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"The Gremlins by Roald Dahl: The Reflection of his War Experiences and the Theme of War in his First Book for Children"

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Abstract:

This research project aims to offer an analysis of Roald Dahl's first book for children, *The Gremlins* (1943). The analysis will be focused on drawing connections between this book and Dahl's own experiences during his years as a RAF pilot in World War II. And simultaneously, bearing in mind that this is a book for children, it will also be explained how the author narrates a story about war – making it suitable– for that target readers. What makes this topic relevant is that in the Literary Studies of English Studies Degree, children's literature is often not deeply studied. Thus, this work can result interesting because it treats a topic that, as we will find out, is controversial in books for children. Additionally, it is the first book of this kind by Roald Dahl, who after this work developed a very successful career as a children's author, becoming one of the most important writers in the field. In order to carry out the analysis of the book, the principal sources used to draw the connections between his war experiences and *The Gremlins* (1943) will be: Dahl's *Going Solo* (1986), Jeremy Treglown's *Roald Dahl: A Biography* (1994), Donald Sturrock's *Storyteller: The Authorized biography of Roald Dahl* (2010) and other academic articles, principally from The Official Roald Dahl Website. And, then, to explain how he treats the theme of war in a book for children, the academic articles of Jacques Barchilon, "Children and War in the Fairy Tale," Catherine Kurkjian, "Children's Books: Worlds of Fantasy," and Allen Newell, "Fairy Tales," will be taken as main references.

Keywords: Roald Dahl, Gremlins, children's literature, war, WWII, RAF.

Ariadna GÁMEZ GÓMEZ

***The Gremlins* by Roald Dahl: The Reflection of His War Experiences and the Theme of War in His First Book for Children**

1. Introduction

In this research project the book *The Gremlins* (1943) by Roald Dahl, published a few years after his participation in the WWII as a RAF pilot, will be analysed. This work narrates the story of Gus – a RAF pilot – and his squadron. In the middle of the Battle of Britain, they suddenly encounter some problems with their machines, which are being caused by little creatures that they call 'gremlins,' these being creatures of a folktale among the RAF pilots in real life that Dahl got to know during his war years.

First of all, it will be illustrated what a folktale is, followed by the emergence of the gremlins' folktale in particular and how Roald Dahl got to know it. Additionally, it will be elucidated how that story came into the hands of Walt Disney and the problems they encountered until it eventually became Dahl's first book. And then, for the analysis of the book, bearing in mind that several critics, such as Jeremy Treglown or Donald Sturrock, have agreed in the observation that the protagonist of that work, Gus, is a reflection of the author himself (Sturrock 190; Treglown 69), the connections between Dahl's war experiences and *The Gremlins* will be traced. To enlighten that correlation between the author and Gus, Dahl's autobiography *Going Solo* (1986) – in which he recalls episodes from WWII and the previous years – will be utilized as the main referential point. Also, as the principal critical sources, there will be consulted the biographies of Roald Dahl written by the aforementioned critics: Jeremy Treglown and Donald Sturrock together with other academic articles mainly from The Official Roald Dahl Website.

The Gremlins was Dahl's first work for children, and that facet of him as a children's author would be the one which, almost twenty years later, would make him a very successful writer and one of the best-selling authors of children's books. According to Dahl himself, the secret of his success resides in that "you can write about anything for children as long as you've got humour" ("Roald Dahl Says" 58). As he explains, the themes of the stories are not so important as long as they are treated in a humorous way. Taking this into account, it will be explained how he treats the topic of the war, which is full of horrors, in a story for children.

My motivation to write about this book in my Degree Final Project is that children's literature is often not treated in depth in the Literary Studies of English Studies Degree and when it is treated it is as a part of something else, as it happens with *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which is seen as part of the Victorian Era Literature. The realisation that we do not explore the field of children's literature in the degree has prompted an interest to develop my paper concentrating in this field, and, more concretely, in one of the most important children's authors and his first book of that specialty.

2. Roald Dahl and *The Gremlins* (1943)

Roald Dahl, also known as “the world’s No. 1 storyteller” –as it appears in the cover of most of his books– or “the greatest storyteller of all time” (Stroud), wrote stories for both children and adults. But what made him known worldwide were the ones for children, and even though his first book of this kind, *The Gremlins*, was published in 1943, it was twenty years later that he achieved success with works like *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) (Treglown8).

Dahl was born on 13th September 1916 in Llandaff, a district of Cardiff in Wales, into a Norwegian family ("About Roald Dahl"). As he explains in *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984) –where he tells different episodes from his childhood – at a very early age, he got to experience the deaths of his sister and father (20). Under these circumstances, his mother decided to send him to an English boarding school, St Peter's School, for him to have the best education possible (75). As records state, he attended that school until he was 13, and then he went to another boarding school to finish his studies, Repton Public School (135). All these experiences, along with his summer vacations in Norway with his whole family (53–59), highly marked his life as an adult and are reflected in his writing style, which was hugely influenced by his own life as it will be further elucidated.

Once his school days ended, he was interested in having a job which gave him the opportunity of going abroad and meeting "distant and magic lands" (166). Eventually, he got to work in a Shell Company and was sent to East Africa (174). For that reason, when World War II broke out in 1939, he was in Dar es Salaam. And it was then that he decided to join the Royal Air Force and fight against the Axis Powers (176). The events he got to experience during his years as a RAF pilot, together with the aforementioned episodes of his childhood, constitute the major influences in most of Dahl's writing work. As Pojana Maneeyingsakul writes in her article for the *Independent*:

Despite his death in 1990 Dahl's own life continues to play out through his fiction. In many of his stories the reader experiences Dahl's metamorphosis into his own characters, with similarities seen between Dahl and several of his heroic creations in his children's books. He can be compared with the Fantastic Mr. Fox – resilient, resourceful and never defeated – and his personality is also similar to one of his most famous characters, Willy Wonka – exhibiting "garrulous, exotic, rambunctious" traits – while a vulnerable and hidden part of him remains a big bad child. ("Roald Dahl: The children's literary giant who wasn't always so friendly")

The characters mentioned by Maneeyingsakul, among others, like Gus from *The Gremlins*, are surrounded by circumstances that have glimpses of Dahl's own life. For that matter, in this paper it will be analysed to which extent *The Gremlins*, its characters and its events are influenced by Roald Dahl's own experiences during his years fighting in WWII.

2.1. Folktales

Before covering the gremlins' story in depth, a theoretical framework on folktales is presented here. Folktales are stories that, in most of the cases, have an unknown author, origin or location ("Folktales"). These stories are typically transmitted orally, and they emerge as part of the popular culture within a certain community (Fischer 235). According to Jan de Vries, myths and folktales are very close in terms of meaning, but he claims that folktales are a re-styling of myths, and he goes on to assert that "this re-styling has first

of all eliminated everything really mythical" (qtd. in Rahmann 177). Moreover, as in myths, in these tales, people reflect upon events or problems of their own daily lives and use them as the basis of the story (179). In addition, the folklorist Stith Thompson adds as another characteristic of folktales, the inclusion of some fantastic characters and realities (qtd. in Rahmann 176).

Focusing now on the gremlins' folklore, as it is asserted by Peter Burger, "the oral provenance of material is obvious" (Burger 141) since it was part of the Royal Air Force folklore and of the daily lives' conversations of the pilots (Sturrock 188). Furthermore, it can be said that it was a reflection of RAF pilots' problems; it was their way to find an explanation for the difficulties they encountered. And, in this scenario, the gremlins represented those fantastic characters (Burger 141) that Thompson pointed out as being characteristic of folktales (qtd. in Rahmann 176).

2.2. The Origin of the Gremlins' Folktale

Closely matching the description of the gremlins that Dahl provided with his writings, in the *Life* magazine, gremlins were depicted as "fantastic imps of both sexes who busied themselves constantly with hideous activities designed to destroy the proper functioning of the machines, and to deal death to the operators of them" (Massigner 359).

When tracing back its origins, the questions that arise are when and how this folktale of fantastic creatures emerged. As Sherman suggests, it is uncertain if its origin dates back to the 1920s or to the WWI (209). What seems to be true is that it is found in its oral transmission due to RAF folklore. According to Treglown, it was created in order to avoid conflicts between air and ground crews when something went wrong during the battle or when the machines malfunctioned. In those situations, the fault would be attributed to gremlins and there would not be disputes among squadron members (62). In this line, Massigner goes further by attributing to these creatures the capacity to "sense impressions received under extraordinary circumstances." For the most part, these "sense impressions" imply "fear, hallucinations and illusions." In his own words, "that illusion is contributory to the 'Gremlin' belief seems almost self-evident" (360). And to explain how that illusion became the gremlins folklore, which RAF pilots believed and transmitted one to each other, Massigner states:

However, the habit of *rapid association* leads to fantastic imaginings rather than rational conclusions and the flyer presumes that some unaccustomed noise of the motor, some unusualness in the functioning of the plane, or some alarming circumstance such as the ripping of the wing covering, the jamming of a gun, the snapping of a vitally important wire or cable has been caused by some *abnormal* agent. (361)

Hence, after reading this quote, it can be derived that that "abnormal agent" used to

explain any strange circumstance that happened in the plane, would give birth to the gremlins. If one tries to discover the origin of the word "gremlin," many different possibilities are encountered. The Oxford English Dictionary provides these possible etymological roots: "perhaps an alteration of GOBLIN, *n.*, although the model for such alteration is unclear" ("gremlin, *n.*"), and it adds more meanings, such as a "connection with the name of *Fremlin Bros.*, brewer of ales and stouts in Maidstone, Kent (...), a borrowing of Irish *gruaimín* gloomy little person, or of either Dutch *gremmelen* to satin, make dirty or *grimmelen*, *griemelen* to swarm, team" (Oxford English Dictionary 2020) but, as it concludes, none of them can be substantiated.

Summing up, it is noticeable that the exact origin of this story, as it happens with many stories that come from the oral tradition, is uncertain. Nonetheless, what is remarkable is that Roald Dahl found in that one the motive to start writing. Those stories would be just the beginning of what later became a very successful career as a children's author (Sturrock 188).

2.3. Publication of the Book, *The Gremlins* (1943)

As it has already been mentioned in previous sections of this project, Dahl was a pilot in the Royal Air Force during World War II, and as it happens with many of his shot-stories – e.g. “Katina” (1944), “A Piece of Cake” (1946) or “Only This” (1944) –, he found there the inspiration for his first book, the one which introduced him in the field of children’s literature: *The Gremlins*. That inspiration came when he got to know the RAF folktale of the gremlins.

It was the year 1942 when he sent the finished gremlins’ story, originally entitled *Gremlin Lore*, to his superiors. By that time, as a former RAF pilot, he was working for the British Embassy in Washington DC and he had published his first short story “Shot Down Over Libya” (1942), shortly before (“The Gremlins”). In *Storyteller* (2010), Donald Sturrock explains how the story arrived to Walt Disney’s hands, recalling:

When Dahl finished his first draft, he sent it to his bosses for approval on both sides of the Atlantic. It was part of his agreement with the Air Ministry that anything he wrote needed to be vetted by them. ... British Information Services in New York, struggled manfully to find meaning in the little creatures, ... but others rapidly realized how gremlins had the potential to raise American public interest in the RAF and the British war effort.... The young British movie producer and entrepreneur Sidney Bernstein, ... swiftly forwarded the story to Walt Disney. (191)

The situation that Disney was undergoing during the war was bittersweet. They had great success with *Snow White* (1937), but *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* (both from the 1940s) were not generating enough revenue. On the other hand, as Treglown indicates, “there were plenty of opportunities for government-funded training films and propaganda” (63). Hence, for Disney, Dahl’s story had “great possibilities” (qtd. in Sturrock 191) to get funded and make it come true into the big screen.

But in the middle of their negotiations, they faced a huge copyright challenge. The reason being that in reality, as one of Disney’s sales representatives, Chester Feitel, reported, “The gremlin characters are not creatures of his imagination” (qtd. in Sturrock 195). Dahl’s writings were a recollection of stories that he had heard and that the entire RAF perfectly knew. Due to this fact, there was no individual who could be credited for them, which meant that to copyright the Gremlins would be an arduous task (Sturrock 195). To solve the problem, they began to work in illustrations for a *Cosmopolitan* publication. They wanted to be the first ones publishing something about the gremlins and they were aware that other companies were working on similar projects. Disney finally included the gremlins’ illustrations in a magazine ad for Live Savers peppermints. Dahl, not in conformity with that usage of the creatures, protested to Disney uttering: “The legend will be ruined” (qtd. in Sturrock 203). He thought that the appearance of those creatures in an ad would damage the mystique of the gremlins as he wanted them to be

perceived by the audience. And Disney explained to him that it “was all part of the business of establishing copyright” (Treglown 64), it had to be done in order to be the first company releasing a gremlin’s project.

Once they got involved in the film, the ownership issue was still undetermined. Some new claimants from the RAF emerged, like Douglas Bisgood, who assured that they were the ones who told Roald Dahl all the gremlin stories. Bisgood even added that he was thinking about writing his own story about the gremlins, which increased Disney’s concerns (Sturrock 196). But Dahl assured Disney that there was nothing to worry about and, in fact, he was right as Bisgood died right after the war ended (Treglown 68).

As Treglown reminds us, Roald Dahl had never claimed the gremlins stories to be his own invention (68). And, as Sturrock contends, he decided that all the proceeds made with these stories would be destined to the RAF Benevolent Fund (191). Isaiah Berlin, a historian and Dahl’s companion during his time in Washington, affirmed that Dahl “initiated gremlins. That is to say, they were already there, in the Air Force, but he put them on the map” (qtd. in Treglown 69).

As a cause of the ownership’s difficulties, Disney’s interest in the creation of this movie began to fade and, as a consequence, the project drastically changed. Treglown depicts the development of the project explaining that what at the beginning was intended to be a movie with an amalgamation of animate and real-life image became an animation short movie, and it eventually was transformed into a picture book published under the name of *Walt Disney: The Gremlins (A Royal Air Force Story by Flight Lieutenant Roald Dahl)* (67). As we can see, despite the fact that the project did not develop as it was expected, it ended up being Roald Dahl’s first book and the one that would define him as a writer, providing him the opportunity of signing his first literary contract(69).

After having given an overall introduction on how Dahl got to know the story and how he finally published it, in the following section I will offer an analysis of *The Gremlins* by drawing connections between his war experiences – told in *Going Solo* (1986) – and the characters and events that he narrates in this work. Also, I will analyse the way he focalises the theme of the war in a tale that has children as its target audience.

3. War in *The Gremlins* (1943): Analysis.

First of all, special attention needs to be drawn to the opening paragraph of the work, where Dahl mentions the first appearance of the gremlins. As he elicits:

It was some time during the Battle of Britain, when Hurricanes and Spitfires were up from dawn to dark and the noise of battle was heard all day in the sky; ... It was early autumn, when the chestnuts were ripening and the apples were beginning to drop off the trees – it was then that the first gremlins were seen by the Royal Air Force. (4)

After having mentioned that the first gremlin was seen, in the following paragraph, we find the first description of the gremlins in Dahl's words. It is through the character of a RAF pilot called Gus. This character, according to both Sturrock and Treglown, constitutes a reflection of the author himself because of the many autobiographical details that Dahl attributes to him (Sturrock 190; Treglown 69), as it will be elucidated through this analysis. In the following extract, Gus is noticing some irregularities in the functioning of his plane and he sees something strange. The first gremlin to appear is depicted:

And there, standing on his wing, he saw a little man, scarcely more than six inches high, with a large round face and a little pair of horns growing out of his head. On his legs were a pair of shiny black suction boots, which made it possible for him to remain standing on the wing at 300 miles an hour. Also do you know what he was doing? He had a large drill, almost as big as himself, grasped firmly in both hands, and he was busily boring holes in the Hurricane's wings. (5)

As we can see, this description of the creature contributes to giving the gremlins a fantastic physical aspect. This kind of character is commonly found in stories where themes that may be too arduous for kids are treated. This is vital, since the story is set in a war, and war implies hideous events. As it is explained in *Children's Books: Worlds of Fantasy*, by using fantastic elements to tell a story for children, the readers can have a more distant relation with the facts told allowing them to think about the real themes expressed in a story – in this case WWII– which may be painful or frightening from a more remote perspective (Kurkjian et al.492). This use of fantastic characters or elements is not only used by Dahl in *The Gremlins*, it can be also encountered in *Matilda* (1988), for instance, who is an orphan that is mistreated by her parents and by the headmistress of the school and, who is presented as a girl with mental superpowers.

Another important theme that appears in many literary works since ancient times and that is included very frequently in fantasy books for children is the "good versus evil and the right versus wrong" (494) which is also presented in the previous extract. As we previously reported, gremlins' main aim was to hinder the work of pilots by making the planes function wrongly or even making the pilots lose the plane's control, who had to force the landing. This idea is introduced in the extract by explaining what the gremlin was doing in the wing of the aeroplane. Thus, from the very beginning of the story, Dahl is clarifying the main conflict by portraying the idea of "right versus wrong" in the pilots and the gremlins respectively, thereby the war conflict seems to be left in the background. In addition, even if in this part of the story, gremlins can be depicted as the bad ones because they are inconveniencing pilots. The classification of gremlins and pilots as good or bad changes throughout the story. However, this last idea will be explained in depth subsequently.

Once the little creature that had been seen on the wing is described, we see how the writer moves on to reveal the origin of their name. Thus, after Gus had seen that little man and got to land the plane, he phoned his squadron to get the plane repaired. Once

the help arrived, the fitter affirmed "those aren't bullet holes, a gremlin did that" (8). In reality, gremlins were known by the entire RAF, even though there were different squadrons of pilots fighting in different countries. This is how it is explained in the text:

This word was to spread through the R.A.F. like a prairie fire. It would travel over the seas to the pilots in Malta, to the desert airdromes of Libya and Egypt, and to remote landing grounds in Palestine and Iraq. Someone mentioned it in India and someone else in Ceylon – and now they all had it – IT WAS A VERY FAMOUS WORD. (11)

Other types of gremlins soon appear, whom Roald Dahl presents as "fifinellas," or female gremlins. These creatures are depicted with a sensual or appealing tone - which was not encountered with the description of the male gremlins- indicating that they owned "small, elegant and curly horns" and "handsome white buckskin boots" (15); and also the "widgets," described as "the young of gremlins and fifinellas" (26). There are also other variants of gremlins such as "spandules," which are "high-altitude gremlins" (29) and have some physical differences from the already depicted gremlins. As Dahl describes:

At least three times as big as ordinary gremlins ... covered with long, clack hair to protect them against the terrific cold, and their faces look rather like oxygen masks. ... Their bodies are flat and thin ... had no legs – just arms with suction gloves on their hands. (29)

As well as gremlins, these other creatures of the same species were not creations of this author; they were part of the stories he heard in his years in WWII. Dahl, as a real RAF pilot, asserted that "the gremlins comprise a very real and considerable part of the conversation of every RAF pilot in the world" (qtd. in Sturrock 187). That asseveration is perfectly reflected in the story, where from the first time Gus encounters a gremlin; the conversations among pilots revolve around that matter throughout the entire story.

As it usually happens with these stories, which go beyond the rational sometimes, there are people who believe them and others who show reticence. It happens nowadays with, for example, Leprechauns in Ireland, which, according to the digital media company IrishCentral, only count with a one-third of believers within the Irish people: "One third of Irish people believe Leprechauns exist." And, it also happens in *The Gremlins*, where the character of Stuffy is incredulous about the existence of these creatures even when he has already seen them. Therefore, in one of those mentioned pilots' conversations about gremlins, he interrogates Gus: "Perhaps you can tell me who these gremlins are and why they are here" (17).

Gus then tells his squadron-mates a story about gremlins. In this story, it is easy to see some glimpses of "Northern European mythology" (Treglown 63) due to the author's Norwegian roots, the English and Scandinavian stories that he was told as a child,

and the time he spent in Norway during his childhood (Sturrock 70). It also constitutes an autobiographical feature, but as it is not related to his war experiences, that mythological aspect will not be treated in depth. Even so, there is something in the tale told by Gus that requires further comment. This tale is used, not only to explain where the gremlins came from, but also, to explain why they were doing what they were doing to the pilots. And to express that, it is told by Gus in this way:

'We will follow those big birds wherever they go' vowed the leader, and he spoke for them all 'to get revenge for the loss of our homes. We will make mischief for them, and we will harry and tease the men who fly them, until we obtain some satisfaction for all the harm that has been done to us.' (18)

In this extract they explain that their intention is to torment the pilots of those planes, to which they refer as 'big birds,' in order to get revenge. While Gus is telling this story, the roles of the pilots being the good ones and the gremlins, the bad ones, as mentioned before, begin to change. In Gus' story we discover that the gremlins' behaviour is a consequence of what humans did to their tribe: destroy their homes. This story makes the audience change their minds about the gremlins and the pilots, and now the roles begin to blur. Until, as it will be commented later, they both join forces and represent the same role.

Before analysing the role change, it is essential to point out the way in which gremlins refer to planes as 'birds,' which is also found in *Going Solo* (1986) while Dahl tries to explain to his African servant, Mdisho, what he is going to do in the war. Dahl clarifies why he uses 'birds' instead of 'aeroplanes' with this statement: "The only word for aeroplane in Swahili language is *ndegi*, which means bird, and it always sounded good and descriptive in a sentence" (75). Therefore, this can be considered another reflection of himself attributed to the protagonist, since both Gus and Dahl faced a similar situation. In *The Gremlins*, gremlins had never seen a plane before so they did not have a specific word to call that machine; and in the case found in *Going Solo* (1986), in Swahili there was no other word to refer to planes, because there had never been planes in those lands before. This is because, as Claire Kramsch collects, "language expresses cultural reality" (3) and, if in the realities of gremlins and Mdisho there were no planes, there could not be a word for planes either. Kramsh also asserts that words are used to refer to a "stock of knowledge about the world that other people share" (3) and, in the cases that are being commented, Gus and Dahl had the word 'plane,' which the gremlins and Mdisho did not share. The cause of this is linked to the previous idea; their cultural realities were not the same. To solve the situation, in *Going Solo* (1986) Dahl and Mdisho use the word 'birds' to refer to aeroplanes which he reflects in *The Gremlins* (1943) when Gus uses the same word to tell the story of the origin of the gremlins.

As the story moves forward, the pilots get used to the presence of gremlins and in another encounter with one of them, Gus has to force the landing because of the gremlin's annoyance. After this episode, he has a conversation with a gremlin, where the gremlin

explains why they behave that way: “‘You men cut down the gremlin wood,’ he sniffled, ‘and gave the land to your giant tin birds.’” And Gus, with the purpose of joining forces and, in that manner, be stronger against the Axis powers, tries to convince the little creature by saying: “These tin birds are planes, and they are helping us fight to save our homes- and your home, too. If you help us win this fight, we’ll give you gremlins the deepest wood in England for your very own” (25). But it was a few days later when Gremlin Gus was completely convinced to join forces with the pilots. It happened when the Squadron received an attack from the Germans and Gremlin Gus, who was in the plane with Gus trying to pester him, struggled to keep himself safe (35). As a consequence of that attack –which will be further analysed in the following lines– Gremlin Gus comprehends what Gus told him about joining forces to maintain their homes safe and after that they begin to be willing to cooperate.

The next analysed passage of *The Gremlins* is the one in which Gus suffers a terrible accident that drives him directly to hospital. Curiously enough, another accident happens in Dahl’s first short-story, “Shot Down Over Libya” (1942), which was later published as “A Piece of Cake” (1946) with some changes in the plot. This incident is also treated in *Going Solo* (1986) in the chapter “Survival.” The similarities are not found in the accident itself but in the consequences at a professional level that it brings to the pilots.

To corroborate this point, in *The Gremlins* it is explained that Gus was flying in inadequate conditions. As Sturrock points out, the fact that the pilot had a terrible flu is a reflection of what happened to one of Dahl’s squadron-mates, Pattle, who was flying in the same circumstances. However, differently from Pattle, when Gus suffered the attack, he survived (219). In *The Gremlins*, apart from flying against the doctors’ indications, there were gremlins all over Gus’ plane, which worsened the flying conditions. In addition, he was suddenly attacked by the Germans, with Gus being shot in a leg and having a crash with the plane. This is how it is narrated by Dahl in the book:

The German rear-gunner was waiting for him. He raked the Hurricane from stem to stem as it passed, and Gus’s right leg fell limply off the rudder bar. He had stopped two bullets, one through the kneecap and one in the ankle.

It hurt like blazes and was bleeding fast. The Hurricane was almost out of control because gremlins were out on the wings, boring holes, jerking at control cables, and hammering on the cockpit cover. ... Everything was going wrong. (34)

After this episode, he had to stay in the hospital for a long time and Gremlin Gus accompanied him. Comparing it with “Shot Down Over Libya” (1942), which was written a year before *The Gremlins* (1943), it depicts also an accident, but this time, instead of being attacked by Germans, the pilot is attacked by the Italians. This is because Dahl was not fighting in the same battle as Gus – one was fighting in Britain and the other was in Libya. However, in the same way as in *The Gremlins*, the conflict ends up with the plane of the pilot crashing, but in the short-story, the injuries drive him to lose his sight for some

time - which differs from what happens in the children's story as it has just been seen. This happens because the injuries, in the way they are explained in "Shot Down Over Libya," could be too shivery to be told in a book for kids:

My face hurt most. I slowly put a hand up to feel it. It was very sticky. My nose didn't seem to be there. I tried to feel my teeth to see if they were still there, but it seemed as though one or two were missing. (38)

Furthermore, in the case of "A Piece of Cake" (1946), which is a revision of "Shot Down Over Libya" (1942), the accident happens due to some unfortunate events and not because of an enemy attack as it is the case of the previous passages analysed. In this one, the plane starts burning and finally crashes. Luckily, the pilot manages to get out of the machine- this part of the short-story is told in a very agonising way; the reader can feel the anxiety that the pilot was experiencing. But then, as a result of the accident, the same injuries from the previous version of the short-story are suffered by the pilot, who is in both cases Roald Dahl. Besides, it can be encountered a clarification of these changes in *Going Solo* (1986):

Some forty years ago I described in a story called 'A Piece of Cake' what it was like to find myself strapped firmly into the cockpit of my Gladiator with a fractured skull and a bashed-in face and a fuzzy mind while the crashed plane was going up in flames ... But there is an aspect of that story that I feel ought to be clarified by me and it is this. ... The fact is that my crash had nothing whatsoever to do with enemy action. (97)

And after clarifying that it was changed to be true to what really happened, he proceeds to tell the facts in a more autobiographical way, being very factual to what is told in "A Piece of Cake."

To conclude after having seen these four Dahl's stories of aeroplane accidents – told in "Shot Down Over Libya" (1942), *The Gremlins* (1943), "A Piece of Cake" (1946) and *Going Solo* (1986) – it is possible to say that this constitutes the most significant autobiographical feature found in *The Gremlins*. Dahl reflects the one that could be the most shocking experience of his life in this children's book, but as Jacques Barchilon claims "showing too much cruelty can be dangerous for the child's mental health" (336). Thus, in order to make it suitable for those readers, Dahl does not reflect the anxiety expressed in the short-stories while having the accident. In fact, in *The Gremlins*, while the accident is happening Dahl focuses the narration in a description of the events more than in the feelings of the pilot. The readers are only given the information that the injuries hurt, but the author does not describe the inner feelings of the pilot. And also and equally remarkable, Dahl, as it has been seen in the previous lines, changes the shivery injuries as well, and does not depict them in the same way as in the short-stories, being in *The Gremlins* much less explicit.

As the story continues, Gus has to stay in the hospital for a period of time. The pilot spends his time pondering upon the gremlins problem and something comes to his mind. Leveraging a visit of his squadron, he announces his idea of creating "the first Gremlin Training School" (36). Gremlin Gus was chosen to be in charge—he was already in the process of becoming a good gremlin as it was mentioned after the explanation of the accident's incident. Hence, a conversion of all Gremlins, changing his behaviour from bad to good and becoming allies of the pilots, starts. The goal that RAF pilots seek to achieve with this conversion was to free themselves from the gremlins' damages and distraction and, in turn, make the Germans the new target of the gremlins, taking advantage of this new situation. And to carry that out, "Gremlin Training School," is created according to Gus' plans and soon accomplishes its main aim: changing gremlins' behaviour. This change of characters from bad to good is characteristic from the fantasy genre of this period. While in the previous years' fantasy, characters constituted a determinate role – the good one or the bad one– throughout the entire story and they did not change, now, they do not remain the same the whole story (Kurkjian 494). As we mentioned when we were analysing Gus' story about the origin of the gremlins, the boundaries between the roles of the good and the bad ones were starting to waver, and, at this point of the story, with the transformation of gremlins, both pilots and gremlins are on the same side. This union of good and bad forces at some point of the story is also collected by Kurkjian as characteristic of this kind of stories (494).

As for the accident, they both suffered permanent effects, but as the injuries from the accident were not equal, the effects were not either. On the contrary, the consequences that those effects provoked were the same for both: inability to fly again. In Gus' case, he could not walk properly when he came back from the hospital, "he walked with a slight limp" and, it resulted in the doctors "saying that he would never be able to fly again" (42). Differently, as Dahl recalls in *Going Solo*, when he returned from the hospital, he could fly for some time until he started suffering "the most blinding headaches" (202). Dahl reported it to the doctor who found the cause in the injuries he suffered in the accident. Furthermore, when the doctor finished examining Dahl, he announced: "'You will be invalided home to Britain,' he said. 'You are no use to us out here any longer'" (202). After this announcement, Dahl did not clearly show how he felt about the news. The only part where he slightly shows his feelings is in an excerpt from a letter to his mother collected in *Going Solo*:

For the last 3 days I've been off flying. I may have to have another medical board & see if I'm really fit to fly out here. They may even send me to England, which wouldn't be a bad thing, would it. It's a pity in a way though, because I've just got going. I've got 5 confirmed, four Germans and one French, and quite a few unconfirmed. (203)

By the way he expresses his experience of the war, it is possible to glean some enthusiasm from his words. Also, by saying "It's a pity in a way" he expresses sadness about the facts. But all of the mentioned results are overshadowed by the sentence "They

may send me to England, which wouldn't be a bad thing, would it." So, it is not possible to be sure how he felt about not being able to fly anymore by what he wrote in *Going Solo* (1986). Nevertheless, taking an overlook to his writing career as a whole, the flying theme is presented in a very high percentage of his works; for instance, in all the short stories included in his book *Over to You* (1946), some of which have been mentioned in this paper; and also in tales like *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) or *The Minpins* (1991). Hence, by observing how much presented flying themes were in his posterior works, it can be presumed that he was somehow passionate about flying –even if he did not show it explicitly in the letter to his mother- and that he felt sadness when he was forced to leave it. Moreover, more aspects that could be the result of that love for flying that Dahl internally felt appear in *The Gremlins*. Firstly, just after announcing that Gus would not be able to fly again, there is a very categorical sentence: "To a pilot, being alive but earthbound is worse than not being alive at all" (42). That was how Gus felt and, as Gus was a reflection of the author, maybe that was what Dahl was feeling when the same happened to him –a short time before writing *The Gremlins*. Conversely, Gus, with the help of the gremlins who were already reformed, got to fly again. Gremlins convinced Gus to take another medical exam and in that exam he would have the gremlins' help to pass the different tests. Here is an excerpt that shows gremlins' help in the first part of the examination:

Then the examination began, and the medico said 'Jump up and down on that chair ten times and then let me feel your pulse.' Gus jumped up and down and then gave the medico his wrist. He knew his pulse was going too fast and he could hear his heart beating great hammer-blows in his chest. But immediately a gremlin hurried forward, gently lifted the medico's finger off the wrist, and tapped it with a little mallet, at first a bit faster than normal, then quickly slowing down to a steady 72 to the minute. (48)

Once he passed the medical exam, the doctor announced "'Remarkable. You've certainly made an amazing recovery,' ... 'I think you are quite fit to fly at last; and good luck to you!'" (49) After hearing the news, Gus and the gremlins started dancing and celebrating. And with that image that shows the union that has been created between the gremlins and the pilots –especially Gus– after realising that they are stronger together, Dahl ends the story. Constituting with that image a happy ending which is necessary, as it will be seen, in stories for children.

Returning to the idea of the passion for flying that the author felt, in this last part we can notice another indicative that would support that idea. Through the figure of Gus, Dahl expresses, in some way, what he would have wanted to happen to him: to have been able to keep flying with the help of some fantastic little creatures. So, maybe, Dahl used the story of *The Gremlins* to express how he really felt about the fact of not flying anymore with this sentence that we highlighted before: "To a pilot, being alive but earthbound is worse than not being alive at all" (42). And, also to voice the magical

solution that he would have liked to receive.

After the analysis carried out and looking at Dahl's book as a whole, it is vital to recall that it is a story about war mainly for children. Dahl, apart from introducing fantastic creatures, which he describes in the book as "a tribe of funny little people" (17), develops the story in a way, in which the principal conflict is not the battle itself, but the tensions and problems between gremlins and pilots and how they resolve those issues. WWII is just the scenario in this story. Even so, there is an attack from the Germans that leads the protagonist to the hospital but, as it was commented in the analysis of that part, it is not described with agony or in a hideous way. Even when the pilot abandons the plane after that accident, the main focus is on his conversation with Gremlin Gus –where the pilot tries to convince him of changing his behaviour. Also, even if accidents occur and pilots have to force the landing because of gremlins on different occasions, there are not any deaths or fatal events, which are recurrent in war itself and tend to appear in war stories. The cause of this can be a result of what Jitka Klugová comments in her thesis, that even though Dahl's books are provoking, disturbing or even shocking, all of them tend to end and finally really finish happily. Dahl respects the rule that all children's books should finish peacefully and the good defeat the bad" (20–21). This is something important in children's stories because as Allen Newell explains, these stories are like a guide in life, and children need to understand that even if they encounter obstacles, they will get to overcome them and eventually achieve their happy ending (46). It is a way of encouraging children not to surrender even if they find mishaps, which they will surely encounter in their lifetime. Thus, the 'happy ending' in this story arrives when the gremlins and the pilots start working together, eliminating the conflict between them and being part of the same 'team' to fight together against the real enemy who wanted to destroy their homes, the Germans. And then, to favour that 'happy ending', arrives the gremlins' intervention helping Gus when he is about to stop flying under medical prescription. Finally, thanks to those creatures he manages to change the doctor's opinion and keep flying planes what leads Gus and gremlins to a celebration that constitutes the ending of the story.

4. Conclusion

As it has been seen in the previous section, the author portrays a series of episodes from his war years in *The Gremlins*. Bearing in mind that the work itself is based on a story that Dahl got to know during his years as a pilot, there are also passages where the author depicts events that he himself lived, as it is the aeroplane accident, the stay in the hospital, and the posterior inability to keep piloting. In the book we also find representations of the pilots' conversations about gremlins that, as Dahl confirmed, were everyday situations in the squadron. These are the most significant resemblances, but not the only ones, as it has been analysed in the previous section.

The other important feature that has been spotted is that *The Gremlins* is a book categorised for children where experiences that belong to a real war are reflected, being war a controversial theme for these books because it is a topic full of violence

(Reynolds 4). Referring to this aspect, Barchilon claims that it is acceptable that the theme of war is included in a work addressed for kids as long as the story is told in a proper manner for that audience (320). Also, as it was mentioned in the analysis, he states that stories can damage children's minds if they contain cruel or brutal episodes (336) because they have "literal minds" (320). Due to this, it is important to mention that Dahl does not show the topic with crudity, he makes the story suitable for kids, as it has been argued, including fantastic items, changing the focal point of the story and avoiding the horrors of wars. Also, the story is narrated with snippets of humour that were the key for Roald Dahl as it was commented in the introduction of this paper. In addition, he also provides a happy ending that, as we have already seen, is a significant feature of this kind of tale.

Finally, after being conscious of how Roald Dahl got to transform the folktale of the gremlins –that he got to know during his period as a RAF pilot– into his first children's book, and also, having analysed how much of himself is reflected in the main character, Gus, and in the facts narrated, it is essential to highlight that apart from *The Gremlins*. The autobiographical features and themes that are not apparently for a children's audience – like war– are recurrent throughout all his writing work. That is why Treglown asserts that "Dahl not only wrote down the gremlins legend but gave it the beginnings of his own style" (69) and by reading Dahl's works, either for adult or for kids, it is possible to realise to which extent that statement is real and how many of the style features encountered in *The Gremlins* can be discovered by digging deeper in his literary work.

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