



Twists of Fate: Exploring Dark Humor and Moral Ambiguity in Roald Dahl's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses Roald Dahl's use of Literary Devices such as Dark Humor and Moral Ambiguity. It emphasizes on the genres he worked in. It further explores Dahl's world of short stories concerning the above-mentioned Literary Devices. This paper also navigates how the author's wicked storytelling has made his short stories a beloved classic among children and adults. This study also explores how fate is twisted in these selected stories and how to understand the characters' impact on readers.

Keywords: Twists of Fate, Dark Humor, Moral Ambiguity, Macabre, Children, Adults, Unconventional, Storytelling.

Introduction:

A fan-favourite among kids, Roald Dahl was not just known as the author of popular children's literature but also as a short story writer, a poet, a screenwriter and a wartime fighter pilot. His life has been as much a journey as he writes one for the protagonists of his novels, who are notably always children. Dahl had always been an enthusiast for writing. He mentions this in his autobiography, *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984), which he relished in writing essays. Once, a younger Dahl broke the tip of his nib and could not continue writing an assigned essay to the students even though he "really wanted to finish that essay". He also mentions that his years in the boarding school made him develop the letter-writing habit at nine. From then on, he continued writing to his mother for the next thirty-two years until she died. Words and sentences had always surrounded his life. Wickedly put together, but just as his audience preferred. Dahl has always created a world full of magic, villainous adults, clever and creative children, and sometimes magical but most times human characters full of kindness and hope. We all have a similar memory associated with this particular author's name, and that is one of his famous novels, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), and *Matilda* (1988). However, what most people miss out on is that Dahl also creates a darker narrative. Here, he wrote stories stained with dark humor and morally ambiguous characters meant only for the mature audience. His years as a wartime fighter pilot during World War II probably gave him the edge of darkness that is vivid in his short stories. His series of short stories for adults, such as *Someone Like You* (1953), a collection of Faerie tales for adults, which was followed later by *Kiss, Kiss* (1959), which focused on complex romantic relationships, were what gained him the status of a "best-seller." Dahl wrote clever stories for children full of freedom and whimsical. But he also had another spectrum filled with stories of the unknown. He explored ominous themes that dived into the human psyche, ranging from betrayal, revenge, anger, greed, deception and manipulation. His short stories, such as *The Landlady* or *Lamb to the Slaughter*, are some of his unconventional stories. Curated with characters that reflect a regular person with a regular life but veiled with a twist so unexpected that you can only expect of Dahl. His works were a way to question society and its norms without being overly modest. Provoking yet engaging, his writings provoke a person to think about the complications and contradictions innate in human nature. Roald Dahl wrote short stories as if they were mysteries to be solved and judged by the readers.

Dark Humor: The Dahl's Way:

Dark humor, or black comedy, is a literary device that uses grotesque and surreal elements to comment upon society's profound, hurtful, outlawed ways. Dahl persists in this contemporary world, which all but feasts on this sort of communication. Ironically, dark humor does not directly hit the bull's eye; instead, it creates anxiety and reflects life's absurdity. Dark humor is a narrator brimming with a sardonic and sceptical tone, keeping the readers on their toes. This literary device is one of the writer's most powerful tools. When used wisely, it even makes the macabre of life a subject of humor. Several writers have used dark humor as their primary weapon; Roald Dahl, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Mark Twain are a few. These authors blended satire and irony to create dark humor at its finest.

Roald Dahl has his art of dark humor. His short stories have an eerie air to them. With his morally ambiguous characters and tell-tale storytelling, Dahl used foreshadowing to give his readers clues. *The Landlady*, *The Way up to Heaven*, and *Parson's Pleasure* highlight subtle peculiarities of characters that merge with the comedy to create dark humor.

In *The Landlady*, Dahl writes about Billy Weaver searching for a lodging to stay the night when he stumbles upon a cheap bed and breakfast run by a sweet-looking lady. However, Dahl, in his writing, gives specific hints about the lady's sinister intentions with the young man. The seemingly old lady has a penchant for preserving her guests. And Billy Weaver is her next victim. The dark humor here is very subtle, rooted in the strange setting of the seemingly humble abode. The lady starts to give off a cold vibe with her constant sinister smiles. The author foreshadows Billy's fate by mentioning that there had been no other guest except Billy in the last two or three years. And the only two other guests who had ever stayed there before had hauntingly similar names to the people mentioned in the newspaper. Also, the landlady casually mentions preserving her dead pets by stating, "I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they pass away." This moment is yet another foreshadowing, hinting towards Mr. Weaver being the next one to be preserved. The humor in this story shows the stark contrast between the outwardly pleasant personality and the inwardly horrifying intentions towards the young man. Dahl proves that a person must not necessarily be 'different' to stand out. People like the lady in the story maybe someone who has easily blended into our surroundings. This story is an intelligent show of not judging a book by its cover. What may appear to be safe does not mean it will be safe.

In another short story, *The Way Up to Heaven*, Dahl writes about an old woman with a "pathological fear of missing a train, a plane, a boat, or even a theatre curtain." Mrs Foster is at her wit's end when she starts to be suspicious about her husband's behaviour of deliberately stalling and testing her patience. Here, Dahl brings in dark humor. While on her way to Paris, Mrs Foster is yet again waiting for her husband, who has returned to the house to search for a gift he had prepared for their daughter. A gift later found "wedged down in the crack of the seat...as though with the help of a pushing hand". With her thinning patience, she goes towards the door to call for her husband when she hears a faint sound inside the house. Instead of calling her husband, she rushes back to the car and goes on her trip. After six weeks, when she returns, She has become a changed woman, satisfied and happy. When she returns home, the house is eerily quiet with a "fain and curious odour in the air that she had never smelled before". The readers can now see what must have happened to Mr Foster that day. Dahl very cleverly turns the submissive Mrs Foster, who had been 'disciplined' by her husband, into a vicious yet victorious woman who changes her fate for the rest of her life.

Dahl's *Parson's Pleasure* deals with humans' selfish and greedy nature. This short story revolves around a small man named Mr. Boggis. Dahl describes him as a man with a "gentle imbecility." Mr. Boggis is an immoral antique dealer who cons others living in the countryside by acting as a clergyman. It's been nine years since he has been using this method to swindle people by buying antique furniture for less amount. This time, his target is an older man named Rummins. He wants to buy only the legs of the "commode", but not before trying to fool Rummins and the others by calling it a fake. Things turn curious when he thinks he has succeeded in his shenanigan. While Mr Boggis is off to get his car to carry the entire "commode", Claud, another man in the scene, convinces Rummins to cut off the legs of the furniture and give it away to the man since no one has ever seen a "parson with a big car". This ridiculous turn of events makes the readers take a cruel delight in Mr. Boggis's misery. Dahl nails the balance of the comedy and the macabre with his unusual, chilling, yet satisfying short stories. He explores and experiments with the dark humor in the story, always reaching an unexpected ending. Dahl's stories have a thrill to them because of their unpredictability. One might never know what serious issue he must have chosen for a story that looks like a goody-two-shoes from the outside. He realistically wrote about the evils of the society. Enigmatic characters with multifaceted personalities make the readers even more inquisitive about the character's next step. Dahl used each element of the story to insert doses of dark humor in fair amounts. From the plot to the characters to the setting, every sentence is a testament to the apprehension in the reader's mind.

Moral Ambiguity as a Literary Device:

Differentiating ambiguity with moral ambiguity is pretty straightforward. At the same time, ambiguity refers to a situation that can be interpreted with multiple meanings, whereas 'moral' ambiguity specifically questions one's ethical or moral notions. A grey area with unconventional thoughts that defy the nature of principles. Moral ambiguity in literature is a device often incorporated by writers. It makes the plot wander in a circle without a socially justified setting. It is often set within a character who ends up doing the morally wrong thing. However, this character also has a past or a present that gains the reader's pity or distastefulness. Being stuck in limbo leads the readers to question their morality. Do we support the character? Or do we blame them for their undignified act? Several authors have frequently used this literary device throughout the history of literature. Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* questions the very bond of morality with aesthetics. Jane Austen's *Emma* is another example of moral ambiguity where the kind but meddlesome protagonist "Emma Woodhouse" assumes her kindness makes her entitled to make decisions for others. Nevertheless, her behaviour costs her some important people in her life. Despite using similar literary devices, Dahl's writing is openly cruel and nasty, with no 'good' character to balance the 'evil' in the story. Dahl's approach to moral ambiguity is outright cruel. He makes his readers lose their sense of setting and immerses them in the other side of the world. One of his short stories, *Taste*, captures the setting of a seemingly ordinary bet made during dinner at the Schofields that slowly descends into a morally complex situation. The bet starts with Mike Schofield asking Richard Pratt, a "famous gourmet", to name the exact vintage and vineyard of the wine. But the real catch is what the two had at stake during the bet. While Pratt made a bet on two of his country houses, his demand from Mike was ridiculous: to give his eighteen-year-old daughter's hand in marriage to Pratt, who was around fifty. The thought of marrying a young girl without her consent is in itself immoral. However, Mike was not living up to his fatherly duties because he agreed to this bet. In the end, Pratt wins the bet, but only after the author reveals that he did so through immoral means. The maid, who worked for Schofield's, addresses Richard while returning his spectacles to him. The maid said he visited Mr. Schofield's study "before dinner." The dishonest and cheating ways come forward, leaving the audience questioning Pratt's intentions despite him being a known figure. Dahl's way of showing the questionable integrity of a morally ambiguous man is truly remarkable.

One of his well-known short stories, *Lamb to the Slaughter*, deals with the eerie moral compass of a six-month pregnant Mary Maloney when faced with a confession by her husband. A confession left unclear by the author but hinted towards the man's intention to separate from his wife. The story loses all its sweetness the moment Mary kills her husband with the leg of a lamb. A moment of shock leads to her committing a grave sin. Her shock does not last long since being a detective's wife has its perks. She covers all her trails by cooking the lamb and going out to weave a story that contrasts with

the real one. In the end, we can see Mary feeding the lamb to the officers searching for that evidence. Then, the ending statement of the story leaves the readers even more horrified. The author writes, "And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle" after listening to the officers guess where the evidence might be. This gradual descent of a sweet, dotting wife to a cold-blooded murderer is what sets Dahl's stories apart from others. Readers might face turmoil between understanding Mary's emotional upheaval and her subsequent violent actions. Thus creating a state of moral ambiguity and dilemma.

Man from the South, the most unsettling of the lot. This story is also about a bet issued between an older man and a young American sailor. The older man makes a bet that states that the young man should light his lighter "ten times without missing once". If the old man loses the bet, he will give away his "Cadillac", but if the younger one loses, he has to give up his little finger. The young man, though disturbed, foolishly agrees to the bet. The author does not even try to hide the moral ambiguity in this story. The mere thought of cutting one's finger gives a person chills. But not this older man; he is very nonchalant about his demands. He even thinks that he has made quite a fair bet. However, the older man's wife enters the scene in the middle of the bet and stops this charade. She explains that the older man has done this kind of thing before. Even the car that he betted on isn't his own but hers. But the horrifying ending leaves the audience in a macabre state. The wife says that she had to win all her stuff back from the old man, and the proof of it comes when the author looks at her hand and states, "It had only one finger on it, and a thumb." The reader has to contemplate the notions of carelessness, obsession and the reality of danger. Dahl's unusual creativity of blending the normal with the surreal is a feat. His setting is always simple: a dinner party, a couple simply sitting in their living room, or even a man simply relaxing by the pool in a hotel. What one does not see coming is a sudden twist in the tale. When the dinner party turns into cruel, planned deception, the seemingly regular living room turns into a crime scene, or the peaceful pool turns into a bet that would cost you a finger. All these settings, with people full of moral ambiguity, lead the readers to question their sanity. Though highly entertaining, these stories are thought-provoking, making one ponder the nature of human life and its complexities. And maybe we all have a hint of moral ambiguity within ourselves, but not acting upon it is correct.

The Psychological Dilemma:

Psychological elements are second nature to Dahl's writings, especially his short stories. Psychological elements generally refer to the conflicts present in the human psyche. Most characters present in Dahl's writings hold a sinister air to themselves. Their slow but gradual character development reveals their crooked thinking to the readers. Dahl was originally going to write his story, *The Landlady*, as one with supernatural elements, preferably a ghost. However, he changes the ending because it is also more likely to happen in reality. Although an open-ended story, it very clearly justifies the Fate of Billy Weaver in the end. In his short story, *Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat*, Dahl weaves a tale about a marriage based on lies and deceit. Mrs. Bixby, the wife of a dentist, is involved in an extramarital affair with a wealthy Colonel. Her need to be with another man arises due to her dissatisfaction with her present life. Her psychological complexities are rooted in her greed and a desire for the finer things. When the Colonel gifts her a rich "mink coat", she is enraptured at the sight of it. She has to have that coat. So, Mrs Bixby conspires a detailed plan about keeping the coat with a "pawnbroker" and taking the ticket back home as if she found one by chance. Initially, her plan goes just as she wanted, but a sudden twist of fate brings a shocking revelation about their marriage. If the coat were for a woman, it would be claimed by Mrs Bixby as decided by the couple. However, all Mr. Bixby gets back from the shop is a mink neckpiece instead of the coat. Later, they reveal that the original mink coat is still there. Instead, it is gifted to Mr. Bixby's assistant at work. The irony of the husband and the wife cheating on each other isn't lost on the readers. Mrs. Bixby's readiness to lie and cheat is returned to her by her husband's dishonest ways. Dahl very cleverly highlights the marriage of two dissatisfied people living together. Their flawed relationship and flawed nature are examples of the complexities and dilemmas people face in reality.

Royal Jelly, another of Dahl's masterpieces, is another story about a couple with a newborn girl. Albert and Mabel Taylor have a rough patch with their daughter's eating habits. Or from the lack of it thereof. Albert, who finds a solution, the royal jelly, soon creates serious trouble. Albert reads about the jelly and its benefits and tests it on his daughter. He keeps giving her the jelly in small doses in the beginning and later in larger doses. The wife, who is not aware of it in the beginning, is shocked to find out her husband has been experimenting on their daughter. Later, the husband also consumed the jelly for quite some years. The wife, who is horrified after being aware of the truth, starts to notice her husband's weird physical changes. She also notices some slight changes in her baby. The story ends with a terrifying ending, with the wife stuck in a disaster. Albert's obsession with bees and royal jelly reaches an unhealthy extent when he tries it on his newborn baby. His need to be proud of his achievement overpowers his concern for his daughter. The mental state of Mable Taylor is an open case for all readers. Her concern for her daughter and helplessness are visible when she discovers the truth. To face the father of her child, who might have been feeding her uncertified items, hits her right where it hurts. Albert's psychological madness and Mable's psychological dilemma are parallel to the reality of life and its uncertainties. The intricacies of Dahl's characters are further complicated by the lack of awareness of the consequences of their actions. A psychological dilemma so eloquently instilled in a person's mindset plays with their consciousness of wrong and right, as well as ethical and unethical. Dahl writes about broken marriages and obsessive family members in a typical, homely setting. He proves that these psychological dilemmas and complexities are a part of each individual out there. His writings proficiently state that a person who is cunning or deceitful does not have to be 'different' from others. Dahl's intensity to stories with morally abnormal activities allows the readers to peek into the minds of those who might not think about anyone but themselves. These seemingly regular and essential relationships that are necessary for each of us might be a way to reach the goal for others. Characters who trample on others to succeed do not just emphasize their psychological complexities but also the emotional turmoil of the other person that they might be using in their conquest. These characters put on masks and carry out their usual activities with each other, but they are entirely unaware that they might be hurting each other in a manner that might cost them their future. In both these stories, Dahl highlights dysfunctional family dynamics, dissatisfied relationships, greed, deceit and obsession. Bringing forth the reality of psychological dilemmas and complexities.

Short Story and Novels: The Key Differences:

Roald Dahl is synonymous with creative storytelling. He has an audience of all age groups precisely because he writes whimsically and darkly. However, Dahl poses a distinct contrast between his literary geniuses. His novels and short stories vary in themes, narrative, and audience. Dahl's novels are mainly focused on children. His novels, such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The BFG*, and *Matilda*, are solely based on childish wonders. The protagonists of these stories are often children themselves, children who face judgement, discrimination, and cruelty, mainly from the adults, the antagonists of these novels. Since his novels focus on children, a common theme among them is hope, kindness, and the goodness of the heart. On the contrary, his short stories are targeted at adults. They explore sinister themes such as deceit, revenge, obsession, and twisted relationships. His short stories often have a plot twist with elements of the macabre. They question human nature and its workings. Roald Dahl's novels always have a sweetness to them, a certified happy ending. The children, though facing issues, are full of life and mischief. The effect of these novels is always rooted in the children's perception of the world. Their willingness to solve their problems and get out there and live again eventually sets them free from their problems. Dahl's depiction of his characters in the novels has a comical element. Even with the villains, the mood is always light-hearted. Dahl ensures these little bundles of joy and mischief get the happy ending they deserve. On the other hand, Dahl pays no heed to sugarcoating things in his short stories. Instead, he is forthright with his approach. The reader can sense the eerie air from the very beginning of the story. The characters and their motifs are layered with their unconventional thoughts and actions. His simple setting of a house might turn into a crime scene the very next moment. The plot twists, at times abrupt and slow, and does not fail to scare the reader's wits. His versatility as a writer is remarkable, as he is both a children's author and a short story writer for adults.

Even the narrative structure is different in both his storytelling. In comparison, his novels have a proper beginning, middle and end structure. He sets his short stories around a single action or event. For example, in his novel *Matilda*, the protagonist grows from a quiet, neglected child to a confident and self-sufficient young girl. In his short stories, Dahl writes in a manner that births a feeling of apprehension in the reader's mind. The consciousness in the story supports the definite upcoming twist. For example, in his *Lamb to the Slaughter*, the narrative is woven around the horrifying murder of a man by his wife. The twisted ending tickles the reader's thoughts when they find the wife "giggling" at the very last. Thus, these tit-for-tat tales are better suited for adults. There is also a distinct variation in the characterization of these stories. Dahl's novels have an element of exaggeration. The good and the bad come with their otherworldly elements. There is also a relatively clear distinction between the 'good and bad characters,' helping the younger audience better understand. In contrast, the short stories have characters with a morally ambiguous stance. They are self-centred and carry a sense of dark humor. They revolve around the plethora of emotions felt by adults, such as anxiety, anger, vulnerability, and a sense of helplessness. But these are not it, and he also brings forth the sides that people tend to keep hidden. That would be their envy, greed, anger, and sense of revenge. Dahl writes about reality in his short stories. Unlike his novels, no 'saving grace' characters or a redemption arc exists. What has been done cannot be undone in his quirky yet cruel short stories.

Another difference noted is the author's writing style. His novels tend to have a jolly wordplay. He even addresses the readers directly, creating a conversational tone. His writing style helps the children interact and interpret more. This method allows them to enhance their skills as a child. The children enjoy having a partner while reading, narrating a story and engaging you in a conversation. Dahl isn't just the author of his novels but also a kind company to several young readers around the globe. While on the other hand, his short stories have a controlled and exact language and style. He tends to have a brief but comprehensive tone, maintaining a strict environment for the readers. He serves the information he sees fit only at the very right moment. Like *Man from the South*, his story is a psychological thriller with the readers in a dubious mind. His stories aren't sweet in any sense. Instead, the author pours a sense of dread over one's conscience. While his storytelling is unbeatable, Dahl works like the two sides of a coin, with his two distinct writing styles. He knows precisely how to cater to his audience and does so very effectively. If readers shift from Dahl's novels to his short stories, they might undoubtedly feel that shock. However, they would unknowingly enjoy his short stories because of the thrill they stimulate. But then again, Dahl has always been unconventional. Neither his novels are what one might consider a 'children's novel' nor are his short stories suitable for a comparative 'light read.' Even his autobiography, *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, isn't a regular one; it is more like anecdotes from his childhood. Some of his best and worst moments that he remembered throughout his life. It could be his unconventional storytelling that makes it so very extraordinary.

Conclusion:

Roald Dahl is a striking example of blending dark humor and moral ambiguity in his short stories. Creating a compelling narrative. His writings bewitch the readers. They evoke a sense of curiosity that pushes the readers to dig deeper. Dahl challenges the reader's morality with his unsettling wit and twisted ironies. His stories, such as *The Landlady* or *Lamb to the Slaughter*, threaten society. The actions in these stories can neither be justified nor excused. These stories do not define 'good' or 'evil.' Dahl's embodiment of his characters is the crux of his storytelling. When placed in highly unpredictable settings, these characters act in distinctive ways and move unusually. Their physical appearance is a stark contrast with their inner-self. Since most of his characters are naturally crooked, it becomes difficult for the reader to understand who might be the victim and the assailant. For instance, in his story, *Man from the South*, we witness a man who is very passionate about his job. But we also notice that he might be too passionate about his job because he is ready to fool people. Through these characters, Dahl exposes the wicked mind of a man. To what extent is one willing to satiate one's greed? The comic element in these stories matches a certain level of psychological insight, revealing a much darker meaning behind these stories. The complexities of these characters are related to their emotional deprivation. In stories like *Royal Jelly*, a father who faces infertility issues tries some of the royal jelly produced by the bees. Noticing his fruitful case, he tries to use it on his daughter, who does not eat enough for a newborn. However, this frightening case of obsession turns into a mother's helplessness. The mother is the only one who notices her husband's physical changes and the gradual change in her daughter's appearance. This psychological realism challenges the readers to empathize with the father trying to help his daughter. Dahl's use of dark

humor isn't to add an element of light-hearted pause in his stories. He very carefully and powerfully wields this tool to satirize societal norms. The playful nature of his humor eventually leads to the absurdity of life. In his story *Taste*, the supposedly childish bet ruins trust and relationships among the people. Dahl's humor is sharp and makes readers uncomfortable.

Even his use of moral ambiguity isn't simply a theme he incorporates. Instead, it is the knife he twists throughout his story. Writing unconventional characters and drawing murky settings. This element uncertainly accentuates the delicacy of human emotions. In *The Way Up to Heaven*, the readers cannot grapple with the unseemly situation of the story. Her ultimate choice of revenge can not justify the years of emotional abuse faced by Mrs Foster. This story mirrors the reality of marriage and the frustration that builds in it over time. Such narratives discuss the emotional and psychological tendencies of humans. The perception of Dahl's works highlights his narrative skill. His writing on greed, jealousy, anger, fear, desire, and the search for meaning is thought-provoking. His stories have been persistent even in the contemporary world, not just because they are entertaining but also because they push the writer to think about the various dimensions of human life. Dahl's earlier life had been nestled between several family tragedies, and the latter half also had to witness the effects of war. These personal tragedies also influenced his need to write stories that belonged to two different worlds. One for the children, with hope and optimism and belief. The other is for adults, who cannot hide what lies deep within them. To act on it would harm not just themselves but also the people around them. Thus, Roald Dahl's short stories are intricate narratives entwined with dark humor and moral ambiguity. By exploring the psychological depth of his stories, Dahl writes in an iceberg form where what he allows the audience to see is just the tip. And most of it, the reality is hidden underwater. Dahl only allows his reader to explore the entirety of the iceberg if he deems it fit. Dahl repeatedly questions the society and its norms in his short stories. Demanding the readers to think upon the absurdity of it all. Ultimately, Dahl's stories have survived all these ages and helped readers to indulge in their darker elements and enjoy the raw, dark humour.

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