The Platinum-Blond Man” for calling Matilda a liar after she correctly gives the answer to a problem in mental arithmetic, a crime augmented, admittedly, by his sexist comments (66). Cumming calls this part of the novel a demonstration of Matilda’s “petty vindictiveness” (91); indeed, the punishments she concocts are not commensurate with the “crimes” they directly follow.

The implication is that Matilda is not only punishing her parents “each time they are beastly to her”; rather, these small episodes of unkindness, indifference, or narrow-mindedness are also seized upon as reasons to exercise a fantasy of class justice. Through the Wormwoods, the caricature of a certain social category becomes the target of built-up anger from a representative of the middle class, stuck with them by mistake. Matilda’s giftedness, and the Wormwoods’ failure to recognize it, represents middle-class annoyance at not being respected by the money-obsessed petty bourgeoisie. And Matilda’s punishments—supported by the complicit narrative voice—are underscored by a constant tendency to class-shaming.

**Hats, Hair, and Humiliation: Child Giftedness and Class-Shaming**

The Wormwoods are characterized by artifice and shallowness. Having no substance, they dwell in a world of appearances, which must be, above all, flashy and loud. The narrative voice takes great pleasure in detailing the Wormwoods’ “bad taste”: Mr. Wormwood “liked to wear jackets with large brightly-coloured checks and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green” (Dahl 28). Elizabeth Butterfield, accordingly, calls the Wormwoods “tacky” (34, 36). But this taste is, of course, only identifiable as “bad” or “tacky” if one locates oneself—as the implied reader is assumed to do—within a supposedly more refined social class. The physical description of Mrs. Wormwood is damning, playing on two different fronts, inasmuch as she represents natural female ugliness ill-rectified by cheap artifice: “She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blonde except where you could see the mousy-brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy make-up and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh appears to be strapped in all around the body to prevent it from falling out” (Dahl 33). This physical description is particularly interesting for its essentialist undertones. There is nothing, of course, “unfortunate” about Mrs. Wormwood’s obesity, at least not in the etymological sense of “unfortunate”: it is not that she is unlucky, but rather that the food she eats does not allow her to be slim. The narrative voice, however, essentializes her “bulging figure” by suggesting that it is in her *nature* to be fat. Similarly, the allusion to her “mousy-brown” hair, poorly hidden under platinum dye, hints that “at the root,” she herself is “mousy-brown”: uninteresting and, maybe, vaguely dirty. However, Mrs. Wormwood is presented as attempting to contain her chubbiness, ugliness, and uninspiring hair color—which are all part of her “nature”—through artifice. She ends up doubly condemned by the narrative voice, first for being as she is, and second for being bad at concealing her “real” self. This double bind, of course, has sexist undertones, but here sexism is also unmistakably tinged with class judgment: Mrs. Wormwood is shamed for being, by nature, an unappealing woman, and, by culture, unable to make the right choices to remedy this issue with good taste.

Strengthening the judgment of the narrative voice, Matilda’s disdain for her parents at the age of four or five is consistently passed off as wisdom. She despairs of their closed-mindedness: “All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they 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” (35). These words sound like the well-meaning discourse of the middle class on a civilizing mission; that Matilda articulates them at a preschool age highlights the precocity of her intelligence and insight, but also of her class prejudice. Again, it is important to note that scholarly readers have often left this condescension unquestioned, or even relayed it, as Butterfield does in her comment: “Here we have the boastful and arrogant Mr. Wormwood, who must at some level actually be aware of his lack of intelligence or his inferior state . . . he rejects the idea of ‘high culture’ altogether, in favor of middle-class tackiness and television” (36).[[3]](#endnote-3) Matilda’s clear superiority is aligned with the reader’s position. Both the narrative voice and the character’s free indirect speech encourage the reader to side with Matilda, and thus to see her punishments as justified. The reader is everywhere influenced to adopt a condescending attitude toward the Wormwoods, and to do so protected by, flatteringly, his or her own implied superior intelligence. Thus the reader is not conditioned to question Matilda’s actions, or the vaguely humiliating comments she is not above making to her parents (Dahl 44).

The greatest humiliations that the Wormwoods undergo are linked to Matilda’s plan of retributive justice. Two punishments involve hair, a symbolic attribute of power, and which both of her parents value highly. By targeting her father’s hair—first forcing him to shave part of it after gluing his hat to his head, then dyeing it blond—Matilda deprives him of his aura of power, both professionally and privately. Indeed, the punishment has a direct effect on his authority at work and on his marital sexuality: that evening, Mrs. Wormwood, seeing her “skinny little husband” (43) moping around the bedroom with his hat glued on his head, is less than impressed with her choice of spouse. The third time Matilda targets her father, she turns his hair platinum blond, the ultimate humiliation, it seems, for an individual so obsessed with external signs of virility. Mr. Wormwood’s masculinity is also under attack during Matilda’s second punishment, when she hides a parrot in the fireplace to make her parents believe there is a burglar in the living room. The paterfamilias, usually so proud of being the breadwinner, is not in this case ready to assume the responsibilities of the traditional masculinity he endorses: “The father didn’t move. He seemed in no hurry to dash off and be a hero” (54). Quentin Blake’s illustration confirms that Mr. Wormwood gets last to the living room, creeping down the corridor after Matilda, Michael, and their mother.

It is important to bear in mind that these comical humiliations are supposed to be funny in part because, through the Wormwoods, they poke at a specific socioeconomic category that they caricature. The Wormwoods are punished where they “sinned”: for their cult of appearances, for their vanity, for their bad taste, and for their gender bigotry. Matilda’s humiliation of her parents is a form of class-shaming because it is justified by, and targets, the traits by which the Wormwoods are recognizably inscribed within socioeconomic caricature.

**“Precociolatry” and the Idolizing of Middle-Class Education**

Even allowing for some critical clemency due to the humorous subversiveness of the novel and the grotesqueness of the parental figures, how can we explain the fact that class prejudice and class-shaming in *Matilda* have not been frequently (if at all) noted—let alone criticized—in scholarly readings of the text? Analyses of children’s books uncovering class prejudice are legion, especially classic children’s books; from Enid Blyton to Harry Potter, it is difficult to find a canonical children’s text whose middle-class prejudice has not been deconstructed and denounced. Scholars of children’s literature are acutely aware that they belong to a discursive sphere that can be generally qualified as liberal humanist and middle class. However, denunciations of middle-class ideologies have mostly been produced in relation to literary representations of the working class, other economically disempowered categories, and cultural and ethnic minorities. As such, they remain condemnations of the liberal left against itself as dominant discourse. But it is possible that the petty bourgeoisie, which is a decidedly Conservative social category, economically and politically powerful and associated with a nouveau riche aesthetic, has generally been considered fair game as a target of literary scorn. It is much rarer, for instance, to find criticisms of J. K. Rowling’s unflattering descriptions of the Dursleys than of her portrayal of house-elves.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Importantly, in *Matilda* the reader’s adherence to the relentless criticism of the Wormwoods is secured by the presence of a particularly powerful figure: the precocious or gifted child. Matilda’s glaring giftedness, unnoticed by her parents, marks a penchant for middle-class culture and values from the very start, justifying her need to be educated by someone from her rightful social category. This movement conceals the novel’s troubling class dynamics, both by naturalizing the differences between the Wormwoods and Miss Honey or Mrs. Phelps and by presenting middle-class education as what “naturally” fits the child prodigy. Matilda’s “natural” appetite for middle-class culture creates an impression of urgency regarding her intellectual development that ultimately explains her confiscation from her family and social category by another.

This movement occurs, primarily, because Matilda’s portrayal as a gifted child already inscribes her within middle-class values: the gifted or precocious child has always been a middle-class construction. This notion must be understood in the cultural and historical context of gifted education and theories of giftedness, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, from the late 1950s to the late 1990s. When *Matilda* was published in 1988, scientific research on child giftedness was undergoing a serious ontological crisis. Psychologists and educators had, until then, worked on the premises that giftedness was an actual and potentially measurable property of individual children, stemming mostly from good heredity, and stimulated by their environments.[[5]](#endnote-5) Throughout the ’80s, however, researchers tentatively began to articulate that giftedness might well have been historically and culturally constructed—alongside the related notions of “intelligence” and “creativity”—by psychologists and educators themselves. Spurred on by the social sciences, psychologists gradually recognized the difficulty of defining a group of children labeled “gifted,” let alone addressing their needs.

For example, philosopher of education Ruth Jonathan, in a much-quoted 1988 article, interrogated “The notion of giftedness, or, ‘how long is a piece of string?’.” Her critique of IQ testing and her remarks on the empirical and theoretical difficulties of defining giftedness were followed by a thorough questioning of a now obvious ethical issue: the correlation between giftedness and social class. Overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly white, gifted children identified by child psychologists and teachers also overwhelmingly belong to the middle and upper-middle classes (123). Jonathan’s article was among the first of many that expressed worry regarding the use of the concept of child giftedness as a pretext for class prejudice. In 2005, James Borland’s even stronger attack on the concept of giftedness and on gifted education programs advocated a complete rethinking of current practices, noting that “gifted education, as historically and currently practiced, mirrors, and perhaps perpetuates, vicious inequalities in our society” (12).

However, given the slow emergence of the idea that giftedness is a socially divisive construct, this concept had enjoyed largely undisturbed ideological impunity since the mid-twentieth century. As Gabriel Mugny and Felice Carugati put it, “theories of giftedness” (popular notions, notably among parents and teachers, of what giftedness is) generally rely on an essentialist model of intelligence: giftedness is seen as the “‘astonishing’ or not easily explicable existence of differences of intelligence between individuals,” and is perceived as innate (84). In short, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of children in English-speaking countries were identified as “gifted,” and because of essentialist theories of giftedness their abilities had been perceived as innate; yet these children were disproportionately of middle-class origin, indirectly normalizing the association between class differences and intellectual differences.

Both popular and scientific theories of child giftedness have staged a tension between a progressive and an essentialist ethos. Progressive views of giftedness, increasingly popular since the 1980s, advocate that many children, if not all, can be seen as gifted in one domain or more, and helped along the way. The essentialist view, in contrast, is the type of giftedness portrayed in *Matilda*: seen as something that one does or does not have, child giftedness in this view becomes at best a mystery, at worst evidence of good breeding. It is also, Joseph Renzulli notes, limited to traditional academic performance (180). From this perspective, the glorification of child giftedness can become one of the last socially acceptable ways to subtly perpetuate a hegemony of class, and this is what happens, I would argue, in *Matilda*.

Where the Wormwoods have most “sinned,” in their petty-bourgeois narrow-mindedness, is in not having noticed their daughter’s extraordinary talent. Dahl’s narrator wonders at this failure: “Her mind was so nimble and she was so quick to learn that her ability should have been obvious even to the most half-witted of parents” (12). Their “criminal” ignorance comes in direct contrast with the sensibilities of the two representatives of the middle class, Mrs. Phelps and Miss Honey, whose perceptions of Matilda’s talents are immediate; Miss Honey “simply couldn’t believe that the parents were totally unaware of their daughter’s remarkable talents” (112). Again, this is largely a matter of viewpoint: Matilda’s genius espouses the values of the middle class, while the Wormwoods do not recognize her abilities because in their frame of reference, reading fiction is not a useful skill. Yet Matilda’s “natural” penchant is described with fervor, extolling the middle-class ideal of the precocious child obsessed with canonical literature.

From the moment she walks into the library Matilda is taken under the wing of a surrogate parent, Mrs. Phelps. A representative of the discreet, hard-working middle class valued by the novel, Mrs. Phelps gives Matilda many books: to begin with, children’s books, all of which she reads in just a few months’ time. Mrs. Phelps is the only person who gives Matilda books; she is thus implicitly enacting a fantasy of complete control over children’s reading, a fantasy in which Dahl himself was not averse to indulging (qtd. in Culley 68). According to Mrs. Phelps’s rather prescriptive tendencies, as several critics have noted (Butler 7; Pinsent 71; Guest 254), Matilda’s strict reading list seems to be coming straight out of Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*. Though it would not win her a place in a Cultural Studies course, it would certainly be met with approval by the traditionalist contingents in Oxbridge English faculties.

For now, however, this bright future and the fascination it elicits are condensed within the static vision of a little child reading. Child-reading idolatry, quite common in the visual arts, is here depicted in words:

Over the next few afternoons Mrs Phelps could hardly take her eyes from the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with a book on her lap. . . . And a strange sight it was, this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor, totally absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham. (Dahl 19)

Mrs. Phelps’s gaze is mentioned repeatedly by the narrator: she “had been watching [Matilda] with fascination for the past few weeks” (16). The scrutiny is quasi-religious in intensity: she “was stunned,” and then “more stunned than ever” (17), “astounded” (21), “filled with wonder and excitement” (22). This gaze is also protective: Matilda is safe “under Mrs Phelps’s watchful and compassionate eye” (22). The vocabulary mingles religiosity and parental care, in complete contrast to the Wormwoods’ “blindness.”

Miss Honey then takes up Mrs. Phelps’s role and watches Matilda, who is “deeply absorbed in the book” (111). The teacher, too, is “feeling quite quivery” (91), “astounded” (98), “wildly excited” (100), inspired: “At this moment she felt ready to take on anybody” (100). Later on, “Miss Honey was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment, as though she were The Creation, The Beginning Of The World, The First Morning” (215)—a sentence so ludicrous I can only read it as sarcastic, but that caricatures only the previous, and more genuine, efforts at an iconography of precocious children reading.

This “precociolatry,” to coin a word, gives rise to a split viewpoint whereby the target audience of the book is put in the position of watching themselves through the subjective camera of the adult gaze. This is all the stronger as such passages are addressed to children who are currently reading a book. The shifty narrative voice, well analyzed by Guest, switches to the viewpoint of the mesmerized adult, thus enjoining child readers to perceive *themselves* as a source of intense pleasure and fascination for surrounding adults. This adult perspective, which forces the child into a position of adoration for another child reading, places young readers in the impossible situation of relishing the spectacle of a child reader from an adult perspective, all the while reflecting back to their own pleasure-giving position as child readers themselves. This identity-splitting process is also intrinsic to the myth of child precocity, which celebrates both the early signs of adulthood in the child and the fact that these signs remain firmly contained within a childish body.

The glorification of both child precocity and of a solid grounding of literary canon, collapsed into the figure of a tiny child reading an enormous book, contrasts with its “fake” counterpart: a child who must be forced to read. *Matilda* begins with a condemnation of pushy parents who believe their children to be extraordinary when they are not. Although these parents are very much a middle-class archetype, their denunciation is possible in the text because they champion what some giftedness scholars have called the liberal or progressive view of child giftedness: the notion that all children have in them some genius, which it is the duty of their parents and the educational system to encourage and nurture (Renzulli 180). This view gained popularity in the late 1980s with the work of researchers such as Renzulli and Howard Gardner and is now at the forefront of gifted education (see, for instance, Davis, Rimm, and Siegle 17–27). Liberal views of giftedness in *Matilda* are rejected outright as highlighting parental narcissism because the novel foregrounds a mystical childish spontaneity and intelligence that cannot be accommodated by the notion that all are gifted in their own ways. *Matilda*’s conservative view of giftedness is superficially democratic, as she is a gifted child born of a petty-bourgeois family, rather than engineered by middle-class parents. However, the apparently “fair” elevation from her lowly origins to a middle-class education reinforces, rather than offsets, the notion that gifted children belong to and must be educated by middle-class professionals. Parents’ responsibility for the education of children is elided, as they are considered either too keen or too indifferent. The type of gifted child that Matilda represents is the ideal blank slate, a prodigious and parentless child ready to be entirely controlled by educators.

The condemnation of children whose giftedness is instilled by their parents implicitly continues throughout the book, notably when Miss Honey visits the Wormwoods and attempts to discover whether Matilda lied to her when she said that her parents did not make her read books:

“Did either of you teach her?”

“Teach her what?” Mr Wormwood said.

“To read. To read books,” Miss Honey said. “Perhaps you *did* teach her. Perhaps she *was* lying. Perhaps you have shelves full of books all over the house. I wouldn’t know. Perhaps you are both great readers. . . . This child has already read an astonishing number of books,” Miss Honey said. “I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.” (Dahl 118; emphasis in original)

Miss Honey does not explicitly criticize parents who teach children before they enter school, but her relentless questioning testifies to a genuine concern with establishing whether Matilda is, so to speak, a “real” or a “fake” precocious child. Her use of the term “lying” to refer to Matilda’s potential concealment of her parents’ education hints that there would have been something devious in this process. But Matilda has not lied; the Wormwoods do not even have books in the house—an indicator, in Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s theorization, of lack of cultural capital.[[6]](#endnote-6) Miss Honey, albeit “shocked,” can now begin to develop a grand narrative of Matilda’s giftedness as natural and miraculous, which fully justifies both Matilda’s upward social mobility toward the middle class and her disdain for the petty bourgeoisie.

The implicit distinction between the “natural” precocious child and the child of pushy parents supports the dream that middle-class values, literature, and culture “naturally” emerge in the most exemplary children, with no interference from parents. Ideally, it is the middle-class education professional, such as the librarian and the schoolteacher, who should be in charge of identifying and helping those who display innate talent. The pushy parent who adheres to a liberal view of giftedness is distasteful, meanwhile, because s/he makes visible the fact that such values are, in fact, profoundly connected to upbringing. Dahl’s narrator remarks, “It is bad enough when parents treat *ordinary* children as thought they were scabs and bunions, but it becomes somehow a lot worse when the child in question is *extra*-ordinary, and by that I mean sensitive and brilliant” (12; emphasis in original). Whatever dwells in this “somehow” is the key to understanding class tension in *Matilda*. It is “somehow” worse to treat badly a child who is “sensitive and brilliant,” because such a child can be put in the service of a specific socioeconomic category; one cannot afford to lose a child like this to “beastly” people, and it is thereby right to take her away from her parents. At the end of the novel, Matilda’s literal adoption by a schoolteacher and the convenient evacuation of her biological parents signals the problematic ideal of a complete absorption, by a benevolent, middle-class educational system, of the genius child who will champion its values.

*Matilda* has escaped criticism mostly because the protagonist’s blissful and unashamed enjoyment of books has been more alluring, and held more importance for both scholarly and lay readers, than the classist assumptions upon which the novel leans. Of course, these values are important. The presence of the immensely popular figure of Matilda promoting reading on countless leaflets for literary festivals and posters is perfectly understandable: the symbolic power that this iconic figure holds, for mediators, children, and parents alike, is enormous, and it is to Dahl’s immense talent that Matilda owes her canonization as role model for reading and education. And perhaps *Matilda*’s ability to elicit genuine excitement and enjoyment regarding literary works, added to its undeniably funny nature, should absolve the novel from its more contentious ideological undertones.

Furthermore, in privileging what could be called an intellectual middle-class view of reading and cultural capital, and showing disdain for a socioeconomic category portrayed as economically and politically powerful but culturally and intellectually inferior, *Matilda* is in no way an exception in the landscape of children’s literature or that of literary fiction. It may indeed be seen as partaking in a more general ideological movement, well described by Deidre Lynch and evident from the rise of the novel onward, legitimating the educated middle class’s gain and preservation of symbolic capital—and therefore symbolic power—by setting apart high culture and dismissing materialistic lifestyles. The class tensions at the heart of *Matilda*, from this angle, illustrate in a particularly strong fashion the frictions elicited by the coexistence in British society of multiple economically powerful and intellectually powerful social categories, whose respective members are all convinced of their own superior worth.

Yet literary attacks on the petty bourgeoisie must not remain unnoticed by children’s literature professionals. Beyond the problems that any form of class prejudice implies, it is not in the best interest of children who may recognize in the Wormwoods some aspects of their own families to be told that they would be better off without them, that reading is not compatible with their parents’ life choices, and that they should seek alternative parental figures in the educational system. *Matilda*’s “wish-fulfillment fantasy” is a blessing for people who like to see children reading, but it also “wishes” that members of the “undesirable” social categories who do not want to take part in this educational dream should be driven out of the picture forever by their own crimes, leaving the middle classes in peace to educate and care for their children.

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1. **Notes**

. Argyle notes that the prevalence of bingo playing among working-class women at this time was in part due to bingo clubs being the only place where they could safely enjoy moments of social life with other women. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . It is noteworthy that Miss Honey, at this stage in the novel, cannot have had any inkling of Mr Wormwood’s criminal streak; her insinuations are thus entirely based on class prejudice. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . The identification of the Wormwoods as “middle-class” is not explained. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . See, for instance, Karin Westman’s interesting analysis of the Dursleys as an epitome of the Thatcherite petty bourgeoisie, which does not, however, criticize Rowling’s derogatory treatment of this social category. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . There are many histories of the development of the construct of giftedness in the twentieth century. For particularly thorough accounts, see Howe; Sternberg, Jarvin, and Grigorenko. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Mrs. Phelps corresponds to the definition of a “great reader” who “loves good literature,” but her influence on Matilda’s early education is somehow elided here. In criticism, too, Mrs. Phelps’s instrumental role in Matilda’s education has sometimes been downplayed. “When Matilda begins her journey of learning, she first goes to the public library on a daily basis and reads whatever books she decides to,” writes John V. Karavitis (100), forgetting that no book that falls into Matilda’s lap is of her own choosing. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)