

# FEMALE ANIMAL CHARACTERS IN ROALD DAHL'S CHILDREN'S BOOKS: A FEMINIST APPROACH

## PERSONAJES FEMENINOS EN LOS LIBROS INFANTILES DE ROALD DAHL: UN ENFOQUE FEMINISTA

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### Abstract

Children's literature introduces children to the world, stimulates their imagination, and mirrors the society they live in by reproducing its social rules and accepted norms. This is especially true with gender stereotypes, which display and reinforce the masculine and feminine roles constructed by a given society. This binary, one-dimensional, and conventional representation is harmful as it negatively impacts young readers' apprehension of gender roles as well as their personality, behaviour, and aspirations for the future. World-renowned children's author Roald Dahl has recently been criticised as a controversial author and a racist, misogynistic person. By adopting a feminist literary critical approach, this study analyses Dahl and his illustrator Quentin Blake's portrayal of female anthropomorphic characters, generally neglected by previous researchers in favour of human characters, in four books: *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *The Magic Finger* (1966), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970), and *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* (1985). Female characters are weak, inactive, confined indoors, and constantly belittled by their male counterparts who are portrayed as adventurous and as decision makers. Therefore, this study aims to encourage parents and educators to teach young learners to read children's books with a critical eye to identify and interpret different stereotypical representations.

**Keywords:** children's literature, gender stereotypes, gender roles, Roald Dahl, feminist literary criticism.

## Resumen

La literatura infantil introduce a niñas y niños al mundo, estimula su imaginación y refleja la sociedad en la cual viven al reproducir sus reglas sociales y normas aceptadas. Esto se nota especialmente con los estereotipos de género que exhiben y refuerzan los papeles masculinos y femeninos de una sociedad. Esta representación binaria, unidimensional y convencional es dañina para lectoras y lectores jóvenes porque impacta negativamente su comprensión de los roles de género, así como su personalidad, comportamiento y aspiraciones para el futuro. Roald Dahl, autor infantil mundialmente reconocido, ha sido recientemente revisado y criticado como escritor controvertido y persona racista y misógina. Desde un enfoque feminista crítico literario, esta investigación analiza la representación que Dahl y su ilustrador Quentin Blake hacen de los personajes animales antropomórficos femeninos en *James y el melocotón gigante* (1961), *El dedo mágico* (1966), *El súperzorro* (1970) y *La jirafa, el pelícano y el mono* (1985). Los personajes femeninos son débiles, inactivos, confinados en interiores y constantemente denigrados por los personajes masculinos, atrevidos, líderes y decisivos. Por lo tanto, esta investigación anima a que madres, padres y docentes enseñen a lectores jóvenes a leer libros infantiles con un ojo crítico para identificar e interpretar representaciones estereotípicas.

**Palabras clave:** literatura infantil, estereotipos de género, roles de género, Roald Dahl, crítica literaria feminista.

## 1. Introduction

Children's literature is crucial in children's development (Peterson and Lach 1990; Burke and Copenhaver 2004; Lerer 2008; Coats et al. 2022). Besides teaching them about the world and stimulating their imagination, it also reflects the society they live in and reproduces its accepted norms and social rules. This is particularly true when it comes to gender stereotypes, which show and reinforce the masculine and feminine roles constructed by a certain society. A binary and one-dimensional representation is detrimental to young readers' perception of gender roles, personality, behaviour, and dreams for the future. While it is negative for both female and male readers, it is undoubtedly worse for the former, who already suffer from systemic and institutional discrimination in their everyday life. The interest in

the way children's books in English convey gender stereotypes has considerably increased since the 1970s and there have been noticeable changes since then. However, recent research shows that female characters are overall still underrepresented and stereotypically portrayed in contemporary children's books (McCabe et al. 2011; Sunderland and McGlashan 2012; Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2019; Lee and Chin 2019; Moya-Guijarro and Martínez Mateo 2022).

Many record-breaking children's authors have inspired generations of readers around the world. Roald Dahl is one of the most influential, with his books translated into more than 59 languages ("Roald Dahl centenary" 2015), sold over 250 million copies (Slater 2020), and adapted into movies and musicals. The British writer has been read by millions of children everywhere and is still one of the best-selling children's authors ("*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*" 2016). However, he has increasingly been criticised both as the author of disturbing and outrageous stories and as a racist, anti-Semite, and misogynist (Sturrock 2010; Anderson 2016). Evidently, as Dahl was born in 1916 in the UK, he grew up in a radically different society from our current world. He started publishing during the advent of second-wave feminism and his last books were released during third-wave feminism. His writings reflect the way women were considered at the time, but today they are being reappraised through a feminist lens.

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While his stereotypical and misogynistic depiction of female characters in *The Witches*, *Matilda*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has been debated (Mulders 2016; Þórðardóttir 2019; Stauri 2020), anthropomorphic animal characters—animals with human characteristics—have been neglected from the perspective of feminist criticism. Omnipresent in children's literature, anthropomorphic characters help young readers understand how their society works and emotionally distance themselves from unpleasant situations (Burke and Copenhaver 2004: 213). This detachment is harmful when it comes to gender stereotypes and misogyny, as children are more prone to assimilate negative representations of gender roles and attributions, which might adversely affect their cognitive development and impact their personality, behaviour, and aspirations for the future (Peterson and Lach 1990: 193).

Dahl's anthropomorphic animal characters are highly stereotypical. While male animals are adventurous and resourceful, female animals are barely visible, confined indoors, and belittled. Therefore, through a qualitative method, the first objective of this study is to adopt a feminist literary critical approach to systematically review Dahl's portrayal of female animal characters and his illustrator Quentin Blake's visual representation in four books: *James and the Giant Peach* (2007), *The Magic Finger* (1997), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1996), and *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* (2009). The second objective is to determine to what extent their description is

stereotypical and misogynistic. The findings are expected to fill a gap in the field since anthropomorphic animal characters in Roald Dahl have not yet been studied from a feminist approach. They can also help parents and educators understand the importance of teaching children to read with a critical eye and to identify and interpret stereotypical representations.

## 2. Terminology: Defining Key Terms

It is first necessary to explain a series of key concepts. To start with, *gender* is commonly confused with *sex*. While the latter is biologically assigned at birth (male or female), *gender* is the “cultural constitution of notions concerning femininity or masculinity” (Wolfreys et al. 2006: 45). It represents the socially sanctioned way of being male or female through clothes, activities, career, studies, behaviour, and interests. Simone de Beauvoir’s iconic “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (1956: 6) establishes a difference between what makes everyone biologically (sex), socially (gender), and in practice (gender roles) a woman or a man. Gender is socially and culturally constructed (Basow 1992: vii; Fallaize 2007: 84), and performed as an “act” (Butler 2006) to match society’s expectations. Gender identity is how one feels about their gender, which may or may not match their sex and its associated gender role.

A stereotype has been defined as “a standardized mental picture [...] held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (Merriam-Webster 2023). Thus, stereotypes help create mental preconceptions of individuals or groups according to their race, class, or gender. Regarding the latter, masculine and feminine roles are omnipresent in our lives through the media, toys, music, sports, grammar, politics, and religion (Basow 1992: vii). Anne Cranny-Francis et al. state that “whether we are sleeping, eating, watching TV, shopping or reading, gender is at work. Yet because it is everywhere, it is sometimes difficult to see it in operation” (2003: 1). The overriding importance of gender in the Western world has led to a normalisation of gender stereotypes, with men seen as strong, rational, ambitious, risk-taking, and protective, while women are shy, creative, motherly, elegant, and submissive. In the binary opposition men/women, the first is “privileged hierarchically over the other” (Wolfreys et al. 2006: 18). Men have culturally, socially, and historically been put in the forefront as providers, kings, leaders, heads of family, managers, in short, superior to women and in charge of them.

This alleged male superiority has led to sexism and misogyny. While these terms are commonly used interchangeably, they are “analytically and ontologically separable, while ideologically linked” (Savigny 2020: 3). Indeed, whereas the

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *sexism* as “prejudice or discrimination based on sex, especially: discrimination against women”, *misogyny* is a “hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women”. In other words, sexism is rooted in the belief that men are biologically superior, and misogyny is an institutionalised and internalised ideology that enforces sexism. Both thrive in patriarchal societies and they affect women's salaries, health, security, and sexuality. Having said that, we cannot separate sexism and misogyny from other types of discrimination based on class, race, and physical ability. Women experience sexism differently even though the basis is the same in essence (Savigny 2020: 1). However, the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the advances of feminist movements have brought visibility and legal recognition for women. The term *sexism* was lost in the “postfeminist” era when feminism was deemed unnecessary as its goals had allegedly been reached, but sexism made a come-back in the form of “retrosexism”, which reflects a need to reaffirm men's superiority in view of the menace that the advances made by women symbolise (Savigny 2020: 2).

### 3. Feminist Literary Criticism

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Feminism is an umbrella term that includes many ideas and positions. Since it was fully theorised and academically recognised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there have been four waves of feminism which are “not mutually exclusive or totally separate from each other” (Kang et al. 2017: 114). Although each of them denounces the limitations of the previous one, they also praise the advances made, “as with a palimpsest” (Pellicer-Ortín et al. 2021: 224). Briefly summarised, the first wave (late 1800s to early 1900s) focused on political engagement and voting rights with a lack of intersectionality that would later be criticised; the second wave (late 1960s to early 1980s) centred on economic equality and reproductive rights with a low consideration for discrimination based on class and race; the third wave (mid-1980s to early 1990s) fought for inclusiveness by defending “non-white, disabled, trans, single or non-monogamous, middle-class, or non-western” people (Kang et al. 2017: 129) thanks to the emergence of sub-groups like the Queer movement, Sex-positive feminism, Transnational feminism, and Ecofeminism; and finally, the fourth wave, which arose in the early 2010s and is still ongoing today, uses social media to denounce rape culture, sexual abuses, and body shaming (Burkett and Brunell 2021).

Closely related to feminist movements and theories, feminist literary criticism is “a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism” (Moi in Tunç Opperman 1994). It studies the oppressive representation of femininity and its symbols (Freedman

2007: xvii) and how this depiction “contain[s] and constrain[s] women in practice” (Plain and Sellers 2007: 6). Although it essentially aspires to “understand the position of females and gender conflict as a feature in literary works written by male writers” (Peter 2010: 58), it uses the theoretical groundwork formed by the different waves of feminism. As such, it has evolved from the need to denounce androcentrism by re-reading male authors to the re-discovery of female writers who had been erased from literary canons, including the multiple experiences of women from all classes and ethnic groups. Thus, feminist literary criticism offers “new substitute models of reading and writing” by deconstructing male authority and challenging unreal representations of female characters (Peter 2010: 58).

In this study, the books have been analysed through a feminist reading that aims at reviewing the cultural codes in which a given literary work is embedded in order to explore the relationship between real-life women and their portrayal in literature. In other words, it questions the meaning of “masculine” and “feminine” as cultural myths and abstract entities (Mora 1982: 3-4). Denouncing the unjust and deceptive representation of women in literature can then lead to efforts to build a new system that would recognise “the differential but non-hierarchizing status of opposed groups”, that is, of each sex (Kristeva 1968: 117). Gabriela Mora defines a feminist reading as the need to “connect the text with human actions and concerns in an effort to discover the similarities, differences, alterations, and erasure between women as an empirical object and the characteristics that codes have imposed on them in literature” (1982: 4-5). However, she warns against the dangers of falling into the opposite position of antagonism. Far from supporting repressive or abusive analysis, a feminist reading calls attention to biased representations and tries to restore a balance between men and women. For Patsy Boyer, a feminist reading does not refer to the sex of the reader or critic (1982: 198). She characterises a feminist reading as opposed to a masculinist one:

By masculinist I mean that reading which focuses on the male protagonist and his fate, which often obviates serious consideration of the female character or casts her in a negative light. [...] Similarly, feminist [...] means a perspective that focuses on the nature and role of the female character and clarifies the impact of this image on the male and female reader. (1982: 198)

To complete this definition, Gill Plain and Susan Sellers add that a feminist reading aims at revolting “against the androcentrism that [...] dominate[s] literary studies” (2007: 102), constructing a history of women’s writing, and recovering “lost and marginalised traditions of women’s writing” that do not only reflect the experience of white, heterosexual, middle-class feminists (2007: 103).

#### 4. Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature in English

Children's literature, understood as "the body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people" (Fadiman 1998), has a long-lasting influence on its young readers' cognitive development, which is why the messages it conveys must be carefully evaluated. Many problems denounced in today's society that are related to gender roles, gender stereotypes, and misogyny are commonplace in classical and contemporary children's books (Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2019; Lee and Chin 2019; Moya-Guijarro and Martínez Mateo 2022). Along with the media, such as television, music, movies, or social platforms, children's literature maintains "hidden sexism" (Lee and Chin 2019: 58) that shapes young readers' minds.

In 1972, Weitzman et al. published their ground-breaking work on what they called, at the time, "sex-role stereotypes" (1972: 1125). They found that characters in best-selling children's books were extremely stereotypical. Gender stereotypes in children's books are all the more harmful as they are taken as a reference by young readers. They influence both their understanding of the world and how they grow and shape their personality (Weitzman et al. 1972; Peterson and Lach 1990; Hamilton et al. 2006; Lewis et al. 2021). Children's books prescribe activities, clothes, behaviours, jobs, goals, and language use for male and female characters (Weatherall 2002). Regarding the latter, Lewis et al. (2021) have found that in 247 popular and contemporary children's books, female characters mainly speak about care, feelings, school, and communication; on the other hand, male characters typically speak about work, transportation, mechanics, and tools. While all characters are represented stereotypically, "male" is the default gender (Heuring 2021) and female characters are particularly affected (Nebbia 2016: 21).

Weitzman et al.'s four main findings about the stereotypical portrayal of female characters were: (1) they are outnumbered by their male counterparts in the titles, the text, the plot, and the illustrations; (2) they are emotionally and physically stereotyped; (3) they are homebound and inactive, as opposed to male characters, who carry out varied and interesting activities in groups and outside; and (4) they are dependent and "cannot exist without men" (1972: 1136). While there have been significant changes, particularly in the last few decades, recent studies show that British and American children's literature remains stereotypical (Brower 2016; Nebbia 2016; Lee and Chin 2019; Lewis et al. 2021; Moya-Guijarro and Martínez Mateo 2022). In particular, McCabe et al.'s (2011) analysis of 5,618 children's books published in the USA throughout the twentieth century shows the constant disparities and inequalities between female and male characters.

Outnumbered by male characters in the titles, the plot, and the illustrations, female characters are thus “invisible” (Weitzman et al. 1972: 1128; see also Hamilton et al. 2006: 761). McCabe et al. speak of a “symbolic annihilation” (2011: 198) which mirrors the underrepresentation of women in real life. Secondly, female characters are emotionally and physically stereotyped as kind, gentle, modest, and shy. They do not speak but whisper or murmur; they do not walk but tiptoe. As far as clothes are concerned, they wear “frilly, starchy, pink dresses” (Weitzman et al. 1972: 1137; see also Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2019), and have big eyes and long eyelashes. These scholars state that the “girl’s clothes indicate that she is not meant to be active” (Weitzman et al. 1972: 1137): this is why female characters are homebound and inert. They cook, take care of children, gossip, listen to music, and sew. As adults, women have limited options. They stay at home and are overrepresented in nurturing roles, particularly as mothers (Lee and Chin 2019: 58), whereas men have jobs that bestow a higher status (Weitzman et al. 1972; Hamilton et al. 2006: 761). Female characters appear helpless and dependent, incapable of living without men. In their research on how children talk about the depiction of characters in picture books, Hill and Bartow Jacobs found that not only is a character’s gender key for young readers, but it is also always determined by the social norms and constructs that children are exposed to (2019: 99).

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## 5. Roald Dahl: Prominent yet Controversial

In 1986, Dahl’s official biographer Donald Sturrock met the British author, who was at the time “the most famous and successful living children’s writer” (2010: 10-11). Sturrock summarises the first twenty-five years of Dahl’s life as follows: “Norwegian parents, a childhood in Wales, miserable schooldays, youthful adventures in Newfoundland and Tanganyika [today Tanzania], flying as a fighter pilot, a serious plane crash, then a career as a wartime diplomat in Washington” (2010: 9). While Dahl claimed his personal life did not inspire his writing, his universe is filled with traumatic childhoods, orphans, animals, sickness, bullies, corporal punishments, and abusive parents.

In 1943, Dahl published his first children’s book, *The Gremlins*. Walt Disney’s project to adapt it into an animated movie was cancelled due to tensions between the two men. For the next twenty years, Dahl published adult fiction, novels, and short stories that most readers and critics today consider “macabre” (Anderson 2016), “outrageous” (Casulli 2015: 4), “sardonic” and “gruesome” (Henfridsson 2008: 6-7). He came back to children’s literature in the 1960s, a gruesome decade for Roald Dahl, as his son was hit by a taxi, his seven-year-old daughter died of measles, and his pregnant wife Patricia Neal suffered strokes. Dahl could not write



prolifically before the 1980s, when he published 15 books and divorced his first wife to marry his yearslong mistress. When he died at the age of 74 in 1990, Dahl left an estate of over three million pounds (Henfridsson 2008: 5) and an astonishing legacy of hundreds of books, anthologies, screenplays, and short stories. His heritage, which now also includes a charity and a museum, is managed by The Roald Dahl Story Company and The Roald Dahl Family.

Although his books were first published over 70 years ago, Dahl “still ranks in the top five best-selling children’s authors on Amazon’s UK site [...] alongside modern day best-sellers” (“*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*” 2016). A dozen movies were based on his books and the rights to his stories sell for billions of dollars. The Roald Dahl Story Company makes millions of pounds every year (Bayley 2022) and the sales are soaring after Puffin announced they would publish edited versions (Schultz 2023). Yet, Dahl’s indisputable notoriety is now tainted with controversy and polemic. He would reuse plots from his adult stories in stories for children, which is why “dreadful, morbid, and macabre [...] and even sadistic elements” can be found in his children’s books (Casulli 2015: 5)—called “tasteless and brutal” by many critics (Sturrock 2010: 21). Abusive parents, frightful incidents, and vicious children abound in all of Dahl’s stories, as well as racist elements. For example, *James and the Giant Peach*’s Grasshopper exclaims he would “rather be fried alive and eaten by a Mexican” (Dahl 2001: 107) and the representation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*’s Oompa Loompas as “small black pygmies” has been criticised (Rosenthal 2014). Consequently, several of Dahl’s books were banned from reading lists in different countries.

Dahl’s personal opinions are similarly contentious, from racist remarks about the population in Baghdad in his letters to his family (Sturrock 2010: 128) and anti-Israeli and colonialist articles in the 1980s to anti-Semitic statements in interviews (Anderson 2016). Although his racism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny were mitigated by his publishers’ careful editing, his integrity has regularly been questioned. The Dahl family released an official statement in December 2020 to apologise for some of the author’s declarations. However, this apology was conveniently published in a bidding war between streaming platforms to acquire the rights to Dahl’s works. After Netflix bought the author’s entire catalogue for \$502 million, the Dahl family donated “a significant part” of this sum to anti-racism, anti-hate, and children’s rights charities, although “no further details explain which organizations those donations might support” (Grossman 2022). Recently, readers’ anger at Puffin’s amended versions brought about a revived love for Roald Dahl’s original pieces of work.

## 6. An Analysis of Roald Dahl's Female Animal Characters

As has been mentioned, this study focuses on anthropomorphic characters, “animals possessing human capabilities and characteristics” (Burke and Copenhaver 2004: 206; see also Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2019: 97). Their animal nature keeps young readers curious and interested while their human abilities and behaviour replicate reality and serve to guide and instruct children. In other words, anthropomorphic characters allow writers to deal with controversial or delicate topics with a “soften[ed...] didactic tone” and “a degree of emotional distance” (Burke and Copenhaver 2004: 210-213). Nonetheless, the emotional distance anthropomorphic characters create can produce a dissociation from the reality that they mirror. Consequently, young readers might not realise that the characters mirror their life and they might not understand the seriousness of certain topics, such as racism or sexism. Interestingly, McCabe et al. notice that the least parity between female and male characters in children's books is found among animal characters, while child characters are more equal (2011: 220).

Animal characters abound in Roald Dahl's books, both real and anthropomorphic. There are even cases of transmogrification, “people morphing into animals” (Burke and Copenhaver 2004: 207), such as the unnamed protagonist changed into a mouse in *The Witches* (1983), or Mrs Winter turned into a cat and the Gregg family into ducks in *The Magic Finger* (1997). For this study, it was necessary to identify Dahl's children's books that include female anthropomorphic characters. Those that only contained non-anthropomorphic animals or that did not include female animal characters were discarded. As a result, four books were finally selected: *James and the Giant Peach* (2007), *The Magic Finger* (1997), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1996), and *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* (2009). The editions illustrated by British artist Quentin Blake were favoured; the work of the London-born illustrator cannot be separated from Dahl's books as his peculiar, immediately recognisable style has given to most of Dahl's characters a visual identity that inhabits the childhood of millions of readers. In addition, however popular and beloved Blake's drawings are, they are not less sexist than Dahl's written portrayals, and in all these books the “complementarity between images and words” is undeniable (Moya-Guijarro and Martínez Mateo 2022: 179).

*James and the Giant Peach*, first published in 1961, was later reedited ten times and illustrated by Quentin Blake in 1995. It was adapted into a film in 1996 and in 2010 into a musical that is still produced today. The book follows James, a young boy who is bullied by his two awful aunts. After discovering a magic potion, James enters into a colossal peach that hosts a group of gigantic insects and embarks on a magical journey that involves a dive into the ocean, a shark attack, an army of seagulls, and a memorable impalement on top of the Empire State Building. Written in 1962 but not published until 1966, as it went against the mighty US gun lobby

(The Roald Dahl Story Company Limited 2018), and illustrated in 1995 by Blake, *The Magic Finger* features an unnamed young girl who uses her magic finger to punish her neighbours, the Gregg family, who are avid hunters. She transforms them into half-human, half-duck creatures, thus forcing them to build a nest and escape from revengeful real ducks. In 1970, *Fantastic Mr Fox* gave life to a family of foxes that only survive thanks to the ingenuity of Mr Fox, who outwits their three abominable neighbours Boggis, Bunce, and Bean by stealing their chickens, ducks, geese, and apple cider. Illustrated by Blake in 1996, the story was adapted into a theatre play (2001), an opera (1998, 2010), a movie by Wes Anderson (2009), and a musical (2016). Finally, *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, published in 1985 with Blake's illustrations, narrates the adventures of a boy who dreams of opening a candy shop. His life changes when he meets the three members of the Ladderless Window-Cleaning Company: a giraffe, a pelican, and a monkey.

These books present female anthropomorphic animal characters. There are four of them in *James and the Giant Peach*: Miss Spider, Ladybird, Silkworm, and Glowworm, and only one in *The Magic Finger*: the mother of the duck family. *Fantastic Mr Fox* mentions several of them, but only one is recurrent and useful to the plot, Mrs Fox, while the others do not even have a name or a personality. Finally, the giraffe is the only female character in *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*. All these characters are treated, described, and illustrated in a sexist way. The following analysis is based on the elements of sexism in children's books identified by Weitzman et al. in 1972: the invisible woman, the physical description of female characters, the activities of boys and girls, and the relationship between male and female characters (domination for the first, dependency for the latter).

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### 6.1. The Invisible Woman

In the four selected books, the only ones of Dahl's works that include female animal characters, the female characters are invisible, either literally or because of their behaviour. In *Fantastic Mr Fox*, all the female characters, except for Mrs Fox, are absent from the storyline, simply mentioned by their husbands as "and all our wives and children" (Dahl 1996: 48). In *James and the Giant Peach*, Silkworm and Glowworm are made invisible by their conduct. The first one is "sleeping soundly and nobody [is] paying any attention to it" (Dahl 2007: 47). At first, the pronoun "it" is used to refer to her, thus erasing her identity as a female character. Later, as James realises he will need silk to escape from the sharks, the Old-Green-Grasshopper reminds him of the existence of Silkworm, whom everybody had forgotten:

'But my dear boy, that's exactly what we do have! We've got all you want!'  
'How? Where?'

‘The Silkworm!’ cried the Old-Green-Grasshopper. ‘Didn’t you ever notice the Silkworm? She’s still downstairs! She never moves! She just lies there sleeping all day long’. (76)

The Silkworm goes completely unnoticed and her silence reinforces her insubstantiality, as she does not utter a single word in the entire story. She never appears in any of Blake’s drawings, even though her silk saves everyone when they need to escape from the sharks. Even the other female characters forget about the Silkworm, for instance, when Miss Spider says, “None of us three girls” (Dahl 2007: 68) to refer to herself, Ladybird, and the Glowworm, thus omitting the Silkworm. Similarly, the Glowworm is described as “a very shy and silent creature” (87). She is drawn twice, but only one half of her body is shown, and she is a mere lightbulb. The other characters treat her as a “lighting system” (65) and take for granted that her only role is to illuminate the peach:

‘Let’s have some light!’ shouted the Centipede.

‘Yes!’ they cried. ‘Light! Give us some light!’

‘I’m *trying*’, answered the poor Glowworm. ‘I’m doing my best. Please be patient’.  
(66)

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Finally, in *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, while the Giraffe is more present than the female characters previously mentioned, her withdrawn behaviour and the fact that the male characters speak much more than her contribute to her invisibilisation.

## 6.2. Physical Description and Clothing

In *James and the Giant Peach*, Ladybird is described as “obviously a kind and gentle creature” (Dahl 2007: 56), “so beautiful, so kind” (133), an insect who speaks “primly” (71) and “modestly” (95) and who blushes when others address her. She is protective of James and has a motherly attitude towards him. Miss Spider does everything “calmly” (87) and is illustrated with long eyelashes even though the text never mentions them. Female characters are sensitive; when James jumps to save the Centipede, “Miss Spider, the Glowworm, and the Ladybird all began to cry” (100). Mrs Fox does not speak but sobs (Dahl 1996: 16) or murmurs (43). Throughout the book, while her husband is doing everything, she quivers (16), cries (17), and acts “tenderly” (15) and “shyly” (77). The Giraffe has “big round dark eyes” (Dahl 2009: 13) and is depicted by Blake with long eyelashes even though they are not textually mentioned by Dahl. She sings “so softly that [you can] hardly catch the words” (28), she tiptoes “very gingerly” (32), she whispers (32), she murmurs (42), and she does not want to sound “pushy” when she asks for food (42). All the female characters are withdrawn and their actions constantly measured; everything they do is softened or toned down. Finally, while

no details about the way characters are dressed are mentioned in the text itself, the illustrations show the female duck wearing an apron (Dahl 1997: 36) and Mrs Fox wearing a long dress (Dahl 1996: 15, 34, 43, 74). This implies that illustrators can take liberties and reinforce stereotypical representations, which is particularly relevant as illustrations in children's books are as important —if not more so— as the text for children. In Seth Lerer's words, "[t]he history of children's literature is a history of image as well as word" (2008: 322).

### 6.3. Girls' Activities

Female characters only engage in activities that are stereotypically reserved for them. For example, Ladybird likes music (Dahl 2007: 92) and gossiping (139), while Miss Spider is expected to make the beds for everyone "as soft and silky as possibl[e]" (53). Later, she panics when James suggests they should abandon the peach and swim: "None of us three girls can swim a single stroke" (68). Swimming, and sports generally, is seen as a male activity. The mother duck cooks alone in the kitchen (Dahl 1997: 36) and Mrs Fox is only mentioned when the next menu is concerned: "'I think we'll have duck tonight', said Mrs Fox" (Dahl 1996: 10), "My son [...], run back with these to your mother. Tell her to prepare a feast" (42), "'A feast it shall be!' she said, standing up. [...] Hurry up, child, and start plucking those chickens!" (44), and finally, "My darlings [...], run back as fast as you can to your mother. Tell her we are having guests for dinner" (57). Mrs Fox is a mere caregiver to her children and her husband as well, tending to him after he is shot by the farmers.

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Consequently, it can be argued that the female characters are passive overall. In *The Magic Finger*, while the three male ducks are holding rifles and shooting, the mother duck is standing next to them, her hands on her hips (Dahl 1997: 45-46). In *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, the Giraffe is much less active than her male counterparts. While she carries her friends on her back and helps them clean the windows, reach the top of the trees, or arrest thieves, her role is subordinate and derisory. This misogynistic portrayal of female characters as mild, quiet, and caring creatures confined to the inside, especially the kitchen, is further strengthened by the way male and female characters interact with each other, as will be shown below.

### 6.4. Relationships Between Male and Female Characters

Interestingly, the female characters do not interact with each other, either because they do not have another woman to talk to or because they only address male characters, who all adopt a paternalist and superior attitude towards them. In *James and the Giant Peach*, the male insects see their female counterparts as objects

or slaves that can be used and mistreated. For example, when James decides he will need silk to carry out his project, the Centipede forces the Silkworm to spin silk and insults her: “Spin, Silkworm, spin, you great fat lazy brute! Faster, faster, or we’ll throw you to the sharks!” (Dahl 2007: 82). Earlier in the book, the Centipede mistreats the Glowworm when she forgets to turn her light off by shouting “Wake up, you lazy beast!” and throwing his boots at her (54).

The female characters have internalised their presumed inferiority and weakness. As soon as a problem arises, Miss Spider and Ladybird panic; instead of working towards a solution, they turn to James: “Is there *nothing* we can do? [...] Surely *you* can think of a way out of this’. ‘Think!’ begged Miss Spider. ‘*Think*, James, *think!*’” (75, emphasis in original). They have no self-confidence and believe that only a man could save them from this critical situation. Similarly, when the Giraffe notices the burglar in the Duchess’s room, she immediately turns to the Pelican and the Monkey, who find a way to capture the thief (Dahl 2009: 32). Mrs Fox, the weakest of all, completely relies on her husband and children. She is also under her husband’s spell: three times in barely 80 pages, she exclaims, “Oh, what a fantastic fox your father is!” (Dahl 1996: 19, 44, 77). Her declaration is even written in capital letters the third time: “Then Mrs Fox got shyly to her feet and said, ‘I don’t want to make a speech. I just want to say one more thing, and it is this: MY HUSBAND IS A FANTASTIC FOX’” (77). Mr Fox incontestably takes pleasure in his wife’s obedient and idolatrous behaviour as he claims he “loved her more than ever when she said things like that” (19).

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Therefore, the female animal characters are seen as physically and morally inferior to the male characters. They are feeble, inept, and dependent. They do not make decisions and need to be taken care of. As Weitzman et al. suggest, female characters in children’s books do not spend time together and their tendency to systematically turn to men in critical situations “impl[ies] that women cannot exist without men” (1972: 1136). Their finding that “boys rescue girls” (1135) in the majority of the children’s books they studied is also true for Dahl’s books.

### 6.5. Evolution of the Representation of Female Animal Characters

A slight improvement of this underlying sexism can be noticed from *James and the Giant Peach* in the early 1960s to *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* in the mid-1980s. First, female characters become more present as the years go by, both in the text and in the illustrations. For instance, the Giraffe appears in the title of the book along with her two male counterparts as well as in the majority of the illustrations, unlike Miss Spider, Ladybird, or the Glowworm. The Giraffe is also more involved in the story than any previous female character as she accompanies the male characters and takes part in the group decisions. Similarly, even if the

female duck is mostly inactive, she does leave the house to escort the male ducks and she acts as a mediator between the Greggs and the ducks. This significantly contrasts with *James and the Giant Peach* and *Fantastic Mr Fox*, whose female characters remain inside the giant peach or in the foxhole. Finally, how male characters treat women evolves noticeably. In *James and the Giant Peach*, the male insects insult, objectify, and bully women, while Mr Fox ultimately loves his wife, and the Pelly and the Monkey worry about the Giraffe's safety and ask for her opinion.

Thus, it appears that second-wave feminism and early research in children's books influenced children's literature in general and Dahl's writings in particular, or at least his publisher's editing. In the 2000s, stereotypical and misogynistic representations were more commonly challenged, reflecting societal changes. Yet, male characters' behaviour remained paternalistic and condescending throughout all of Dahl's books and female characters were still underrepresented, even in the most recent ones. This finding is similar to that of McCabe et al.: there are changes over time, "but not consistent improvement" (2011: 219), particularly with animal characters (221).

## 7. Conclusion

Gender stereotypes have always been present in Western children's literature, which is damaging to young readers' cognitive and affective development. By internalising one-dimensional and stereotypical descriptions from a very young age, children perpetuate them as they grow up (Lewis et al. 2021). While there is more awareness of the issues related to gender representation, studies conducted recently show the same results as Weitzman et al. in 1972 when experts started being interested in this topic; thus, contemporary children's books still produce misogynistic representations (McCabe et al. 2011; Sunderland and McGlashan 2012; Hill and Bartow Jacobs 2019; Lee and Chin 2019; Moya-Guijarro and Martínez Mateo 2022). This is especially harmful in the case of world-renowned authors like Roald Dahl. Although his books were published over 30 years ago, his stories have constantly been revived with successive reeditions, Quentin Blake's illustrations in the 1990s, and numerous adaptations into movies, musicals, or theatre plays. Today, countless read-aloud versions of Dahl's books gather millions of views on YouTube and audio versions read by famous actors and actresses are available online. Roald Dahl is still one of the best-selling and most famous children's books' writers in the world and his books have a considerable influence. The objectives of this study were to review four of Dahl's children's books with a feminist literary critical approach and to analyse his portrayal of female

anthropomorphic characters, extremely common in his stories but neglected by previous studies that only take human characters into consideration. Animal characters significantly affect children's imagination and understanding of the world (Burke and Copenhaver 2004: 213), which is why the depiction of female animal characters is of such importance for the young readers' cognitive development (Peterson and Lach 1990: 193). Apart from being barely visible, female characters in Dahl's books are inferior to male characters, both physically and emotionally. Confined indoors and mostly irrelevant to the plot, they are brutalized and bullied by their male counterparts. Although second-wave feminism and early studies in gender stereotypes in children's books produced changes that can be noticed between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s, Dahl's representation of female animal characters remains simplistic and misogynistic.

Having said that, this does not mean that Roald Dahl's books should be censored, taken out of reading lists, or banned from libraries. Oppenheimer supports "condemning without cancelling"; obviously, "we should not ignore the public ugliness of a public figure", but in this case, "the perpetrator is gone" (2020). Therefore, it is necessary to teach parents, educators, and readers how to identify and interpret misogynistic representations on the one hand, and to encourage new generations of authors and illustrators to bring to life characters of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and social backgrounds, on the other hand. While young readers should be able to read with a critical eye, children's writers should also create non-sexist, gender-fair stories that feature less caricatured characters and more multi-faceted female characters. Such stories must also be recognised by publishing houses, award committees, and school programmes.

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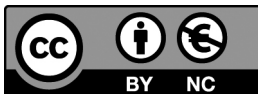
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