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Emphasizing Common Childhood Anxieties in Children's Fantasy: An Analysis of the Illustrations in *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web*

By Ellie Erhart

Introduction: The Importance of Illustration

In children's literature, illustrations are just as important to story as a book's text; illustrations contribute to the overall tone of the story and to the way readers interpret its events.

Karen Feathers and Poonam Arya claim that their observations during a study they conducted support the idea that illustrations in children's books have a significant effect on the reader's experience of the overall story. Their study involved observing six children reading the same verbal story, but with two different illustrated versions, one with significantly fewer illustrations (twelve images versus twenty-eight). Feathers and Arya observed the way the children in the study looked at the illustrations and the differences in the summaries given by children who read different versions of the illustrated book, and found that children who read the version of the book with more illustrations remembered specific details from the story that the other children did not (Feathers and Arya 41). Ultimately, Feathers and Arya concluded that children rely on illustrations during reading to confirm what they read, contextualize the story, and provide new information. According to Feathers and Arya, children use illustrations not just to confirm what they've read, but to provide context and new information as well (41). Feathers' and Arya's observations suggest that illustrations do not serve merely as a supplementary material to help struggling readers or provide atmosphere, but that illustrations are as much a part of the story as the text, capable of hugely affecting a reader's understanding of a story. Given the amount of power illustrations have, it's remarkable that so little research has been done on the role illustrations play in classic and popular children's literature.

Meredith Pike, Martha Barnes, and Roderick Barron expanded the topic of the effect of illustrations on children beyond merely comprehending or remembering the story by exploring the relationship between illustrations and inferences. They conducted a study in which children were given short passages of text, then asked to answer a multiple-choice question requiring them to infer what comes next in the story (Pikes, Barnes, and Barron

247). The children were given either a helpful illustration, an unhelpful illustration, or just text, which served as the control group (247). Pikes, Barnes, and Barron found that younger children performed significantly worse on the questions when given the unhelpful illustrations or the text only, while older children (grade four and above) did not perform differently with only text or helpful illustrations, but made significantly less correct inferences when given the unhelpful illustrations (251). Like Feathers and Arya, Pikes, Barnes, and Barron argue that the results of their study support the idea that “pictures are used in the construction of meaning during reading,” but add that “the findings also suggest that illustrations affect the inference making of younger readers more than older readers” (Pike, Barnes, and Barron 253). Thus, researchers have found that illustrations can affect not just children’s understanding of small details, but also their comprehension of the overall plot of the story, and ability to make inferences. The knowledge that illustrations affect the story on this level, independently of the text, suggests that a book’s success with children is helped or hindered by the book’s illustrations, meaning that books that have remained popular across multiple generations—like *Matilda* by Roald Dahl or *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White—didn’t achieve that feat with the text-based story alone.

Matilda was illustrated by Quentin Blake, and tells the story of its titular character, a young genius named Matilda, who has parents who don’t appreciate her and goes to a school with a villainous principal. Matilda ultimately uses her intelligence to develop telekinetic abilities and take back her school and her life. *Charlotte’s Web*, illustrated by Garth Williams, follows Wilbur, a pig rescued from death by Fern, a young girl. Wilbur befriends Charlotte, a spider who writes messages on her web to stop the farmer from killing Wilbur for meat.

Because the illustrations of both *Matilda* and *Charlotte’s Web* heighten the elements of the narrative that relate most to the anxieties of childhood, such as a lack of autonomy or fear of losing parents, the illustrations contribute to the books’ abilities to remain relatable to children across multiple generations, because, though the specific experiences of childhood may change based on time period, the general struggles and fears associated with it do not. The illustrations in *Matilda* and *Charlotte’s Web* invite readers to use the story to vicariously work through those pressures.

The Power of Fear

The world is new and scary to kids and children especially fear being rejected by their parents; consequently, danger and unsafe situations that work as magnifications of children's natural fears appear often in children's fantasy fiction. *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web* both give the protagonists very high stakes to deal with, but both are careful to employ distancing devices to keep these dark themes from becoming too serious for a child audience. The way the narratives handle danger is reflected in the styles of the illustrations: *Matilda's* illustrations are more humorous and exaggerated, while the illustrations of *Charlotte's Web* are more realistic, reflecting the more serious tone the danger in *Charlotte's Web* is given.

Themes of high stakes and danger are common in children's fantasy, often as dramatized of common childhood fears. In "Roald Dahl and Danger in Children's Literature," Barbara Richter claims that "children will read experimental literature because the experience of childhood is experimental, and sometimes dangerous," citing the overall confusion associated with childhood as the reason books that put protagonists in dangerous situations are appealing to children (Richter 332). According to Richter, children will read fantasy with strange or dangerous situations because they have yet to entirely figure out how the world works, so reality is scarier and more confusing than it would be to an adult (Richter 332).

In "Wish-fulfillment and Subversion: Roald Dahl's Dickensian Fantasy *Matilda*," Dieter Petzold offers a similar explanation for the prevalence of the "neglected-child" fantasy in children's literature, and in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* in particular (Petzold 188). Petzold characterizes stories about neglected children the same way Richter characterizes dangerous children's stories in general: as exaggerations of the scarier elements of childhood. However, since Petzold is focusing on neglect in children's literature, he focuses on a specific childhood fear, the fear of parental abandonment. Petzold claims that stories about neglected children are so popular because the fantasy is rooted in the "universal or near-universal . . . conflict between a child's natural egoism and the demands of society," meaning that virtually all children feel abandoned in some sense, as part of the process of maturing and becoming more expected to fend for themselves (188). This parallels Richter's assertion that virtually all children find life to be strange and potentially dangerous; danger and neglect are both recurring themes because they reflect common childhood anxieties. The incorporation of a feel-

ing of high stakes into a story, done well, echoes children's own experiences trying to figure out the world. *Charlotte's Web* and *Matilda* both give their main characters very high stakes, but *Charlotte's Web* takes a much more serious approach, dealing with the threat of Wilbur's death, while *Matilda* takes a humorous approach, comically inflating the awful natures of Matilda's horrible principal and parents. These approaches are reflected in the styles of the books' illustrations; Williams' illustrations are drawn more realistically and with neater lines than Blake's, visualizing *Charlotte's Web's* more serious approach to danger.

Petzold's explanation for the prevalence of the 'neglected-child fantasy' in children's literature can also apply to the perseverance of another common dangerous situation in literature: the "Cinderella pattern" identified by John Gough in "Rivalry, Rejection, and Recovery: Variations of the Cinderella Story" (100). Gough claims that a lot of the traditional components of *Cinderella*, such as the magic, the ball, or even the stepsisters, are not necessary in order for a story to be considered a *Cinderella* story. What is necessary, according to Gough, is "rejection by family, testing of character, and eventual restoration of family," making details like the prince, stepsisters, or magic just that—small details that are not at the core of the story or its appeal (103). Viewing *Cinderella* from the perspective of Gough's pattern explains how both the story itself and stories with its general structure have managed to stay popular, as Gough's general outlines of the pattern focuses on issues that are very close to being universal for children. The central issue of a story following the Cinderella pattern is the relationship with one's parents or parental figures, which is a type of relationship virtually all children have in their lives, regardless of the era in which they grew up.

Matilda immediately establishes its protagonist as a Cinderella figure. The text of the story begins with a description of how most parents adore their children regardless of whether or not their child is "the most disgusting little blister you could ever imagine," then informs the reader that Matilda's parents actually hate her, despite the fact that she is brilliant (Dahl 3). Beginning the text of the story with a description of the unconditional love of many parent-child relationships makes it immediately accessible to the young reader, as it begins by exploring a type of relationship with which most children are familiar. This beginning also serves to emphasize how much of a Cinderella figure Matilda is, by contrasting the idea of unconditional love with the descriptions of Matilda's own comically horrible parents.

However, the visual component of the story begins not with descriptions of other children, but with an image of Matilda herself, staring calmly and intelligently at the reader, looking overly small with a book as large as herself on her lap; a figure with whom the reader can identify.



The Reader of Books

Fig. 1. (Dahl 3)

Matilda is positioned above the title of the first chapter, “The Reader of Books,” reinforcing her as an ally of the reader, who, at the moment they view the illustration, is also a young person reading a book (figure 1). Matilda stares back, book in hand, mirroring the reader. This positive image of Matilda immediately makes her relatable to the reader, which is vital to a story that exaggerates children’s fears of parental rejection to the point that they become comically unrealistic. She’s drawn in Blake’s usual gestural style, which simplifies characters, and uses a few key features to make them obvious to the reader. Matilda’s key identifying features are her long hair, small figure, book, and inquisitive expression. This nonspecific depiction furthers Matilda’s relatability. All Matilda’s physical features—with the exception of her coloring and the length of her hair—are very general traits that the reader can easily project themselves onto. Children’s ability to identify with the protagonist allows the story to act as a fantastical representation of their own concerns, making the pattern relatable to children across different time periods. This relatability is central to why the Cinderella pattern works.

In the middle portion of the Cinderella pattern, there is “judgement and trial, some-

times exemplified by the period of hard, undeserved work” for the protagonist, resulting in a period of growth (Gough 102). This aspect of the pattern may have been popular for the same reasons as what Petzold refers to as the ‘neglected-child fantasy.’ As children start having to deal with more expectations, they relate to the image of the poor Cinderella figure going through a period of undeserved struggle. Dahl establishes Trunchbull, the school’s principal, as the true villain, with her introduction marking the beginning of Matilda’s period of struggle. Furthermore, Trunchbull’s defeat signifies the true end of the story; Matilda also escapes from her parents, but that happens in the last several pages, almost as an afterthought.

While the textual story of *Matilda* establishes Trunchbull as the main villain through structure, the visual story does it through the use of visual tropes. Blake introduces the Trunchbull as a permanently angry, heavily shadowed figure—imagery generally associated with evil and danger.



Fig. 2 (Dahl 80)

The illustration in figure 2 is uncharacteristically dark; Blake’s animated lines are obscured with dark smudges of ink, giving Trunchbull the appearance of emerging from a black void. The tone of the illustration alone is enough to signal to the reader that Matilda’s trial period has begun.

Matilda's trial period is characterized by overly horrible villains and an exaggerated amount of danger. In "'We Have a Great Task Ahead of Us!': Child-Hate in Roald Dahl's *The Witches*," James Curtis, like Richter, analyzes the prevalence of dangerous situations in Dahl's work, except he examines *The Witches*, and focuses on a specific type of dangerous situation: the adult hatred of children, and its role in children's literature. Curtis argues that Dahl's descriptions of the unrealistically extreme child-hate of the witch characters serves as an illustration of the actual danger of abuse by which children have always been threatened. Like Richter and Petzold, Curtis claims that dangerous situations in children's literature are a reflection of actual realities of childhood, and argues that an adult disdain for childhood may be the cause of "the more problematic notions of child-protection that lie at the heart of the ambivalent treatment of childhood in many children's texts" (Curtis 175-176). Curtis explains that "Dahl's absurd caricatures of his witch characters" allows Dahl to alleviate the seriousness of witches' hatred of children (Curtis 175).

Dahl balances dark events of the narrative created by amplifications of potentially serious themes by balancing them with a more playful, comic tone. Dahl's ability to find the right balance between emphasizing common childhood themes enough to give his books a universal appeal and avoiding an alienating melodrama is rooted in his use of humor. Petzold claims the light tone of Dahl's stories "serves as a distancing device," reminding the reader that this is merely a wish-fulfilling fantasy (192). This level of self-awareness in Dahl's presentation of his stories allows him his exaggerations, as the reader is aware that the narrative isn't trying to be serious or realistic. Blake's gestural illustrations are a visual version of what Dahl does with his storytelling—the quick lines and cartoon-ish look of the characters remind the reader that the story is not meant to be taken too seriously. Blake also depicts Matilda in a nonspecific way that makes her and her struggle easily relatable to readers. Ultimately, *Matilda* has stayed popular in part because its ability to strike a balance between serious themes that dramatize childhood fears of parental neglect, and tongue-in-cheek humor that keeps the tone of the book from becoming too dark. This effect is mirrored in the book's illustrations.

Charlotte's Web handles danger differently—the danger presented in *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur's potential death, is never played for laughs. This tone is reflected in the illustrations,

which are more realistic than Blake's gestural caricatures. The more realistic style means that the characters in *Charlotte's Web* are drawn with more detail than those in *Matilda*. Of course, more detail doesn't necessarily mean a drawing is better; it's a stylistic choice with pros and cons. For instance, less detailed illustrations, like Blake's, allow the reader to more readily identify with the character. However, in *Charlotte's Web*, this isn't an issue because of the book's extensive use of animal characters.

In "What Children's Literature Classics Do Children Really Enjoy?", a study surveying children on why they enjoy the classic books they do, Patricia Wilson and Richard Abrahamson found that children specifically enjoyed *Charlotte's Web* because of "the appeal of specific animal characters" (Wilson and Abrahamson 410). Animal characters exist independently of any sort of human background, so can serve as blank slates onto which children can project.



Fig. 3 (White 29)

The use of animal characters in *Charlotte's Web* achieves the same relatable effect Blake does with his simple, gestural drawings without forcing Williams to compromise his realism. The animal characters, like all the characters of *Charlotte's Web*, are drawn realistically, but the animals don't have any specific human details to them other than their facial expressions (fig.

3). This lack of specific human detail allows the viewer to project themselves onto the animal characters the same way Blake's general, less detailed caricatures allow viewers to project themselves onto the characters in *Matilda*.

The use of animal characters has another benefit as well: like Dahl's humor, animal characters can serve as a buffer between the reader and the story. The fact that the drama of the story is primarily happening to animals, rather than people, can distance the reader from the darker themes of story. In "Animals as People in Children's Literature," Carolyn Bruke and Joby Copenhaver discuss the history of anthropomorphism in children's literature, and claim that animal characters "provide for children. . . a buffered engagement with a message of cultural significance" (210). This provides another explanation for the popularity of animal characters with child readers—the fact that the story isn't happening to humans serves as constant reminder that, though children may identify with the characters, the story isn't taking place in the reader's world. The distancing effect created by animal characters allows White to discuss serious issues of life and death the same way the distance created by Dahl's humor allows him to explore themes of parental neglect. Distancing devices in the writing and illustrations stop the tone from becoming too dark for a child audience, while Dahl's use of dark, virtually universal fears make the books relatable to children regardless of time period.

A Divide Between Children and Adults

Children's stories often establish a divide between the adult and child characters. Emphasizing the more childlike qualities of a young protagonist encourages children to identify with the character. Furthermore, because children naturally feel a lack of autonomy over their lives, stories that portray the protagonists as somehow more knowledgeable or powerful than adult characters can offer readers a way to vicariously experience the power and control that they crave. Fern, from *Charlotte's Web*, and Matilda are both examples of this; Fern can speak to the animals while the adults can't, and Matilda has her ability to move things with her eyes. The illustrations in the both books reinforce the characters' abilities and the divide between children and adults.

In Susan Scheftel's analysis of Beatrix Potter's work, "The Child's Child: Theory of

Mind in the Works of Beatrix Potter,” Scheftel claims that part of what made the Potter’s books succeed was their awareness of the difference between adults and children. Beatrix Potter’s stories fit the pattern of popular children’s books that focus on the internal experience a child has of growing up, or, as Scheftel calls it, the “child’s child,” childhood as experienced by children (161). Scheftel claims Potter’s work shows an understanding of the ‘child’s child’ in the way her book addresses the divide between children and adults. The tone of the narrative is calming without seeming condescending and “testifies to the fundamental principle of adult/child relationships,” the awareness and respect for the smallness of children (163).

Matilda and *Charlotte’s Web* also show an awareness for children’s smallness, as both books immediately establish their protagonists as being physically tiny, a trait they likely have in common with the book’s young audience. *Charlotte’s Web* does this through words first, informing the reader that Wilbur is going to be killed because he’s a runt, and then emphasizes that idea with an illustration of Fern feeding Wilbur through a bottle (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 (White 4)

The image of Wilbur, tiny, with legs that seem far too small to support his round body, reinforces Wilbur’s smallness and vulnerability. Williams presents the reader with peaceful image of Fern caring for tiny Wilbur that creates the same soothing quality Scheftel identifies in Potter’s work. *Matilda* also makes the main character’s smallness one of her

defining traits, but does so entirely through illustrations.



Fig. 5 (Dahl 8)

Blake consistently depicts Matilda as ridiculously tiny, dwarfed by the books she reads, the adult characters, and basically everything in the story other than her fellow children (fig. 5). Matilda and Wilbur are both introduced to the reader as tiny but inquisitive; Wilbur is very alert for an infant, looking directly at Fern, and Matilda's gaze is always focused. The protagonists are both small and curious about the world around them, as children are.

In "Wish-fulfillment and Subversion: Roald Dahl's Dickensian Fantasy *Matilda*," Dieter Petzold notes that Dahl's books, like Potter's, address the divide between adults and children. Petzold argues that the reason Dahl's books are often loved by children but viewed skeptically by adults is because of the specific way Dahl handles that adult/child divide, which Petzold describes as "radical siding with children against adults" (185). Petzold claims that Dahl's books indulge "fantasies of childhood omnipotence" by featuring child characters who are somehow more knowledgeable or powerful than the adults around them; who are special in some way (191). This easily applies to Matilda, who is shown both in the writing and in the illustrations to have an ability: the power to move objects by staring at them intensely. The illustrations reinforce the physical feeling of her telekinesis, which Dahl describes as "a kind of electricity" Matilda feels in her eyes (Dahl 159-160).



Fig. 6 (Dahl 169)

Blake exaggerates the intensity of Matilda's gaze while she's attempting to use her power, underscoring the amount of effort she's putting into it and reminding the reader of the physical feeling of Matilda's ability. As demonstrated by figure 6, the only unusual quality Matilda has when she's using her telekinesis is the intensity of her focus, which makes the extraordinary power more relatable to the ordinary reader.

In *Charlotte's Web*, Fern has a much quieter super power, but it's there nonetheless: Fern is the only human character in the story who can understand what the animals are saying. The narrative treats this quality as a fact of life rather than a power, but Fern's ability still serves as a massive divide between her and the rest of the human characters, particularly the adults who initially plan on killing Wilbur. Though not as blatantly wish-fulfilling as *Matilda*, *Charlotte's Web* gives Fern access to an entire secret world that only she can understand, populated by interesting characters and adventures. This special access to the animal world qualifies Fern's situation as one of the "fantasies of childhood omnipotence" that Petzold describes (191). The fact that Fern generally observes the world of the animals, rather than participating, only further increases the reader's ability to vicariously experience Fern's power, because the reader is an observer as well.

Fern's ability is reinforced by Williams' illustrations, which place Fern in the background of scenes between the animals.



Fig. 7 (White 46)

The choice to put Fern in the drawing as an observer serves as a visual reminder of Fern's presence on the peripheral of the animal world, and thus as a reminder that she can see what the adults can't. In the illustration in figure 7, the textual story never explicitly states that Fern is present for this scene, so this is an example of the power illustrations can have to provide a reader with new information. Williams' decision to put Fern in this scene emphasizes her fantasy-fulfilling role in the story, and demonstrates that illustrations have power over the overall content of a story.

In "Children's Fantasy Literature: Toward an Anatomy," David Gooderman elaborates on the idea of stories relating to children's wishes and experiences by breaking children's fantasy down into several different types that correspond to periods of children's emotional growth, which are childhood experiences that are common across multiple generations of children. One type of children's fantasy Gooderman discusses is specifically tied to children's interest in their inability to control their lives, offering a potential explanation for the appeal of the fantasy of childhood omnipotence in children's literature. This type of fantasy, which Gooderman names the "fantasy of control," is appealing to children because it uses fantastical elements to simulate the "feeling of grasp or loss of control" (178). Petzold's description

of the wish-fulfillment fantasy of omnipotence fits with Gooderman's definition. Children commonly experience a lack of autonomy over their lives, so Fern and Matilda's abilities, which give them a measure of control or knowledge that most children don't have, are appealing.

Endings in Children's Fantasy

Children's fantasy fiction often makes a point to reassure the reader that all the conflict is resolved by taking on a calm, comforting tone or including information that reinforces the idea that the protagonists are indeed living 'happily ever after' at the conclusion of the story. Both *Matilda* and *Charlotte's web* do this by establishing that the characters are fully out of their difficult situations and presenting the reader with final illustrations that present images of peace and stability.

The final passages of a children's book are crucial moments in the story; in children's literature, endings are often used to reassure the young reader that the protagonists are safe. In "All is Well: The Epilogue in Children's Fantasy Fiction," Michael Cadden claims that epilogues or epilogue-like endings are especially prevalent in children's books because authors feel the need to comfort children. However, Cadden is careful to point out that the comforting nature of epilogues may be based on the belief of children's authors that children need to be comforted rather than reflecting the needs of actual readers (Cadden 349). Scheftel agrees that comfort is a common element in popular children's book, but disagrees on the reason why, stating that the comforting tone of Beatrix Potter's work is a large part of its appeal. Scheftel argues that Potter's ability to use a tone that is comforting in its awareness of the smallness of children shows her understanding of "childhood as experienced by children themselves," implying that it is the children, not the authors, who are creating a demand for comfort in their books (Scheftel 161). However, both Cadden and Scheftel seem to agree that a defining and consistent characteristic of children's fantasy is the neatness of its endings. *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web* exemplify this; both stories end not only with neat textual endings, but with neat visual endings as well. The final illustrations of the stories each feature the protagonist content and happy, with balanced compositions that make the drawings seem motionless, giving them a comforting feeling of finality and stability.

In “Magic Abjured: Closure in Children’s Fantasy Fiction,” Sarah Gilead examines a specific kind of children’s fantasy ending, return-to-reality. She classifies return-to-reality endings into several types, only one of which is based on the need to comfort. Gilead defines return-to-reality endings as endings in which the departure of the fantastical elements of the stories signify its end: the child goes back to the real world, the magical being leaves, or the magical powers stop working. Return-to-reality endings can, like the distancing devices *Charlotte’s Web* and *Matilda* use to lighten the tone of their themes of danger, have the effect of safely removing the reader from the dangers of the fantasy world. However, return-to-reality endings can also reflect the growth of the protagonist, and represent a loss of childhood. The darkest type of return-to-reality ending reflects a loss of childhood, and is anything but comforting. Gilead explains that, in these endings, the reader and the protagonist see the loss of the fantastical elements of the story “as a loss, not as a restoration,” resulting in a discomforting feeling of being forced from the childhood world of magic back into adult reality (Gilead 287). Gilead also argues that some return-to-reality endings attempt to “suggest the successful maturation of the child protagonist,” implying that the fantasy world was a tool for the child protagonist to use to mature (Gilead 283).

Though the types of ‘return-to-reality’ endings Gilead identifies may not all be intended to comfort the reader, they do all contain themes of growing up. For instance, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy’s return home means that she “is freed from enslavement both to reality and to fantasy,” meaning that she has matured and figured out what virtually all children must: how to reconcile reality with fantasy (Gilead 280). *Matilda* also contains a return-to-reality ending, with Matilda announcing in the last chapter that she can no longer move things with her mind, removing the main fantastic element of the story. The characters decide that Matilda no longer needs her power now that she’s in a better situation where she’s actually being intellectually challenged, which makes the growing-up symbolism very obvious for the reader. Matilda relies less on fantasy now that she’s able to explore and learn in the reality she has. Matilda’s powers were a tool for her to use to grow; like Dorothy, her task was to figure out how to use the fantastic elements of her story to “make reality endurable” (Gilead 280). The illustration for the passage in which Matilda discusses her loss of power emphasizes this sentiment, with Matilda and Miss Honey sitting at a round table with

a pleasant, normal kitchen visible in the background (fig. 8).



Fig. 8 (Dahl 224)

This deviates from the rest of the illustrations in the story in its inclusion of a relatively detailed background. Miss Honey's kitchen is still drawn in Blake's gestural style, but with more careful attention to detail than most of his backgrounds; every individual mug is visible, and the reader is given an idea of the decorated plates on top of the cabinet, of how the picture hanging on the wall fits in its frame . . . all small, ordinary, pleasant details that emphasize the normalcy of the scene. The characters themselves look content, unconcerned by the loss of Matilda's power, underscoring the implications in the text that the fantastical elements of the story were merely tools for Matilda to get to this point.

The epilogue-like endings that Cadden argues exist to comfort the reader can also serve a similar function to Gilead's "return-to-reality closure" (277). Cadden claims that a final word from the narrator that focuses on events many years after the story's conclusion "distances the reader from the story" in addition to achieving its primary goal of providing emotional reassurance (345). Distancing the reader from the events of the story may be just as much a reason for an epilogue of children's fantasy story as emotional reassurance, as any device that distances readers from the story's fantastical elements can work as a buffer between the child and the fantasy. These, like White's use of animal characters or Dahl's use of humor, gives the fantasy space to exaggerate any dark or strange elements without overly

affecting the child. Stories with epilogues end with both a feeling of reassurance and comfort and a sense of detachment, which may allow the stories to benefit from the impact created by exploring more intense themes (which are often more universal) without losing the young audience.

Though *Charlotte's Web* does not contain an epilogue, it certainly contains an epilogue-like ending that softens the blow of Charlotte's death: three of Charlotte's children remain with Wilbur, and Charlotte's legacy continues. The visual component of the story has an ending that echoes the textual one, with an epilogue-like final drawing of Wilbur looking up at Charlotte's children (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 (White 181)

The drawing serves the same purpose as an epilogue-like ending: to reassure the reader that all is well, and give the story a sense of finality. Williams' final illustration for the story, shown in figure 10, echoes an earlier illustration in *Charlotte's Web*, a drawing of when Wilbur first meets Charlotte.



Fig. 10 (White 36)

Both illustrations depict Wilbur looking up at the door frame from the view of the inside of the barn, but everything about the ending illustration gives it a feeling of stability that's especially evident when contrasted with figure 10. The illustration of the introduction between the two characters is about discovery, with only the left of the doorframe visible, and Wilbur on his hind legs beneath it (fig. 10). Both Wilbur and the overall composition of the illustration are off-balance and energetic, with the large, light space opening up to the right of the doorframe, giving the illustration a feeling of openness that beckons the viewer to find out more. The epilogue-like illustration shown in figure 9, the barn door serves as a solid frame for the illustration, with Wilbur centered beneath it, firmly planted on the ground. The dark frame formed by the barn creates a visual version of the comforting sense of detachment an epilogue can have. The dark border serves as a barrier around the illustration, sectioning it off from the text and reader, like the curtains closing after a show or the screen fading to black at the end of a movie. Everything is balanced and stable, giving the image a feeling of permanence—a visual reassurance to the reader that this newfound peace is here to stay. Like the illustration towards the end of *Matilda* shown in figure 8, the final illustration of *Charlotte's Web* underscores the neatness of the story's ending, providing comforting reassurance to children that the story is indeed over.

Conclusion

Charlotte's Web and *Matilda* have remained relevant to multiple generations of children because they address common childhood anxieties, and the successful ways each individual book chooses to address these anxieties is magnified by the illustrations. Blake's illustrations are loose and gestural, with exaggerated characters, a style that underscores the humorous, hyperbolic nature of Dahl's writing. Similarly, Williams' illustrations parallel the tone of *Charlotte's Web*; they're more realistic, with finer, less extreme details.

These styles emphasize the way the two stories handle danger, a common theme in children's literature because of its ability to serve as a magnification of virtually universal childhood fears and confusions, such as neglect, which is addressed in *Matilda*, and a fear of mortality, which is magnified into poor Wilbur's plight in *Charlotte's Web*. Both stories employ distancing devices to create a buffer between young, potentially sensitive readers and the darker themes: Dahl lightens the tone with his humor, and White sets the story in the world of animals, which is removed from the reader's own reality. Blake's caricatures reflect Dahl's humorous tone, and Williams' realistic depictions of animal characters serve as a constant reminder to readers that the danger is separate from their own world.

The themes of common childhood experiences in the illustrations of *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web* extend beyond the situations and overall tone of the stories to the illustrators' depictions of the protagonists. Blake and Williams emphasize the childlike qualities of their books' protagonists, establishing the protagonists as allies of the child readers. Blake and Williams also emphasize the wish-fulfilling powers of Fern and Matilda, which appeal to children because super powers represent a feeling of being knowledgeable and in control, which provides an escape of the lack of autonomy that is a common aspect of childhood.

In addition to enhancing the tone of the books and depicting the characters in a way that allows children to easily relate to them, the illustrations of *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web* also provide reassurance to the reader at the end of the story. The visual stories of both book end with calm illustrations that emphasize the reassuring, final nature of the endings in the texts.

The narratives of *Matilda* and *Charlotte's Web* exaggerate virtually timeless childhood fears, wishes, and experiences. The illustrations not only demonstrate this effect, but further

it by essentially curating the reader's experience with the narrative. Blake and Williams create visual worlds uniquely parallel to the specific tone of each book, remind readers of the story's more relatable elements, and establish a visual relationship between the reader and characters that alters the way the readers view the characters throughout the text. The end result is a timeless story rooted in common childhood anxieties and created by an interdependence between text and illustration.

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