

## FEMALE AVENGER: VIOLENCE, ABSURDITY, AND BLACK HUMOUR IN ROALD DAHL'S SHORT STORIES

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### **Abstract:**

*Dahl's short stories criticise women's societal roles in the mid-nineteenth century. Dahl presents women who defy standard gender boundaries and move from domestic to criminal domains in startlingly horrible ways in one narrative after another. His female characters depict the "feminine mystique" — the inconsistencies and tensions those post-year years witnessed over gender roles in society. What appears to be a common and recurring concept that runs through all three elements of this triangle is revenge? Dahl introduces avenger models in one story after another. His female avenger is a picture of a woman who is obsessed with getting revenge and succeeds no matter what she does. In Dahl's short stories, the female avenger is a character who is mean and clever when she wants to get revenge on the male protagonist, even though her actions are sometimes surprising and unexpected. A lot of people read Dahl's stories, and this one will look at three that show female avengers at work. When we talk about some Dahl short stories, we'll pay attention to how the female avenger fits into Dahl's mix of black humour, absurdity, and violence.*

**Keywords:** Women, feminine, gender, avenger, violence.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Before we get started, let's take a look at Roald Dahl's literature and how he employs parody to communicate humour to both adults and children. Dahl's children's work has always had a fanciful quality to it, appealing to a child's imagination. Just mentioning novels like *The BFG*, *The Witches*, and *Fantastic Mr Fox* brings up giants blowing dreams into children's ears, witches turning people into mice, and a talking fox who always manages to outsmart three cruel farmers. Dahl's readers are drawn to him not just because of his vivid descriptions and innovative plots, but also because of his frequently mischievous and malicious ideas, his ridicule and distortion of society standards and individuals, and his use of nonsense to appeal to the inner child in all of us. Roald Dahl's works are focused on breaching social standards and most of his content deals with "taboos for children, such as people with negative characteristics, misbehaviour, and the grotesque and somewhat violent situations." Violating these taboos in children's novels is what makes them so enticing to youngsters" [in the first place], according to Oittinen (2000: 92). These are language expressions that result in mental representations based on the receiver's prior assumptions or knowledge, as well as the mind's ability to establish associations based on this information. As we can see, relevance theory is strongly reliant on the cognitive process of making connections to what has been provided, and this knowledge and experience is also culturally relevant.

Dahl's writing style sets him apart from other authors. His sardonic tone and cynical satirical attitude are only a few of the traits that distinguish his work. It is, in Beth Pearson's words, a "The fact that a great author's work outlasts them is a characteristic of a great author, but Dahl is an exception. His originality, ingenuity, and sense of humour have always made him look young." (Klugová 2007: 50.) His ideas are also very different because he uses dark humour to show weird and sadistic things about people. He gives us this recipe, which explains his storey and makes him different from other authors. In many ways, Dahl's work is similar to that of other people who write about the same subject is unusual. He uses a combination of horror, shock, and absurdity to heighten the impact of his work. His method, on the other hand, is refined and enhances his ability to tell stories. "A master of storey creation with a tremendous capacity to weave a tale," according to Dahl ("Roald Dahl" 2009: 437) His work, on the other hand, is divisive to say the least. Dahl's works "have been accused of being vulgar, excessively violent, and distrustful of adults" due to the violence and grotesque elements that pervade his work (West 1985: 219). As a result, his work was met with scepticism by critics. He is also accused of being a snob since, as evidenced in his narrative *Matilda*, he is known to side with children over adults (Petzold 1992: 185). Dahl's ability to write both adult and children's books is one of his greatest assets. In an interview with Mark West, Dahl claims to have had significant success in both areas (West 1990: 61). In the 1950s and 1960s, he began with adult stories before transitioning to children's fiction. His children's stories, on the other hand, drew a lot of flak was accused of portraying amorality and viciousness that shook and questioned any society's moral order, this is what people thought. One of the things that I like to do is read people remember him for is the darkness that pervades his short stories. Dahl's success is undeniable, as Elizabeth Hammill points out "stems in part from his ability to bring children's darkest desires to life in fiction, as well as give subversive, gruesomely satisfying, and occasionally humorous answers to their nightmares. His protagonists are usually outcasts — the poor, bullied, pursued, orphans – whose lives are changed by the strange, sometimes terrifying occurrences of the stories." (1989: 52.) Dahl isn't afraid to get into people's dark parts, but he also adds a little humour, even if it's black humour. Dahl's stories are unique because they have a mix of things that doesn't seem to make sense together. This is likely what makes them so appealing. Humour is no longer used for what it was meant to do: make people laugh and make them happy. There are a lot of dark themes mixed with grotesqueness, violence, and other weird things. This makes for a confusing and weird world that draws the reader in, though.

## **2. COOKING THE MURDER WEAPON: THE MURDEROUS HOUSEWIFE IN "LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER"**

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is a dark comedy with harsh ironies. It's about vengeance and the human impulse to avenge oneself. The storey begins with Mary Maloney is having a baby and waiting for her husband, a police officer named Patrick, to come home from work so they can be together again in their home. When he tells her that he's leaving her without giving her a reason, the happiness fades quickly. She beats her husband with a leg of lamb and kills him. As she does this, Mary goes from being a home housewife to being a killer. For dinner, Mary

cooks the leg of lamb for Patrick's police friends. The storey ends with the officers eating the murder weapon, which is the only evidence of Mary's cooking. actions. Mary is introduced in a household setting at the start of the novel. She is anticipating her husband's arrival and intends to prepare a meal for him. She "merely wanted to reassure herself that each passing minute brought us closer to the time when he would return" (23). She's stitching, which is a household activity, yet she's "curiously serene" (23). She's also expecting a child, which adds to her female character as a stay-at-home mom. However, Mary's persona is swiftly altered when she transforms into a murderous lady. Mary is nice and even meek when she initially appears in the storey. She hangs her husband's coat on the coat rack and offers him his beverage. She recalls her time with her husband as follows: "It was always a great time of day at this hour. She was content to sit quietly and enjoy his company after the many hours alone in the house, knowing he wouldn't say anything until the first drink was completed."(24). the key puzzle, and indeed subject, throughout the novel is the shift in Mary's character. Makman's statement about "turning the tables" in Dahl's novels (Makman 1997: 219) is pertinent to "Lamb to the Slaughter." The plot concentrates around the reasons for Mary's unexpected transformation into a murderess. This all comes back to Mary's desire for vengeance and how she responded as an avenger when confronted with her husband's decision to abandon her. Her means of murder, the leg of lamb, and the manner in which she disposes of the murder weapon, reflect her major role in the plot as a woman seeking cruel vengeance on her husband. As a result, the novel depicts a narrow line between premeditated murder and impetuous crime. When the storey ends, we're left wondering if Mary is acting rashly because she's in shock when her husband tells her he's leaving her, or if she's a cunning woman plotting his murder. The topic of vengeance is centred on the conflict that exists between these two states. The main question surrounding Mary's agency as a vengeful wife is likewise based on this tension. As exemplified by Mary's characterisation, the novel deals with the conceptions of gender and authority. In the novel, Mary goes from a housewife to a murderess in the blink of an eye, shattering the concept of submissive femininity and the ideal of the "good wife." The way the storey focuses around the mystery of Mary's murderous intentions also provides opportunities to explore Dahl's depiction of revenge in his fiction. The reasons and motives for Mary's husband's murder maintain the mystery, not only to attract attention to her characterization, but also to keep the reader guessing throughout the novel. The vagueness and obscurity of Patrick's motives for leaving her just adds to the confusion. Even after the murder, it's unclear why a police officer would abandon his pregnant wife. However, examining how she responds with the murder after it has occurred provides answers to the following questions:

Okay, she said to herself. As a result, I've killed him. It was amazing how clear her thinking had become all of a sudden. She began to think quickly. She was well aware of the consequences as the wife of a detective. It didn't seem to matter to her. It would actually be a relief. What about the baby, on the other hand? What laws applied to murderers who killed children who are still in the womb? Was the mother and child killed? Do you think they waited until the child was born? It's not clear what they did.

There was no way Mary Maloney knew what was going on. She didn't want to take a risk (29).

### **3. TRAPPING THE HUSBAND: THE REVENGEFUL WIFE IN "WAY UP TO HEAVEN"**

The tale first appeared in *The New Yorker* and was reproduced in the 1960 anthology *Kiss Kiss*. Mrs. Foster is the protagonist of the novel, and she is terrified of missing trains, aircraft, or boats. Eugene Foster, her husband, keeps purposefully delaying her as she travels to Paris to meet her daughter and grandkids. Mr. Foster goes to the house to collect a gift for his daughter while they are driving to the airport. Mrs. Foster, worried about missing her trip, discovers the gift buried in the car, which turns out to be a cruel joke. So she follows him to his residence in order to rush him, but she returns to the airport alone, leaving her spouse behind. Mr. Foster's terrible fate After six weeks in Paris, she doesn't tell anyone about what she did. In the movie, it's shown that she left him locked in the elevator, where it looks like he died a terrible death. The narrative depicts another female avenger, similar to "Lamb to the Slaughter." Mrs. Foster avenges her husband by exacting her vengeance on him for taunting her and using her weakness (her fear of being late). Despite the fact that she knows she has locked him in the elevator and that he would die on his own there, she appears composed and peaceful. The fact that She leaves him there while she goes to Paris to spend time with her daughter and grandkids, even though the house is empty after the servants have been sent out. This makes her look like a ruthless avenging angel. Mrs. Foster's portrayal is very important to the storey narrative. Her "serious preoccupation" propels the plot forward and is the catalyst for the events that unfold in the storey. The story opens with a description of Mr. and Mrs. Foster's relationship:

Mr Foster had every right to be angry by his wife's folly, but he had no justification for exacerbating her suffering by keeping her waiting unduly. Although it is far from definite that this is what he did, his timing was so precise—just a minute or two late, mind you—and his demeanour so bland that it was difficult to believe he wasn't inflicting a horrible little torture of his own on the poor lady whenever they were to go anywhere. (56)

Mr. Foster is clearly not the person who did not do anything wrong in this case. He tries to make her unhappy by making her a "unhappy lady" with the scheduling issue. Dahl starts the book with a complicated and tense balance between the crime and its justification. That is, the storey asks if Mrs. Foster's actions are right or wrong (the murder she commits). The question is whether Mr. Foster is good enough for what he's going to get. Dahl's stories don't seem to have a simple answer; good and bad don't seem to be separate things. If you want to talk about human nature, instead, there is a blurring between the two extremes of the scale which is tinted with this complicated typography in the example of Mr. and Mrs. Foster's relationship. The reader's sympathies and allegiances swing back and forth between Mrs. Foster and her husband, knowing that he preyed on her feelings and fears and against her

when it is revealed that she killed him at the end of the novel. This complexity, in turn, determines not only the story's moral context, but also the female characterization as an avenger. Mrs. Foster, who "had always been a nice and loving wife" (56) is confronted with the injustice of her husband's "suffering," but her behaviour (the cruelty and ruthlessness in leaving her husband to die without feeling any guilt) is difficult to comprehend, even if she herself mistreated. The conflict between these two viewpoints is the basis of the intensity that keeps the reader interested in the storey. It also preserves the moral ambiguity about where to stand on Mr. Foster's murder case: should we sympathise with him or believe he deserved what he got? The stunning transformation of characters in Dahl's novel is what makes it so scary. Suddenly, a housewife transforms into a murderess. The joy of wedded life turns into a nightmare in a horrible fashion, much as it did in "Lamb to the Slaughter." Dahl's criticism of the marriage institution is consistent throughout his writings, but it also extends to the darker aspects of human nature. Dahl, on the other hand, does a good job of combining bitter and dark humour with cruelty and violence that is disturbing in many ways. During a "joke" that the husband plays on his wife, he ends up paying with his own life. As a result, the storey is an example of Dahl's "black comedy," which is a mix of scary and funny things. The storey has an effect because Mrs. Foster was able to do what she did in cold blood. The story's impact is also shown in how shocked the readers are when they learn that Mrs. Foster can kill her husband this way. During the book, Mrs. Foster's image at the start of each storey and how it changes by the end is what makes it interesting. Dahl's style also plays a big part in this storey. The way he talks about the most gruesome things in a detached, objective tone makes it hard to understand the story's themes of comedy and violence.

#### **4. THE UNEXPLAINED REVENGE IN "THE LANDLADY" STUFFING THE VICTIMS**

Dahl's "The Landlady" depicts a distinct side of the female avenger. It depicts a sinister, yet mysterious, facet of Humans act like criminals. She runs a Bed and Breakfast in Bath, but only a few people come. Billy Weaver, a young man who moves from London to Bath to start a new job, is one of her guests in the book. Bed and Breakfast sign: He sees the sign and is met by an old lady who wants him to stay for the night. The landlady is willing to charge him a reasonable price. He quickly becomes interested in her love of stuffing animals and displaying them as trophies, so he asks her about it. That's not what happened. When Billy goes to write in the guest book, he finds that there are only two names there, and both of them were written more than two years ago. There are also some names that he recognises (two men who are killed and whose names he read in the paper in the past). That's how this storey ends: The landlord is going to kill Billy after he drinks a cup of poisoned tea like the two men before him. It shows a woman who wants to kill young men, even though there is no obvious reason for her to do so. She is just as mean and clever as me any of Dahl's female characters,

if not more so. She not only shows no remorse, but she also conducts the ideal killings without raising any suspicions. "The Landlady" depicts an elderly woman who not only murders young men, but also stuffs them and maintains them as decorative pets. The landlady's actions are so heinous that they defy all conceptions of traditional gender roles. This landlady, rather than being a nurturer or a compassionate elderly lady, relishes murdering this landlady is difficult to read and comprehend. She plays the old lady card with Billy, appearing to look after him and providing him tea and drinks while arranging a gruesome and horrifying murder. It's difficult to transform an image of an elderly lady who cares into that of a deadly woman. What adds to the difficulty is the fact that she has clearly been able to cover up her crimes and get away with them for years. In some ways, this depicts the landlady as a woman who defies established gender roles and challenges stereotypes of passive and obedient women. The storey depicts different kind of vengeance, one that is hidden and not easy to see. "The Landlady" is different from Dahl's other stories in which a husband and wife are shown events that show a quick change into revenge. "The Landlady" has a hidden goal as to why she is killing these people. The fact that we know why she kills young men helps us see her as a calculated woman, while also giving the retribution idea more depth. It looks like this is a woman who loves to raise human pets and wants to kill young men. Due to the way she feels, her revenge is almost Freudian. She's angry with a castrating woman who wants to kill men in her area. There is no way to know what her vengeance is. It is this uncertainty that draws the reader into a world of darkness and violence. Despite not knowing why the landlady was killed, the storey foreshadows the tragedy that will follow the kindness and sweetness she showed at the start of the storey. Then Billy, who is only 17 years old, does this, too recalls reading the names of two earlier guests. "Now where on earth had he heard that quite peculiar name before?" he wonders. We have a feeling something isn't quite right (10, 13). Billy "had never been in any boarding-houses," and "he was a tiny bit terrified of them," the narrator says early on (5). The fact that Billy is unfamiliar with boarding homes and is terrified gives the reader a hint that something dreadful is about to occur, despite the fact that it is not defined or stated explicitly. As a result, the reader does not realise what is wrong until the very conclusion of the novel. The story's dread and dark atmosphere is reflected in Dahl's delivery of foreshadowing. The narrator, for example, recounts how each "word was like a giant black eye staring at him..., holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was" (6) and how the "air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his chest" (3). The frightening mood created by the novel is linked to The landlady in particular has a lot of dark inside of her. In this case, the storey doesn't say what the problem is, but the fact that it implies something is wrong but doesn't say what it is just makes it more violent and absurd behaviour. It compels the reader to seek an explanation for an elderly woman who kills for fun, while also recognising the futility of this effort. Furthermore, the novel employs irony to heighten the gloomy atmosphere and sense of impending catastrophe that Billy is about to encounter. The landlady's words, in particular, become weighted with double meanings and express the murky and evil nature that she hides as an avenger against young men. When my small pets die, I stuff them myself, says the landlady (15). On the surface, this phrase appears to be

innocent, but it conceals a horrifying secret. The "pets" the landlady alludes to are people she kills, not animals. 'You see, it isn't very often that I get the pleasure of welcoming a visitor into my small nest,' she also informs Billy (7). She does not welcome Billy to a serene or comfortable environment. Rather, it's a deadly web of risk. The landlady's violence is amplified by her deliberate use of terms that have the opposite meaning (nest normally connotes warmth and tranquilly). That is, rather of showing a spiteful, aggressive woman who commits murder in front of the reader, Dahl depicts female violence in a subtle, yet dormant manner throughout the novel. Billy sips the tea that is said to be poisoned near the end of the storey. He didn't care for the tea because it "tasted slightly of bitter sweet almonds" (15). The taste of almonds is a metaphor to sarcastic poison. Food is utilised as a kind of forced violence in this country. It can be regarded as a way for the landlady to get sexual fulfilment by possessing teenage guys. Dahl's stories "convey the pleasures of food in a cultured gourmet fashion and are rather tied to concepts of sexual cravings and/or revenge," according to Vias Valle (2004: 111). As a result, when trying to understand the landlady's behaviour while reading "The Landlady," revenge becomes an urgent concept. She wants to torture and avenge young guys who come to her Bed and Breakfast for unknown reasons. The female character of "The Landlady," as Makman suggests, is a "forerunner of Dahl's terrible enchantresses in *The Witches*," as the landlady is not who she appears to be at first even the sweetest-looking lady can be a witch in *The Witches*" (1997:215).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Dahl places this criticism inside a three-part a structure of violence, absurdity, and wit. So, in Dahl's short stories, retribution takes the lead, but only through the other things that make up Dahl's fictional world. To put it another way, Dahl constructs this world by triangulating black humour, gloom, violence, and absurdity in order to produce a recipe that generates controversy while remaining consistent and captivating. Dahl is successful in inverting not just the genre of the short storey he writes, but also the genre of comedy, too. He also does a good job of making interesting female characters that fit in with his world while also questioning and subverting society's established roles. Dahl shows female avengers, housewives who take revenge on their husbands, and an elderly woman who has a secret plan for young men in the three stories he chose for this list. To get back at people who have hurt them, the characters in Dahl's books come up with complicated and macabre ways to do so. Vengeance is a common theme in Dahl's adult literature, and his female avengers are relentless in their quest of their goals. One part of Dahl's fascination in delving into the dark side of human nature is the image of the female avenger, which features an ambivalent mix of black humour, violence, and absurdity.

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