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**Roald Dahl - the reflection of his life  
experience in his short stories**

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I claim that I wrote this diploma thesis on my own and that I have listed all the used materials in Bibliography.

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## Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to point out the many similar features of Roald Dahl's work and life. The short stories, in the thesis briefly characterised, are put into chronological order according to Roald Dahl's life periods. The analysis of the short stories suggests to which extent they are autobiographical. The author's autobiographies, *Boy – Tales of Childhood*, *Going Solo* and the biography *Roald Dahl* by Jeremy Treglown, are used as the basis of this parallelism.

## Anotace

Hlavním cílem této práce je ve vybraných povídkách poukázat na četné společné rysy tvorby a života Roalda Dahla. Povídky jsou řazeny chronologicky podle autorových životních období, v práci stručně charakterizovaných. Analýza povídek naznačuje, do jaké míry jsou autobiografické. Podklady ke srovnání jsou čerpány z autorových autobiografií, *Boy – Tales of Childhood*, *Going Solo*, a biografie *Roald Dahl* z pera Jeremyho Treglowna.

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## 1. Introduction

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*Times Newspapers Ltd*

Roald Dahl in his writing hut  
Source: [www.roalddahlstans.com](http://www.roalddahlstans.com)

Many people and especially children know Roald Dahl for his children's stories and only then is he remembered as an author of adults' literature. Although this certainly has reason, I would not completely agree with this stance and since quite a lot has been written about his children's stories but not much about the latter, I would like to go into details with his short stories for adults and compare them with the way they seem to reflect his life 'stories'.

In my thesis I chose to explore various crucial moments in Dahl's life (a life period when he was bullied at school, his work in Africa, later followed by his air force service in Europe and Africa during the Second World War and his return to England, his numerous hobbies and the end of his life) and systematically put some of his stories into chronological sequence, juxtapose them to his life and emphasise the moments, which correspond with his personal experience, and the ones that I consider to have been written solely from his imagination.

To do this I plan to compare three different sources: a) his short stories *The Collected Short Stories* (henceforth – CSS), b) his autobiographies *Boy – Tales of Childhood* (henceforth – BToC) and *Going Solo* (henceforth – GS) and c) Jeremy Treglown's biography called *Roald Dahl* (henceforth – RD), but before I do that, in every chapter I am going to explain the whereabouts of Roald Dahl in each period based on all three sources.

By analysing all these I would like to show him 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.

## 2. Origins of the Short Story

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As was already mentioned, Roald Dahl was not an author of short stories only, but also of books for children, two novels and a cookbook. But as this thesis is concerned with his short stories, I hereby introduce the theory of short stories in general and make a connection to Roald Dahl's short stories.

When we think of a short story what often comes to our minds are mostly modern short stories, it is unquestionable however that the history of short stories is much older. If we go back in time, we can trace their imprints even in the very first literary works of Judeo-Christian (and thus European) tradition, such as the stories of Ruth and Jonah in the Old Testament. The origins of the short story can be traced to fables, epics, tales and romances of the Middle Ages that directly contributed to the popularity of a narrative and to the desire to develop story telling. (1)

The literary short story in the modern sense developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a distinct literary genre and as a direct result of the growth of periodicals for leisure reading. Another factor was the contribution of E. A. Poe, the genre's originator and the first critical theorist, who established the first rules. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century short stories were influenced by various genres such as naturalism, impressionism and other genres.

According to general rules, a short story is a fictional prose narrative, which tends to be brief in nature. Though it has many features in common with novels, such as characters, setting or plot, a short story mainly deals with a single event or episode and often a single character. It is also shorter than a novel or a novelette, so the characters may not be as fully developed or as complex. As to the length, no limits have ever been set, but usually the reader's sense of satisfaction signals the completion of the story (2), though other literary critics claim that a single short story should be from one sentence to four pages long. Another assessment claims that a

short story should consist of 500 -10,000 words conveyed during a single hearing or reading, while E. A. Poe states, "a short prose narrative requires half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal." (3) According to him " /t/he best short stories seek to achieve a single, major, unified impact or emotional effect on the reader, /which he calls/ 'The Single effect Theory'." (4) This concept emphasises "unity of mood, time, place, and action working together." (1) Also "a short story in which nothing at all happens is an absolute impossibility." (5) A similar opinion is shared by T. Hardy who claims that "a story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling." (5) Thus the question of the precise length of a short story remains unsolved.

As to the plot of a short story, it generally tends to deal with only a single event. The reader knows almost nothing about the previous facts or has only been given a brief introduction and the plot is very simple without any distracting episodes. The number of characters is limited and the main hero usually does not evolve throughout the story. Very often there is only one narrator of the story, whose space is represented much more than the space of the characters.

Short stories can be divided according to the theme into humoresques, arabesques (short, uncomplicated plot, simple structure, possibly ironical) or absurd short stories, or can be divided according to the plot as psychological, autobiographical, science fiction, detective, historical, from contemporary life, etc.

Roald Dahl's short stories generally follow the above-mentioned rules: in length, the number of characters, the plot is also the most important and one only learns the necessary facts of the previous history of the characters. The twist at the end is very strong in Dahl's stories, often even shocking and macabre, as is to be seen for example in *The Visitor*, *Pig* or *Parson's Pleasure*. Thematically Dahl wrote mainly arabesques (*The Bookseller*, *Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat*, *The Great Switcheroo*, etc.) or absurd short stories (*Royal Jelly*, *Georgy Porgy*, *Pig*, *The Landlady*, etc.), his plots are slightly psychological (*William and Mary*, *The Way Up to Heaven*, *The Last Act*, etc.), science fiction (*The Sound Machine*, *The Great Automatic Grammatizor*, etc.) one even detective (*Lamb to the Slaughter*). But the chief focus of my thesis

will be on semi-autobiographical stories or stories that in some ways may relate to Dahl's life  
(*Galloping Foxley, A Piece of Cake, Only This, The Visitor, Poison, etc.*)



This chapter is concerned with David Dahl's earliest years. As I want to tell the  
autobiographical stories one by one, the first story obviously reflects his childhood  
and is called *Galloping Foxley*. In the story he describes the time he spent at a number of  
schools, but not by the names of the schools, but by the teachers. As he writes at the end  
of the story almost verbatim in his autobiography: "The first of the teachers in his biography reads David  
substantiates by many examples with David's own words." I decided to give the parallel  
between the stories and Dahl's life story.

David Dahl was born in 1917 in London, England, to Norwegian parents, Sidsa and Henrik,  
and had six sisters. Sidsa, the youngest, was very close to her and a strong relationship  
developed between them, which lasted up to his death in 1967. This nickname of  
Sidsa was "The Apple" because of her bright blue eyes. (RD 10) He does not  
know how he got the name "foxley" but he says it was in his first school, "foxley" and  
some words which were in his first school.

David also recalls that he went to the first school, St. Andrew's Cathedral School in  
1925, in 1927 he went to St. Andrew's Cathedral School in Glasgow and in 1929 he went to  
school in Derby where he stayed until 1934.

### 3. Roald Dahl's Childhood until his Graduation

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Roald Dahl at Repton  
Source: [www.roalddahlfans.com](http://www.roalddahlfans.com)

This chapter is concerned with Roald Dahl's earliest years. As I want to put the autobiographical stories into chronological order, the first story apparently reflects his childhood and is called *Galloping Foxley*. In the story he describes the time he spent at a number of schools, bullied by the school prefects and caned by the headmasters. As he writes about this period almost verbatim in his autobiography *Boy and Mr Treglown*, in his biography *Roald Dahl*, substantiates it by many interviews with Dahl's schoolmates, I decided to show the parallels between the stories and Dahl's life, where they exist.

Roald Dahl was born in 1916 in Llandaff, Wales, to Norwegian parents, Sofie and Harald, and had six sisters. Roald, the only son of Sofie, was very close to her and a strong relationship developed between them, which lasted up to his mother's death in 1967. ["His nickname at home was 'The Apple,' because he was the apple of his mother's eye." (RD 15)] He does not conceal that he worshipped her greatly and often mentions her in his two autobiographies and some stories, which are going to be mentioned later.

Soon after his father's death in 1920 he starts to attend Llandaff Cathedral School (in 1923), in 1925 he enters St. Peter's School in Weston-Super-Mare and in 1929 Repton Public School in Derby, where he graduates in 1934.



## *Galloping Foxley*

a) This school period makes a strong negative impression on him and his childhood so that is the reason why he writes quite extensively about it in the autobiography *Boy* and employs a strikingly similar topic in his story *Galloping Foxley*. The story written in 1953 begins with a description of "a contented commuter" (CSS 505) Mr Perkins, who loves his every day routine travels to work by train, when suddenly one day, his peace of waiting at the platform is tragically disturbed by a stranger "looking [...] as though he owned the whole place" (CSS 506). To Mr Perkins's shock "try if you can to imagine my horror" (CSS 506), the intruder even comes in and sits down in Perkins's compartment, which nobody has done for fifteen years. Under such circumstances Mr Perkins gets to examine the person opposite him and together with his co-traveller's voice and the way he swung his cane at the platform he gets another, much bigger shock. In the face of the intruder, he recognises a boy from his schooldays at Repton, who used to bully him and he suddenly realises it is him.

In his memories he goes many years back into his schooldays and he is thinking about all the things he was forced to do for this boy, Bruce Foxley. For example he had to dust his room up to a point of sterilisation and even then Foxley would beat him. For this procedure Foxley had a special technique, to which he owed his nickname - Galloping Foxley. First he would ask his victim, if he wanted "...six with the dressing gown on or four with it off?" (CSS 510) and then he would go right to the end of the changing room and from there gallop back to get the most of his strokes and if the boy was lucky, his bottom did not bleed when everything was over.

Apart from tidying the premises of the prefects, as the older boys were called, Foxley being one of them, Mr Perkins remembers he had to polish Foxley's shoes and even the soles every day for fifteen minutes, he had to light the fire in Foxley's study every morning and although he spent most of his pocket money on special fire lighters, he often failed his task and got a beating anyway. Another thing he was ordered to do was to go and find irises in rainy



weather two and a half miles far from the school to put on Foxley's table and very often he would fall ill because of it. One of other tasks for all the fags, as the little slaves of the prefects were called, was to prepare their masters a fresh, but not burned toast or to clean their uniforms and football clothes. Anything not done to the taste of the prefect was " 'a beatable offence'."

(CSS 515)

Recalling this while staring at this man opposite him, Mr Perkins decides to address him and with a kind of triumph and revenge of embarrassing him in front of the rest of the commuters he introduces himself, "My name is Perkins – William Perkins – and I was at Repton in 1907"

(CSS 516), while the other replies " Mine's Fortescue – Jocelyn Fortescue, Eton 1916."

(CSS 516) This scene naturally implies Mr Perkins gave in to his strong memories from childhood, without them being well founded.

b) After reading Dahl's autobiography *Boy*, one cannot resist mentioning it in connection with this story as half of this book is about his childhood sufferings at school under the hands of prefects, or as he makes more accurate, in his chapter about them, Boazers. "/T/hey had the power of life and death over us junior boys." (BToC 141) Unfortunately, the Boazers are not the only source of beating, as the headmasters, either at the preparatory school in Llandaff or St.Peter's School in Weston-Super-Mare, are even worse. It is a common knowledge that one only remembers the very intense memories from one's childhood, and for Dahl those memories are mostly connected with all the beatings he was given at every school he went to.

Though the first chapter of his schooldays in a kindergarten in Llandaff has nothing to do with beatings (as rendered in his autobiography) and he does not remember much from this time, the second school he attends, Llandaff Cathedral School, leaves him with some more memories. The first memory he recalls is a big wish to have a bicycle and the second is connected with his every day walks to school around a sweet shop. "To us, it was what a bar is to a drunk, or a church is to a Bishop. Without it, there would have been little to live for."

(BToC 33) This shop is owned by Mrs Pratchett, "a small skinny old hag with a moustache on

her upper lip and a mouth as sour as a green gooseberry" (BToC 33), who hates children and is always rude to them. So one day little Roald and his friends make up a plan to punish this "disgusting old woman" (BToC 34), who always has dirty hands and apron, when touching the sweets. This idea comes to Roald when they find a dead mouse and they all decide to put it into one of the jars in Mrs Pratchett's shop. And here we come to Roald Dahl's first beating at school, because when Mrs Pratchett finds the mouse and recovers from the shock, she goes straight to the headmaster of Cathedral School and demands a punishment of the guilty boys. They are all summoned to the headmaster's study and get beaten with a cane by the headmaster, while Mrs Pratchett screams in excitement "H/et 'im 'ave it! Teach 'im a lesson" (BToC 47) and the boys have to bend down as tight as they can and touch the ground, just as in Dahl's story *Gallopig Foxley*. (CSS 511)

Nevertheless, this was just the beginning of what was to come. After the holidays spent in Norway, Roald Dahl starts to attend St. Peter's boarding school in England. In this chapter he describes many stories about "a large, fair-haired /matron/ with a bosom" (BToC 85), who could send you at any time to the study of the headmaster to get caned, or about a teacher Captain Hardcastle, who "had it in for /Dahl/" (BToC 110) right from the very start and made it clear with every caning Dahl received from him.

Dahl's last experience with any kind of schooling system awaits him in his thirteenth year in 1929, at Repton. Although he does not attend it at the same time as Mr Perkins in the story, there are certainly many elements that are similar in both the autobiography and the story. On the first day at Repton, he has to dress into an old-fashioned uniform with the straw hat mentioned in the story (CSS 513) when fetching irises for Foxley's table. It is needless to say that this day starts another unlucky seven-year period of his life. Like many others, he becomes a fag to one of the boazers "Repton /is/ run by its prefects known [...] as 'beausieurs'. (Dahl writes them phonetically, 'boazers')" (RD 28), who have a right to thrash the little boys for anything from "burning /their/ toast [...], for failing to dust /their/ study properly, for failing to get

/their/ study fire burning in spite of spending half of your pocket money on firelighters, [...]. The list was endless" (BToC 141). Each boazer has his own technique of punishing his fags. For example Williamson, a footballer, cricketer and athlete "/is/ famous for the speed of his strokes. Most of them paused between each stroke to prolong the operation" (BToC 141). Another boazer's speciality is to inspect the result of cleaning his study with a white glove on his hand and intentionally look for any small stain of dust for which to cane his fags. As it is "an actual impossibility to clean a much-used room to the point where no speck of dust remain/s/" (BToC 156), they would almost always meet Carleton in the changing rooms to get their share of thrashing. Another boazer Wilberforce is the one for whom Dahl warms his toilet seat in winter and thus spends a lot of time "in an unheated outhouse, and on a cold day /it is possible to get/ frostbite" (BToC 158). As Wilberforce "only use/s/ hot-bottomed fags to heat /his/ bog-seat" (BToC 159), Dahl becomes Wilberforce's "favourite bog-seat warmer" (BToC 159).

According to all these experiences with boazers, Foxley seems to be an embodiment of them all, together with the headmasters. The duties Dahl talks about in his autobiography such as warming the toilet seat (CSS 510, BToC 158), cleaning a boazer's study room (CSS 513, BToC 155), making toast for breakfast (CSS 514, BToC 141), or shining the soles of shoes (CSS 515, BToC 157) are easily comparable in the story *Galloping Foxley* and the book *Boy*. Although Dahl adds many details (for example about the way Foxley starts galloping before he canes his victim) and many other parts are exaggerated and changed (for example in the story, Perkins's father accompanies him to the train station, while in reality Dahl's father had been nine years deceased when Dahl went to Repton), the story *Galloping Foxley* clearly has a lot in common with Dahl's own life.

c) Mr Treglown in his biography *Roald Dahl* claims that Dahl once conceded to one of his friends Highton that he "coloured /St Peter's school/ by /his/ natural love of fantasy" while Highton "found the school ordinary enough. None of it was as grim as in *Boy*" (RD 20) On the other hand some of Dahl's contemporaries at Repton remember, "older boys of the house were

licensed to terrorise the younger. /It/ was a tough place, rules and discipline tight, living really Spartan, enforced by boys who did 90 percent of the beating, of which there was a lot." (RD 22) Another student at Repton, a future novelist, Denton Welch mentions all the beatings in his autobiography as well (RD 23). He even connects some of the prefects' actions to their homosexuality, which Dahl skips altogether and which, according to Treglown only adds to Dahl's distorted memories of his childhood. Here he alludes to Dahl's wrong mentioning of one headmaster, Geoffrey Fisher, who was particularly enthusiastic about all the caning. Some time after this man leaves Repton, he becomes the Archbishop of Canterbury, who crowned Queen Elizabeth II. In reality the headmaster, Dahl describes, is not Geoffrey Fisher, who chaired Repton a year before, but J. T. Chrissie (RD 24). Although many ex-students at Repton do remember the beatings, it is only natural that Dahl, as a writer, elaborates on this topic. The story *Gallopingle Foxley* (1953) and Dahl's autobiography *Boy* (1984) do resemble each other and Mr Treglown even argues that " Dahl transferred /some of the/ passages of the story more or less intact into *Boy* " (RD 27)

### *The Swan*

a) + c) Dahl returns to the topic of chicanery in another story *The Swan*. In the story two older boys torture a boy called Peter to such an extent that first they tie him to a dead swan and then they force him to climb to the top of a tree. When the boys start shooting at him with a rifle he jumps down. The ending is a bit fairy-tale-like, because when he jumps, he is able to fly home to his mother. This reminds Mr Treglown of Dahl himself in the times of war, when he had to fly his aeroplane through many terrible battles until he got back home to his mother (RD 273).

#### 4. Roald Dahl's Life until the Second World War

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Roald Dahl in Africa  
Source: [www.roalddahlsfans.com](http://www.roalddahlsfans.com)

Following his graduation at Repton, Dahl refuses to go either to Oxford or to Cambridge. After the long experience in harsh boarding schools he feels he cannot stand schools any longer and longs to see exotic countries such as Africa or China, which are two to five weeks away from England by boat then. As there are not many opportunities to visit these countries, unless one wants to work there, he is fortunate to obtain a job with the Shell Company. After some time of working for Shell he gets a chance to go and work for them in Mombassa, East Africa, where he " /gets/ the roasting heat and the crocodiles and the snakes and the long safaris up-country, selling Shell oil to the men who /run/ the diamond mines, /gold mines/ and the sisal plantations." (BToC 175) So in 1938 it is a common experience for Dahl to shake scorpions out of his boots or to stay in a car when the flood brings with it various dangerous animals from the jungle. This period of his life seems to be reflected in several stories by Roald Dahl with exotic settings, of which I have chosen the following.



## *Poison*

a) Although the story *Poison* is set in India, the plot is very close to all the dangerous experiences Dahl had to endure in Africa, as will be later shown. At the very beginning of the story a reader learns about two friends, Timber and Harry, who live together in a bungalow in India and work there.

One day Timber comes home late and peeps into his friend's bedroom to say hello, when he realises something is wrong. Harry is lying in his bed, but seems to be ill, as he is sweating enormously and whispers something to Timber in a weird way. "A krait [...] I haven't been bitten. Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep." (CSS 354) So when Timber realises the awful situation he immediately calls a doctor. Dr Ganderbarai urgently arrives and first he injects a serum into Harry's vein and then he pumps some chloroform under the sheet to make the krait fall asleep. The whole procedure taking a long stretch of time, they finally manage to do all possible precautions before they unfold the sheet to find there is actually no krait in Harry's bed. The whole situation being so psychologically strenuous the doctor asks Harry if he is hundred percent certain he saw the krait, to which Harry explodes in a rude racist reaction "you dirty little Hindu sewer rat. [...] You dirty black..." (CSS 541) This only shows the enormous pressure accumulated in Harry, who thought he was close to death and also introduces the topic of poisonous snakes in Dahl's work.

b) In *Boy* and especially in *Going Solo* Dahl describes the times he spent in East Africa when working for the Shell Company. There he learned how to take care of himself (BToC 175,176), though his own servant or as he is called "boy" helped him with everything. His name was Mdisho, who "was an expert at sewing and mending and washing and ironing and polishing and making sure there weren't scorpions in your mosquito boots [...] and he became your friend. [...] In return you look after him and his wives (never less than two) and his children." (GS 34)

Dahl soon starts to love this country though there are moments when he gets really scared, especially when he comes into contact with deadly snakes. "Oh those snakes! How I hated them!" (GS 50) One of those contacts he describes in *Going Solo* when once during his morning shave he encounters a great black mamba behind a servant in the garden. "It is the only /snake/ that has no fear of man and will deliberately attack him on sight. If it bites you, you are a gonner." (GS 36) He quickly shouts at the servant that it is behind him and runs outside to help him, while the other bravely hits it with the rake he is holding in his hands and kills it. If Dahl did not warn him, he would have been dead.

Another contact, but this time with a green mamba, is some time later, when he is invited to the house of his friend Mr Fuller, his wife and their two children. He is just approaching the house, when he sees a green mamba "gliding straight up the veranda steps of Fuller's house and in through the open front door" (GS 50). This is "a creature almost as deadly as the black mamba." (GS 50) So once again he warns the family and in a couple of minutes he is helping them all to get out of the house through a top window. Then Mr Fuller brings the snake-man, who finds the snake in the house and then puts it into a sack, both of which he manages superbly while Dahl and Mr Fuller are watching in horror. "I never lost my fear of snakes all the time I was in the tropics. They gave me the shivers." (GS 85)

Another experience with wild animals, but this time with a lion, awaits Dahl at another visit, to a District Officer in a town called Tabora, Tanganyika. As they are having a drink at the veranda, Mdisho comes running and shouting: "Come quick! A huge lion is eating the wife of the cook" (GS 44), and that is exactly how it appears. The lion is leaving the house with the wife in its jaws, while her husband runs behind to help her. The District Officer takes his rifle and is trying to shoot the lion, but as the cook is in his way he cannot aim properly. So the only thing he can do is to shoot ahead of the lion, which scares the animal enough to drop the cook's wife and run away. As all come closer they find the cook's wife safe and not even bitten and so it actually has a happy ending.



c) In connection with the story *Poison*, written in 1950, Mr Treglown mentions some criticisms of Dahl in the 1970s. Although Dahl certainly did not sympathise with Hitler or the Nazis and this story is a psychological satire on racism, throughout Dahl's life there were some moments when people hated him for his racist opinions. Once in 1983 he said, "t/here is a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity.... I mean there's always a reason why anti-anything crops up anywhere; even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason." (RD 256) Another questionable element can be traced in his book for children *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, where the slaves are black Congolese pygmies, which is later changed to a different colour (RD 39). As an old man, Dahl admits to being ashamed of accepting the political situation in Africa as normal. "It was only comfortable because we had masses of servants, which is not right, of course it is not right." (RD 39)

This is just to show how controversial Dahl was. On one hand, he was fighting in the war against Hitler and could have died there for this cause and on the other hand he became more and more anti-Semitic throughout his life. Nevertheless it perfectly corresponds with his daily behaviour, as he loved to amuse, scorn and shock at the same time, in other words the opinions about him vary tremendously. Some say he was conceited (RD 111), others that he was a very silly dull fellow (RD 110), while many loved to be in his company as he was a charming entertainer, "who seemed able to talk about anything." (RD 56)

### *An African Story*

*An African Story* comes from a collection of stories *Over to You*. This collection is mainly about his war era, such as stories like *Yesterday was Beautiful* or *Death of an Old Old Man* or *Madame Rosette*. I chose this story to represent his time spent in Africa, because the plot is more connected to his African experience than to his fighting as a pilot.

a) The *African Story* begins by explaining its origins. It starts with a subplot about a pilot during the Second World War, who at the outbreak of war leaves East Africa and reports in

Nairobi to be a pilot, just as Dahl himself (GS 84). As the pilot later dies during one flying training his co-pilot finds a story the deceased pilot wrote after he had come from one forced landing. He narrates a story of a man who had lived in a shack near the spot he landed on.

The old man lives there peacefully with another man called Judson until one day, Judson kills his dog and when he asks him why, he simply replies: "He wouldn't stop licking that old place on his paw. I couldn't stand the noise it made." (CSS 213) As the old man loved his dog, this makes him really angry, but he does not show it then. Some days pass before a weird thing happens. Every morning Judson would get up to milk their cow, when one day he discovers there is no milk in the cow's udder. At first they both think there was a thief, who stole it, but after the old man's night-watch he sees a black mamba snake, "eight feet long and as thick as a man's arm" (CSS 215) approaching the cow and then sucking her udder. "And while he watched these things, the old man began laughing quietly." (CSS 217) The next day he tells Judson about a boy stealing their milk and suggests a plan to him. They agree that Judson will hide in a trench and the old man will be on the watch and when the boy comes again, he will shout at Judson, who will jump up and beat him. This settled, they proceed with their plan until the morning when the old man eventually shouts, "Here he comes, Judson; here he comes. Go and get him." (CSS 220) At this Judson springs up, sees the mamba and as it sees him it strikes him into his chest and in another moment Judson lies dead on the ground. The mamba then takes one of the cow's teats and satisfied, drinks the milk, while the old man's reaction to this is, "You can have his share. We don't mind you having his share." (CSS 221)

b) + c) 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 only assume it is a product of Dahl's imagination. Nevertheless, it is clear that it is strongly influenced by his earlier knowledge and encounters of different snakes in Africa and to some extent by his flying period.

## 5. Roald Dahl during the Second World War

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©RDNL 2004  
Roald Dahl as a soldier  
Source: [www.roalddahl.com](http://www.roalddahl.com)

In 1939 when the war breaks out Roald Dahl enlists in Nairobi to join the RAF, where he starts to fly as a fighter pilot. Although he is much taller than a pilot should be "six feet six inches was not the ideal height for a flier of aeroplanes" (GS 88) he is accepted and introduced to his first plane Tiger Moth. At the beginning of the training there are sixteen of them young pilots and out of those "no less than thirteen were killed in the air within the next two years." (GS 89) After eight weeks of initial training they are all sent by train to Uganda, from there by a big plane to Cairo and then straight to Iraq, where they stay for another six months to "complete /their/ advanced flying training." (GS 98) This commences another adventurous period in Dahl's life, as it is not rare to get stung by scorpions and be escorted to a hospital or to evacuate the whole camp when the Euphrates river floods or situations like when "/t/he Iraqi tribesmen sometimes /take/ pot shots at us from the surrounding hills." (GS 98)

At the end of this training Dahl gets promoted to a Pilot Officer as a fighter pilot and is sent to Ismalia RAF station on the Suez Canal and from there he is posted to 80<sup>th</sup> Squadron in

the Western Desert of Libya to fight the Italians in the Gladiator planes. When Dahl eventually arrives there, he is given one of the planes he has never piloted before and is ordered to "get in and do a few circuits and bumps" (GS 99) before there are some Italians shooting him down. "W/e were flung in at the deep end, totally unprepared for actual fighting in the air, and this, in my opinion, accounted for the very great losses of young pilots that we suffered out there. I myself survived only by the skin of my teeth." (GS 100)

### *A Piece of Cake*

a) This story that also belongs to the collection *Over to You*, was actually the first story Dahl ever wrote. *A Piece of Cake* brings us into central Libya, to Fouka, where two pilots have to land to refuel and then they fly on to a place called Mersah Matruh. One of the pilots is Peter, the other one's name is not mentioned, but he is the narrator. When their Gladiator planes are prepared they take off saying, "It isn't anything at all. It's a piece of cake" (CSS 223) and fly to fight the Italian army.

Unfortunately, the pilot narrating the whole story crashes after having "lots and lots of trouble" (CSS 223) and in details describes his feelings that come to him like from a dream or detached as if from someone else, but not his own body. His machine is on fire and, probably from the shock he is slowly analysing the situation, wondering what would be best to do. Of course it might have been seconds, but for him it feels like hours, before his brain manages to find the best solution, which is to undo the straps and drag himself out of the plane. This successfully done, he is lying in the darkness next to the plane, while his "machine-gun ammunition go/es/ off/ [...] and some of the bullets thump/.../ into the sand near by." (CSS 225) Though he is alive and conscious, he is severely hurt in the face ["/his/ nose /doesn't/ seem to be there" (CSS 225)] and he cannot see anything. In this state his friend Peter gets to him and together they wait until an English patrol finds them.

From this moment on, the story continues with the pilot's hallucinations in a hospital in Alexandria. He imagines he is back with his squadron and together with the other pilots they make a plan to draw and write jokes on their flying machines so that their enemies will not be able to aim properly if they laugh. Then he flies into a battle, where he is shot by many German pilots "who [...] had no sense of humour" (CSS 229) and he dreams he is dead in heaven, thinking about his mother ["Then I must tell my mother." (CSS 230)]. At last he wakes up to find he has been in the hospital four days and a kind nurse is taking care of him.

b) In a chapter *Survival in Going Solo* Dahl describes his plane accident on the Western Desert when flying from Fouka, just like the pilot in the story. By mistake he is sent to the place called Mersah Matruh, where no one is waiting for him. The difference is that he is not shot down but because he has no more petrol he has to force-land in the dark. However as there is no "little patch of desert that /is/ clear of boulders and gulleys and lumps of rock" (GS 104) he crashes down and has many serious injuries such as a skull fracture, his nose is pushed in and some teeth knocked out and for some time onwards he remains blind.

The plane then goes out in flames so Dahl is lucky to drag himself out of it and before he falls unconscious he hears his "machine-gun ammunition exploding [...] and the bullets [...] pinging all over the place" (GS 105) until he is found by three British soldiers, who escort him to a first-aid post and from there he is sent by train to a hospital in Alexandria. There he has a plastic operation on his nose and "appalling headaches" (GS 119) trouble him for more than five months.

In comparison to the story there are two big differences. The first one is that Dahl flies from Fouka alone and the second, already mentioned, is that he is not shot down (as is hinted in the story) but has to force-land. Although the stories vary, his injuries and the places are the same as the pilot's in the story (for example the camps in Fouka and in Mersah Matruh or the hospital in Alexandria). As to the destination he is sent to, Dahl claims "It was revealed at an



enquiry into my crash held later that the /Commanding Officer/ at Fouka had given me totally wrong information. Eighty Squadron had never been in the position I was sent to." (GS 105)

c) In July 1941, Dahl is released from fighting and invalidated home to Britain, where he after three years eventually meets with his mother. That is the last note in his second autobiography *Going Solo*. As Mr Treglown claims in *Roald Dahl*, Dahl spends some time with his mother in England before he decides to move to the USA to work as assistant air attaché at the British Embassy. And since the British need some propaganda, they decide to concentrate on RAF and thus a novelist Mr Forester asks Dahl to tell him some story from the war to write into a newspaper. As he finds it easier to write it down for Forester, he sends it to him, which Forester publishes under the title *Shot Down Over Libya* without touching a word. As it is published in *The Saturday Evening Post* as a " 'factual report on Libyan air fighting' by an unnamed RAF pilot 'at present in this country for medical reasons' " (RD 58), it is later criticised for the disputable truthfulness of the story. The first version is actually a direct account of a pilot shot down by Italian fighters while Dahl later argued, "it had been edited and misleadingly captioned" (RD 58) though Forester completely denies this.

Dahl then rewrites the story "less heroic/ally/" (RD 43) under the name *A Piece of Cake* and "pretend/s/ that this version /is/ the original one." (RD 59) The squadron's report of the whole event says, "/The pilot/ unfortunately not being used to flying aircraft over the Desert [...] made a forced landing 2 miles west of Mersah Matruh. He made an unsuccessful forced landing and the aircraft burst into flames. The pilot was badly burned." (RD 43) This would mean that it was actually Dahl's mistake and not the Commanding Officer's, but Mr Treglown does not elaborate on this topic any further.

Nevertheless, this is unquestionably the first story Dahl wrote and the beginning of his writing career. From this moment on, he was no longer expected to justify his plots against its truthfulness.

## *Only This*

In chapter 2, I mentioned Dahl's strong relationship to his mother. Throughout her whole life he never stops writing letters to her or visiting her. The story *Only This* is in many ways different from his own life. Nevertheless the feelings described there could have easily been his mother's.

a) The whole story describes one very emotional scene: a mother of a pilot sitting in her armchair during a night of an air battle, praying for her only child to get home safe. "T/here was nothing else to live for except this." (CSS 313) She is looking out of the window while dozing off into some kind of a dream.

She imagines she is with her only son in his cockpit, watching him piloting the aircraft and then even talking to him. She is paying attention to every move he makes when suddenly their aircraft is hit and the fire quickly gets to the cabin. While the whole crew escapes, this woman's son stays by the wheel and a bit later falls unconscious. She becomes hysterical and is frantically trying to drag him out of his seat, which is completely useless and in a swerve the plane makes, "she /is/ thrown forward into the fire." (CSS 315) The last scene is a woman, sitting next to a window, who died in her dream.

b) As Dahl's mother did not die during his war era but much later and she had many children besides Dahl, this is certainly not a story of her and her son. Of course any speculations about the possible links between this story and Dahl's life are only hypothetical. Nevertheless Dahl was his mother's only son and one whom she loved very much and must have been worried about. Therefore one can imagine her own feelings, especially when hearing the sounds of planes going into a battle above her head.

In *Going Solo* Dahl only mentions the first time he meets his mother again after his return from RAF. They meet after three years and he "[...] steps off the bus straight into the arms of the waiting mother." (GS 208) That is the last note in his second and last autobiography, which may show how close they were to each other.



c) Jeremy Treglown contemplates Dahl's feelings in *Roald Dahl*, "he/ may have experienced a pride and burden of being his mother's only son. Only child is what it must have felt like, despite - or perhaps partly because of - the size of the family." (RD 15) She was the main influence of his life, Dahl once admits. (RD 16) He often refers to her as "'the mother', as if there could be no other. "For the next six years / in 1945/, where she went, he went." (RD 82) According to Treglown, Dahl "explores /his/ relationship /to his mother/ in the story *Only This*." (RD 16) Another influence relevant to this story Treglown draws attention to, is a collection of stories Dahl read at prep school called *Can Such Things Be*, by Ambrose Bierce, especially a story *The Death of Halpin Fraser*, which in its topic should distantly resemble Dahl's story or should I say the other way round. (RD 16)

#### *Katina; Death of and Old Man; Yesterday was Beautiful*

b) + c) At the end of his convalescence Dahl reported back at the RAF and was told to join 80 Squadron fighting the Italians in Greece. This meant to fly for the first time a Hurricane plane and what was even worse, to fly it straight for almost five hours non-stop to join them. There Roald Dahl, for the first time in his life, came into the middle of big air-battles, even though he had no experience with fighting whatsoever and what was even worse, 80 Squadron was outnumbered by the Germans 15 to 500 bombers. This probably inspired his stories as *Katina*, *Death of an Old Old Man* or *Yesterday was Beautiful*.

#### *The Visitor*

This story is rather characteristic of Roald Dahl as it concerns his uncle Oswald (though his uncle's real name was Oscar) about whom he even wrote a novel called *My Uncle Oswald*. Unfortunately the novel was not considered to be very successful and "Dahl [...] regretted having ever published it." (RD 269) We can only deduce from the real life of his uncle Oscar that Dahl took great inspiration in this man's life. Although in reality he might not have had such a

great sexual appetite, as he married in his forties and settled down in La Rochelle, France, he does make a fortune, in his case, by buying a fleet of trawlers and a canning factory (BToC 14). Thanks to that he buys a chateau and a splendid house and just as in Dahl's stories he collects old furniture, precious paintings and rare books.

a) The idea behind this story and also behind the above mentioned novel is that this man, before he dies, sends Roald Dahl a wooden box full of 28 thick diaries about his fruitful life, which his nephew then transforms into stories. This "astonishing stuff" (CSS 329) is about one very vital man, who spent his entire life exploring woman after woman, searching for spiders and making ties out of their threads, collecting various kinds of art such as Chinese porcelain, carpets or walking sticks. There is for example nothing he does not know about nineteenth-century Italian opera; he is a very entertaining companion in every social group, "Nobody ever found it dull to be in Oswald's company." (CSS 333) As a womaniser he used to say, "I cannot *believe* that any man in his senses would put up with just one female day after day and year after year." (CSS 336) His life motto is never to spend more than twelve hours with one woman "e/ven eight hours is stretching it a bit." (CSS 336) Though at the time of this story he is 51 and unmarried, he is actually "precisely the sort of man that an anxious father would be likely to choose to escort his daughter safely home." (CSS 330) And last but not least he is obsessed with hygiene and wherever he goes he takes his own personal bedding and antiseptic soap with him.

Under circumstances described in the 28th volume, we happen to find him in the middle of the Sinai Desert in 1934, in the last mentioned place where Oswald Hendryks Cornelius set foot on. Prior to the main story we get to know this man through his affair with a mistress of a Royal Personage in Egypt, which ends up with Oswald running away from the pyramid of Cheops, leaving his mistress behind for the Arabs to literally chop her head off, saying "i/t is against my principles to travel with a lady." (CSS 334) Through this episode we can see the sarcasm and humour of the author. Not only does Oswald leave his mistress behind to her own

merciless fate, but he even feels wronged after she is angry and uses bad language. "I can not abide bad manners in a pretty girl." (CSS 335)

He then continues in his journey through Cairo and across the Sinai Desert to Jerusalem. There he actually realises that he does not like Egypt at all as it "is a squalid /and/ [...] repulsive/ly/ /dirty/ country. [...] It was the dirtiness of it all [...] and the putrid smells." (CSS 335) He travels in his highly luxurious Lagonda car like in a shell, insulated from the outer world "as snug as a hermit crab." (CSS 336)

On the way through Ismalia he stops to have a rest in one of the hotels. But even the best room has, in his opinion, bed sheets that look as if "twenty-five unwashed Egyptians on twenty-five consecutive nights" (CSS 337) slept in them, so in his obsession with hygiene he gets rid of them and uses his own sheets, carefully washing his hands with his antiseptic soap after touching the original ones. However, this is just to demonstrate Oswald's attitude towards cleanness as he thinks about it more or less every second of his journey and thus is finally relieved to get to the desert as it is "one of the least contaminated places on earth." (CSS 337) But even before getting there he has to experience a terrible display of local diseases in the form of trachoma or seborrhoeic impetigo (which only shows the details Roald Dahl uses in his stories). The first one is Oswald's diagnosis for a proprietor of a store and the other is Oswald's opinion of a state of the cook, who made him eggs in the hotel, as it contained "a gleaming, curly, jet-black human hair" (CSS 337), which "swarm/ed/ with millions and millions of loving pathogenic cocci." (CSS 338)

After finding some scorpions of pandinus kind in the Sinai desert (again there are specifically the names of different kinds), contended with his prey, he slowly drives on towards the only gasoline pump in the desert, when he realises he forgot to fill his tank and therefore has to stop at this "unenticing place." (CSS 341) In a temperature of 106 degrees, he is waiting for the proprietor of the station to serve him, during which time Oswald has the opportunity to scrutinise this man and comes to a shocking conclusion that the man has to have locomotor

ataxia, which is "a slow and merciless consuming of the actual nerve fibres of the body by syphilitic toxins." (CSS 342) He does not drive away only because he desperately needs the petrol. Thus he remains in the car "staring at the awful creature" (CSS 342), wishing to be far away from this "infernal spot." (CSS 349) Then "the most blighted human/.../ he/ ha/s/ ever seen" (CSS 342) fills his tank and moves on towards the front of the car to check water and oil. No matter how much Oswald does not want this man to touch any part of his car, he does not dare to argue. Only a bit later does he get impatient when he sees this "disgusting man" (CSS 344) bending over his engine and in another second holding up a broken fan-belt.

The terrible implications of this situation start coming to Oswald. From now on he is dependant solely on this man. Although he has no evidence to prove it, he has a feeling this man cut it himself but there is nothing he can do. So after a short conversation they agree to order a fan belt from Cairo or Ismalia, which means to have it the next day. "The man had all the answers. He never even had to think before replying. *This bastard [...] has cut fan-belts before.*" (CSS 344) At first Oswald wants to telephone his car agents himself, but then he realises he would have to "use this man's contaminated instrument." (CSS 345) Therefore he solves it by writing to this "Arab with his ghastly diseased face" (CSS 345) a note to read to his agents.

While waiting for the delivery, after about one hour, he notices a car approaching the station and when it comes closer, he is thrilled to find out it is a Rolls-Royce, which means "a virtual guarantee that /he/ would receive all the assistance /he/ required; for [...] there is a powerful brotherhood" (CSS 348) among owners of expensive cars. This really proves correct as the newcomer, a swarthy man called Mr Aziz, shows great apprehension and offers to let Oswald stay overnight at his place until the delivery comes. Naturally Oswald gratefully accepts this kind offer and Mr Abdul Aziz in return explains, he is glad to have a guest for dinner. Along the way while talking, Oswald learns Mr Aziz has a business in carpets; he has a wife and a daughter and lives in a palace in the middle of the desert to guard his eighteen-year-old daughter against "every Achmed, Ali, and Hamil that comes along." (CSS 352) As they drive into

Mr Aziz's private driveway Oswald notices the telephone poles leading into it and a strange thought comes to his head. "Might not this, then, explain the fortuitous arrival of Mr Aziz?" (CSS 351) He is thinking that what might have happened was, that first the proprietor of the gas station immobilised his car and then called Mr Aziz to inform him about his new guest for dinner. Of course he knows the idea is a bit far-fetched, but he cannot help himself from having such suspicions during their conversation, until they finally come to the house. It is more of a castle, "a miniature paradise" (CSS 353), built for his wife and princess daughter.

Together they enter the house, where Oswald is introduced to the beautiful wife of Mr Aziz "she had a figure that made me wet my lips" (CSS 354) and just a little while later to Mr Aziz's daughter Diana, who is in Oswald's opinion, even more beautiful than her mother. At this point, he is really puzzled, which one of them to seduce, but he leaves this question till later. He is happy to find himself under these circumstances "t/he white castle, the comfort, the cleanliness, the air-conditioning, the two dazzlingly beautiful females, the watchdog husband, and the whole evening to work in!" (CSS 355) He really makes his best in entertaining both ladies with his exciting stories. Throughout the dinner Oswald "continues to play most delicately and insidiously upon the sensibilities of the women" (CSS 358), while they "were melting before /his/ eyes like butter in the sun." (CSS 358) Oswald is just about starting to be satisfied with his art, when suddenly Mr Aziz announces it is time for bed, which both women obeyed without delay, and thus leave this poor seducer aghast. He would have never expected anything like that. A poor seducer left stranded at the beginning of a promising night! This ruins his plans completely and although he is shocked, the only thing he can do is to forget about the whole business and get some sleep. It is not until about midnight that anything happens.

Oswald eventually has a very passionate visitor who "transport/s/ /him/ to greater extremes of ecstasy" (CSS 360) than any other woman of his life. But what worries Oswald the most is that during these four hours he is never certain whether it is the younger or older woman. The room is dark and whenever he wants to find it out either by lighting a cigarette or talking to



her, she harshly stops him. He really feels ashamed as "a supreme connoisseur, should always be able to guess the vintage without seeing the label on the bottle." (CSS 361) Nevertheless, he looks forward to the morning as he makes a teeth mark on the lady's neck, which will, as he is certain, solve his problem.

What a shock it is in the morning to find both women wearing scarves tied carefully round their necks. Due to that he feels really confused, but does not give up hope of solving this mystery. He intends to get invited to this house again, but this time "discover/.../ the truth." (CSS 363) When Mr Aziz asks Oswald about the night "/h/is shrewd little eyes rest/.../ on /Oswald's/ face and move/.../ over it slowly, as though searching for something." (CSS 362)

When both women say goodbye, the two men drive off to the gas station politely conversing, while Oswald is trying his best to get another invitation to the house. As they are finally approaching the station, Oswald strikes the topic of Mr Aziz being a remarkable man for living in such isolation because of his daughter's sake. To this Mr Aziz replies almost reluctantly at first but then, closer to their destination, freely that he has actually another daughter living in the house. "But I never saw her!" (CSS 366) Oswald cries out, to which Mr Aziz answers "/w/ell [...] maybe not." (CSS 366) Oswald, naturally curious why he did not see her asks about it his host, who "bashfully" (CSS 365) replies, "/s/he has leprosy. [...] It is not a very contagious disease. You have to have the most *intimate* contact with the person in order to catch it..." (CSS 366)

Thus Oswald's insatiable sexual appetite, together with his arrogance and selfishness, gets him justly punished in the most undesirable way. As many of Dahl's stories have at the end some kind of a deserved punishment (*The Bookseller, The Way Up to Heaven, An African Story*), a question then arises, according to this principle what crimes did Dahl commit, to deserve his own terrible destiny. Because around the time this story was written (in 1965) Dahl himself experienced several life disasters. The first one happened in 1960, shortly after his son Theo was born, when a taxi in New York hit his baby carriage and caused him a number of head

injuries. Then in 1962 his daughter Olivia died of measles and in 1965 his wife Patricia Neal suffered three strokes. It seems as though he needed to reveal his potential anger in his work, ending his hero's life under such terrible circumstances.

The plot in this story is most important and as is typical of Dahl, one of *the* topics of this story is sex. He infinitely relished this topic, as could be seen in his other stories, such as *The Great Switcheroo*, *The Last Act*, *Bitch*, *The Bookseller* or *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*.

However long this story may seem for a short story genre, in no way does it lack excitement and tension. At the beginning, there is a switch of narrators. At first, uncle Oswald's nephew narrates it, but shortly after the introduction it is narrated by Uncle Oswald himself in the form of a diary, therefore it is a story within a story. The ending is deliberately ambiguous, open-ended, very paradoxical and shockingly surprising. The paradox in this case is in the contrast between Oswald's obsession with hygiene on one side and his possible or very probable contraction of leprosy, as it is the last note in Oswald's diary.

b) As to the setting and partly even plot, it is generally known Dahl derived his information from his Royal Air Force era, when fighting in Africa and Europe. As he mentions in *Going Solo*, after the pilots were rescued from Greece in 1941, they were told to collect a new Hurricane plane and fly it to Haifa aerodrome in Palestine. But as Dahl was proud to own a Morris Oxford car, he asked if he could drive it there and was granted permission. Thus he crosses the Suez Canal at Ismalia (actually a place where in the story Oswald stops in the hotel) on a ferry and showing the officials enough petrol and water "/he is/ allowed to start the long and lonely journey." (GS 188) As he goes through this "sterile wasteland [...] /he/ begins to wonder how many hours or days /he/ would have to wait for another traveller to turn up if /his/ old car should break down." (GS 188) Imagining this, and after a five hour ride in a terrible heat, his radiator starts to boil over and when he is finally able to open the radiator cap he realises there is no point in going on as it would boil again. So there he is completely deserted in the middle of the Desert, waiting for the sun go down, but knowing that he cannot drive during the night either



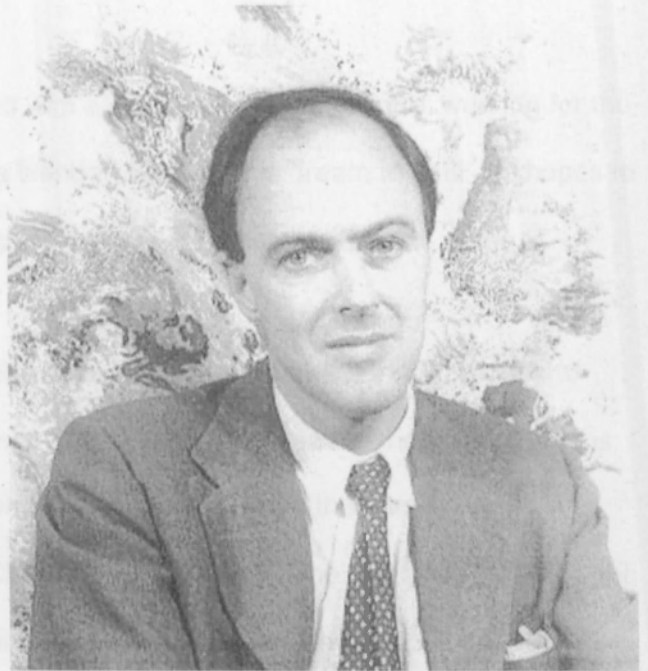
as his headlights do not work. If he did drive through the night, it was very probable he would lose his way in the dark and could slip off the road and get stuck in the sand. The only possibility therefore was to wait there, roasting in the sun, and wait till dawn and then in the morning rush towards civilisation before the sun comes up.

Just as uncle Oswald in *Visitor* Dahl eats some melon and is pacing the desert when he sees a big scorpion mother with fourteen babies on her back. (CSS 340, GS 189) (Some parts of this scene are described word by word in both books.) However, in the story, Oswald kills the scorpion, while in Dahl's autobiography the scorpion hides in a burrow. Dahl eventually gets safely back to his squadron (driving the same route as uncle Oswald in the story through the desert to Jerusalem), but one can imagine the feelings of fear, solitude and uneasiness he must have felt there and at the same time how his fantasy must have run wild, the story *Visitor* being a proof.

c) As to Jeremy Treglown's book, he only mentions Dahl's travel through the desert in his Morris Oxford car, in connection with a different experience Dahl went through when being in Haifa. According to Dahl in *Going Solo* it happened a little later than Mr Treglown claims. According to Dahl the story goes that he flies to find a good hiding place for aeroplanes, when he meets a big group of children, who are Jewish refugees from Germany. Here he, for the first time in his life, learns about the Holocaust and Hitler's persecution of Jews. (GS 194, RD 48)

## 6. Roald Dahl's Easy-going Era in the USA

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Roald Dahl

Source: [www.roalddahlfans.com](http://www.roalddahlfans.com)

In 1942 Roald Dahl moved to the USA as an Assistant Air Attaché, which was where and when he started to write. His first twelve short stories based on his wartime experience were published in American magazines, and afterwards in a book, *Over to you*. During this period he writes his second collection *Someone Like You* and some time later his third one *Switch Bitch*. He enjoys life to the fullest, while he gets to know many women, collects art, wine and starts to gamble, as well as getting acquainted with many famous people (writers: Hemingway, Ian Fleming and Noel Coward, a painter: Matthew Smith or many politicians from the White House). At parties he often becomes the centre of attention and entertains everyone.

## *Bitch*

a) This story is again about the author's uncle Oswald, just as the story *The Visitor*. It is actually an earlier story as it is from the 23<sup>rd</sup> volume of Oswald's diaries, while *The Visitor* is from the last one, the 28<sup>th</sup> volume.

In the beginning Oswald gets acquainted with a scientist Mr Henry Biotte, working for the most famous perfume companies as a perfume blender, who has his dream to fulfil. He hopes to invent a special perfume, which will change history, but has no money to do that, so he is looking for someone to back his idea.

The special invention is based on the long gone abilities of men a hundred thousand years ago "to become sexually animated by smell." (CSS 418) The idea behind the perfume is that when a man smells this sexual stimulant on a woman, it "will have the same electrifying effect upon /the/ man as the scent of a bitch in heat has upon a dog! One whiff and that will be it! The man will lose all control. He'll rip off his pants and ravish the lady on the spot!" (CSS 418) Hearing this and having lots of money, Oswald with his strong sexual appetite, sense of adventure and understanding for everything bad, makes a five-year-contract with Henry, in which he donates to all Henry's experiments and the agreement is that if it is successful they both get half of the outcome.

Everything settled Oswald lets Henry do his job, while he almost forgets about the whole business except on one occasion. That day he comes to visit Henry, who is "busy applying the electrodes to the olfactory organs of a frog in one room", while Oswald "[...] /finds himself/ applying something infinitely more agreeable to Jeanette /Henry's assistant/ in the other room." (CSS 422) From that day Oswald does not visit Henry, as his rule is never to visit a woman for the second time. "Women invariably pull out all the stops during the first encounter, and a second meeting can therefore be nothing more than the same old tune on the same old fiddle." (CSS 423)

But after a year Oswald gets an excited phone call from Henry who tells him the perfume is finished. Oswald naturally hurries to Henry's laboratory, where he is given nose-plugs and Henry shows him "the most precious fluid in the entire world!" (CSS 423) He tells him the whole story how he came to the laboratory that morning to check the sample from the day before and suddenly "I went wild. [...] I was like a wild beast, an animal. I was not human! I felt that if I don't get hold of a woman immediately, I would explode." (CSS 424) But because there was no woman in reach the effect had worn off and Henry regained his senses. When his assistant Simone came, he immediately told her the story and she agreed to take part in an experiment that was to take place when Oswald arrives. The three therefore wait for the second protagonist, a young boxer Pierre, who is promised to get a thousand francs for the job. The plan is that while Oswald and Henry have nose-plugs, they spray a small amount of the invention on Simone and then they wait to see what and when anything happens to the boxer.

What happens is indescribable as Pierre "suddenly start/s/ making noises through his nostrils, queer little snorts and grunts [...] /like/ a pig sniffing around its trough. Then without any warning at all he /springs/ at the girl," rips off her clothes and "/a/fter that, all hell breaks loose." (CSS 429) Watching this, Oswald realises all the possible uses of this invention, such as stopping riots by using this instead of a tear-gas, selling it to fat, rich women, or curing impotent men or bad marriages.

But in another second a better plan flashes across his mind. As he does not like the President of the USA, he makes up a plan to overthrow him, by using this liquid, which they name 'Bitch'. He takes the amount needed for the action and leaves to the USA, while Henry sets off to write down the formula of Bitch. Unfortunately, something else happens which ruins Henry's plan. Simone, his assistant who took active part in the experiment, enjoyed it so much, that she sprays the rest of the liquid on herself and comes to the poor scientist. Because he had heart problems even before, it is a quick death for him and so the whole invention is lost from the whole world except for the tiny amount Oswald owns.

Thus he proceeds in his plan. He asks his friend to make him a special capsule, which could be sealed and has a tiny timing device attached to it and then finds out about the President's visit on TV to the Daughters of the American Revolution. He is delighted with the setting as the whole nation will be able to see the shocking failure of their President directly. In order to realise his plan, he buys beautiful orchids, to which he attaches the capsule with Bitch, and these he delivers to the suite of the President of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

When the President, Mrs Ponsonby, opens the door of her suite, he meets a woman broader, taller and thicker than "the huge Masai women in the plains below Kilimanjaro." (CSS 435) Recovering from the shock he hands her the orchid with a message from the President, which reads that he will be pleased to see her wearing it at the show. She is naturally flattered and immediately pins the flowers to her dress, unfortunately precisely into the capsule containing Bitch.

What happens then is very quick and very intensive. The scent hits Oswald and in another second, he is standing naked, looking down at his "beloved sexual organ [...] three feet long and thick to match. It /is/ still growing. It /is/ lengthening and swelling at a tremendous rate [...] /until Oswald himself is/ a gigantic perpendicular penis, seven feet tall and as handsome as they come." (CSS 437) In another second Oswald is "riding her bareback, crouching forward and gripping her tightly between /his/ thighs" and he feels like "the Lord of the Universe." (CSS 438) Some time lapses before he regains his consciousness and sees the whole outcome. He quickly collects all his belongings in the desolated room, which looks worse than after a tornado and is promptly leaving, while he hears, "I don't know who you are young man, but you have certainly done me a power of good." (CSS 438)

b) In neither of Dahl's autobiographies does he mention any encounter of women, so I cannot draw on any information from these, but as the topic of sex often reappears in Dahl's stories and Mr Treglown proves the links between this topic in connection to Dahl, it should be considered in my thesis.



c) While Dahl leaves his life experience with his arrival home from the war, Mr Treglown covers the whole of Dahl's life until his death. Throughout the whole *Roald Dahl* book, he mentions several times Dahl's enthusiasm for women and especially theirs for him. During his job at Shell in Africa he "develop/s/ an increasingly complicated and secretive sex life. [...] Dahl was particularly attracted, and attractive to older women, especially if they were married." (RD 36) According to his friend Dennis Pearl "/Dahl/ tended to choose something which created difficulties - he seemed to like mystery." (RD 36) In connection with Dahl's sexual life at the time, Mr Treglown even mentions some names of his girlfriends and mistresses. He actually claims that women were for Dahl a question of collectibility and precious knowledge, useful in social competition. (RD 55)

Later on, when Dahl left the RAF and settled down in Washington, a daughter of Dahl's friend, Antoinette Marsh, says, "/G/irls just fell at Roald's feet. He was very arrogant with them, but he got away with it. [...] I think he slept with everybody on the East and West Coasts that had more than fifty thousand a year." (RD 59) Dahl's close lifelong friend and mistress Anabella acknowledges the first part as well, "Roald didn't make passes at women; the women ran to him." (RD 208) Another friend of his, Creekmore Fath, says Dahl was "one of the biggest cocksman in Washington," (RD 59) who used sex in his spying activities for the British Embassy. Others claim Dahl was interested in women only to boast with them (RD 77) and that he actually hated women (RD 78). Dahl himself once wrote in a piece to *Ladies' Home Journal* "a relationship is 70 percent based on sex and only 30 percent on mutual affection and respect." (RD 80)

As to Dahl's more serious experience with women, he was married twice. The first time in 1953 he married a very famous US actress Patricia Neal and they had five children. Later on in the 70s he met Felicity Crosland when filming a commercial for a coffee and they fell in love. For some time they kept meeting secretly before Dahl's marriage finally broke down and he divorced Patricia and remarried in the same year, in 1983. Although he was married half of his life,

according to Mr Treglown and his revelations, Dahl was not exactly a faithful husband (RD 207) and his wife Patricia was well aware of it.

After reading all the statements of Dahl's friends and Mr Treglown's notes, one can see many connections of Dahl's heroes with himself. Despite the fact that Dahl probably does not share Oswald's fate in the stories *Bitch* and *The Visitor*, there are elements, which are similar to Dahl's own behaviour, such as Oswald's arrogance to women or his resembling experience to the one with Mrs Ponsonby. Because during one of Dahl's spying activities he spent some time with Mrs Luce, a member of Congress, and later described it to his friend Fath in the following way, "I am all fucked out. That goddam woman has absolutely screwed me from one end of the room to the other for three goddam nights." (RD 60)

## 7. Roald Dahl back in Britain again

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Roald Dahl with Patricia and their family  
Source: [www.roalddahlfans.com](http://www.roalddahlfans.com)

In the 50's Dahl together with Patricia and their family move from the USA to England, where he starts writing. Although it is quite hard for him to be back in this calm country in comparison to the exciting life they lived in Washington, they settle down and he restores his pre-war hobbies, such as greyhound racing or playing cards. Under these conditions he finds a new friend, a butcher, Claud Taylor.

### *The Champion of the World*

a) This story is about a man called Gordon Hawes, who owns a petrol station and his friend and a petrol station assistant Claud Cabbage. We get to know about their awesome plan right at the beginning, when they are preparing bait for poaching pheasants out of the woods nearby.

Because Claud's father used to be a genius poacher when he was alive, Claud inherited this hobby from him, as well as several techniques for poaching pheasant. When Claud persuades Gordon to join him on this adventure, he offers him to choose the best technique to use that night. "It'll be a milestone in the history of poaching." (CSS 174)

The main thing about pheasants Claud's father discovered is that "p/heasants is *crazy* about raisins." (CSS 176) He used to keep a flock of cockerels on which he did his experiments, a result of which are three methods. The first one is called the horsehair method. The most important part naturally plays the raisin, which is left to soak in water through the night. "Then you get a bit of good stiff horsehair and you cut it up into half-inch lengths. Then you push one of these lengths of horsehair through the middle of each raisin so that there's about an eighth of an inch of it sticking out on either side." (CSS 176) The effect on the pheasant then is that when it eats it "it sticks in his throat /and/ the bird never moves his feet again", but just stands there "pumping his silly neck up and down just like it was a piston." (CSS 176) After that it is all up to the poacher to pick up the pheasant and do with it whatever he likes.

The second method is based on a fishing line and the raisins again. The poacher has to bait the hook and then wait for a prey. The big disadvantage is that the pheasant "squawks like hell as /the poacher/ haul/s/ him in, and then every keeper in the wood comes running." (CSS 177)

The third method is the last invention Claud's father did before he died. For this one, the poacher needs a cone made out of paper, which he smears with birdlime and to the bottom he drops a raisin once again. This done, he goes to the wood and digs some cones into the ground and arranges a couple of raisins leading to his bait. What happens is that as soon as the pheasant pecks into the cone, it gets stuck over its eyes and thus it cannot see anything or go anywhere.

Gordon listens to the whole lecture about poaching pheasants very thoughtfully when he makes his own suggestion. His idea is to use his sleeping pills for filling the raisins and then drop them in the wood. "Half an hour later we'd come back, and the pills would be beginning to work, and the pheasants would be up in the trees by then, roosting, and they'd be starting to feel groggy, and they'd be wobbling and trying to keep their balance, and soon every pheasant that had eaten *one single raisin* would keel over unconscious and fall to the ground." (CSS 179)

Claud, flabbergasted by this idea, tells Gordon he needs about two hundred of the raisins. "There is really not much point in doing it unless we have two hundred." (CSS 180) Suddenly Gordon grasps the real zeal of their future adventure. Every year, there is a huge party organised by Mr Hazel, the owner of the land and the pheasants. He is a posh "self-made man with no charm at all and previous few virtues" (CSS 174), who hates all ordinary people and "/strives/ desperately to mingle with what he believe/s/ /are/ the right kind of folk." (CSS 175) As this event is about to come Gordon realises Claud decided to ruin it by stealing all the pheasants and thus turning the hunting party into a terrible fiasco. Despite the fact that Gordon is afraid of the keepers and that they "can get six months in the clink" (CSS 173), if they get caught, he agrees to help Claud prepare the raisins and join him at night.

So, just as was planned they make the raisins, go to the wood and secretly, so that the keepers do not see them, spread their bait and then wait for some time near the forest for the pills to start working. Also at this time the keepers go home for supper, which Claud found out during his monthly investigations. When they finally get to the clearing again where they spread the raisins, some doubts start to overcome them when they do not see any pheasants. "If a bird can keep its balance on a branch when it's asleep, then surely there isn't any reason why the pills should make it fall down. [...] After all it's not dead. It's only sleeping." (CSS 187)

Yet suddenly they hear a soft thump "as though a bag of sand /has/ been dropped from about shoulder height" (CSS 188) and then another thump and dozens of others. They start searching and find lots of pheasants "doped to the gills", which are actually "raining down out of the trees." (CSS 188) As a natural born poacher Claud looks "like a child who has just discovered that the whole world is made of chocolate", he is "in a whirl of ecstasy [...], dashing about like a mad ghost under the trees" and with every pheasant he finds he "/gives/ a little yelp of triumph." (CSS 189)

Thus they make "a pile of pheasants as big as a bonfire" (CSS 189) and Claud immediately counts them and gets to a number of one hundred and twenty birds. He cries out



"It's an all-time record" to which Gordon replies, "You're the champion of the world." (CSS 190) Another trick Claud learned from his father is to leave the forest by taxi, which is therefore waiting for them at the edge, with his friend Charlie inside. Another important piece of information originally from his father is never to take the prey straight home, as the keepers usually wait there to catch you. As Claud says, "Always choose a respectable woman to deliver your game." (CSS 191) So that is why they first go to Bessie, the vicar's wife, and they leave everything at her place.

On the next day, the day of the delivery, they are waiting at their petrol station, when they finally see Bessie in the distance, pushing a baby carriage down the road with her one-and-half year old son inside. Meanwhile Claud explains to Gordon, "There is only one safe way of delivering the game, and that's under a baby. [...] There's about sixty or seventy pheasants at least under that little nipper." (CSS 192)

Watching Bessie approach, they suddenly notice she is in quite a hurry and in another moment she is sprinting towards the petrol station, while they also hear the loud screaming of her little one. "Suddenly, out of the pram, straight up into the air, /flies/ an enormous pheasant! Claud let/s/ out a cry of horror." (CSS 194) When they both realise the pills are wearing off, Bessie rescues her son, while all the sixty pheasants fly off the pram and still dizzy, try to keep their balance on the pumps of the petrol station. Upon this Gordon says, "Lock up. Put out the sign. We've gone for the day." (CSS 195) Thus their perfect plan is completely ruined and they are evidently guilty of poaching.

b) Although Dahl never mentions his enthusiasm for poaching, which is the main topic of this story, there is a clear link between his first job and the job of Gordon. Before Dahl joins the RAF he works for the Shell company, where he is taught "all about fuel oil and diesel oil and gas oil and lubricating oil and kerosene and gasoline" (BToC 170), which might have inspired him to write several stories (*The Ratcatcher*, *Rummins*, *Mr Hoddy*, *Mr Feasey*) about an owner of a petrol station in England.

c) When Dahl finally settles down in England again, he starts to meet quite regularly with his local neighbours, with whom he plays snooker or cards. Also, Buckinghamshire, where the whole story takes place, is actually the same county Dahl lived in. (9) There he meets Claud Taylor, the butcher, who teaches him how to poach pheasants. Dahl writes down all "the jokes, poaching yarns, pieces of rural lore" (RD 83) and later writes several stories, often using what he learned from Claud Taylor.

### *Mr Feasey*

a) Under the same conditions as are already described in the previous story that is when Gordon owns a petrol station and has a friend Claud, we are drawn into yet another adventure of these two. The story belongs to the collection *Claud's Dog* and that is also what it is about. Not only is it about his dog, but mainly about greyhound racing.

As Claud is an expert on dog racing, when he desperately needs money to marry his girlfriend Clarice and buy a house, he makes up a fantastic plan. He obtains two ringers that look completely alike, but one of them is a good runner and the other one cannot gallop at all. He explains his plan to Gordon and together they attend eight races in a period of six months with the slow dog, who runs "exactly like a crab." (CSS 638) He loses each time except once, "when a big fawn dog by the name of Amber Flash put his boot in a hole and broke a hock and finished on three legs. But even then /their dog called Black Panther/ only just beat him." (CSS 638) Thus they have him in the bottom of the stakes, twenty or thirty to one and the bookies almost beg people to back him.

Then finally the last race is due and this time they do not take Black Panther, but on the contrary they take Jackie, the fast one. Now even Gordon understands why they risk getting caught by Mr Feasey, the boss of the greyhound races. During all their previous journeys to the races, Claud educates him on the subject of the greyhound racing racket. He explains, why is it not better to stop the dog in the first races and then let him go in the last one. "stopping a good

dog breaks his heart.”(CSS 641) If he is a good runner, it is not a good thing to let him taste losing. Yet another problem is connected with the techniques, which some people, especially Gypsies, use either to stop a dog or on the other hand win the race. Among some methods he tells Gordon about is for example strapping dogs, which means “pulling the muzzle-strap tight around their necks so they can’t hardly breathe” or “some of ‘em just tie two of the toes together [...] Dog never runs well like that. Unbalances him.” Another way is to “put a piece of fresh-chewed gum up under their tails, [...] just where it is tenderest. No dog likes that you know.” Some people use sleeping pills by weight of the dog. “They measure the powder according to whether they want to slow him up five or ten or fifteen lengths.”(CSS 642)

On the other hand, if someone wants the dog to win he rubs some wintergreen or Sloan’s Liniment into the dog’s skin, so that he runs as fast as he can to escape the terrible pain it causes him. Even worse is, when some owners of the dogs drug them by needle, using “caffein or camphor” (CSS 651) to go faster or “for stopping them [...] it’s chlorbutal. That’s beauty, chlorbutal, because you can give it the night before, especially to someone else’s dog. Or Pethidine. Pethidine and Hyoscine mixed.” (CSS 651)

When Gordon hears about all these techniques and more, he is content with Claud’s idea and they excitedly proceed in their plan. On the big day, Gordon locks up the petrol station at noon and when he withdraws one hundred and five pounds from the bank they both drive to the race with Jackie at the back of the van. Then everything goes according to the plan although at first Mr Feasey does not want the dog, who he thinks is Black Panther, to race as he lost so many times in a row. But when Claud persuades him, by making him a bet, Mr Feasey consents to let him run.

While Claud takes the dog into the starting-traps, Gordon goes to the seventeen bookies “staking three pounds with each book” (CSS 654) at first at the rate twenty-five to one and later fifteen-to one. This done, he collects all his tickets and goes to the finish to catch Jackie, when he comes. Watching the race started, he sees Jackie, “He is really laying down to it now up that

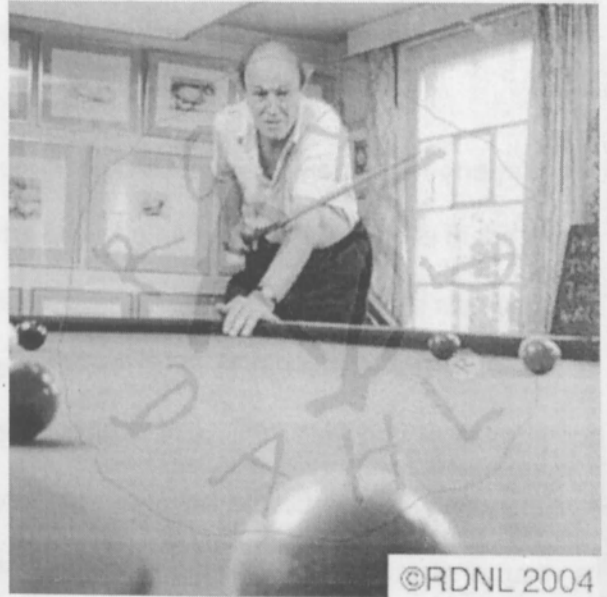
hill. He's won it now! He can't lose it now..."(CSS 655) The race won, Claud takes Jackie to the van, while Gordon goes to collect "something over two thousand pounds." (CSS 655)

However, what happens is nothing that either Claud or Gordon expected. When Gordon comes there and hands the first bookmaker his ticket, demanding seventy-five pounds, his clerk looks into their book and says, "Don't pay. That ticket backed Snailbox Lady." (CSS 657) "The point was this: a bookmaker's ticket [...] never has anything written on it regarding the nature of your bet. This is normal practice." (CSS 657) So according to such rules, Gordon has no evidence to prove he did not bet on Snailbox Lady, but Black Panther. Moreover, when he goes to the second bookmaker, he is told, "Whatever's the matter with you? Trying such a silly thing as that." (CSS 658) Once Gordon tells them they are thieves "all at once everybody start/s/ to laugh." (CSS 658) So what happens is that Gordon and Claud do not win anything because of the trick of the bookmakers.

b) + c) The same as was said about the story *The Champion of the World* applies to this story, as to Dahl's friend Claud and the petrol station. But what is important to this story is the mentioning of greyhound racing Dahl went to with Claud Taylor in *Roald Dahl* by Mr Treglown. He actually states that "Taylor helped Dahl to breed and train his own dogs, and they had a run of luck which made them unpopular among the local gypsy greyhound owners." (RD 83) (10)

## 8. Roald Dahl's Hobbies

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Roald Dahl – playing snooker  
Source: [www.roalddahlstans.com](http://www.roalddahlstans.com)

Dahl, as was already stated, has many hobbies that often correspond with his heroes'. According to Felicity, his second wife, his hobbies range from "racing greyhounds to breeding homing budgies, medical inventions, orchids, onions, gambling, golf, wine, music, art and antiques." (11) As mentioned earlier, Dahl especially appreciates the company of women (some people claim they are just a hobby for him), other hobbies vary from antiques, playing snooker, to gardening in general. He also collects birds' eggs, music and enjoys edible fungi. His great hobby art becomes "a matter not only of collectibility, but of information: names, places, dates, prices." (RD 55) That is also visible in his work, as he is much concerned about every detail and plenty of information included in every story.



### *Parson's Pleasure*

a) The reader will notice a striking similarity of Dahl's short stories with the basic formula of the American classic of short humorous stories, O. Henry. A seemingly banal interplay of events develops into a rather surprising and not infrequently shocking denouement, especially in Dahl.

Perhaps the closest to O. Henry's pattern of all the Dahl stories selected for analysis is the short story *Parson's Pleasure*. Not only does the tale of a petty impostor, who is in the end outwitted and punished, perfectly correspond to this pattern, but *Parson's Pleasure* also contains ingredients, which are almost identical with the typical ingredients of O. Henry's stories.

Among others it contains the O. Henry-esque character of an impostor, not necessarily too dangerous, but rather somewhat ludicrous who eventually gets the punishment he deserves. *Parson's Pleasure* therefore contains a strong moral element so much outstanding in virtually all O. Henry's short stories reflecting the late 19<sup>th</sup> century American (Puritan) 'Quasi-Victorian' mentality.

*Parson's Pleasure* contains many characteristic features, which also recur in many of Dahl's stories. Practically all the characters and the setting in which they move reflect at first sight many if not all features of 'Old Englishness'. By this term is meant the stereotype of English life in perhaps the most 'typical' English area of Britain, the so-called 'Home Counties' (CUT 199) in the period mostly ranging between the 1940s to the 1960s. (6)

Although the dating of the stories, in contrast to the geographical setting, is often less clear and only implied and has often to be deduced, it is clear it refers to the transitional period of several decades following World War II during which typical English middle and upper class values survived but were already under destructive pressure of new modern tendencies (Americanisation, Europeanization).

This surviving but already precarious world of traditionally English middle-class values can be demonstrated first in the person of the protagonist of *Parson's Pleasure*. It is Mr Boggis,

a dealer in antique furniture, who makes his money on "/buying/ very very cheap and /selling/ very very dear." (CUT 196) That is how he is known among his friends and colleagues in London. "Apparently the man had a source of supply that was almost inexhaustible, a sort of private warehouse" (CUT 197), and whenever he has a chance to boast with some kind of business of this kind, he makes use of the opportunity.

Thus he finds a way to have a mine of antique pieces by quite regular visit to the countryside around London, disguised as a parson in a uniform of a clergyman, pretending he is compiling an inventory for the 'Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture'. He decides to assume the disguise of a clergyman "travelling around on a labour of love" (CUT 199) in order to most effectively appeal to the gullibility of his future victims. This is undoubtedly a strategy, which would be most efficient at any time before the Second World War but only for a few decades after it. It is somewhat difficult to imagine an impostor in contemporary Britain trying to elicit the trust of his victims by passing as a clergyman even among the more gullible, poor, elderly people Boggis most often chooses as his targets. "There was no point in calling on the prosperous" - (CUT 196). In other words the England Dahl describes in this but as was shown also in many other stories is seemingly the old 'idyllic' South-English countryside known to the Czech readership from Karel Čapek's *Letters from England*. This is underlined by the description of the typical atmosphere of the area including the picturesque nature, "The hawthorn was exploding white and pink and red along the hedges and the primroses were growing underneath in little clumps, and it was beautiful" (CUT 195), the non-hectic, peaceful attitude to life of its inhabitants and occasional backdrops of a truly 'Old England' such as fox-hunting personified by the apparently innocent, if eccentric, country Tory woman in riding-breaches. [To enlist her trust he tells her that "his idea of heaven [...] was a place where one could hunt the fox, the stag, and the hare with large packs of tireless hounds from morn till night every day of the week, including Sundays." (CUT 201)] This obviously raises in the reader expectations, which are misleading. The reader expects more of this 'Old English' idyll which is only to be turned upside down by the

surprising ending. After describing Mr Boggis's nine-year career of a successful impostor (does his name imply 'bogus'?) the story focuses on his encounter with a group of countrymen who at first sight may strike the reader, as they do the self-confident Mr Boggis, as a bunch of idiotic country bumpkins ["a stumpy man with a wide frog mouth", "the shortish fat-faced man with a narrow corrugated brow and immensely broad shoulders." (CUT 203)]

On that occasion he comes to a farmhouse, which looks "rambling and dirty" (CUT 203), where in an "exceedingly filthy living-room" (CUT 205) he discovers a very old and expensive Chippendale Commode from the 18th century worth 15-20 thousand pounds, and what is more, which would make him not only rich but also famous. Immediately, he starts thinking about the price at an auction and how full of envy his colleagues will be.

He does not give his astonishment away, though, and simply tells the owner Mr Rummins, a seemingly ignorant farmer, it is "worth a few pounds" (CUT 208). Only a moment later does he offer to buy it in order to use just the set of legs for his own purposes as it could fit beneath one of his tables. The farmer is very suspicious at first but a bit later he is persuaded by Mr Boggis's knowledge of furniture and by the twenty pounds he can get for it and so agrees to sell this "bloody thing." (CUT 217)

These country bumpkins also at first add to the general misleading impression of the pre-modern England, as people not yet touched by modern education, and especially the modern information era ["t/hese people may be ignorant, but they are not stupid." (CUT 206)] Yet, as it turns out, this generally old English scenery already contains germs of modern times. The bumpkins, contrary to Boggis's expectations, are no longer as gullible as Boggis in his stereotypical understanding of silly countrymen would expect. They find it "intriguing to hear about some new form of crookery or deception" because as they later say "/o/ne never knew when it might come in handy." (CUT 212, 213) In spite of their general lack of education and uncouthness they show features of doubtful thinking. "How can you possibly make new brass look like old? [...] Brass doesn't rust, you know." (CUT 213)

They have not only profound countrymen's cunning but also profound distrust and a disillusioned view of a clergyman's solidity and trustworthiness, "I think you are buying the stuff yourself." (CUT 205) Such a disillusioned view of parsons would even a generation ago have been extremely rare. In spite of the gamut of incredibly rich imagination and tricks by which the impostor tries to dupe them (such as surreptitiously substituting a new screw for an old one or persuading the farmers that faked patina is cold while genuine is warm), they are relentless in their all-doubtful attitude and counter Boggis's tricky talk not by blind disbelief but rather by rational arguments, such as producing from the back of the drawer "a bit of paper" proving by the writing it is "bloody old" (CUT 209). This drives the increasingly nervous impostor to even wilder fantasies.

So what brings about the symbolic doom of the protagonist is actually his strong trust in the men's gullibility. Because what happens is when the parson disappears round the house to fetch his car, Mr Rummins doubts, together with his neighbour and son, that a parson goes round in a van or rather the contrary "parsons've got usually piddling little Morris Eights or Austin Sevens" (CUT 218) and thus they decide to cut the legs off and smash the rest into pieces with an axe, so that "it'll be sure to go in the car" (CUT 217) for firewood. The whole story ends up with a scene where the parson, fetching his car, is out of his mind with happiness how great a deal of the century he has done ["a cheerful song came rippling faintly to them" (CUT 218)] and on the other hand, the farmers, who are proud of themselves for the "bloody good idea" (CUT 217) they got to maintain the deal.

This story has many elements of a traditional short story. It describes one event, the sale of a piece of furniture, around one specific time that is one summer Sunday, centred on one main character, Mr Boggis. The unity of time, space, mood and action has been observed. The plot is the most important part of this story, as all new information given by the narrator builds the suspense. We are told only briefly about the background of Mr Boggis and the farmers; just enough that is needed to understand it, without any redundant detail. This is done through the

exposition in the part before Mr Boggis comes to the farm of Mr Rummins. On the other hand, the external conflict of Mr Boggis and the farmers is presented through the whole narration and is resolved at the end. While the climax comes at the point when Mr Boggis finds the precious commode, delaying the fact to the reader for quite a long time ["And there it was. [...] It couldn't be true; not possibly!" (CUT 205)], a falling action takes place when they are trying to settle the price "Ten pounds! [...] Don't be so ridiculous, Parson, please!" (CUT 215)] and the resolution comes when the farmers cut off the legs of the commode ["it was only the legs he was wanting" (CUT 217)], therefore making it truly worthless.

The characters are disclosed in their actions by a direct method of the writer's opinion, by means of a third-person omniscient point of view, in a complex style and neither of the characters evolves, they are static. There are two main characters, Mr Boggis and Mr Rummins; his son and their neighbour are just minor characters.

Roald Dahl's language is very descriptive, one is totally drawn into the story. "He was a small fatlegged man with a belly. The face was round and rosy, quite perfect for the part, and the two large brown eyes that bulged out from his rosy face gave an impression of gentle imbecility. He was dressed in a black suit with the usual parson's dog-collar round his neck, and on his head a soft black hat. He carried an old oak walking-stick which lent him, in his opinion, a rather rustic easy-going air." (CUT 200)

The way Dahl describes the scenes of the parson's joy is so vivid that through imagery he successfully appeals to the senses of sight and hearing of the readers such as when Mr Boggis leaves the farmer to return with his station wagon and at that moment is certain the commode is his, just for a few pounds. "He found himself giggling quite uncontrollably, and there was a feeling inside him as though hundreds and hundreds of tiny bubbles were rising up from his stomach and bursting merrily in the top of his head, like sparkling water. All the buttercups in the field were suddenly turning into golden sovereigns, glistening in the sunlight. The ground was littered with them, and he swung off the track on to the grass so that he could walk among



them and tread on them and hear the little metallic tinkle they made as he kicked them around with his toes. He was finding it difficult to stop himself from breaking into a run." (CUT 216)

It is generally known that Dahl was a great art collector, knew a lot about its history and was almost obsessed with the truthfulness of the details he put into his stories. He was very particular about the meticulous knowledge of the details. This can be seen on the way furniture is described in this story. "He knew, as does every other dealer in Europe and America, that among the most celebrated and coveted examples of eighteenth-century English furniture in existence are the three famous pieces known as 'The Chippendale Commodes'. He knew their history backwards – that the first was 'discovered' in 1920, in a house at Moreton-in-Marsh, and was sold at Sotheby's the same year; that the other two turned up in the same auction rooms a year later, both coming out of Raynham Hall, Norfolk." (CUT 206) Whether the information is correct I cannot judge, but the important thing is that it is so realistically written that a reader should not have any doubts about it.

Thematically this story is an arabesque with a realistic, in a way whimsical plot. The subject of this story is money and fame and the theme avarice, cunning and pride Mr Boggis takes in his theatrical abilities. The startling ending is rightly left to the very end without giving the readers any hint of what is to follow. This story is about 8000 words long, which is more or less average and can be read in no more than half an hour.

As stated at the beginning this is a story, which is perhaps most reminiscent of O. Henry's as evil is punished at the end as in many Dahl's stories such as *The Way Up to Heaven*, *The Great Switcheroo*, *Bitch*, *Dip in the Pool* and many other as stated before in *The Visitor*.

b) + c) Dahl himself seriously starts to collect art and antiquities after he comes from World War II so that is the reason he never mentions it in his autobiographies, but the main source of his hobbies is again found in Jeremy Treglown's book *Roald Dahl*. There are several allusions to this Dahl's hobby; the first one is in connection with a painter Matthew Smith. Once Dahl sees his paintings, he wants to see more. But while the painter is in the USA, it becomes

one of the reasons why Dahl himself travels there. When he befriends him, he learns all about art and "over the years /he builds/ a valuable collection of modern art" (RD 55) such as paintings of Matisse, Picasso, Rouault, Moore, etc. Later on he meets Charles Marsh, a self-made multimillionaire and a big art collector and Dahl actually becomes his art collection agent. From what Mr Treglown writes one would think art collectors constantly surround Dahl and even his uncle Oscar has a valuable art collection of his own.

In the late 50s Dahl's family commutes between England and Manhattan. That is when Dahl's life experiences resemble the parson's in the story. Because in England Dahl "tour/s/ the countryside buying antique furniture, some of which he restore/s/" (RD 127) it might mean he has to have some concrete knowledge of the antiquities, and also the setting described in the story cannot be that strange to him either. Later, when his daughter Tessa faces many problems such as drugs, he comes up with "a practical solution /-/ setting up an antique shop [...] for Tessa to run." (RD 207) This again shows Dahl's relation to art, as well as his attitude towards his children, who had no such affinity to art as him.

To summarise, just as any other Dahl's story this one is strongly influenced by his writing gift too. Nonetheless, if anyone reads through Mr Treglown's biography, he must inevitably come to a conclusion that the story *Parson's Pleasure* is very much affected by its author's knowledge and interests.

### *Taste*

This story is again concerned with a topic very close to Dahl, and that is wine. It is the first story of the collection *Someone Like You*. It shows two connoisseurs, whose hobby is to bet on the abilities of the other, either to choose an extremely rare brand or to guess the precise vineyard together with its year. Under such conditions we are completely engrossed in the story, which takes place in a house of a wealthy stockbroker, Mr Mike Schofield. Six guests are invited

for dinner, among them the narrator of the story, and most importantly about fifty-year-old Richard Pratt who is "a famous gourmet." (CSS 441)

Through the introduction we are told there were similar dinners before this one, where Mike betted Richard a case of the wine in question that he would not tell the precise breed and vintage. Though Mike lost both times, he was glad he had a chance to "prove that his wine was good enough to be recognised" while Pratt was pleased to "display/.../ his knowledge." (CSS 441) While the dinner is in progress and Mike is looking forward to serving the claret, Pratt is completely absorbed in talking to Mike's eighteen-year-old daughter Louise. To Mike's disappointment Pratt does not even notice the special taste of the wine served before the claret, about which Mike talks with the narrator so enthusiastically. "He leaned over to me and whispered to me that Geierslay was a tiny village in the Moselle, almost unknown outside Germany. He said that this wine we were drinking was something unusual, that the output of the vineyard was so small that it was almost impossible for a stranger to get any of it. He had visited Geierslay personally the previous summer in order to obtain the few bottles that they had finally allowed him to have." (CSS 442)

Nonetheless as this wine is not the crucial one of the supper, Mike does not show his disappointment and announces that he goes to fetch the claret from his study cabinet. Upon the narrator's question, why does he keep it in his study cabinet he replies it is the place Pratt helped him to choose last time he visited him, as it is "a good draught-free spot in a room with an even temperature." (CSS 443) Upon this, he finally brings the precious claret and starts to negotiate another bet on this wine. "What about this one, Richard? You'll never name this one!" (CSS 444) At first Mike thinks the bet is for a case of the claret again, when Pratt asks his host if he is willing to bet anything Pratt likes. Mike, being perfectly certain Pratt cannot guess it and being terribly wealthy, agrees to bet anything. "All right, then. I'll tell you what I want you to bet. [...] I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage." (CSS 445)

At first it is a shock for everyone, especially Louise and her mother, but then when Mike hears that Pratt bets his two houses against his daughter's hand he starts to consider this tempting offer and very intensively he tries to persuade his daughter there is no danger of losing. "The point is this. He cannot possibly win. [...] If you will take this bet, in ten minutes you will be the owner of two large houses. [...] You'll be rich. You'll be independent for the rest of your life! [...] I'll guarantee you won't lose." (CSS 447)

Finally, Louise, under the pressure of her father, consents to make it a bet and Mike pours Pratt the mysterious claret. First he sniffs it delicately "the point of the nose enter/ing/ the glass and mov/ing/ over the surface of the glass" and then with an intense concentration "swirl/ing/ the wine gently around in the glass to receive the bouquet." (CSS 448) He closes his eyes and his whole body looks like a big "smelling-machine, receiving, filtering, analysing the message from the sniffing nose." (CSS 448) Afterwards through a very careful and slow process he tips half of the glass into his mouth, first getting the taste, then swallowing a tiny bit of it and then "draw/ing/ in through the lips a thin breath of air, which mingle/s/ with the fumes of the wine in the mouth and pass/es/ down into his lungs." (CSS 448) For seconds he holds his breath. When he blows it out again, he rolls the wine around the tongue and finally chews it. This done, he slowly starts analysing the potential results out loud, "It is far too light in body to be either from St Emilion or Graves. It is obviously a Medoc." (CSS 449) Going on like this for a stretch of time he finally comes to his final decision, which is "Chateau Branaire-Ducru," year 1934. (CSS 451)

Normally the next step would be for Mike to turn the bottle round for everyone to see the label, but as everyone notices, Mike has become all pale "as though all the force was draining out of him." (CSS 451) Now the daughter and his wife both get nervous and urge him to say something, to which Mike reacts, "I'll tell you what Richard. I think you and I better slip off into the next room and have a little chat." (CSS 452) The problem is that Pratt does not want any agreement and forces Mike to show him the label to prove him the winner.

While all this is in progress Mike Schofield's maid approaches Mr Pratt and with an air of importance she hands him his glasses saying, "I believe these are yours, sir" and after a brief pause continues, "You left them in Mr Schofield's study. On top of the [...] cabinet in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner." (CSS 452) This disclosure gives away the fact that Mr Pratt was cheating in his last guessing game, as he knew the answer beforehand.

b) Here again I must say Dahl never mentions his wine hobby in either of his two autobiographies, but Mr Treglown can trace more in *Roald Dahl*.

c) Mr Treglown refers to this hobby of Dahl's several times (RD 55, 100, 134, 137, and 254) as there are several stories connected to it. Once, when Dahl goes together with Matthew Smith and Charles Marsh to France, Marsh asks the waiter to draw the cork with his personal corkscrew in a shape of penis. When the waiter does that, Marsh insists everyone to sniff the cork. (RD 100) (7)

Another time Dahl buys a couple of clarets at an auction in London and because their labels are rotted away they are quiet cheap. But when he starts opening them, the names on the corks reveal they are first-class vintages dating back from before the First World War. (RD 134)

On a different occasion he entertains his friends at dinner with a trick, he recently did to some of his guests. He first bought some very good wine, drank it and then filled the bottles with some cheap one, amusing himself with the admiring looks of his guests. While he finds it funny, Patricia's friend talks about it as "appalling and indicative of Roald" that he deliberately wanted "to diminish and demean people, and to crow about it." (RD 137) (8)

As Mr Treglown writes, Roald always "bought wine cleverly, sometimes at country-house auctions. He often went straight to the source - he 'went banco' on the excellent clarets of 1982, investing in 'a thousand' cases." (RD 254)

To sum it up, although there is no doubt a great deal of imagination is concerned in the story, certain aspects of it are clearly much influenced by Dahl's own knowledge of wines in his



real life. Also, according to the stories told by his friends, one can imagine Dahl as a participant of the story *Taste*.

Another story by Dahl quiet similar to this one is called *The Butler*. It resembles *Taste* in the facts about different wines and the techniques of distinguishing them, while the story is attached to the owner of the wines and his butler, who makes him a fool in front of his guests.

## 9. The End of Roald Dahl's Life

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Roald Dahl's grave  
Source: [www.roalddahlstans.com](http://www.roalddahlstans.com)

Before Roald Dahl dies, he has to first fight with cancer of the bowel (1985), and a couple of years later with leukaemia, to which he in 1990 succumbs. When asked, by the *Guardian*, whether he was scared of death, he said, in connection to the death of his beloved daughter Olivia, "If she can do it, I can do it." (RD 272) Furthermore, he said, " 'The world didn't seem to be becoming a better place.' [...] No, fear did not come into his feelings about death." (RD 272)

As I have already mentioned, Dahl is considered to be a very controversial person. When he wanted, he was able to be a very nice and entertaining companion, but if not he tended to be rude and even nasty. 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.

## 10. Conclusion

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In my thesis I tried to follow the way Dahl's short stories reflect his own life experiences and I hope to have introduced some interesting relevant information on the subject of Roald Dahl's literary output.

I do not mean to say that all of his short stories have something in common with his own life experiences, but having read all of them, I cannot help to see the connection. As a big admirer of Dahl's work I believe it is an interesting point of view and that is the reason why I decided to write about this topic. I would say it is admirable how full use of his own life experiences Dahl made in his short stories.

Generally speaking, when critics make a reference to Dahl's work they often use adjectives such as macabre, charming, candid, deliciously disgusting, cruel, revengeful, stunning, sinister, witty, savage, mischievous and many others (12). Together with the twist in the end of each story and his singular sense of humour, which might originate in Dahl being raised in partly Norwegian atmosphere, it is exactly what makes his books so original. Furthermore, the adjectives in my opinion actually reflect the writer himself and also his lifelong disasters at various moments of his fruitful life.

To conclude, my ultimate goal was to cover all major aspects of autobiographical traits in Roald Dahl's literature and by analysing the stories as well as Dahl as a personality and a writer, I wanted to bring this point of view nearer to those who are interested in Roald Dahl in general. It is up to the readers of my thesis to judge whether I have managed to do this satisfactorily, but I dare to say that in the stories I have chosen there are many direct and indirect proofs of his stories being at least semi-autobiographical.

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## 12. Appendix

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### *Short Story Collections*

#### *5 Bestsellers*

*Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*

*The Best of Roald Dahl*

*The Collected Short Stories of Roald Dahl*

*Completely Unexpected Tales*

*Further Tales of the Unexpected*

*The Great Automatic Grammatizator and Other Stories*

*Kiss Kiss*

*Lamb to the Slaughter and Other Stories*

*The Mildenhall Treasure*

*More Tales of the Unexpected*

*The Roald Dahl Omnibus*

*Over to You*

*Selected Stories of Roald Dahl*

*A Roald Dahl Selection: Nine Short Stories*

*A Second Roald Dahl Selection: Eight Short Stories*

*Skin and Other Stories*

*Someone Like You*

*Switch B\*\*\*h*

*Tales of the Unexpected*

*Tales of the Unexpected (Volume 1)*

*Tales of the Unexpected (Volume 2)*

*Taste and Other Tales*

*Twenty Nine Kisses from Roald Dahl*

*Two Fables*

*The Umbrella Man and Other Stories*

*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*

## Short Stories

*A Connoisseur's Revenge*

*A Fine Son*

*Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*

*An African Story*

*Beware of the Dog*

*B\*\*\*h*

*The Bookseller*

*The Boy Who Talked with Animals*

*The Butler*

*The Champion of the World*

*Death of an Old Old Man*

*The Devious Bachelor*

*Dip in the Pool*

*Edward the Conqueror*

*Galloping Foxley*

*Genesis and Catastrophe*

*Georgy Porgy*

*The Great Automatic Grammatizator*

*The Great Switcheroo*

*The Hitchhiker*

*In the Ruins*

*Katina*

*Lamb to the Slaughter*

*The Landlady*

*The Last Act*

*Lucky Break*

*Madame Rosette*

*Man From the South*

*The Mildenhall Treasure*

*Mr. Botibol*

*Mr. Feasey*

*Mr. Hoddy*

*Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat*

*Mrs. Mulligan*

*My Lady Love, My Dove*

*Neck*

*Nunc Dimittis*

*Only This*

*Parson's Pleasure*

*A Piece of Cake*

*Pig*

*Poison*

*Princess and the Poacher*

*Princess Mammalia*

*The Ratcatcher*

*Royal Jelly*

*Rummins*

*Shot Down Over Libya*

*Skin*

*Smoked Cheese*

*The Soldier*

*Someone Like You*

*The Sound Machine*

*The Surgeon*

*The Swan*

*The Sword*

*Taste*

*They Shall Not Grow Old*

*The Umbrella Man*

*The Upsidedown Mice*

*Vengeance is Mine Inc.*

*The Visitor*

*The Way Up to Heaven*

*William and Mary*

*The Wish*

*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*

*Yesterday was Beautiful*