

Roald Dahl – the reflection of his life experience in his short stories

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„How much do we need to know about a writer personally? The answer is that it doesn't matter. Nothing or everything is equally satisfactory. Who cares in the end? ... Biography is there for the curious; and curiosity gives out where boredom begins.” Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliche* (quoted in Orwell, *The Life* by D.J. Taylor).

The aim of this thesis is very clear – to show how selected short stories by the British author Roald Dahl connect with events in his life. In the introduction the author states that she would like to show Dahl “through the prism of his life and thus explain his likely motives to write each story. As I believe Roald Dahl's life was almost as exciting as his stories, I cannot leave it out of my thesis”. (p.2). This is a terribly simple approach to literature, and also unintentionally arrogant as it is surely impossible, even if it were thought worthwhile or in any way illuminating, to attempt to explain the motives of a writer.

After a short introduction the author explores the genre of the short story before beginning a description of Dahl's life, including work, war experience and hobbies, with a parallel analysis of the short stories that seem to reflect the trajectory of his life.


The “celebrity magazine” approach to literature is depressing, not only in that it blocks an interesting analysis of the literature itself. It also truncates and trammels the story of the life. Though the information given by the author about Dahl makes one feel that he was something of a monster, one is sympathetic to the fact that the information offered is partial and superficial. Whilst Dahl would undoubtedly make an interesting subject for psychoanalytic analysis – insofar as the marked cruelty, craving for revenge/wild justice, misogyny, and focus on situations in which people are manipulated and trounced that pervade his work could perhaps be interestingly related to the sadistic British upper-class habit of sending 8 or 9-year-old boys away from their homes and mothers to an all male public school environment in which they are rendered powerless, bullied, flagellated and abused by strangers – a slim thesis is not the place for such an analysis.

The invariable superficiality of such speculation is particularly apparent when “dealing with” (p.15) the controversial aspects of Dahl's life. For example she quotes Dahl talking about how “even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them [Jews] for no reason” (p.15). The author describes this as a “questionable element”. It isn't, it's hateful and vile without question. And his use of a silly public schoolboy vocabulary (“stinker” and “pick on”) adds further insult to deep injury. But the superficial treatment of the life is less important than the lack of any in-depth analysis of the literary texts themselves. The author limits herself to a kind of detective work e.g. “The topic of this story can be traced neither in Dahl's autobiography *Going Solo* nor in Mr Treglown's biography *Roald Dahl*, so we may assume it is a product of Dahl's imagination.”, (p.16) as if pinpointing a biographical inspiration for a text has any meaningful bearing on its literary value.

The author in fact undermines her thesis when she concedes, in the extremely brief conclusion, that, “Throughout his life he was accused of racism, plagiarism, misogyny and God knows what more, so I cannot say he was an overall nice individual. The point is that he is a writer known by millions of people all over the world, who love his unique wicked sense of humour, which has gained him a steady appreciative audience.” To add the opinion of the

English poet Stevie Smith "But neither odd lives nor sex really signify, it is a person's ...[works] that stand to be judged"

Though strongly critical of the approach the author takes, I feel that she does so with a genuine and obviously extensive knowledge of the work of Dahl, an enduringly popular writer with both children and adults. She writes very clearly and has worked hard to map out an overview of both Dahl's short stories and his life. The thesis is also extremely well structured and illustrated. For all these reasons I recommend the thesis for acceptance at a suggested grade of 3.

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