



# Humour and the locus of control in *The Gruffalo* (Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler)

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## Abstract

### Humour and the locus of control in *The Gruffalo* (Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler)

*The purpose of this article is firstly to distinguish between the notions “external locus of control” and “internal locus of control”, secondly to indicate ways in which the locus of control in humour in “The Gruffalo” by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler can be identified and thirdly to indicate possible ways in which emphasis on the internal locus of control in the young reader can assist him/her in the development of a general mental/psychological well-being.*

*Different kinds of literary humour contribute to the ways in which young listeners/readers can identify with stories, poems, dramas and films. The young listener/reader can recognise him/herself in humorous situations, in the humorous use of imagery, wordplay and illustrations/visuals. He/she can also identify with or distance him-/herself from or reject the characters, the values represented and the author who created the text.*

*When in interaction with the works of authors who use negative as well as positive kinds of humour to point out the dos and don'ts, the rights and the wrongs in life, the horizon of a young listener's/reader's experience can be expanded. Such a reading would contribute to the development of the young reader's cognitive, emotional, social and moral values as it links up with an*

*unconscious or conscious decision about the locus of control in his/her life.*

## **Opsomming**

### **Humor en die lokus van kontrole in *The Gruffalo* (Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler)**

*Die doel met hierdie artikel is eerstens om te onderskei tussen die konsepte "eksterne lokus van kontrole" en "interne lokus van kontrole", tweedens om wyses aan te dui waarop die interne lokus van kontrole in "The Gruffalo" deur Julia Donaldson en Axel Scheffler geïdentifiseer en nagegaan kan word en derdens om moontlike wyses aan te dui waarop klem op die interne lokus van kontrole vir die jong leser tot voordeel kan wees in die ontwikkel van sy/haar algemene psigologiese welstand.*

*Verskillende soorte literêre humor dra by tot die wyses waarop jong lesers met verhale, gedigte, dramas en films kan identifiseer. Die jong leser kan hom-/haarself herken in humoristiese situasies, in die gebruik van beeldspraak en stylfigure, en illustrasies/die visuele. Hy/sy kan hom-/haarself ook identifiseer of distansieer van situasies of karakters, die waardes wat aangebied word, of die outeur van die literêre werk verwerp.*

*Wanneer die jong leser in interaksie is met die werk van outeurs wat negatiewe en positiewe soorte humor gebruik om te wys op die moets en moenies, die regte en die verkeerde in die lewe, kan die ervaringshorison van die luisteraar/leser verruim word. So 'n luister-/leeservaring kan bydra tot die ontwikkel van die jong leser se kognitiewe, emosionele, sosiale en morele waardes, omdat dit aansluit by onbewuste of bewuste keuses en besluite oor die lokus van kontrole in sy/haar lewe.*

## **1. Into the deep, dark wood**

There are millions of mice in world literature, from mythology to musicals, from stories to poems and songs, from fables to film. Literary mice are all around us, symbolising many different things about the nature of humans.

One of the best known recently published mouse books is *The Gruffalo*, a story in verse written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler. This story about a little mouse with big schemes has been a phenomenal success since it was first published in 1999. It received, among other awards, the prestigious Smarties Gold Award (the children's literature equivalent of the Booker Prize), has been translated into at least 28 languages, has sold more than a million copies and has been performed on stage all over Britain, Ire-

land, Canada, Poland and in New York, and has been made into a film as a musical adaptation. It was translated into Afrikaans by Philip de Vos and published under the title *Die Goorgomgaai*.

*The Gruffalo* is a story of a mouse that went “for a stroll in the deep, dark wood”, and then meets a fox who invites him to lunch, an owl who invites him to tea, and a snake who invites him to a feast. Mouse declines every invitation each time politely saying that it is going to have lunch, tea and a feast with the gruffalo, of which none of them knows anything. The little mouse first outwits the fox, then the owl and the snake – all predators whose real intentions are suggested not to be friendly and hospitable at all. In about the middle of the story the narrative makes a turnaround – the mouse meets a real Gruffalo and also outwits the Gruffalo.

To be able to link humour, the locus of control and assertiveness to the story of *The Gruffalo*, the progression of the story can be followed to ascertain how it gradually becomes clear that the mouse acts from a conscious or subconscious feeling of an internal locus of control.

## 2. Points of departure

Children can be assisted to get more control over their emotions and to master their anxieties by for example reading books to them through which they are enabled to gain more assertiveness by developing an internal locus of control. The notions *assertiveness*, *external locus of control* and *internal locus of control* are important in an endeavour to open up the emotional riches of the story-poem, *The Gruffalo*.

To arrive at the internal locus of control, it is often necessary to develop skills to be assertive. Berko, as quoted by Tubbs and Moss (1994:232-236), emphasises several principles of assertiveness. One of the most important principles is not to be victimised. Assertiveness is also to approach a difficult situation with a positive assumption, but at the same time to be proactive and to know what you want. Being assertive also means to speak up for yourself, to use “I” statements and feeling verbs, not to feel compelled to always justify yourself and to say “No” firmly and calmly. When in a tight spot or danger, look for solutions, but try not to confuse assertion with aggression.

The views of De Vito (1998:104, 233), Louw and Edwards (1997: 578, 634, 635) as well as that of Woolfolk (1998:388) on the notions

*external locus of control* and *internal locus of control* refer to the work of Rotter (1953; 1966), who showed that expectations determine whether people are self-directed or not. If a person – in the case of this article, the child – feels that the locus of control is external, he/she might feel that he/she is often forced into doing things, into feeling suffocated, distrusted and depressed and his/her self-motivation and creativity are usually very low. If the locus of control is internal, the person – as in the case of the mouse in *The Gruffalo*, or the child as a young listener/reader who identifies with the (humorous) portrayal of positive characters and events – (consciously or subconsciously) feels that he/she has more freedom, greater self-motivation, more room for creativity and problem solving and has a brighter outlook on life.

One characteristic of mice in children's literature is that they are often portrayed in a humorous way. Humour is also an integral part of the story in *The Gruffalo*, as the main character, in spite of the title of the story-poem, is a mouse. Just as children enjoy identifying with seemingly insignificant mice that succeed in difficult circumstances, they enjoy the humour that is an integral element of numerous mouse stories.

Three to five year olds enjoy incongruity, the unusual, repetition, the creation of expectations, surprise and unexpected similarities. Six to eight year olds still enjoy the same kinds of humour, but also find exaggeration and hyperbole, experimenting with language as in phonetic manipulation, rhyme and rhythm humorous, if these support humorous events or characterisation in stories and poems (Van Coillie, 1999).

To identify a few kinds of humour that are used in *The Gruffalo* to enhance the theme, the following can be looked into: humour with regard to the narrative aspects, humour with regard to the poetic aspects, visual humour and humour and the performing arts.

### **3. Poetic representation of the locus of control in *The Gruffalo***

When the text of *The Gruffalo* is opened, the reader goes quietly through the first double-page illustration into the wood, and then, where the story starts, reads the following:

A mouse took a stroll  
through the deep dark wood.

A fox saw the mouse  
And the mouse looked good.

These words also appear on the back cover of the book, so if the adult reader reads this before starting to read the book to the child or the audience, or if the child is competent to read the book, these words are the child's very first acquaintance with this story-poem. Perhaps the child might have heard about the author when he/she takes this book from the shelf for the first time, but if not, this appetiser of something terrifying inside the book, will lead him/her through the first two pages, which is a double-page illustration of a forest in dark hues of brown and green, into the forest and into the story-in-verse experience.

### **3.1 Conceptual and poetic aspects of the story**

#### **3.1.1 Poetic narration of the story: a mouse took a stroll**

The poetic narrator structures the story in such a way that a process develops in which the mouse as a character is carefree in the beginning, but then meets three predators who it has to outwit. Although there is no evidence from the verbal text or the illustration that Mouse is afraid of these predators, it can be assumed that Mouse is consciously hiding its real feelings. If Mouse doesn't show that it is scared (compare the three relevant illustrations) of the sly-smiling fox, the low-browed, sharp-clawed owl and the half erect snake, Mouse has an advantage over them, which is part of an assertive attitude in which it is emphasised that you should always try not to let your enemies know that you are afraid of them. The way the story is narrated is that of a positive assumption that the Mouse will not become a victim; it will survive. But sometimes survival is not enough; life has to be far more than the survival of the fittest – or the cleverest. After having outwitted these predators, Mouse still believes that it has scared them off with an imaginary beast, the gruffalo (with a low-case g). Mouse is scared right off its feet when it sees what is in the context of this animal fantasy a "real" gruffalo. Mouse, however, recovers very quickly, tricks the Gruffalo by reversing its strategy, the Gruffalo and Mouse walk back along the same footpath and the narrative strategy leads the story and the listener/reader in a full circle.

The narrative strategy makes ample use of humorous expectations when the exact structure of the dialogue is repeatedly used in the case of the fox, the owl and the snake. The way Mouse outwits one

after another repeatedly is a humorous confirmation that Mouse is still alright and in control.

The poetic use of language in *The Gruffalo* brings about a distinctive enchantment which quickly captivates the audience. Some of these poetic aspects are that the poem has a powerful rhythm. It is written mainly in dactylic metre and in stanzas of varying length. There are couplets, tercets, quatrains and sextets, and a strong pattern of paired rhyme throughout:

~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ /  
A mouse took / a stroll through / the deep dark / wood.  
~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ / ~ ~ /  
A fox saw / the mouse, and / the mouse looked / good.

Other ways in which the poetic aspects of *The Gruffalo* as a poem appeals to the audience is in the use of imagery and wordplay. The symbolic meanings of the different animals, the wood and the foot-path are rich and contribute to the subconscious fostering of the inner feelings of the child as listener. The encounter with playful language may strengthen the association with the topic and the theme of the poem.

The suggestion that the mouse's life is in danger is used at least four times, beginning with the fox:

A mouse took a stroll through the deep dark wood.  
A fox saw the mouse, and the mouse looked good.

Hyperbole/exaggeration is combined with repetition:

He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws,  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.

This exaggeration is supported by the illustrations – when mentioning the detail of the Gruffalo's appearance, it is as if it shows a close-up (like a close-up in a film) of the Gruffalo's tusks, claws, teeth and jaw. When seeing only part of something, tension mounts, as the listener/reader is not sure about the information regarding the gruffalo that is withheld from him/her.

Irony is used – the little brown mouse, who should be scared of the others, outwits the others and becomes the hero of the story-poem. The Gruffalo, who actually is the scary creature, is scared off by Mouse – or rather the image that it projects to the outer world.

Repetition is an integral part of the story, along with the strong rhyme and rhythm, which is also the repetition of sound and rhythmic patterns:

‘Where are you going to, little brown mouse?  
Come and have lunch in my underground house.’

‘It’s terribly kind of you, Fox, but no –  
I’m going to have lunch with a gruffalo.’

The element of surprise is very effectively used in the narrative structure, as the listener/reader follows Mouse on the footpath as it meets the fox, the owl and the snake, each time telling them that it can’t go with these animals who are pretending to be friendly towards it, and each time saying that it is going to have lunch, tea and a feast with the gruffalo. And directly after that, when the others have fled, repeatedly saying to itself:

‘Silly old Fox/Owl/Snake! Doesn’t he know,  
There’s no such thing as a gruffalo?’

But then the surprise comes right in the middle of the story, when Mouse comes face to face with the supposedly imaginary gruffalo:

‘Silly old Snake! Doesn’t he know,  
There’s no such thing as a gruffal ...  
... OH!  
But who is this creature with terrible claws  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws?’

‘Oh help! Oh no!  
It’s a gruffalo!’

This humorous turnabout/reversal (peripety) in the story is a narrative strategy to refer back and to put the story in reverse, but with a new twist: now the quick-thinking mouse also has to outwit the Gruffalo. An interesting and humorous pattern evolves: Mouse uses the hypocrisy of three predators and the Gruffalo’s straightforward intentions against each other, scaring them off with one another.

It seems that the type of humour most often used, is incongruity. In this story everything that is not as it should be, or everything that is not as expected, stirs up tension, nervousness, anxiety and stress about the safety of Mouse, with whom the listener/reader might identify. The child as listener/reader will feel that Mouse shouldn’t be eaten or become a victim of the predators and the Gruffalo. Creative wordplay such as “roasted fox”, “owl ice cream”, “scrambled snake”

and "Gruffalo crumble" are all examples of humorous incongruity. Because the language as such plays an important part in the narrative strategy, not only that of the implied author, but also the skilful use of words and arguments by Mouse, there is much credit to be given to language as a means of getting control of something, whether it is control over one's own fears or control of a situation in which one feels threatened. According to Lacan, as interpreted by Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński (2003:32), "language formation is motivated by the pleasure that comes through feelings of control". Lacan sees language as "the symbolization of desire and the never-ending search of control" (Barker & Galasiński, 2003:32).

In the end, when Mouse has scared off everyone who wants to eat it, it can sit down and peacefully enjoy eating a nut:

All was quiet in the deep dark wood.  
The mouse found a nut and the nut was good.

While there are many possible sources of nervous laughter and anxious shrieks in the story, it ends with a feeling of deep and quiet joy. The words "the nut was good" may suggest, among other meanings of this phrase, that not only was the nut good, but that there is an overall good feeling of contentment and achievement. This feeling, seen in hindsight, has much to do with the assertiveness of Mouse and the way it quietly went its way in outwitting the others without ever losing its cunning and its will to survive.

What Chris Barker and Galasiński (2003:34) say about the telling of stories in general, is also applicable to the story as narrated in *The Gruffalo*:

In order to display and manifest ourselves as intelligible persons we tell stories about ourselves in the context of social relationships. Personal construct psychology stresses that narratives are rationales for courses of action.

This also has implications for the ways in which listeners/readers might identify with a mouse story as told in *The Gruffalo*; a story in which the threatened Mouse succeeds by using its inner qualities of assertiveness to gain control. By doing this, Mouse probably develops its inner feeling of being able to handle difficult situations. If a listener/reader had had a bad experience in his/her past (e.g. being bullied or denied the toys others in a group play with), the narration of *The Gruffalo* might be therapeutic to such a child. It is in this context that experiencing a story like *The Gruffalo* is similar to narrative



therapy as used in psychiatry or by psychologists, of which Barker and Galasiński (2003:35) say:

... in the therapeutic situation persons are in principle able to reconstruct their past – bringing it into line with the requirements of the present – thereby consolidating an emotional narrative with which they feel relatively content.

### 3.1.2 Focalisation: to look and tell; to see and decide what to do

The narrative world of *The Gruffalo* is focalised from an external point of view, as if none of the characters can know what Mouse is really thinking. If Mouse is afraid, its advantage is that nobody can see that from any of its actions or in the way it talks. On the contrary, Mouse is perceived to be in control of itself and in control of the encounters with the predators and the Gruffalo. There is dramatic irony in the fact that the listener/reader knows more about the way Mouse thinks and acts than any one of the other four characters at any given time. This puts the listener/reader in a position of superiority compared to the inferior positions of the predatory characters within the story, which fosters the feeling of an internal locus of control in the listener/reader.

### 3.1.3 Characters: Mouse and company

- **Mouse**

Mouse symbolises the human self-image when feeling like a “little brown mouse”. It sometimes (usually in hindsight) can be very humorous to be in a tight spot or in big trouble, as long as the “little brown mouse” can keep cool and everything turns out fine. It is never suggested what gender Mouse is – it can be male or female. It is important that the mouse can also be female – it is good for little girls to identify with strong characters. It is only in *The Gruffalo’s Child*, published in 2004, five years after *The Gruffalo*, that the gender of the mouse is specified as male and the gruffalo’s child as female:

The Gruffalo’s Child unclenched her fist.  
‘The Big Bad Mouse – so he does exist!’  
The mouse hopped into the hazel tree.  
He beckoned, then said, ‘Just wait and see.’

A question that might be asked from a point of view of gender studies is whether “its” and “it” instead of “her” and “he” would have been better in both stories.

Having read the story, the reader and/or listener suddenly realises that this mouse is a little liar – it constantly tells (white) lies to save itself. The most common type of humour that small children like, is incongruity, which is intrinsically something which appears or happens in a wrong way. For the same reason the breaking of taboos are often humorous to children. Telling a lie is breaking a taboo and therefore a form of incongruity. A mouse that tells lies in a humorous way and gets away with it, may be what many children are secretly dreaming of. Therefore children will eagerly identify with the mouse, all the more because the mouse outwits four other animals who would probably have harmed it.

With regard to assertiveness, Mouse does quite well. Throughout Mouse shows that it is alert. It is a good listener and hears every little detail of what the other characters are saying and it immediately sees who the predators are and what intentions they have. It reacts in detail by calling them by their exact names and reacts to what each one of them have said specifically. Mouse is assertive in many ways. It sets out with the positive assumptions: it confidently goes for “a stroll”, it doesn’t walk timidly. Mouse is proactive: it thinks on its feet and finds ways in which the predators can be scared off. Mouse knows what it wants: its freedom. Mouse speaks up for itself, uses “I” statements and feeling verbs: e.g.: “Its terribly kind of you, Fox, but no – I’m going to have lunch with a Gruffalo.” Mouse doesn’t make excuses or over-explain what it wants to do or why it wants to do it; it seems as if it doesn’t feel compelled to justify itself. Mouse says “No” firmly and calmly: it doesn’t say “No” and then agrees – it matches its delivery to its message. Mouse looks for solutions – it is creatively solving problems as it goes along, because creatively solving problems seems to be part of its lifestyle.

By identifying with Mouse, the listener/reader may feel that like Mouse he/she is in control of the situation when experiencing problems.

- **Fox, Owl and Snake**

The fox, the owl and the snake as predators may be seen as different forms of the same threat: dangerous people who pretend to be friendly, accommodating and hospitable, but who don’t have the best interests of others at heart. These kinds of characters are not imaginative but real in the lives of the readers/audience.

- **The Gruffalo**

The talking animals in this text are part of animal fantasy, but the Gruffalo as an imaginary beast is a form of heightened fantasy, which corresponds with the fact that the fear of something is often in our/the child's imagination. The child creates fears in his/her mind, equivalent to monsters, and the child doesn't really think that there might be such a threat in the real world. Monsters are, as explained by J.E. Cirlot (1983:213):

... symbolic of the cosmic forces at a stage one step removed from chaos. ... On the psychological plane, they allude to the base powers which constitute the deepest strata of psychological geology, seething as in a volcano until they erupt in the shape of some monstrous apparition or activity. ... They are the antithesis – or the adversary – of the 'hero' and of weapons. For weapons are the positive powers granted to man ...

In the case of Mouse, its weapons are its wits, its strong sense of survival and its assertive counteraction.

When Mouse meets the other three animals one by one, it describes the supposedly imaginary gruffalo to them in detail and in a very graphic way and progressively adds more detail to the image of the gruffalo:

At first to Fox:

'He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws,  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.'

Then Mouse describes the imaginary gruffalo to Owl:

'He has knobbly knees, and turned-out toes,  
And a poisonous wart at the end of his nose.'

And then Mouse describes the imaginary gruffalo to Snake:

'His eyes are orange, his tongue is black,  
He has purple prickles all over his back.'

But sometimes it is not just an imaginary monster or beast, as Mouse discovers when it meets the real Gruffalo, and sees with terror that *all the details it thought to be imaginary, are true*:

'Silly old Owl! Doesn't he know,  
There's no such thing as a gruffal ...

...OH!

But who is this creature with terrible claws  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws?  
He has knobbly knees, and turned-out toes,  
And a poisonous wart at the end of his nose.  
His eyes are orange, his tongue is black,  
He has purple prickles all over his back.

'Oh help! Oh no!  
It's a gruffalo!'

The order in which the menacing animals appear and reappear in the story is important: fox, owl, snake, Gruffalo, and then in reverse order, snake, owl, fox. Part of the humour in these successive scenes is mechanised repetition and humorous exaggeration.

There is very subtle wordplay/manipulation of spelling – before Mouse actually meets the gruffalo, the word "gruffalo" is spelled with a lower-case "g", but when Mouse meets the creature, the Gruffalo becomes real, he gets a name when the spelling of "Gruffalo" starts with a capital letter "G". So the Gruffalo becomes more specific, more substantial in the humorous reversal in the story.

- **Relationships between characters**

Apart from the Gruffalo, all the other characters try to control Mouse by offering it lunch, tea and a feast – all of them most probably want to eat the mouse.

Food plays an important role throughout the story. The story starts with the mouse peacefully taking a stroll in the wood, but then it is confronted by four creatures who would like to devour it. As for food, the story has a happy ending, though:

All was quiet in the deep dark wood.  
The mouse found a nut and the nut was good.

In the end the mouse eats a nut, something far removed from any animal species.

Eating together often has the meaning of sharing friendship, but there is a difference between eating and devouring. *Devouring*, as explained by Ad De Vries's (1984:134-135), is associated with entrapment and entanglement and can result in partial mutilation or complete death; in the human sub-conscious it is ugly and aggressive, and for example the head of a monster "psychologically ... represents the danger of being devoured by the destructive forces of some species". People who don't care for each other, symbolically

devour one another – in the case of Mouse in *The Gruffalo* it, however, doesn't have the meaning of "eat or be eaten!", but rather to be assertive, so that it doesn't get devoured.

Throughout the story there is the suggestion of violence between the characters. Sometimes violence can be humorous, especially when it is inflicted upon the negative characters. In this story there is no direct violence, but only the suggestion of violence against the mouse, violence that is reversed and turned against all four characters who were a threat to the life of the little mouse.

The relationships between the characters, the mouse, the fox, the owl, the snake and the Gruffalo, correspond with what Barker and Galasiński (2003:102) say about fear and respect in another context, and about fear and respect in general: fear and control are "predominantly the realm of perceptions and mental states. ... controlling people are those who do not have a certain mental attitude (respect) towards others". In the case of *The Gruffalo*, the defensive and assertive attitude of Mouse might develop out of its fear of being controlled by others.

The interaction between the characters in *The Gruffalo* can also be seen as powerplay in a humorous fantasy mode. Barker and Galasiński (2003:102) point out that if somebody is feeling unsure or insecure, and gets good at doing things and getting in control of others, it boosts that person's confidence. But controlling others should be distinguished from a child's need to be loved and respected by others. It is often this need for love and respect which causes him/her to want to show that he/she is not afraid, that he/she is in control. In some cases, for some children, "respect" for example having respect for the father, becomes virtually a "synonym for fear" (Barker & Galasiński, 2003:100-101). To instil fear in others often seems to be a way of surviving, but the child preferably has to be guided to distinguish between having a feeling of internal control because others are scared of him/her, or because others respect and like him/her. This ties up with the child's development of self-worth or self-esteem, building confidence and developing a healthy and positive sense of an internal locus of control and general well-being.

The issue of the locus of control in *The Gruffalo* can also be linked to what Barker and Galasiński (2003:120-121) say about people misunderstood by society:

... no single identity acts as an overarching organizing core since identities shift according to how subjects are addressed or

represented. Further, it is not that we *have* multiple identities (which would imply a subject that possesses) but that we *are* a verbal weave constituted as multiple and contradictory identities which cross-cut or dislocate each other.

These efforts to "cross-cut" and "dislocate" others are metaphorically evident from the cruel intentions and as seen in the dialogue between Mouse and the fox, the owl and the snake ("outside" the mouse), but also the "gruffalo within ourselves – the creation of our minds". The effort to gain an internal locus of control which enables the individual to have a constant feeling of inner strength which will enable him to stand up for himself when others want to harm him, goes hand in hand with learning to be assertive in a polite way.

### **3.1.4 Events: outwitting enemies as survival strategy – repeatedly**

The clever mouse decides what to tell each of the animals it encounters in the forest, but denies the existence of the gruffalo. When the mouse eventually encounters the Gruffalo, it is taken by *surprise*, and is almost shocked off its feet, but Mouse pulls itself together and puts the events in reverse so that its assertive survival strategy can work repeatedly. Mouse now has to go back on its own tracks and its words to make everything true, especially its own safety.

It usually is not humorous at all when one is experiencing trouble, but it becomes humorous when one can contemplate and recognise it later. In that way one can be more prepared to handle trouble when it repeatedly crosses one's path again, and again, and again, as in the case of the Mouse being confronted by a fox, an owl, a snake and a real Gruffalo.

There is a difference between the notions of *being in control of others and/or the situation* and the notion *internal locus of control*. Mouse is in control of the events from the start. Mouse is not controlled by any of the other animals, because it most probably believes in itself. Mouse has inner confidence; the locus of control is *within* itself. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that Mouse hasn't harmed the other animals in any way. People like to feel that they are in control, often exactly because they are not sure of themselves; this helps the individual to know that he may get into a difficult situation and actually deal with it (Barker & Galasiński, 2003: 101-102). The internal locus of control should not be based on feelings of aggressiveness and fear, but on the constant develop-

ment of an inner feeling of a healthy self-esteem and self-confidence.

### **3.1.5 Space: on his way through the deep, dark wood and back**

Considering the space where the story takes place, a wood with a footpath, a stream, a lake, mushrooms, birds, squirrels, ants, butterflies and beetles, two very important spatial symbols become prominent in the story and in the illustrations. Taking a stroll links up symbolically with taking a journey, which is one of the five most prominent themes in world literature. A journey is also associated with adventure and the desire for discovery, although the mouse did not have big ambitions when setting out on a stroll. It nevertheless symbolises being confronted with problems in life and the exploration of the unconscious (De Vries, 1984:278). The forest as such symbolises the home of outlaws and hunters.

Although the footpath and the wood are a very threatening space, the element of humour is an integral part of what happens where and with whom. Although the place doesn't change, which can be seen from the way the forest is illustrated in the end as an exact mirror image of the illustration of the forest before the story starts, much has happened to the mouse, and the listener/reader can share with a smile of contentment the obvious relief of the mouse who has outwitted the predatory animals in the forest.

Fears are not always unfounded, silly creations of children's minds. There are many real dangers in this big forest of life and the world we live in, and children do have to become streetwise and do have to develop ways to outwit dangerous people they might encounter and defuse dangerous situations they might get into.

The psychological concept of the locus of control is related to a person's need for controlling certain spaces/environments, or a territory, but these concepts are not equivalent to each other.

### **3.1.6 Time: to be prepared – for whatever, whenever**

Time is an important issue throughout the story. The mouse has to get out of the tight spot as fast as possible when each of the predators, except the straightforward Gruffalo, invites it to have lunch, tea and a feast, respectively, with them.

The story has a strong and fast pace, which contributes to the mounting tension. Sometimes the progression is put on hold or slowed down by the dialogues between the different predators and

the mouse, which further adds to the tension. The way Mouse repeatedly outwits the other characters, creates an enjoyable pattern in the story, as the listener/reader suspects what is coming next, but is still in suspense about it. Although the story is told chronologically, the child as a listener/reader experiences something of a "fake" flashback when Mouse and the Gruffalo go "back" in time and space in the reverse order. This repetition of the events, in reverse, makes for an enjoyable reading experience as the child as a listener/reader might feel that he/she knows what is coming:

'My favourite food!' the Gruffalo said.  
'You'll taste good on a slice of bread!'

'Good?' said the mouse. 'Don't call me good!  
I'm the scariest creature in this wood.  
Just walk behind me and soon you'll see,  
Everyone is afraid of me.'

'All right,' said the Gruffalo, bursting with laughter.  
'You go ahead and I'll follow after.'

As the events unfold in time, and yet another predator is scared off, the identifying child may unconsciously or consciously have a growing feeling that Mouse will be all right, because it has a secret plan which is working.

### **3.2 Visual aspects, humour and the locus of control**

Throughout the illustrations are an integral part of the story – without the illustrations the listener/reader would not be able to visually project his/her thoughts and feelings of fear and anxiety on the visible, real predators and the Gruffalo.

As the author Amanda Craig (2004) notes, "the illustrations need to not just match the text but deepen it in unexpected ways". This implies that the illustrations add to, and tell more than the story tells in words. With regard to the interaction and addition of multiplying meanings, illustrations are the interplay of verbal humour and visual humour in the two double-page illustrations: the one in which Mouse scares off the snake, and the illustration directly following that, in which Mouse meets the real Gruffalo.

The double page illustration in which Mouse scares off the snake consists of four small illustrations and one which is bigger, as if the experience is fragmented and as if only certain features of the gruffalo are known. The verbal text is also scattered in six loose



fragments over the two pages, which gives the impression that there is similarity or parallelism between the verbal text and the visual text, which in turn creates a certain kind of unity in the text as a whole. The three round forms on the left, which might resemble the eyes of the Mouse as it sees the gruffalo, are repeated on the right in the rounds of the fallen trees. On both pages there are many open white spaces and the general feeling is that of ample light. On the left as well as on the right page Mouse is looking to the right. After the snake has taken off, Mouse can proceed to the next page with the words:

‘Silly old Snake! Doesn’t he know,  
There’s no such thing as a gruffal ...  
.. O!’

This double-page illustration is a unity (there is no fragmentation) and the picture in hues of dark greens and browns fills the pages to the outermost edges. There is no feeling of lightness here, no feeling of escape, not even the sky can be seen. Here is a feeling of dark despair, especially when looking into the deeply saturated orange eyes of the Gruffalo. Now the verbal text is within the illustration, which makes it more difficult for Mouse to distance his words from what it thought was only an imaginary gruffalo. Very effective is the one long stanza into which all the characteristics of the Gruffalo (now with a capital letter G) which Mouse has related to the fox, the owl and the snake over several pages, are compressed. The Gruffalo actually is all this, and more, because in the illustration, and we can assume that Mouse also sees it, the listener/reader can see that the hairy Gruffalo also has horns, big ears, strong arms and a huge body. The Gruffalo is obstructing Mouse’s way by standing right in the middle of the footpath, filling the visual space or plane with his gruesome presence. By using contrast in texture and colour of the fur of the mouse and that of the gruffalo, the mouse looks all the more threatened and the gruffalo all the more menacing. The unity in the illustration is also enhanced by the use of round lines, as if the Gruffalo is bending inwards, towards Mouse, who is scared right off its feet. This can be seen in Mouse’s shadow: his feet and his shadow don’t meet. This humorous surprise, which is accompanied by the suggestion of aggression, will most probably result in shrieks of enjoyment from the listener, which, when he/she reads the words “‘Oh help! Oh no!!! It’s a gruffalo!’”, will quickly turn over the page to see what is going to happen next.

Regarding the humour in the illustrations, Amanda Craig (2004) points out that the mouse looks very innocent with its big round eye

(it is always seen in profile, so only one eye can be seen), its pure white tummy and its pale fawn body. She also mentions that the illustrations give only glimpses of the gruffalo when the mouse describes him to the other animals, "which builds the tension and makes the climax far more terrifying".

Another aspect of the illustrations that contributes to the tension in the story, is the dark hues and saturated colours of the forest – the deep greens and dark browns contribute to the dark atmosphere and feeling of suspense, and that forms the psychological background for the comic relief when Mouse outwits all the dangerous animals in the surrounding forest. The forest can also be seen as a symbol of the unconscious, as in most fairy tales. Objects in the spatial plane of the illustrations have dark outlines, which give a certain sharpness and defining quality to the characters – characters who are all neatly put back into their place by the canny Mouse.

#### **4. The theme, humour and locus of control**

A question that remains to be answered, is whether we can really encourage children to identify with a mouse/somebody who is a liar, who actually makes a habit of lying, who is a trickster, who is so secretive that we never know what it really is thinking.

There are numerous ways in which the theme and sub-themes of this story-verse can be formulated, of which I would point out only a few (using the inputs of children and adolescents I talked to about this story):

- "It is not a good thing to be obedient to bad people."
- "It is not wrong to manipulate the truth a little to get yourself out of a bad joint like when evil-minded hypocrites, and dishonest two-faced people clearly want to harm you."
- "Don't tell lies, but if you are in danger, it is better to lie than to be killed."
- "It's better to lie than to die."

The book ends peacefully, returning to the beginning:

All was quiet in the deep dark wood.  
The mouse found a nut and the nut was good.

Most people, also children, don't like being controlled; some have an "irrational dislike of it" even when it is a reasonable request to do

something; it is not that people/children want to control everything, they just want to be left alone so that they can feel relaxed (Barker & Galasiński, 2003:101).

Although adults can mediate the story of *The Gruffalo* in such a way that the young child can become more assertive and develop an internal locus of control, the child should also be made aware of it that he/she should never underestimate evil, that he/she shouldn't think that he/she can play with the idea of outwitting imaginary evil. Evil can be very real and alive and living in one's (mental) neighbourhood!

## 5. Conclusions

While *The Gruffalo* is a story-poem that is hugely enchanting and charming, it is at the same time a story-poem that yields much food for thought.

Humour in children's literature, which fosters the internal locus of control in children, can play a very important role in the development of their wholeness and general well-being.

*The Gruffalo* links up with intertextual resonances in literature which deal with being threatened by some kind of monster, among others, the monsters we create for ourselves in our minds. Children can be empowered to be assertive in a well-mannered way, to confront problems, fears and anxieties (whether these are real or imaginary) by exposing them to humorous, fortifying, empowering literature about a little mouse who outwits all who want to devour it, or by reading any book where evil is outwitted by the good.

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**Key concepts:**

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Donaldson, J.: *The Gruffalo*  
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