The Female Avenger: Violence, Absurdity, and Black Humour in Roald Dahl's Short stories

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Abstract

Roald Dhal's is a prominent British short story writer who presented a fictional world full of contradictions and ironies. It is also full of double meanings where things are not what they appear to be and where meaninglessness is a prominent component. Dahl's world is also colored with blackness and grotesqueness; full of comedy that makes you shiver instead of laugh and characters who invite a sneak peek into a different side, a dark side of human nature. Dahl's themes are various and gripping but usually revolve around the triangle that frames his fiction: violence, humour, and absurdity. What seems to be a prominent and recurrent theme that intersects with every element in this triangle is revenge. In one story after another Dahl presents models of avengers. His female avenger is an image of a woman who is fixated on her revenge and who succeeds in her deeds regardless of the means she uses to exact her revenge. The female avenger in Dahl's short stories is a character who is ruthless and cunning in carrying out revenge against the male character, yet her action is often unexpected and shocking. This paper will address three of Dahl's stories that illustrate clear examples of female avengers. The discussion of selected short stories of Dahl will elaborate on the positioning of the female avenger in the midst of his recipe of black humour, absurdity, and violence.

المرأة المنتقمة: العنف، العبثية والكوميديا السوداء في قصص قصيرة مختارة لـ رولد دال

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الخلاصة

يعد رولد دال احد ابرز كتاب القصة البريطانيين حيث تخلق قصصه عالما مليئا بالتناقضات والمعاني المزدوجة، وتحتوي قصصه على عناصر عبثية وتعكس العنف في الطبيعة البشرية ، كما ان قصصه القصيرة تحتوى على كوميديا لكنها كوميديا سوداء تفتح الباب لرؤية الجانب الظلامي في السلوك البشري. ان موضوعات تلك القصص فيها تنوع كبير لكنها تتمحور حول ثالوث العنف، والكوميديا السوداء والعبثية. وأحد الموضوعات البارزة في اعماله الادبية هو الانتقام حيث ترسم قصصه نماذجا من المرأة المنتقمة وهي شخصية تركز على دافع الانتقام وتنجح عادة في تحقيق ما تصبو اليه بغض النظر عن الوسيلة المستخدمة. المرأة المنتقمة في قصص دال هي شخصية تتمتع بالذكاء والدهاء وعادة ما تنفذ الانتقام ضد الرجل بطرق غريبة ومبتكرة. يناقش هذا البحث التمثيل الادبي لشخصية المرأة المنتقة في مجموعة مختارة من قصص دال وذلك ضمن ثيمات العنف، الكوميديا السوداء والعبثية التي تؤطر اعماله القصصية.

Introduction

When Dahl was fourteen years old, his English teacher in school commented on his essay: ‘‘I have never met a boy who so persistently writes the exact opposite of what he means. He seems incapable of marshaling his thoughts on paper’’ ("Roald Dahl" 2009: 437). Apparently, the comment was put in a negative framework of critique to Dahl's writing even when he was just a student in school, and obviously the teacher could not see his talent. Yet, the teacher's comment that Dahl writes the opposite of what he means is not inaccurate. The style that Dahl developed over the years is based on the tension and friction between fantasy

and reality, between fact and fiction. Dhal's fictional world is full of contradictions and ironies. It is also full of double meanings where things are not what they appear to be and where meaninglessness and absurdity are prominent components. Dahl's world is also colored with blackness and grotesqueness; full of comedy that makes you shiver instead of laugh and characters who invite a sneak peek into a different side, a dark side of human nature.

Roald Dahl is a British writer (1916-1990) and is considered one of the most talented authors in the twentieth century.[1] He is a short story writer, poet, and screenwriter. Dahl is mostly known for his children's fiction. A number of his works are classics. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Matilda* are examples of books that have weight in modern children's literature and beyond. Dahl's works have been reproduced in millions of copies and also adapted on TV and in cinema.[2] Despite all this success, not many critical books can be found on Dahl.[3] Much of what has been written on Dahl appears in magazines and papers and focuses mainly on his children fiction. So, while scholarly work on Dahl's adult fiction is disperse, this paper capitalizes on this gap in critical appraisals and brings attention to Dahl's adult fiction, particularly the representation of the female avenger in relation to the violence, absurdity, and black humour in a number of Dahl's selected short stories.

Dahl's style is what distinguishes him as a writer. His ironic tone and cynical satirical approach are only some of the characteristics that define his writing. In the words of Beth Pearson, it is a "mark of any great author that their work outlives them, but Dahl is a special case. His originality, inventiveness and sense of mischief have always combined to give him an aura of eternal youth" (qtd.in Klugová 2007: 50). His themes are equally unusual in the way he infuses darkness with humour illustrating strange and sadistic aspects of human behavior. He offers this compelling recipe that defines his fiction and makes him stand out from other authors.

So, Dahl's is unique in many ways. He combines horror, shock, and absurdity in a way that reinforces the effect of his work. His technique, on the other hand, is skilled and adds to his story-telling abilities. Dahl has been described as "a master of story construction with a remarkable ability to weave a tale" ("Roald Dahl" 2009: 437). His work, however, is controversial to say the least. With violence permeating his work along with grotesque elements,[4] Dahl's books "have been accused of being vulgar, excessively violent, and distrustful towards adults" (West 1985: 219). His work, therefore, received uneasy reception by critics. He is also accused of being a snob as he is known to side with children against adults as shown in his story *Matilda* (Petzold 1992: 185).[5]

One of the main strengths of Dahl is that he wrote both adult and children books.[6] Interviewed by Mark West, Dahl states that he achieved great success in both areas (West 1990: 61).[7] He started with adult stories and soon moved from adult to children fiction in the 1950s and 1960s. But his children stories faced sharp criticism, as he was accused of presenting an amorality and viciousness which shake and question any societal moral order. The darkness that invades his short stories is one thing he is remembered by. As Elizabeth Hammill suggests, Dahl's popularity "stems, in part, from his ability to realise in fiction children's innermost dreams, and to offer subversive, gruesomely satisfying, sometimes comic solutions to their nightmares. His heroes tend to be underdogs – the poor, the bullied, the hunted, the orphans – whose lives are transformed by the fantastic, sometimes disconcerting events of the stories." (1989: 52). Dahl does not hesitate to indulge the dark side of people, but he also infuses this darkness with humour, that is also black humour. What initially seems like an unusual, even unconventional combination is what characterizes Dahl's stories and is perhaps the secret behind the appeal of his stories. Humour is not used for its original purpose; to instigate laughter and entertain people. Rather humour is intermingled with dark themes, grotesqueness, and violence in a mix that creates a contradictory and bizarre world that draws the reader in.

Another element in Dahl's world is his style. Language in Dhal is more than a medium to covey meaning. It is a tool for delivering and at the same time deconstructing the message behind his work; more often than not the message is obscure and illusive and even contradicts moral and social order. But language in Dahl's fiction is also a tool for social criticism. Words in Dhal's stories are loaded with double meanings, which only give away the complexity of his characterization and plots. His writing style, however, is characterized by simplicity; his stories tell of unusual and extreme events all narrated in very direct and simple language. That is to say, when Dahl narrates the unusual murder of a wife who uses a leg of lamb to kill her husband in "Lamb to the Slaughter", or a wife who traps her husband in the elevator to die in "The Way up to Heaven" or the strange experiment of how a character called William undertakes a procedure of transplanting his brain from his body after death, and attaching it to an artificial heart in "William and Mary," Dahl does not use exaggeration or hyperbolic language to convey the gravity of the action in these stories. The gap between the intensity of what happens (murder, revenge, and grotesqueness) and the ordinariness of the language creates the effect of his stories and delivers even a more compelling impact.

Dahl's themes are various and gripping but usually revolve around what is here described as a triangle that frames his fiction: violence, humour, and absurdity. What seems to be a prominent and recurrent theme that intersects with every element in this triangle is revenge. Revenge is part of Dahl's world and one of the prominent themes in his work. But it is also more than just a theme. It is the force that governs his dark world. Revenge is that energy that controls and dictates the pace, tone and action of the events and it is what makes characters tick. In one story after another Dahl presents models of avengers. His female avenger is an image of a woman who is fixated on her revenge and who succeeds in her deeds regardless of the means she uses to exact her revenge. The female avenger in Dahl is a character who is ruthless and cunning in carrying out revenge on the male character, yet her action is often unexpected and shocking. This paper will address three of Dahl's stories that illustrate clear examples of female avengers. The discussion will elaborate on the positioning of the female avenger in the midst of his recipe of black humour, absurdity and violence. It will also explain the context in which these female avengers are born both within Dahl's oeuvre and within a larger socio-cultural context of turbulent gender roles and the feminine mystique that followed World War II.[8]

Cooking the Murder Weapon: The Murderous Housewife in "Lamb to the Slaughter"

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is a story of bitter ironies and dark comedy.[9] It is about revenge and human desire to get even with others. At the beginning, the story presents Mary Maloney in domestic bliss as she is expecting a baby and waiting for her husband, policeman Patrick, to come home from work. The bliss is soon shattered when he tells her that he was leaving her without giving an explanation. Mary turns from a domestic housewife to a murderess as she hits her husband with a leg of lamb and kills him. When Patrick's policemen friends come to the house to investigate the murder, Mary cooks the leg of lamb for them for dinner and the story ends with the policemen eating the murder weapon and the only evidence to what Mary has done.

At the beginning of the story, Mary is presented within a domestic domain. She is waiting for her husband and wants to cook dinner for him. She "merely wanted to satisfy herself that each minute that went by made it nearer the time when he would come home" (23).[10] She is sewing, which is associated with a domestic chore and she is "curiously tranquil" (23). She is also pregnant which adds to her female persona as a domestic housewife. This persona, however, is changed quickly when Mary changes into a murderous woman. When Mary first appears in the story, she seems polite, even submissive. She hangs her husband's coat and brings him his drink. She describes the time with her husband: "this

was always a wonderful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she was satisfied to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house." (24).

The change in Mary's character is the central puzzle and indeed theme in the story. Makman's point about "turning the tables" in Dahl's fiction as one of the most pervasive themes in Dahl's fiction for both adults and children (Makman 1997: 219), is relevant to "Lamb to the Slaughter." The story revolves around the questions of why and how Mary turns into a murderess so suddenly. This all ties back to revenge and how Mary acted like an avenger when faced with the decision of her husband to leave her. Her method of murder; using the leg of lamb and the way she gets rid of the murder weapon, is telling of her central role in the story as a woman who exacts a ruthless revenge upon her husband.

So, the story presents a fine line between the deliberate intent to kill and the impulsive side of crime. When the story concludes, we wonder if Mary is acting impulsively as she might be in shock after her husband has told her that he is leaving her, or if she is a scheming woman who intelligently plans his murder. The theme of revenge is situated in the tension between these two states. It is also this tension that constitutes the main question around Mary's agency as a revengeful wife. The story addresses the constructions of femininity and power as outlined in the characterization of Mary. The definition of docile femininity and the ideal of the "good wife" collapse in the story as Mary transforms from a housewife into a murderess in a blink of an eye. The way the story revolves around the puzzle of Mary's intentions of the murder also opens up venues to examine the treatment of revenge in Dhal's fiction. The reasons and the motives behind Mary's murder of her husband sustain the mystery not only to draw attention to her characterization, but also to create the suspense in the story. What adds to this is the vagueness and obscurity of the reasons of why Patrick is leaving her. Even after the murder, it is not clear exactly why the police cop is abandoning his pregnant wife. However, tracing the way she deals with the murder after the fact gives insight to the questions above:

> All right, she told herself. So I've killed him.
>
> It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew what the punishment would be. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the baby? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both -- mother and child? Did they wait until the baby was born? What did they do? Mary Maloney didn't know and she wasn't prepared to take a chance (29).

Mary's state of mind, "how clear her mind became all of a sudden", and the questions she poses about her next steps as well as her determination to avoid punishment, all show her a calculating smart woman. This is especially clear when she goes to the bathroom to fix her make-up and starts practicing lines rehearsing what she would say when she goes to the grocery shop in her attempt to create an alibi – a scenario that includes Mary finding her husband's body when she returns home from the grocery shop:

> The smile was rather peculiar. She tried again. "Hello, Sam" she said brightly, aloud. The voice sounded peculiar, too. "I want some potatoes, Sam. Yes, and perhaps a can of beans." That was better. Both the smile and the voice sounded better now. She practiced them several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, and went out the back door, through the garden into the street (29).

Part of the reason why Mary succeeds in covering for her crime so cleverly and flawlessly is that she is familiar with the police procedures and how they run their investigations being a wife of a policeman. She also knows that her husband's friends would start looking for evidence. The biggest irony in the story is how the evidence gets consumed by the policemen. There is perversity and absurdity in the way that a leg of lamb (intended to be cooked for

dinner) is turned into a murder weapon and how after it becomes a murder weapon it is tuned back to be a dinner meal. When eaten by the policemen, the leg of lamb would quite literally consume the only evidence that Mary has killed Patrick. There is a cycle that only paints a rather absurd picture of the events where there is a struggle to find meaning behind this sudden change in Mary, and more generally struggle to find an explanation to how people think and act.

This turn of events illustrates Mary's intelligence and her ability to exact revenge as a perfect murder. It also testifies to the grotesqueness of Dahl's creative writing. The title "Lamb to the Slaughter" has significance beyond the literal meaning. First of all, the title is an expression that suggests that something bad or catastrophic is about to happen without being aware of it. That is, Patrick is walking to his death and he is totally unaware of his impending fate. But the title also has a biblical allusion. In *The Bible* (King James Version), there is a reference to the lamb:

> But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; And I did not know that they had devised a plot against me…"Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, And let us cut him off from the land of the living, That his name be remembered no more!" (Jeremiah 11:19)

The lamb, also being a symbol of serenity and helplessness, in the hand of Mary, turns into a deadly weapon when she "brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head. She might as well have hit him with a steel club" (28). The act of murder is described in such detail that asserts the violence, grotesqueness, and morbidity of Mary's action:

> She stepped back, waiting, and the strange thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds. Then he crashed onto the carpet.
>
> The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped to bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a few minutes, looking at the body, still holding the piece of meat tightly with both hands (28).

Therefore, the questions that "lamb to the slaughter" invokes are: Is Patrick the only victim here as he is killed? Or is Mary, the betrayed deserted wife, justified in her action? This is also related to how we see Patrick: Is he a cruel heartless husband who has no consideration for his wife? Or retrospectively, after seeing what Mary is capable of, perhaps the reader would reconsider this evaluation and see Mary as a vengeful woman?

Mary seems composed and ruthless with the exception of one moment when she leans over her husband's body and weeps after she comes back from the grocery shop. She tells herself that "That's the way" and convinces herself to keep " things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for acting at all" (31). She even fakes calling for her husband and orchestrates a whole scenario where she encounters the dead body of her husband as if she was shocked:

> "Patrick!" she called. "How are you, darling?"
>
> She put the package on the table and went into the living room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor, it really was a shock. All the old love for him came back to her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry hard. It was easy. No acting was necessary (31).

But even here Dahl does not explain her reasons clearly. It seems that Mary had a moment of loss of control but then the text shows that she actually meant to do that as part of her plan to cover up for her murder. Again like the motive behind Patrick leaving her, the story does not explain where to draw the line between genuine sentiment to Mary's part, and a performance that she has perfected as part of her plan to get away with murder. The ending of the story confirms the recipe that Dahl uses in his fiction: black humour mixed with perverse violence (here perpetuated by a woman). In fact, the story, with a mixture of elements of savagery,

humour and unpredictable side of human behaviour, can be described as children's story but more intended for adults. The ending of the story particularly emphasizes this recipe. The ending sees the policemen eating the leg of lamb:

> "No, we'd better not finish it."
> "She wants us to finish it. She said we ought to eat it up."
> "That's a big bar the murderer must have used to hit poor Patrick. The doctor says the back of his head was broken to pieces. "That's why the weapon should be easy to find."
> "Exactly what I say." "Whoever did it, he can't carry a weapon that big around with him."
> "Personally, I think the weapon is somewhere near the house."
> "It's probably right under our noses. What do you think, Jack?" And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to laugh. (36-37)

The dialogue between the policemen is full of irony with the reader's knowledge about the leg of lamb and the murderer's identity. So the ending combines the perverse comic infused with irony: That the weapon is "under their noses" is clear example of verbal irony intermingled with black humour as the leg of lamb is being devoured by the same people who are supposed to find it. As Treglown writes, the story of Mary Maloney's murder of her husband constitutes "a comic crime thriller in miniature which was to become one of [Dahl's] best-known stories and whose plot must be among the first to depend on a domestic freezer" (1994: 105). Here Treglown describes the story as "comic," emphasizing its black humour. He stresses the importance of the use of comedy considering it a strength rather than a weakness. So, instead of criticizing the grotesqueness of Dhal's fiction and the morbid sense of humour as it is the case in a number of critical appraisals of Dhal, Treglown differently distinguishes this as a marking quality in Dhal's fiction and a virtue not a vice. Thus, when Mary laughs at the end of the story, it is not laughter that entertains or for fun. Her laugh as the conclusion of the story is both a testimony that she has the upper hand over her dead husband and his policemen friends. It is a laugh of victory and it conceals the depth of Mary's vengefulness and darkness shown in the act of murder.

The story, in conclusion, offers criticism to both the marriage and the police institutions. Patrick is the link between the two as a husband and a policeman. The police and by extension the law is represented by Patrick and his friends who are fooled and manipulated by Mary. Then the marriage and the martial and domestic bliss that appear in the beginning of the story fall apart and turn into betrayal and murder so quickly and so shockingly that the reader doubts its existence in the first place. The story establishes Mary as an avenger, but keeps some mystery and perhaps deliberate obscurity in the way moral judgments are passed. That is to say, Mary is not portrayed as completely evil; she is also a betrayed wife whose husband is leaving her with no obvious justification. The different, contradictory elements that constitute the mystery of Dahl's crime story are the same that outline the critique that his story offers. A dysfunctional marriage hides behind appearances and those appearances are ripped apart by a female who jumps into action to get her revenge.

Trapping the Husband: The Revengeful Wife in "Way Up to Heaven"

The story was first published in *The New Yorker* and was reprinted in the collection *Kiss Kiss* in 1960. The story is about Mrs. Foster who has a fear of missing trains, planes, or boats. While she is travelling to see her daughter and her grandchildren in Paris, her husband, Eugene Foster, keeps deliberately delaying her. When they are in the car to the airport, Mr. Foster goes to the house to retrieve a gift to his daughter. Mrs. Foster, terribly anxious about missing her flight, finds the gift hidden in the car and it turns out is just mercilessly teasing her. So she follows him to the house to rush him but she heads back to the airport on her own

leaving her husband behind. The horrible fate of Mr. Foster is not revealed until she comes back from Paris after six weeks. It is revealed that she has left him trapped him in the elevator where he died apparently a horrible death.

The story, like "Lamb to the Slaughter," shows another female avenger. Mrs. Foster gets even with her husband, as she exacts her revenge upon him for teasing her and using her weakness (being afraid of being late) against her. Even though she knows that she has trapped him in the elevator with the knowledge that he would die on his own there, she still seems collected and calm. The fact that she leaves him there while she goes to fly to Paris and have fun with her daughter and grandchildren, while knowing that the house is empty after sending the servants away, adds to her persona as a ruthless avenger.

The characterization of Mrs. Foster is key to the plot of the story. Her "serious obsession" is what drives the narrative and it is behind the series of the events that occur in the story. The story begins with giving an account of the dynamics between Mr. and Mrs. Foster:

> Mr Foster may possibly have had a right to be irritated by this foolishness of his wife's, but he could have had no excuse for increasing her misery by keeping her waiting unnecessarily. Mind you, it is by no means certain that this is what he did, yet whenever they were to go somewhere, his timing was so accurate--just a minute or two late, you understand and his manner so bland that it was hard to believe he wasn't purposely inflicting a nasty private little torture of his own on the unhappy lady. (56)[11]

What is apparent here is that Mr. Foster is not the innocent party. He purposely tortures her with the timing issue and this renders her an "unhappy lady." From the very start of the story, Dahl gives a complex and uneasy balance between the crime and its justification. That is, the story poses questions of whether or not Mrs. Foster is justified in her actions (the murder she commits). The question here is whether or not Mr. Foster deserves his fate. It seems that Dahl's stories do not give an easy solution; the polarity of good versus evil and right versus wrong does not exist. Instead, there is a blurring between the two ends of the continuum of human nature, and in the case of the relation between Mr. and Mrs. Foster, it is also coloured with this complex typography. The alliances and sympathies of the reader oscillate between Mrs. Foster, with the knowledge that her husband played with her feelings and anxieties, and against her when it is revealed that she killed him at the end of the story.

This complexity, in effect, shapes not just the moral frame of the story but also the female characterization as an avenger. Mrs. Foster who "was and always had been a good and loving wife" (56) faces the injustice of her husband's "torture" yet her action (the brutality and the ruthlessness in leaving her husband to die without feeling any guilt) is not easy to grasp, even if she is mistreated. The tension between these two positions formulates the source of the intensity that sustains the interest in the story. It also maintains the ambivalence around the moral stance of where to stand on the case of Mr. Foster's murder: should we sympathize with him or should we think he deserves what he got?

What is so disturbing about Dahl's story is the shocking change of people. A housewife turns into a murderess all of a sudden. Like in the "Lamb to the Slaughter" once again the bliss of married life turns into a nightmare in a horrific way. The critique that Dahl makes throughout his work targets the marriage institution, but it also goes beyond to address the darkness of human nature. Indeed, Dahl succeeds in combining the elements of bitter and black comedy with cruelty and violence that is actually shocking in many ways. The plot of the story is based on a "joke" that the husband plays on his wife to irritate her, but it turns against him and he pays the price with his own life. So, the story is an example of Dahl's use of black comedy in how he mixes grotesque and violent elements with comedy.

The effect that the story creates revolves around the capability of Mrs. Foster to do what she did in cold blood. The effect of the story is also encapsulated in the shock that the

readers feel when they realize that Mrs. Foster actually is capable of killing her husband in that way. The difference between the image of Mrs. Foster as first established in the story and how it changes at the end is at the centre of the plot of the story. In addition, Dahl's style is also important here. The way he delivers the most horrific facts in an objective even distant tone, creates a contradiction that is a key to reading the elements of comedy and violence in the story.

Most of the story is a narration of back and forth strenuous dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Foster; she urges him to hurry up in order to catch her flight, but he continuously makes fun of her and delaying her. This tension is presented as a comedy of a teasing husband and an unnecessarily anxious wife. The ending, however, sees a change in Mrs. Foster; she is more in control and she is the one giving commands:

> "Hurry, driver, hurry!"
>
> "Isn't your husband travelling with you?" the man asked, astonished.
>
> "Certainly not! I was only going to drop him at the club. It won't matter. He'll understand. He'll get a cab. Don't sit there talking, man. Get going! I've got a plane to catch for Paris!"
>
> With Mrs Foster urging him from the back seat, the man drove fast all the way, and she caught her plane with a few minutes to spare. Soon she was high up over the Atlantic, reclining comfortably in her aeroplane chair, listening to the hum of the motors, heading for Paris at last. (70)

Then the story's narrator describes the shift that is happening in Mrs. Foster. [12] It is a shift that shows her not only as more relaxed, even happier, but she also feels stronger. Her new-found freedom is realized in getting rid of her husband and it seems that her revenge has liberated her of her anxiety. If anything, this shift illustrates the:

> new mood was still with her. She felt remarkably strong and, in a queer sort of way, wonderful. She was a trifle breathless with it all, but this was more from pure astonishment at what she had done than anything else, and as the plane flew farther and farther away from New York and East Sixty-second Street, a great sense of calmness began to settle upon her. By the time she reached Paris, she was just as strong and cool and calm as she could wish. (71)

This attitude is even clearer in the very end of the story, when she comes back from Paris to see her empty house. She walks into the house as if she is inspecting everything and contemplating her next move. She is composed and collected: "There was something deliberate and purposeful about this action; she had the air of a woman who is off to investigate a rumour or to confirm a suspicion" (72). When she finishes her inspection, which just is checking to confirm that her husband has died when she left him, she has a "glimmer of satisfaction on her face." This shows a different face to the neurotic woman at the beginning. She is able to hold her own and there is determination in the way she deals with the aftermath of her actions. She goes to her husband's study and makes the phone call about the broken elevator that takes her husband to "heaven" – to his death:

> "Hello," she said. "Listen--this is Nine East Sixty-second Street...Yes, that's right. Could you send someone round as soon as possible, do you think? Yes, it seems to be stuck between the second and third floors. At least, that's where the indicator's pointing...Right away? Oh, that's very kind of you. You see, my legs aren't any too good for walking up a lot of stairs. Thank you so much. Good-bye." (73)

The fact that she does the phone call from her husband's office is telling of confidence, boldness, and even perhaps vindictiveness on Mrs. Foster's part. It is the final stage in her revenge against her husband. The final statement of the story is also illustrative of the complete transformation of Mrs. Foster into the female avenger: she "replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband's desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon

to repair the lift" (73). She is in control and she has the perfect alibi to get away with murder. She is the one who has the final laugh after avenging all the harassment that she got from her husband. This new Mrs. Foster is shockingly intimidating and hardly recognizable from the one we see when the story opens as a woman with anxieties and obsessions.

In conclusion, Dahl's "Way Up to Heaven" shows another example of a marriage that collapses suddenly. The story thus critiques marriage as a hindrance to personal happiness. In the case of Mrs. Foster, murder is the way to freedom and happiness. Hence Dahl offers insight to the representation of gender roles in mid-twentieth century. That is, the story paints a picture of the disillusionment of marriage as a haven for happiness and love. As such, the story criticizes traditional gender roles as perceived by society at that time by showing a woman trapped in her marriage and how she goes to extreme measures to get free, literally trapping her husband him to die. All this critique is framed in the intersections between violence, black humour and absurdity that Dahl's short stories master within the boundaries of his scary and unpredictable world.

Stuffing the Victims: The Unexplained Revenge in "The Landlady"

"The Landlady" by Dahl shows a different aspect of the female avenger. It illustrates a dark, but also a mysterious aspect of human criminal behaviour. It is about a woman who owns a Bed and Breakfast in Bath and who rarely receives guests. The story is concerned with one of her guests, Billy Weaver, a young man who takes the train from London to Bath to begin a new job there. When he sees a sign in the Bed and Breakfast and is met by an old nice lady, he decides to stay the night in this place, especially after the landlady offers a good rate. He soon picks on her hobby of stuffing animals and keeping them as trophies. But when Billy signs the guest book he realizes that there are only two names and they are over two years ago. He also realizes that the names are familiar (two men who are killed and whose names he read in the paper in the past). The story concludes with the suggestion that Billy is going to be killed by the landlady like the other two men after drinking a poisoned cup of tea.

The story presents a woman on a mission to kill young men, but there is no obvious motive as to specifically why she does that. She is as ruthless and cunning as other female characters in Dahl, if not more. Not only does she show no guilt, but she commits the perfect murders without casting any suspicions around her. "The Landlady" paints a picture of an old lady who obviously not just kills young men, but she also stuffs them and keeps them as decorative pets. The perversity of the landlady's actions is extreme as it actually transgresses all the definitions of traditional gender roles. Instead of being a nurturer, a caring old lady, this landlady does not kill out of necessity, but she enjoys murder. This landlady is not easy to read or understand. She plays the old lady card with Billy pretending to take care of him offering him tea and drink while she is actually plotting a grotesque and horrible murder. It is hard to reverse the image of an old caring lady into that of a murderous woman. What adds to the puzzle is that it is clear that she has been able to cover her crimes for years and get away with her actions. In a way, this establishes the landlady as a woman who breaks the traditional representations of femininity and challenges the notions of docile and submissive women.

The story presents a different aspect of revenge, one which is hidden and not clearly illustrated. Unlike in Dahl's other stories that present a husband and a wife with events that show a sudden transition into revenge; in "The Landlady" there is a hidden agenda as to why she is committing these murders. The fact that we do know why she kills young men actually adds to her characterization as a calculating woman and also gives another layer to the theme of revenge. This is a woman who seems on a mission to kill young men and she enjoys keeping human pets. Thus, her revenge is almost Freudian with a castrating female that aims to destroy men around her. Her revenge is mysterious yet it is this mystery that draws the reader into a perverse world of darkness, cruelty, and lurking violence.

With all the mystery behind the murder motives, however, the story offers foreshadowing to the horror that will follow the kindness and the sweetness in the landlady that are seen at the beginning of the story. This takes place, for example, when Billy, only seventeen years old, remembers that he read the two names of previous guests "Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before?" (10),[13] we feel something is not right. Also from early on the narrator tells that Billy "had never stayed in any boarding-houses," and that "he was a tiny bit frightened of them" (5). That Billy is not familiar with boarding houses and that he is frightened, give the reader a glimpse that something ghastly is about to happen, despite the fact that it is not defined or stated clearly. As such, the reader cannot detect what exactly might be wrong until the very end of the story. The way Dhal offers the foreshadowing is also embedded in the foreboding and gloomy atmosphere of the story. For instance, the narrator describes each "word was like a large black eye staring at him..., holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was" (6), and the "air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his chest" (3). The ominous atmosphere that the story paints is related to the darkness within the characters, especially the landlady. The fact that the story hints that something is off but does not pinpoint what it is exactly only intensifies the edge of the violence and the absurdity of the action. It makes the reader seek an explanation to understand the motive for an old woman, who kills for fun, and yet perhaps realize the futility of this pursuit.

The story, moreover, utilizes irony to create and deepen the gloomy atmosphere and the sense of the impending doom that Billy is about to face. The words, particularly that of the landlady, become loaded with not only double meanings but also convey the murky and dark nature that she hides as an avenger against young men. The landlady states "I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they pass away" (15). This statement is harmless on the surface, yet it hides a grotesque secret. The "pets" the landlady refers to here are not animals but people she kills. She also tells Billy "You see, it isn't very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest" (7). The nest that she welcomes Billy to is not peaceful or homey. Rather, it is a dangerous deadly web. With the deliberate use of words that actually mean the opposite (nest usually indicates warmness and serenity); the violence of the landlady is intensified. That is to say, instead of portraying a violent vengeful woman whom the reader sees committing murder, Dahl in the story provides a subtle, yet dormant representation of female violence. Towards the end of the story Billy drinks the tea that is suggested to be poisoned. The tea "tasted faintly of bitter sweet almonds, and he didn't much care for it" (15). The almond taste is actually a reference to snide poison. Food here is used as imposed violence. It can be explained as a means to achieve sexual fulfilment for the landlady to possess teenage boys. Viñas Valle states that in Dahl's stories "the pleasures of food are presented in a civilized gourmet manner and are rather attached to ideas of sexual appetites and/or revenge" (2004: 111). As such while reading "The Landlady," revenge becomes an insistent thought when seeking to explain the landlady's behaviour. She wants, for undefined reasons, to exact torture and revenge on young men who visit her Bed and Breakfast. As Makman suggests, the female character of "The Landlady" is a " precursor of Dahl's wicked enchantresses in *The Witches*, the landlady is not who she initially seems to be. In *The Witches* even the sweetest-seeming lady can be a witch" (1997:215).[14]

Hence, in this story Dhal offers a different perspective to male-female relationships than the one in "Lamb to the Slaughter" and "Way up to Heaven." That is, "The Landlady" diverts from the domestic context of husband and wife, and goes to explore an encounter between a landlady and a guest. Moreover, Dhal in "The Landlady" goes into a great detail about the male-female interaction instead of focusing on action. A good example is found towards the end of the story when there is a deliberate tardiness in the description of almost no-action:

> Billy started sipping his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so, neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not it, the least unpleasant, and it reminded him well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital? (13)

The ending of the story provokes an ominous sense with the realization that Billy is going to die. It is concluded, but with not total certainty, that the tea is poisoned and Billy is going to follow the two men who went missing. The fact that Dahl does not offer conclusive details of a murder adds to the mystery and even to the sense of dark mood that dominates the story. The reader is on his/her own here; not much help is provided by Dahl. This, as technique in itself, is part of how Dhal weaves his fictional world. It is so scary, but it is not obviously so. The story ends with a sense of an impending disaster that is about to happen, yet the fact that we do not see it happen increases the intensity and the tension. The last dialogue between the landlady and Billy shows her looking at the young man, calm with "gentle smile" that is in contrast with the murder we know she has just committed. There is also a sense of confinement with Billy completely under her mercy:

> "…but haven't there been any other guests here except them in the last two or three years?"
>
> Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.
>
> "No, my dear," she said. "Only you." (16)

In conclusion, the story ends with the conclusive term "Only you" which carries two contradictory facets of meanings. The first is a sense of intimacy that usually suggests warmth and kindness. The second, however, is a contrary sense of fear and anxiety on the part of the reader as s/he realizes that she is keeping Billy to herself, "only you" not as an act of kindness but she has the intention of killing him. The story, therefore, concludes with irony and a looming sense of a hideous act that is about to take place. What Dahl keeps off the page in his story and the abrupt ending only increases the menace of the characterization of the landlady as an avenger.

Conclusion

Dahl's short stories offer critique of societal roles of women in the mid-twentieth century. In one story after another, Dhal depicts women who transgress traditional gender roles and transform from the domestic into criminal domain suddenly and in shockingly horrific ways. His female characters show the contradictions and the tensions that post-year years witnessed regarding gender roles in society – the "feminine mystique." Indeed his stories address the ideology that Betty Friedan famously called the feminine mystique which is a repressive movement in society to relocate women into the domestic order after a period of freedom and hard-won gains for women during the Second World War.[15] Dhal addresses the dilemma of the society's perception of women's roles after the war and the constant attempts to control and contain women at the time. Dahl's stories offer a lens to rethink gender representations and dynamics. With women who try to get even with men, through the revenge they exact against male characters, the texts show the power the women demonstrate and impose. Dhal's female characters go to extreme measures – murder – to make a point, they reveal the dysfunctionality of the marriage institutions as well as the police and the criminal justice system. These are women who get away with what they do; no justice is fulfilled and no punishment is administered. They are clever, calculating and fully capable of achieving what they want. But it is only through revenge that they can do that.

Dahl situates this critique in the midst of three-fold framework of violence, absurdity and humour. That is, revenge in Dhal's short stories takes centre stage but only through the other elements that constitute the fundamentals of Dhal's fictional world. In other words, Dahl creates this world through triangulating black comedy, darkness and violence and absurdity to perfect a recipe that delivers controversies, yet consistent and compelling effect. Indeed, Dahl succeeds in subverting not only the genre of the short story in which he writes, but also comedy. He also succeeded in presenting memorable female characters that fit within his world and yet subvert and challenge the perceived and traditional roles in society.

In the three stories selected here, Dahl offers different images of female avengers, housewives who exact revenge against husbands, but also an old lady with a hidden agenda against young men. Revenge is the core of Dahl's fictional world; it is the instinct that drives the characters into convoluted and morbid plans to get even against those who harm them in one way or another. Revenge is a persistent theme in Dahl's adult fiction and his female avengers are relentless in their pursuit to achieve what they want. The representation of the female avenger is one facet of Dahl's interest to delve into the dark side of human nature, which presents ambivalent combination of black humour, violence, and absurdity.

Notes

[1] Dahl was born in 1916 in Wales of Norwegian parents, he was educated at Repton, and after a period abroad, he settled in England. He wrote almost twenty books for children, in addition to fiction for adults. But Dahl made an impact in America and he had an affinity with American audiences. According to West, Dahl "should be seen as an American author. He began his writing career in America in the early 1940s [he settled in New York City in the early 1950s, returning to England in 1960], and for a long time his stories and books appeared in America before they came out in England. It was not until the mid-1970s that Dahl began giving his English publishers the chance to bring out the first editions of his works" (West 1992, ps.ix). For more on Dahl's reception in America, See Schober (2009).

[2] A number of Dahl's stories were adapted into films and in television. *Matilda and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were made into films in 1996 and 2005, consecutively. Another good example is *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, which is an anthology series hosted by Alfred Hitchcock and featured thrillers and mysteries. This featured a number of Dah's stories towards the end of the 1950s and early 1960s. Dahl himself wrote and hosted some shows, such as *Way Out* (1961), a horror series hosted by Dahl, and *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979–1988), which was written and introduced by Dahl. He also wrote film scripts such as *Chitty Chitty*, *Bang Bang* (1968), *The Night Digger* (1971), and *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971).

[3] Viñas Valle (2004:4) suggests that critics tend to see Dahl as a two-headed writer. Therefore the critical materials on Dahl focuses on his books for children or those for adults, but not on both. There are a few full length books, for example, Alan Warren's *Roald Dahl: From The Gremlins to the Chocolate Factory* (1988) and Mark I. West's *Roald Dahl* (1992) that gave a comprehensive review of the author and his works. For more on Dahl as children fiction writer, see Culley (1991).

[4] The criticism of Roald Dahl usually addresses the misogyny in the representation of women especially in his story *The Witches* (1983). See for example Rees (1988), Landsberg (1988) and Tzin (1985). For more on the treatment of women in *The Witches*, see Bird (1998).

[5] *Matilda* (1988) is one of Dhal's most significant works. It evoked criticism as Dahl has been accused of corrupting children minds and dealing with inappropriate topics. *Matilda* in

particular shows a negative depiction of lower class people, which in effect caused the criticism of Dahl as a snob. For more this subject, See Petzold (1992).

[6] Moynahan states that Dahl's children and adult stories are different yet similar suggesting that "Dahl's stories for adults and children are a bit on the bizarre side. I'm thinking of the adult story of the apiarist who began turning into a bee after putting himself on a diet supplement of royal jelly ... The narrator of 'The Landlady' … positively enjoys hinting to us that his character has been pickling and stuffing" (1977:6).

[7] In the interview Dahl also says that he started writing children books when he had children and started telling them bedtime stories. He then turned some of the bedtime stories into *James and the Giant Peach* (1961). The book achieved a great success. Its sales in America "went from about 7,000 in the first year to about 18,000 in the second to about 25,000 in the third. By the fifth year, *Charlie* was up to 80,000. And, of course, *James* jumped on *Charlie's* bandwagon" (West 1990: 64).

[8] The "feminine mystique" refers to a prominent work by Betty Freidan under the same title (1965), in which she discusses the condition of women in the post-war period and exposes the oppressive ideology of that time. To Freidan, this ideology aimed to place women in a domestic space and reinforce sexual passivity and male domination.

[9] The story was initially rejected along with four other Dahl stories by *The New Yorker*, but it was published by the *Collier* in 1953 after appearing in Knopf's publication of Dahl collection of short stories.

[10] All quotations from Dahl's "Lam to the Slaughter" are from *The Roald Dahl Omnibus* (1987). A page number appears in all quotes from the short story in the paper.

[11] All quotations from Dahl's " Way Up to Heaven " are from the collection *Kiss Kiss* (1960). A page number will appear in all quotes from the short story in the paper.

[12] Dahl uses third person omniscient narrator *in Someone Like You* (1954) and *Kiss Kiss* (1959), his two collections of adult short stories. For example the third person narrator is used in , 'William and Mary', 'The Landlady', 'Lamb to the Slaughter', 'Dip in the Pool', 'Skin', 'The Way Up To Heaven' Skin', 'The Wish' , to name only a few.

[13] All quotations from Dahl's "The Landlady " are from the collection *Kiss Kiss* (1960). A page number appears in all quotes from the short story in the paper.

[14] Makman points this out in relation to the *Kiss Kiss* and *Someone Like You* collections where, as she claims, "For the most part in his stories, people and their relationships are not what they appear to be" (1997: 215). That is, the critic sees a connection here around the subject of appearances and reality.

[15] For more on the "feminine mystique" see Freidan (1965).

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