

# RETHINKING HUMAN/NONHUMAN HIERARCHY

## Food in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Xinyue Yuan  
Shanghai Jiao Tong University  
Xinyue418@sjtu.edu.cn

### Abstract

Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* foregrounds an intriguing relation between humans and food. The agency of food is demonstrated in threefold facets. Prominently, it controls people by occupying their desires. Meanwhile, food cravings, as rooted in cultural metanarrative, are evoked and consistently reinforced by modern commercial civilization. Equally, food is sophisticatedly embedded in the hierarchical societal system and spontaneously composes a social language that actively intervenes in the identity formation and self-perception of humans as social beings. Notably, the agency of enchanted food aligns with the familiar moral dichotomy of "good" versus "bad" children. Food operates as a disciplinary agent that rewards virtue and punishes vice, guiding children's behavior through its own metaphoric authority. The narrative appeals to an anti-traditional aesthetics which takes pleasure in a departure from anthropocentric values. Therefore, it invites readers to rethink their relationships with food and further implies a new ecology of mutual existence between humans and the nonhuman world.

### Keywords

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, children's literature, food, nonhuman narrative, Roald Dahl

### About the Author

Xinyue Yuan is doctoral candidate at School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. Her research interests include English literature, narratology, and children's literature.

## INTRODUCTION

In *Carnal Appetites*, Elspeth Probyn poses fundamental questions about the relationship between food and identity: “Do we eat what we are, or are we what we eat? Do we eat or are we eaten? In less cryptic terms, in eating, do we confirm our identities, or are our identities reforged, and refracted by what and how we eat?” (11). Probyn’s series of questions challenges the long-standing view held ever since the Enlightenment, which regards humans as the dominators of the world and intrinsically superior to nonhumans. Such a counterintuitive and somewhat uncomfortable idea is witnessed in British children’s writer Roald Dahl’s most well-known novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Dahl’s novel features a poor boy named Charlie Bucket who lives in a world where people are all fascinated with chocolate bars produced by the mysterious Wonka factory. When five golden tickets are hidden within Wonka bars, the novel unfolds as a surreal and metaphorical adventure, following Charlie and four other children on their factory tour.

Despite their widespread popularity, Dahl’s works face considerable scholarly critique, largely owing to persistent claims that they promote problematic ideologies and transgress established norms for children’s literature.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the narrative in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is uncanny, spectacularized, and estranged from common assumptions. However, despite its bewildering textual manifestation of an incredible chocolate-fetish, the motif of food and eating is foregrounded by and structures the storytelling. This, as I shall argue, should warrant critical attention within a framework of nonhuman philosophies.

Previous scholarship examines the characters’ obsessive consumption and Willy Wonka’s exercise of power within the narrative. Analyses explore the link between the children’s uncontrolled desires and Lacanian theories of the superego, enjoyment, and desire, as well as the influence of consumerism (Rudd, “Willy Wonka” 125–142). Wonka’s factory has further been read as an overtly idealized representation of imperialist enslavement activities (Bradford 198; Keyser 405). Robert M. Kachur points out that food and Judeo-Christian tradition are intertwined “[b]ecause the world Dahl creates is a postlapsarian one, however, the characters’ relationships to food are disordered from the start” (224). Recognizing food’s role in conveying cultural memory and metaphor, this paper seeks to further interpret Dahl’s “sadistic aesthetic” (Keyser 404) in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The novel envisages a somewhat uncomfortable scenario where food is empowered while humans are irrational and vulnerable. Rather than positioning food as a passive object of human control, Dahl’s story features a playful reversal of the human/food hierarchy. By this token, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* draws our attention to human existence in the more-than-human world. It delves into the captivating realm where the agency of nonhuman entities, notably food, takes center stage.

This reading prompts a question that resonates with Probyn's inquiries: who is the true consumer? Specifically, is food merely a substance for human use, or do the very definitions of "humanity" emerge dynamically through our entanglement with the material world around us?

### NONHUMAN, FOOD, AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

For all its pervasive presence, the discourse on nonhuman elements was curiously underexplored within mainstream academic scholarship. The topic of nonhuman draws critical awareness only in recent years, under the impact of ANT theory, animal studies, new materialism, and the other intellectual trends generating the nonhuman turn in social science and humanities. Indeed, as Biwu Shang's insightful observation states: "it is not only possible for narrative works to represent the non-human experience but also urgent for critics to examine their non-human agents" ("Approaching the World" 35). Adopting the perspective of Latour's ANT theory, humankind is not necessarily the only actant but instead coexists within a constantly shifting network of relationships. Latour aptly indicates that previous social studies have ignored objects, which are "nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt. They exist, naturally, but they are never given a thought, a social thought" (73). Despite the belief that objects may embody specific metaphorical meanings, they remain marginalized in mainstream discourse "like humble servants... As if a damning curse had been cast unto things, they remain asleep like the servants of some enchanted castle" (73).

As Bruce Clarke notes, "[t]he conceptual destination of Latour's project has always been *posthumanist*, in that it aims to displace the reigning humanist biases of both natural science and sociology in favor of symmetrical relations between human and nonhuman—in this instance, microbial—actors" (143–44). This observation holds true not only in social studies but also in literary criticism, where anthropocentric bias has long prevailed. On this issue, Biwu Shang advocates for a theory of nonhuman narrative in his 2022 essay and expounds on its definition, types, and functions. Shang argues that nonhuman narratives step beyond the anthropocentric realm as framed by narratologists like Roland Barthes and Monika Fludernik, offering experientiality, embracing multiple species, and reevaluating human-nonhuman relationships. Due to its fictionality, literature can experiment with "a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman" (Bennett 224).

Despite often being overlooked by the literary community, children's stories are fascinated with other-than-human characters with supernatural features, diverging from everyday reality. In this regard, they might be surprisingly radical. The affinity of children's novels with nonhuman beings is recognized, as seen in Brian Boyd's concept of "the pleasures of the as if" (225) and Zoe Jaques's idea of "a 'natural' pairing" (6). In her 2016 essay, Maria Nikolajeva provides cognitive accounts for the prevalence of nonhumans in children's literature, which are "rare in literature targeting mature audiences. Among other things, as cognitive criticism maintains, anthropomorphizing is the learning brain's strategy to make sense of the world" (135). Among all the nonhuman entities, regrettably, food has been receiving relatively less attention. As observed by Allison James, Anne Trine Kjørholt, and Vebjørn Tingstad, food holds significance beyond bodily nourishment, as it is deeply embedded in broader social, political, and economic structures (3). Food, as a vital resource, not only offers visceral pleasures and visual metaphors, but also provides inquiry into the very meaning of being human.

With all this in mind, a few points need further addressing. Firstly, within the intellectual trends of the nonhuman turn, it is necessary to consider children's literature as important research material, which would hopefully bring about new perspectives to both areas. Notably, although children's literature cannot liberate itself from adult ideologies, it inherently features reflexivity and escapism, serving as an opposition to and examination of public discourse. Children's literature delights in disarming mainstream ideological assumptions, which is, if I may say, a mere sheltering prerogative enjoyed by it. Moreover, many similarities have been noted to be shared by children and nonhumans. Both are assumed to be *less human*, given the reverence for impeccable humanity, mature cognitive ability, and strong rationality. In light of this, nonhuman elements in children's literature effectively access the child image that is framed socially, culturally, and ideologically. In the novel, chocolate, as an icon evoking cultural memories of childhood, notably addresses irrationality, gluttony, child obesity, parenting, and the dichotomy of innocent kids/fallen kids under adult moral didacticism. The narrative proposes a striking reversal: rather than freely choosing and consuming food, humans themselves become edible, subject to the agency of food, driven, controlled, identified, and ultimately transformed by it. Intriguingly, humans are entangled in a network composed of nonhuman entities, intertwining with their very being. And therein lies the reflective essence of this novel.

## CHOCOLATE AND HUMAN DESIRES

Do humans consume food, or does food, in turn, control people through their desire to possess it? Dahl's novel repeatedly raises this paradox, leaning toward the latter. One explanation for such desire is material insufficiency. The Buckets suffer from severe poverty and hunger, with the family preoccupied only with staying warm and finding enough to eat. Despite this, they save up to buy Charlie a birthday chocolate bar, his most longed-for treat. He treasures it deeply, savoring it in small bites to prolong the pleasure (Dahl 8–9). David Rudd aptly suggests that the choice of Charlie's surname, "Bucket," is strategic—not of psychological emptiness, but of a deep material yearning filled only by familial love ("Willy Wonka" 134). To take "Bucket" literally, it refers to a desperate want on a material level. The family's socioeconomic struggle highlights this futility, especially as Charlie's father's hard work fails to improve their condition. This makes Charlie's rare encounters with chocolate all the more meaningful. Against his bland, meager diet, the rich, sugary treat becomes an irresistible indulgence—both a symbol of visceral satisfaction and a fleeting escape from deprivation.

However, in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, insufficiency is definitely not the sole reason for chocolate cravings. The other four kids invited to Wonka's factory who come from upper-middle-class families exhibit an even more irrational obsession with chocolate than poor Charlie. While Charlie's craving stems from material deprivation, the others are driven by a compulsive, almost pathological desire for sweetness. In Dahl's novel, food, which is specifically incarnated as Wonka's candy bars, evokes a strangely universal fascination. People seem to be in an incredibly sick ecstasy with consuming chocolate bars. The fetish of the chocolate produced by the Wonka factory has become a collective unconscious behavior present in all social classes in the novel, as witnessed in the core event of golden tickets. For the characters, Wonka's factory is almost heavenly, a place where food is unlimited. Therefore, once the news of golden tickets is announced, it quickly makes headlines and captures the attention of people all over the world. The theme of food and consuming is central to this narrative—people are captivated, enticed, punished, and rewarded by food. This unfamiliar storytelling thus hints at a new ethics between human beings and what they eat. Consciously or not, food emerges as characters' foremost desire.

Truly, early in the biblical story that has become an archetypal narrative, food, the forbidden apple, has appeared as an irresistible seduction to human beings. Although it is strictly prohibited, Adam and Eve succumb to the irresistible allure of the fruit from the tree, leading to their subsequent exile from the Garden of Eden. Undoubtedly, the story alludes to and exaggerates the meta-narrative that the forbidden apple allures Eve. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum indicate the

overarching effects of metanarratives: “Such traditional materials... come with predetermined horizons of expectation and with their values and ideas about the world already legitimized” (6). In this light, Kachur further interprets *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* through the lens of a biblical metanarrative, proposing that candy functions as a symbolic vehicle through which children’s desires are aligned with the grand arc of creation, paradise, fall, and eventual redemption (222). In the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, the symbolic presence of the forbidden apple serves as a potent metaphor. Food is conceptually woven into a cultural symbol, representing humanity’s innate vulnerabilities and weaknesses when confronting internal impulses. It embodies carnal sensations and visceral satisfaction, constantly alluding to one’s fragile sanity. So, even though eating has been taken for granted as a daily activity of human beings, its overarching power is evident as it centralizes in and structures people’s desiring psyche.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 marks the onset of modern industrialization and commodity spectacle. Published a century later, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* obviously is written in the context of the burgeoning consumer society of its time. Contemporary society sees food cravings intensified and validated by a pervasive and sophisticated commercial culture. According to the narrative, the entire society revels in the joy of consuming and owning candies. People find themselves enslaved by sweetness, irresistibly drawn to the enticing displays in shop windows, pervasive advertisements, and engaging television programs. Charlie, for example, often gazes longingly at chocolate “piled up high in the shop windows,” and watches other children munching them greedily, which to him is “*pure torture*” (Dahl 8). The yearning for eating, and for eating more, becomes a collective hysteria and a global carnival participated by the whole society. Jane Suzanne Carroll elaborates that the term “fetish” originally denotes a distorted attachment to objects. Marx re-terms it within the context of consumer culture by coining the term “commodity fetishism,” which encompasses both the material properties of human labor and the societal properties of objects (qtd. in Carroll 92). Commodities are worshipped, with people bowing down to their mysterious aura. Slavoj Žižek concisely summarizes that commodity fetishism refers to the belief in objects possessing intrinsic metaphysical power (qtd. in Carroll 92). Post-humanist perspectives offer new interpretations of it. The morbid obsession with objects is, explicitly enough, the dominating force of objects over humans. Objects are not inertia; instead, they are proactive actors. “Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour 44). Simply, food not only is centralized in people’s desiring psyche, but also instructs people on what they want, and how they want it through the penetrating consumer culture. Overwhelmed by the abundance, modern people live in the siege of economy, politics, and cultures of eating.

Indeed, the impact of food cannot be disregarded with the twin foci in cultural psyche and modern consumption practices. In Dahl's novel, the seemingly deliberate and compelling setting—everyone is fascinated with chocolate—creates a narrative that seems unbelievable. This narrative setting, as argued by some critics, evokes a sense of discomfort and strangeness. Dahl's writing features multiple aspects of human weakness, vulnerability, and irrationality. Characters in the novel, both children and adults, fail to resist the spell that Wonka's candy bars have cast on them. The unease imposed by the storytelling lies in people's false assumptions about human-nonhuman relations. Specifically, the very truth is that, despite how uncanny it might sound, individuals cannot take the full responsibility for their behaviors, especially regarding issues of pleasure, fear and desires, as they are "conglomerate[s] of many surprising sets of agencies" (Latour 44). Food's agency is evident in how it drives people to act, preoccupies them, and fulfills their desire structure. The narrative suggests an interdependent network where humans and nonhuman entities are tightly entangled with each other, arguing for a distributed agency wherein actions cannot be fully accounted for human impetus alone.

#### FOOD AS A SOCIAL LANGUAGE

Another issue addressed in the novel fundamentally concerns the very existence of humans as social beings. Yet it begins with a rather simple question: how are characters identified in the fiction? As a story intended for children, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* portrays a fictional social order that seems simplistic and primitive—characters' status is defined by their access to food, among which chocolate undoubtedly comes at the top of the list. While the Buckets are still struggling to purchase one bar of chocolate, the Indian Prince, in Grandpa Joe's story, is said to own "a colossal palace entirely out of chocolate" (Dahl 15). In essence, social hierarchy in this fantasy is determined by one's chocolate consumption, making the legendary chocolatier, Willy Wonka, the most influential figure. The ostensibly straightforward storytelling brings about a new perspective to rethink the default assumption of human identity. A truth implied in the story is that human identity, the actual fact of being, is not inherent, fixed, or self-reflexive. Instead, we need vibrant substances to mediate our existence.

Although they cannot articulate themselves, substances are omnipresent. Wonka's chocolate bars, on the one hand, have been imprinted with properties of societal mechanisms ever since it was collected, produced, and circulated in society. On the other hand, humans, in turn, use these internal mechanisms to perceive,

orient, and construct themselves, whether consciously or not. Indeed, when we talk about a chocolate bar, we cannot ignore its underlying storylines of who produces, who sells, who consumes, and who profits. In this sense, the event that the five kids enter Wonka's chocolate factory and witness what happens inside the giant candy-producing machine helps to unveil the hidden story. Wonka's chocolate is well-known all over the world, but nobody knows who actually produces it—until the children meet the workers. The Oompa-Loompas, described as “no larger than medium-sized dolls,” originally found by Wonka in “the very deepest and darkest part of the African jungle” where they were “practically starving to death.” According to Wonka, their dream food was the cacao bean, which they could not obtain in the jungle. In exchange for a steady supply of their dream food, he brought the entire tribe to work in his factory (Dahl 72-5).

The labor line in Wonka's chocolate factory metaphorically reminds readers of colonialism, which has also notoriously drawn criticism. If we temporarily set aside the heated debate around hidden ideologies, we will discover another important fact that the novel foregrounds. Indeed, it is natural to associate this with the rise and development of chocolate, tea, coffee, and sugar. Sidney W. Mintz suggests in his *Sweetness and Power* that “[i]n complex hierarchical societies, ‘the culture’ is never a wholly unified, homogeneous system, however. It is marked by behavioral and attitudinal differences at different levels, Cultural “materials”—including material objects, the words for them, ways of behaving and of thinking, too—can move upward or downward, from lord to commoner, or vice versa” (121). The history of chocolate starts at the same time of tea, sugar, and coffee, which are initially expensive imports serving the wealthy to claim difference from ordinary people. In this process, the history of objects evolves with, corresponds to, and completes the history of human beings. Food is a miniature of the social division of labor, which powerfully implies a social control: *the power over food equals the power over other people*. In other words, who controls food, controls other people's lives, which accounts for the omnipotence and omniscience of Willy Wonka in the novel.

This also applies outside Wonka's factory. When chocolate exchanges hands from seller to buyer, its journey begins. Food travels between individuals and groups, forming a network of meaning through its trajectory where people are captured, consequently finding themselves situated in different positions. Households with varying economic backgrounds exhibit significantly different relationships with food. In sharp contrast to Charlie's poverty, the other four kids feature an extravagant consumption of things. For instance, Veruca Salt, whose family owns a large fortune, buys hundreds and thousands of candy bars: “Then I had them loaded onto trucks and sent directly to my own factory. I'm in the peanut business, you see, and I've got about a hundred women working for me over at my joint, shelling peanuts for roasting and salting” (Dahl 30). Different from Charlie

who only “take[s] a tiny nibble...take another nibble,” (Dahl 9) rich and spoiled kids indulge in food consumption in a hedonistic, luxurious, and careless manner. Notably, characters in the story appear to be trapped in a self-reinforcing feedback loop: *the more people acquire, the more they crave, and the more elevated their status appears*. This also accounts for what happens to Charlie at the end of the story. As the most obedient and morally upright child among all the five, Charlie is appreciated and ultimately chosen by Wonka to inherit the chocolate factory. In other words, Charlie is deemed the most “deserving” and thus entitled to greater possession.

As the anthropologist Carole M. Counihan notes, “in every culture, foodways constitute an organized system, a language that—through its structure and components—conveys meaning and contributes to the organization of the natural and social world” (19). Dahl’s narrative highlights exactly “an organized system, a language,” as Counihan phrases it, constituted by food. As this unfolds, individuals acquire corresponding identities within certain power structures. People’s consuming practices significantly participate in the process of identity perception and formation. We struggle to confirm and validate who we are in the constant interactions with surrounding environments. Eating is a means of finding and establishing individual identity. As Nicholson puts it, “[a] person isn’t just ‘there’—a static object in space, like a table in the kitchen. To exist is an activity of daily transformation; one continually forms and transforms oneself, and the material means by which one performs this act of self-creation is food. No one can assimilate food for another” (37).

Simply put, eating is not only a means of survival; it also claims significance in the ongoing production and reproduction of individual identity. In other words, our perception of ourselves in relation to others and how we “become ourselves” are always in flux. In this sense, people’s identity is always being produced, as we are located in the network that is knotted both by countless human and nonhuman nodes. Mintz notes that “[t]he chemical and mechanical transformations by which substances are bent to human use and become unrecognizable to those who know them in nature have marked our relationship to nature for almost as long as we have been human” (xxiii). Therefore, despite the common usage of the phrase “human society,” it is actually difficult to claim that the society is an assembled organization under mere human’s agency. Instead, the presence of objects consistently emerges in unpredictable ways, making them difficult to disregard. Consequently, an individual’s identity is not an outcome but an ongoing process; it is not purely anthropic, but rather hybrid in nature.

### FOOD AND METAMORPHOSED BODIES OF “BAD KIDS”

How is the agency of food embodied visually and tangibly on characters? This highlights the obvious didactic nature of Dahl’s narrative. Notably, the dogma about dos and don’ts in children’s fictions naturally combines with the binary characterization of “sinful kids” and “innocent kids.” As Jacqueline M. Labbe contends, one prominent feature of children’s literature concerns “children who eat, rightly and wrongly: whether in the didactic tales popular in the early nineteenth century, or in the fantasies that developed in reaction to the perceived restrictions of didacticism” (94). Analyzing children’s texts where innocent children serve as the eaten, Labbe aptly suggests a correlation between eating practices and the traditional good/bad dichotomy prevalent in children’s literature. In some prevalent views, didacticism in children’s novels began almost simultaneously with the beginning of Western children’s literature. Considering fairy tales and folklore as possible precursors to children’s literature, this tradition might date back to the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, where children’s texts serve as educating instruments for codifying the civilizing process (Daniel 37).

Presumably, fictional food in children’s novels function as a channel of transporting societal regulation of manners and morals to young readers. In this regard, voracity is often associated with misbehavior. In children’s classics food always serves as a tempting lure leading children into dangerous situations. As in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the White Witch manipulates the child protagonist Edmund with his favorite treat, Turkish Delight, thereby effectively rendering him obedient. He grows increasingly obsessed: “the more he ate, the more he wanted to eat, and he never asked himself why the Queen should be so inquisitive” (28). Lewis’s story suggests that once a child succumbs to the temptation of food, they are marked as a “sinful kid” who ultimately face the consequences of their gluttony. Such a didactic tendency in Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has been noticed. As David Rudd notes: “[Roald Dahl] can also be seen as remarkably didactic in, for instance, his disapproval of television (Mike Teavee and the Wormwood parents) and of badly behaved children in general (e.g. all those in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* except Charlie himself)” (“The Development of Children’s Literature” 6). This good/bad pattern is clearly evident in the novel. Undergoing the numerous challenges set by Willy Wonka, the most well-behaved child, Charlie, emerges victorious in this peculiar game and ultimately gains ownership of the Wonka factory.

What I’m interested in is how this classic storytelling responds to the nonhuman perspective. In Dahl’s narrative, specifically, the lesson is delivered through food. Food’s power over people is demonstrably manifested through a system of reward and punishment enacted on children’s bodies. Depicting a world where people

are obsessed with eating, however, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* maintains a conservative and didactic stance toward the unchecked consumption, emphasizing how such cravings can lead to striking physical transformation. The narrative explores bodily change most prominently through characters of Augustus Gloop and Violet Beauregarde. As the first kid to find the golden ticket, Gloop wins by sheer volume of chocolate he consumes daily. His physical description exaggerates the consequences of his obsession, casting his body as a visual metaphor for excess, “as though he had been blown up with a powerful pump... and his face was like a monstrous ball of dough with two small greedy curranty eyes peering out upon the world” (Dahl 27). Similarly, Violet Beauregarde’s constant gum-chewing results in a dramatic bodily metamorphosis. The two characters’ trajectories function symbolically within the narrative structure: Augustus is swept away by the chocolate river—literally consumed by his favorite treat—while Violet is transformed into a giant blueberry, her entire form overwhelmed by the very thing she refuses to give up.

While neither character succeeds in the factory’s moral trial, the narrative suggests that they leave the experience changed, both physically and metaphorically. In Dahl’s dark fantasy, the narrative conveys the idea that people’s bodies are stretched, transformed, and altered by what they digest in a surprisingly straightforward and uncanny manner. These exaggerated transformations reflect a surreal logic in which digestion is externalized: the children are not merely consumers of food, but are themselves acted upon by it. In essence, the punitive game performed in the factory simulates the journey of food through human body in a sarcastic manner, offering reflections on consumption and the permeability of human boundaries in the face of nonhuman forces.

In *Ethics and the Endangerment of Children’s Bodies*, Graf and Schweiger propose that childhood obesity should be understood “one piece of the puzzle, although one that deserves all the attention it can get” (82). They consider the common phenomenon of overweight within the contexts of societal justice regarding food availability, the ethics of identifying “normal” and “abnormal,” and body politics. In Dahl’s novel, obesity linked to overconsumption is depicted as an exaggerated physical transformation, symbolizing a complex and problematic relationship with food. Graf and Schweiger note that, unless caused by unavoidable physiological factors, dominant discourses problematically attribute childhood obesity to individual responsibility, often interpreting it as a failure of personal agency (89-90). However, in the novel, Dahl’s narrative complicates this by suggesting that food itself exerts agency over the body. In this sense, children’s struggles to manage their physical changes paradoxically highlight the powerful influence of nonhuman substances. The excess weight that enlarges Gloop and the swollen jaw

of Beauregarde both vividly illustrate food's active role in reshaping the human body.

As Mervyn Nicholson aptly puts it “eating is the means of self-reproduction: consuming food is what the individual does in order to reproduce himself” (37). Further, consumption not only sustains the self, rather, it also complicates the boundaries of selfhood. Carolyn Daniel suggests that “the realities of the eating body mean that food passes from the outside to the inside and subsequently to the outside again, distorting notions of what is properly inside/self and outside/other. When we eat food (an object) it literally becomes part of us (a subject)” (6). Daniel's proposal highlights a posthumanist view of human bodies as open to the manipulation of myriad substances that coexist with us. The exaggerated representation of food's agency on characters' bodies calls into question the ideological myth that the body is an enclosed, fixed, and self-sufficient system. On the contrary, humans' physical bodies “can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways,” (Haraway 32) lying open to actions that are generated by “a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (Latour 44). In other words, the human body cannot be said to be entirely under the control of its host. Rather, it operates as a dynamic site of interaction, a playground for nonhuman substances that influence and reshape it. In the novel, the unnatural plot cognitively reveals how people are controlled and further overwhelmed by what they eat. This anti-traditional aesthetics reflects a deviation from old humanist values and shows a narratological inclination that “put[s] pressure on this anthropocentric set-up involves reconceptualizing the notion of character and opening it up to nonhuman realities” (Caracciolo s174-s175). *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* embodies an intentional mockery of anthropocentrism by the employment of a trick of bodily transformation. Although the narrative may initially appear didactic, it prominently brings to the forefront how physical bodies are surrounded, penetrated, and altered by nonhuman substances. Humans, in turn, are rendered powerless in the face of this, a point particularly highlighted in Dahl's storytelling.

## CONCLUSION

For Mikhail Bakhtin, eating symbolizes the triumphant pleasure of “man tast[ing] the world, introduc[ing] it into his body, mak[ing] it part of himself” (281). The eater-eaten relation literally demonstrates a power hierarchy. To be “edible” is, by definition, to occupy the subordinate position, available to be tasted, consumed, and assimilated. However, Dahl’s narrative takes a rather counter-intuitive turn from traditional anthropocentric assumptions. The unsettling sides of the story in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, including the almost insane chocolate fever, the enigmatic Wonka’s factory and the grotesque bodies, prompt an interpretation under the nonhuman turn. It narrates a story where people are overwhelmed by the power of food and thereby forced to experience their inner vulnerability. The seemingly almighty chocolatier Willy Wonka, who unnaturally controls the world by selling candies, appears as a representative of food and visualizes the complex interventions it offers in the societal system.

This essay returns to Probyn’s intriguing initial question: who is the edible, humans or food? In contemplation of Levinasian philosophy in the Anthropocene and in response to the pandemic, Seán Hand suggests that the virus’s unhostile yet overwhelming breach of human barriers serves as a “wordless accusation of arrogance that may necessitate from us a salutary acknowledgement of fragility” (174). This critique finds an unexpected echo in Dahl’s novel, which interrogates human hubris and vulnerability on three levels. Food, most prominently, represents a deep-seated human longing. Or more radically, it embodies desire itself. In the text, the cravings for chocolate arise not only from material deprivation. Rather, it is a collective behavior that transcends social strata. Indeed, the urge for consumption has become a recurring motif in cultural memory, continually evoked and reinforced by pervasive commercial civilization. Furthermore, in contemporary society, food forms a social language through which individuals understand their existence and articulate their identities. The framework it composes entangles people, offering instructions and significance to their social existence. Moreover, the novel amplifies the agency of food in overtly unnatural ways, particularly through the bodily transformation experienced by the “bad kids” in Wonka’s factory. By exposing characters to the metaphorical process of digestion, the novel mocks human subjectivity.

As a popular novel that also stirs heated debates, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* foregrounds the image of “chocolate” while engaging with ideologies surrounding childhood, which significantly include irrationality, gluttony, child obesity, parenting, and the dichotomy of good kids versus bad kids. These aspects are given a nonhuman perspective through a reevaluation of human-food relation. Children’s fictions take pleasure in examining mainstream discourse, and the

subversive nature of this novel lies in its ability to do so. It invites readers, especially young ones, to reconsider a sustainable relationship with food and draws attention to the significant role of food as an active actor in the ontological becoming progress of human beings. In this way, the novel prompts the idea of an entangled network, where humans and the broader nonhuman world, while not as eerily and sensationally as depicted in the text, inseparably coexist with each other.

**NOTES**

1. See, for example, Eleanor Cameron's "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part I" and "McLuhan, Youth, and Literature: Part II," published in *The Horn Book*, Oct. 19, 1972. Other elaborations on criticism of Roald Dahl's novels, see "De-constructing Dahl through Criticism" in Laura Viñas Valle's *De-constructing Roald Dahl*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, pp. 5–70.

## WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky, The M.I.T Press, 1965.
- Bennett, Jane. "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Philosophy." *The Nonhuman Turn*, edited by Richard Grusin, U of Minnesota P, 2015, pp. 223–40.
- Boyd, Brian. "Tails within Tales." *Knowing Animals*, edited by Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong, Brill, 2007, pp. 217–43.
- Bradford, Clare. "The End of Empire? Colonial and Postcolonial Journeys in Children's Books." *Children's Literature*, vol. 29, 2001, pp. 196–218. DOI: 10.1353/chl.o.0796
- Caracciolo, Marco. "Notes for an Econarratological Theory of Character." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 4, no. s1, 2018, pp. s172–s189. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2018-0037>
- Carroll, Jane Suzanne. *British Children's Literature and Material Culture: Commodities and Consumption 1850-1914*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- Clarke, Bruce. "The Nonhuman." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke, Cambridge UP, 2016, pp. 141–52.
- Counihan, Carole M. *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power*. Routledge, 1999.
- Dahl, Roald. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Illustrated by Joseph Schindelman, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964.
- Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2006.
- Garcia-Gonzalez, Macarena, and Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak. "New Materialist Openings to Children's Literature Studies." *International Research in Children's Literature*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2020.0327>
- Graf, Gunter, and Gottfried Schweiger. *Ethics and the Endangerment of Children's Bodies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Hand, Seán. "Being for Every Other: Levinas in the Anthropocene." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2021, pp. 156–75. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2021-0009>
- Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. U of Minnesota P, 2016.
- James, Allison, Anne Trine Kjørholt, and Vebjørng Tingstand, editors. *Children, Food and Identity in Everyday Life*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Jaques, Zoe. *Children's Literature and the Posthuman Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. Routledge, 2015.
- Kachur, Robert M. "A Consuming Tradition: Candy and Socio-religious Identity Formation in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*." *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, edited by Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard, Routledge, 2009, pp. 221–34.

- Keyser, Catherine. "Candy Boys and Chocolate Factories: Roald Dahl, Racialization, and Global Industry." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2017, pp. 403–28. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2017.0030>.
- Labbe, Jacqueline M. "To Eat and be Eaten in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature." *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, edited by Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard, Routledge, 2009, pp. 93–103.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweet and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Viking Penguin, 1985.
- Nicholson, Mervyn. "Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others." *An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1987, pp. 37–55.
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Recent Trends in Children's Literature Research: Return to the Body." *International Research in Children's Literature*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, pp. 132–45. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2016.0198>
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. Routledge, 2000.
- Rudd, David. "The Development of Children's Literature." *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, edited by David Rudd, Routledge, 2010.
- . "Willy Wonka, Dahl's Chickens and Heavenly Visions." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 51, 2020, pp. 125–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-018-9366-6>
- Shang, Biwu. "Approaching the World of Non-human Experience: Unnatural Ways of Worldmaking in Ian McEwan's Fiction." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2022-2013>
- . "Towards A Theory of Nonhuman Narrative." *Neohelicon*, vol. 49, 2022, pp. 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-022-00628-y>
- Stephens, John, and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 1998.