A Thematic Analysis of Roald Dahl’s Adult Fiction

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C-essay
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Introduction

In the area of short stories there is little doubt that Roald Dahl has been an influential writer. Dahl’s short stories have been presented to the general public through TV-broadcasts but in order to grasp the true spirit of Dahl’s writing the best method is, of course, reading his books. The fictional works of Roald Dahl can be divided into two major categories; stories for adults and stories for children. This essay is concerned with the second grouping and is an attempt to analyse three themes that are of particular importance to his work. After a brief biographical note on the author, the essay analyses the element of the macabre in Dahl’s writing. Given the author’s diverse treatment of this theme I have found it convenient to divide this aspect of the work into two distinct subcategories; the implicit and the explicit macabre.

The following chapter deals with how relationships between men and women are depicted in Dahl’s fiction and pays particular attention to how vengeance and sex frequently manifest themselves in such relationships. The final chapter looks at the theme of lonely children. In this particular aspect of Dahl’s work he emphasises both the idea of protection and innocence, together with an intense portrayal of insanity.

Compared to his children’s literature it is fair to say that Dahl’s adult stories represent a category that has not yet been subjected to a great deal of critical analysis. The secondary source which has proved most useful for the initial part of this essay has been Jeremy Treglown’s Roald Dahl, which is primarily a biographical study. Moreover, within the biographical sphere, I have also used Dahls’ own Boy. Considering his biography there are evident traces that manifest themselves in his later fiction. Furthermore, critics have produced a number of shorter reviews concerning Dahl’s literature for adults and the objective to this essay is to present and facilitate a new body of understanding of the literary legacy of Dahl within the genre of short stories.
A biographical Note on the Author

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century the Norwegian Harald Dahl moved to Cardiff in the south of Wales. He decided to go into the shipbroker business, a move accomplished with great success. By the time he married his second wife, Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg, he was already a millionaire. Together they had four children, three girls and a boy (Roald). From his first marriage Harald had two children, so there were now six children in the family. A larger and grander house was needed and in 1918, when Roald was two, the family moved to Radyr, about eight miles west of Cardiff. Roald was three years old when his sister Astri died of appendicitis and only a few weeks later his father died of pneumonia. This led the family once again to move, this time to a smaller more manageable house, in Llandaff.¹

In Llandaff at the age of six Roald went to his first school or Kindergarten as it was called. Later he attended Llandaff Cathedral School for two years. After he received a terrible beating Roald’s mother decided that it was time for him to change school. This time he was sent to a boarding-school, called St Peter’s. At St Peter’s the treatment the boys received was not much better. In Boy, Dahl explains how the fear of the cane was always hanging like a shadow over the boys:

I was frightened of that cane. There is no small boy in the world who wouldn’t be. It wasn’t simply an instrument for beating you. It was weapon for wounding. It lacerated the skin. It caused severe black and scarlet brusing that took three weeks to disappear, and all the time during those three weeks, you could feel your heart beating along the wounds.²

In 1929 when Roald was thirteen he went to Repton, a famous public school at that time. Repton was situated close to Derby, some 140 miles to the north of the area they were now living in, Bexley, in Kent. In Boy Dahl describes the “fagging-servant-system” which existed at Repton. The older boys enjoyed the privilege of making one of the newcomers his own servant and beat him up every once in a while when he did not fulfil the expectations of his master. Even though the headmaster performed beatings it was more often the older boys who executed them. However, there were naturally happier moments at Repton. Roald was very keen on photography which he practiced during the rare moments of his spare time. Another incident described in Boy was the market research conducted by the chocolate company, Cadbury’s. They performed blindttests among the boys at Repton, who were

supposed to mark and comment on every bar of chocolate, in order that Cadbury’s could find out which or what bars that were the most popular and why. This event, according to Dahl himself, was probably what inspired him, 35 years later, to write Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

Roald was not very successful at Repton, ”Nor, any more than at St Peter’s was he doing well at his academic subjects.”3 This helped him to develop competitive abilities in other areas such as sports: “At the age of nine he had already taken up golf, which he continued to play during the holidays. He became captain of the Repton Fives team, played hockey for the school, and football and cricket for his house, swam and played golf.”4

Upon leaving Repton it was his mother’s intention that he should go to Oxford or Cambridge, even though his grades hardly offered him that possibility. Roald himself was much more inclined to the idea of starting to work for a company which could offer him the chance of going abroad (Africa and China especially attracted him). In 1934, at the age of eighteen, he got his first job as an Eastern Staff Trainee at The Shell Company. He made friends more easily here than in school and he and his friends often went to greyhound racing and played poker together. He stayed for three years until he finally got his new posting in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, nowadays known as Tanzania.

In September 1939 there was about to be a war with Hitler’s Germany. The Taganyikan army consisted of only a few native soldiers, called Askaris, and a handful of officers. Thus Roald, along with other civilian men, was made Special Reservist. Dahl was put in charge of 20 Askaris. He subsequently joined the Royal Air Force (R.A.F) in Nairobi, Kenya, and at a training camp he learned to fly small airplanes, Tiger Moths.

He was then sent to an airforcebase called Habbaniyih close to Baghdad, Iraq. It was here that Roald was taught how to fly a more powerful airplane with guns. Although poorly prepared he and twenty other men were sent to Egypt to fight the Italians. Seventeen of his companions were never to return. His plane, however, crashed (or got shot down and crashed as he himself claims) behind enemy lines and he escaped with some head injuries. He was rescued and flown to Greece. He stopped flying due to his head injuries and was sent back to England. Many of his short stories such as Yesterday Was Beautiful and They Shall Not Grow Old, relate to his time as a pilot.

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4 Treglown, 27.
In January 1942 he went to Washington D.C. in the U.S.A, where he was meant to work at the British Embassy as an Assistant Air Attaché. Roald was now 26 years old and he still had no thoughts of becoming a writer. It was then that he was contacted by a man called C.S Forester who wanted to write a story about Roald’s experiences in the war. The process of Roald telling his story and Mr Forester writing it down turned out to be quite laborious, so in the end Roald offered to write the story himself. “That, though I didn’t know it at the time, was the moment that changed my life.” A Piece of Cake as it was to be called was printed in the Saturday Evening Express in 1942 and it was the start of a brilliant writing career.

In July 1953 Dahl married Patricia Neal, a young Broadway actress. Apparantly Dahl was the dominant partner in their marriage: “Friends of Pat’s were horrified by how demanding, perfectionist and intolerant he was with her, and how he always seemed to be putting her down. Measured by show-business levels of kissing and embracing he, like the rest of his family, could also seem cold.”

Their marriage, however, became more stable and in summer 1954 Patricia became pregnant and a baby girl named Olivia was born in New York on 20 April 1955. Roald was a very loving father and demanded a great deal from the baby’s nannies. As he lived without a father for most of his childhood everything he had learnt about parenthood had come from his mother. Thus he became a “very maternal daddy.” His literary career had not been particulary successful for several years. After his first published collection of short stories, Someone Like You (USA 1953), he had difficulties earning his living. He was forced into writing filmscripts and this was in fact to become his major source of income for some years in the late sixties.

In April 1957 Patricia and Roald had Tessa, their second daughter and three years later a son, Theo. In 1960 his new collection Kiss Kiss was published and was, in comparison, to his other collections, more warmly received by the British literary establishment than by their American counterparts. It has to be added, however, that in spite of this the collection sold very well in the USA. When four months old Theo was struck by a taxi and his skull was broken in many places; a time of pain and despair followed. Fortunately Theo recovered, but this was only to be followed by another tragedy. The family had now moved to England where Dahl’s daughter Olivia caught the measles and she later died. These two events, which followed upon each other so closely were naturally very disturbing for Dahl: “He had always

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5 Roald Dahl, The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and six more (Great Britain: Jonathan Cape, 1977) 199.  
6 Treglown, 106.  
7 Treglown, 115.
found it almost impossible to talk to anyone about his feelings, and seemed now to cut himself off from friends, relatives, even from his own children, in a way which made Tessa at least feel that she could never mean as much to him as Olivia had meant.8

In terms of writing Dahl now entered a particulary barren period while his wife worked hard and successfully at her acting career; so much so that she received an Oscar. Partricia became pregnant during this time and all of a sudden a new period of anxiety was to enter the Dahl family. Patricia suffered from three successive strokes and became lame and lost her speech as well as her ability to read and write. Dahl now focused on three main aims. He wanted their baby born safely, his wife to get better and finally to become so rich that they would never have to worry about money again.9 His first aim was fulfilled in August and his new daughter’s name was Lucy. His second and third aims he fulfilled subsequently. A friend helped Partricia on her way to recovery and Dahl participated in the making of a James Bond film, enjoyed a short Hollywood career, and had many of his adult stories adapted for the TV-medium.

By 1975 many of his books became bestsellers in Britain as well as in the USA. This was especially true of his children’s literature. Dahl now had a difficult time finding new ideas for his adult fiction. During this time he recycled some old Playboy stories in a collection called Switch Bitch and also planned a new collection called The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar. His relationship with Pat, who had now started acting again, though on a small scale, deteriorated. This was quite a stormy period in his life. Theo, due to his brain damage, had to be put in special school, Lucy had a slight drug problem and Tessa was in a chaotic state of mind. On top of this, Dahl himself drank quite heavily and had a quarrellsome period with his acquaintances. Patricia and Roald finally divorced in 1983. Roald was now sixty-six years old and had for a time been secretly dating Felicity Crosland whom he married later the same year. Felicity brought three children to the relationship from a former marriage.10

During the 1980s Roald entered a more productive literary phase. He produced books such as The BFG, The Witches, Matilda and two autobiographies Boy and Going Solo. He had up to this point regarded himself as primarily an adult writer. However, given the fact that his children’s literature was now becoming well known he started to openly express his happiness in mastering this particular branch of writing: “Dahl took pride in what he called his “Child Power”. Without much exaggeration, he said that he could walk into any house in

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8 Treglown, 135.
9 Treglown, 159.
10 Treglown, 199.
Europe or the USA and if there were children living there, he would be recognized and made welcome.”\textsuperscript{11}

Dahl continued his writing right up to the end of his life in spite of undergoing a series of surgeries related to cancer and despite the fact that he suffered from leukaemia. On 23 November 1990 Roald Dahl died. This was eight months after his stepdaughter Lorina died from a brain tumour; the last family tragedy to occur in Dahl’s life. He left behind an estate valued at three million pounds.

\textsuperscript{11} Treglown, 231.
1. The Macabre in the Short Stories of Roald Dahl

When studying the short stories of Roald Dahl it is impossible not to notice his frequent use of the macabre. The macabre is often used to illuminate both character and the essential components of the plot. Before developing this subject any further it is important to define the word macabre. According to the Oxford Dictionary the word macabre means “grim” or “gruesome”.12 It is described as having a forbidding or harsh quality and is often related to death. Although it is defined as meaning “grim” or “gruesome” the etymology of the word macabre is obscure.13 “The personification of death and the motif of the macabre is recurrent and appears to exercise a considerable fascination for writers and artists. Death is, as it were, presented as a kind of sardonic joke.”14 In the quotation above we find the very essence of Dahl’s macabre stories. I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that Dahl often presents a sardonic twist in his use of the macabre.

1.1 The Implicit Macabre

A technique often used by Dahl is to leave the macabre unspoken. Quite frequently he leaves an implicit meaning for the reader to interpret. The stories combine the macabre with an element of humour, in the most ingenious of ways. These stories all examplifies what Bradbury refers to as the creativity of Dahls’.15 The reader can find humour as well as experiencing a shudder of horror when reading one of Dahl’s macabre stories.

A representative example of this is the story Dip in the Pool from the collection Someone Like You.16 The main character, Mr Botibol, takes a voyage onboard a large ship. There is the traditional betting onboard among the passengers. They bet on the estimated distance that the ship can cover during a certain period of time. Mr Botibol, due to the bad weather, bets that the ship will only be able to travel a very short distance. However, when he awakens the next morning the sun is shining and the ship is advancing at top speed. Mr Botibol understands that he must slow the ship down in order to win the bet. He makes a plan whereby he is going to pretend to fall off the ship at a time when he is sure that somebody

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14 Cuddon, 218.
16 Roald Dahl, Someone Like You: (Great Britain: Michael Joseph, 1961). All the subsequent references are to this edition and will be inserted into the text within parenthesis.
will see him. He hopes that because of this action they will have to stop the ship and fish him up out of the water and the boat will therefore be delayed. He carefully picks out a woman to be the one to announce, “man over board” making sure that she is neither blind nor deaf. Mr Botibol jumps off the ship shouting and waving vigorously and the old lady spots him. It is later revealed that the lady suffers from some sort of mental retardation and her last line is a prime example of how Dahl combines the macabre with humour, “Such a nice man, she said. He waved to me” (503).

Another betting plot occurs in Man from the South, also from the collection Someone Like You. It is about a sinister foreigner who bets ‘his’ Cadillac that a younger man cannot make his cigarette lighter work ten times in succession. The stake he wants from his rival is the little finger of his left hand. In the grim twist at the end, the bet is called off by the real Cadillac owner. This person, who happens to be his wife, is now the true possessor of all of the foreigner’s previous belongings. The only things she seems to be missing are three of her fingers:

He hasn’t anything left to bet with, the woman said. He hasn’t a thing in the world. Not a thing. As a matter of fact I myself won it all from him a long while ago. It took time, a lot of time and it was hard work, but I won it all in the end. She looked up at the boy and she smiled, a slow sad smile, and she came over and put out a hand to take the key from the table. I can see it now, that hand of hers; it had only one finger on it , and a thumb (472).

Dip in the Pool and Man from the South both involve bodily sacrifices in order to gain money. This is also true of Skin, a somewhat gruesome and macabre story also included in the collection Someone Like You. The main idea of the story concerns a lack of money; which was at that time, the late forties and the beginning of the fifties, a major concern of Dahl himself. He lived in an empty house owned by some friends, “rent free in exchange for his keeping an eye on the installation of a new phone system”\(^{17}\) Indeed, it might be his own financial problems that inspire him to write these stories about fabulous schemes meant to create wealth.

In the story, Skin, we are introduced to a poor old man walking the streets of Paris in the year 1946. Before the war this man, Drioli, has a picture of his wife tattooed on his back by Soutine, a former friend, who is now a very famous artist. Drioli passes an art gallery which seems to have a special exhibition of the same artist. This coincidence leads him to enter and when

\(^{17}\) Treglown, 96.
inside the gallery he is allowed to show his eccentric work of art. An absurd bidding process starts concerning the old man’s tatoo. A stranger offers Drioli a life of luxury and comfort in the company of beautiful women at his Bristol Hotel in Cannes. In return Drioli has to spend his time at the hotel beach in his bathing trunks, walking around among the Hotel guests, swimming and drinking cocktails. Drioli is obviously tempted but he hesitates. The stranger invites him to discuss it over dinner and Drioli accepts:

It wasn’t more than a few weeks later that a picture by Soutine, of a woman’s head, painted in an unusual manner, nicely framed and heavily varnished, turned up for sale in Buenos Aires. That - and the fact that there is no hotel in Cannes called Bristol - causes one to wonder a little, and to pray for the old man’s health, and to hope fervently that wherever he may be at this moment, there is a plump attractive girl to manicure the nails of his fingers, and to bring him his breakfast in bed in the mornings. (531)

In the ill-omened ending Dahl gives a hint, in his typically skillful manner, about the macabre fate of Drioli. Though we cannot be one hundred percent certain, it is hinted that his fate may well have been gruesome. This technique, by which Dahl lets the reader’s imagination interpret the story, is called the implicit macabre.

1.2 The Explicit Macabre

There are however, stories where Dahl is much more explicit regarding the element of the macabre. One example is the macabre fate of young Lexington in Pig from the collection Kiss Kiss. This is a story about a boy, Lexington, who at 12 days old becomes an orphan and is subsequently brought up by his great aunt, Glosspan. Glosspan, a strict vegetarian makes sure young Lexington follows her guidelines concerning what food to eat. In fact she teaches him the art of cooking in such detail that he becomes a true expert in the kitchen. By the time Lexington is seventeen aunt Glosspan meets a sudden death and, although Lexington mourns her bitterly, one has to appreciate the humorous elements regarding her demise. At one point in the story Lexington visits the doctor in order to get a death certificate:

‘Old Glosspan?’ the doctor said. ‘My God is she dead?’
‘Certainly she’s dead’, the youth answered. ‘If you will come back home with me now I’ll dig her up and you can see for yourself.’

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18 Roald Dahl, Kiss Kiss:(Great Britain: Michael Joseph, 1960). All the subsequent references are to this edition and will be inserted into the text with parenthesis.
'How deep did you bury her?’ the doctor asked.
‘Six or seven feet down, I should think.’
‘And how long ago?’
‘Oh, about eight hours.’
‘Then she’s dead’, the doctor announced. ‘Here’s the certificate.’ (161)

On his way home Lexington orders pork and cabbage at a restaurant without really knowing what he has ordered. Note, aunt Glosspan is a strict vegetarian and has never served him any kind of meat. However, he finds this a tremendously enjoyable meal and of course he would like to know what it is that he has actually been eating. The cook answers:

‘Well’, he said, looking at the waiter and giving him a sly wink, ‘all I can tell you is that I think it was pig’s meat.’
‘You mean you’re not sure?’
‘One can never be sure.’
‘Then what else could it have been?’
‘Well’, the cook said, speaking very slowly and still staring at the waiter. ’There’s just a chance, you see, that it might have been a piece of human stuff’.
‘You mean a man?’
‘Yes.’
‘Good heavens.’
‘Or a woman. It could have been either. They both taste the same.’
‘Well - now you really surprise me’, the youth declared.
‘One lives and learns.’
‘Indeed one does.’ (167)

This is the first instance where we get a hint of the macabre fate that awaits young Lexington. He then visits a slaughter-house to watch the way they butcher the pigs. This is a visit that will have the most gruesome effect on young Lexington’s life:

At this point while Lexington was gazing skyward at the last pig to go up, a man in rubber boots approached him quietly from behind and looped one end of a chain around the youth’s own ankle, hooking the other end to the moving belt. The next moment, before he had time to realize what was happening, our hero was jerked of his feet and dragged backwards along the concrete floor of the shackling-pen.
‘Stop! he cried. Hold everything! My leg is caught!’
But nobody seemed to hear him, and five seconds later, the unhappy young man
was jerked of the floor and hoisted vertically upward through the open roof of the pen, dangling upside down by the ankle, and wringling like a fish. (170f)

Roald Dahl is highly esteemed for the macabre element in his writings and it may well be that it is this aspect of his fiction that is most appreciated by his many readers. Raphael mentions Dahl’s mercilessness as the very trademark of Dahl.\textsuperscript{19} Another critic argues very well by describing Dahl’s savage sense of humor as suitable for stabbing and cutting.\textsuperscript{20} However, as the following chapters will prove, there are other, equally interesting themes in his writing. The next chapter will deal with one of these themes, the relationship between men and women.


2. Relationships Between Men and Women

Roald Dahl has illustrated this popular theme in a two dimensional manner, from both the male and the female sex’s point of view. One can divide his relationship-theme into three subcategories; female vengeance, male vengeance and sex as a source of the absurd or a source of mortality. The stories that I will mention in this chapter all fall under the theme of deferred revenge. This is a quality that Wood mentions as one of Dahl’s biggest assets.21

2. 1 Female vengeance

One of Dahl’s most famous stories Lamb to the Slaughter is concerned with the matter of a woman seeking revenge on a man. This is a story about a couple that are expecting a child. At the beginning of the story her husband, Patrick Maloney, announces that he has decided to leave her. This comes as a major shock to Mrs Maloney since she is pregnant. She is just about to make supper for her husband when the story takes an unpredictable turn:

‘For God’s sake’, he said, hearing her, but not turning round. ‘Don’t make supper for me. I’m going out.’
At this point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it as hard as she could on the back of his head. (457)

We are led to believe that she feels no remorse whatsoever for her deed. She has enacted revenge on her husband and would not worry about her own punishment if it were not for the consequences this would have on her comming baby:

As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both - mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?
Mary Maloney didn’t know. And she certainly wasn’t prepared to take a chance. (457)

Roald Dahl describes Mary’s state of mind as being quite rational. To her it does not matter if

She gets caught, she is merely doing it for her baby. She tries to act as normal as possible when she goes shopping at a small store nearby:

"That’s the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things absolutely natural and there’ll be no need for any acting at all. Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was humming a little tune to herself and smiling.

'Patrick!' she called. ‘How are you darling?’" (458f)

Her complete lack of emotions quickly changes when she spots her husband lying twisted on the floor. No acting is therefore necessary when she calls the police to announce the death of her beloved. Mrs Maloney is soon joined by some detectives, a doctor and a few policemen. They search the house looking for the murder weapon. Naturally they have a hard time finding it, as it is getting cooked in the oven. The search goes on for several hours and eventually Mrs Maloney persuades them to stay for dinner as she claims that she cannot stand the thought of eating the lamb herself. The final scene by the dining table is once again an example of how Roald Dahl successfully combines irony and humour:

‘Have some more,’ Charlie?
‘No. Better not finish it.’
‘She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour.’
‘Okay then. Give me some more.’
‘That’s the hell of a big club the guy must’ve used to hit poor Patrick,’ one of them was saying. ‘The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer.’
‘That’s why it ought to be easy to find.’
‘Exactly what I say.’
‘Whoever done it, they’re not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer then they need.’
One of them belched.
‘Personally, I think it’s right here on the premises.
Probably right under our very noses. What do you think, Jack?’
And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle. (461)
The theme of vengeance is also contained in the story entitled *The Way up to Heaven*. In *Lamb to the Slaughter* as well as in *The Way up to Heaven*, from the collection *Kiss Kiss*, the final outcome is death. The similarity goes even further, as the person seeking revenge is a woman and her victim is a man. Equally, in both stories the main characters are man and wife. In *The Way up to Heaven* we get to know Mrs Foster. Mrs Foster has a fear of appearing late to various meetings and this fear is almost obsessive:

> All her life, Mrs Foster had had an almost pathological fear of missing a train, a boat, or even theatre curtain. In other respects, she was not a particularly nervous woman, but the mere thought of being late on occasions like these would throw her into such a state of nerves that she would begin to twitch.” (37)

Mr Foster is well aware of this odd quality of his wife and it is clearly something that irritates him. However, he has no excuse for increasing her misery by keeping her waiting unnecessarily. Although there is nothing that clearly states that he is doing this on purpose he always seems to be arriving one or two minutes late. Therefore he often drives his beloved wife into hysterics. It is hard not to believe that he deliberately uses this little personal torture for the mere joy of seeing his wife suffer.

The day when Mrs Foster has a flight to catch to Paris is no exception to the usual routine. Mrs Foster is already exceptionally early while her husband does his best to delay them:

> ‘Ah yes,’ he said. ‘Of course. And if you’re going to take me to the club first, I suppose we’d better get going fairly soon, hadn’t we?’
> ‘Yes!’ she cried. ‘Oh, yes - please!’
> ‘I’m just going to get a few cigars. I’ll be right with you. You get in the car.’
> She turned and went out to where the chauffeur was standing, and he opened the car door for her as she approached.
> ‘What time is it?’ she asked him.
> ‘About nine-fifteen.’ (44)

They have not travelled far when Mr Foster stops the car, as he has just remembered a present he has to give to their friend Ellen. They have to drive back to their house and search for it. This naturally drives his miserable wife into a hysterical state of mind. Mr Foster orders his wife to wait in the car while he searches for the present in the house. While her husband is inside Mrs Foster finds the present in the crack of the seat on the side where her husband had been sitting. She could not help noticing how firm and deep it was wedged
down, as though it had been placed there with the help of a great deal of pressure. She runs madly to the door and just before turning the key she stops motionless and just listens:

She appeared actually to be moving one of her ears closer and closer to the door. Now it was right up against the door, and for some seconds she remained in that position, head up, ear to the door, hand on the key, about to enter but not entering, trying instead or so it seemed, to hear and to analyse these sounds that were coming so faintly from this place deep within the house. Then, all at once she sprang to life again. She withdrew the key from the door and came running back down the steps.

'It’s too late!’ she cried to the chauffeur. 'I can’t wait for him, I simply can’t. I’ll miss the plane. Hurry now, driver, hurry! To the airport!’ (46)

Towards the end we can discern the horrible fate of Mr Foster when his wife comes back from Paris. It has to be added that no one has been in the house except Mr Foster during his wife’s stay in Paris. When she enters the house the following happens:

The first thing she saw as she entered the house was a great pile of mail lying on the floor where it where it had fallen after being slipped through the letter box. The place was now dark and cold, the atmosphere was peculiarly oppressive, and there was a faint and curious odour in the air that she had never smelled before... Then, suddenly , she turned and went across into her husband’s study. On the desk she found his address book, and after hunting through it for a while she picked up the phone and dialled a number.

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

She replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband’s desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon to repair the lift. (47f)

As in the previous story, *Lamb to the Slaughter*, it is clear that the female character is depicted in a more harsh manner than the male. This fact is also true in the story entitled *William and Mary* and illustrates a pattern in Dahl’s writings. Sometimes Dahl provides a character who has an almost obsessive desire to get even. One can find such an obsession in the character of
Mary in *William and Mary* from the collection *Kiss Kiss*. Mary gets a letter from her recently deceased husband William. William has known that he is suffering from a fatal disease. Therefore he has agreed to participate in a medical experiment after his death. The experiment concerns taking out a human brain from the skull, preserving it and then reconnecting it to an artificial heart. William is naturally doubtful to start with, but when he finds out that he is actually going to see via one of his own eyes and his optic nerves he finally agrees to the experiment. This is, surprisingly enough, a decision that he does not disclose to his wife, partly because he has always been the dominant partner in their relationship.

He leaves a letter for her to be opened after his death. The letter reveals everything about the experiment as well as some parts where he asserts what a satisfying wife she has been. These parts she reads with a giggle, as she is confident of it being nothing but a mere formality. The latter part of this letter is filled with useful tips concerning how she is to manage without him:

‘ps. Be good when I am gone, and always remember that it is harder to be a good widow than a good wife. Do not drink cocktails. Do not waste money. Do not smoke cigarettes. Do not eat pastry. Do not use lipstick. Do not buy a television apparatus. Keep my rose beds and my rockery well weeded in the summers. And incidentally I suggest that you have the telephone disconnected now that I shall have no further use for it.

W.’ (28)

This final paragraph is a prime example of the kind of relationship William and Mary have. This will explain Mary’s later reactions when she gets to meet her “new” husband. Mary is not really eager to call Mr Landy, the doctor who has carried out the surgery, but she somehow feels that it is her obligation to do so. Mr Landy is relieved that she finally calls and invites her to come and visit William. This she does, and at this moment she looks down into the basin where her husband’s eye, together with his brain, is floating around:

‘Hallo dear’, she whispered. ‘It’s me - Mary.’
The eye, bright as ever, stared back at her with a peculiar, fixed intensity.
‘How are you, dear?’, she said.
The plastic capsule was transparent all the way round so that the whole of the eyeball was visible. The optic nerve connecting the underside of it to the brain looked a short length of grey spaghetti.
'Are you feeling all right, William?' (32)

Even if it is not stated explicitly the reader can undoubtedly recognise Mary’s sense of triumph. The fact that she is enjoying every moment becomes quite obvious subsequently when Mary thinks to herself:

You know what, she told herself, looking behind the eye now and staring hard at the great grey pulpy walnut that lay so placidly under the water, I´m not at all sure that I don’t prefer him as he is at present. In fact, I believe that I could live very comfortably with this kind of a William. I could cope with this one.

‘Quiet, isn’t he?’ she said. (34)

Towards the end of the story Mary slowly develops a quality that exists somewhere in the area between pure irony and insanity. She has finally got the chance to even the score, she finally has the upper hand and ultimately she will take her revenge. The way she does so turns out to be quite sadistic:

She inhaled deeply, and she held the smoke inside her lungs for three or for seconds; then suddenly, woosh, out it came through her nostrils like two thin jets which struck the water in the basin, and billowed out over the surface in a thick blue cloud, enveloping the eye. Landy was over by the door, with his back to her, waiting.

Come on, Mrs Pearl, he called.
Don’t look cross, William, she said softly. It isn’t any good looking cross.
Landy turned his head to see what she was doing.
Not any more it isn’t, she whispered. Because from now on, my pet, you’re going to do exactly what Mary tells you. (35)

The three prior stories are prime examples of what Alan Warren (120) means by "evildoers" who usually get punished in the end. Whether this makes Dahl a keeper of morality or not is of no concern to this essay.22 However, in Dahl’s fiction, vengeance is not exclusively something only the female gender experience. The subchapter below explores how certain male characters also enjoy the feeling of revenge.

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2.2 Male vengeance

There are not as many of Dahl’s stories that fall into this particular group as in the former category. Nevertheless, I will present three stories where the male sex gets its revenge on the female sex. The stories end in a somewhat more cruel and graphic revenge than one would feel is entirely necessary. These stories are Edward the Conqueror, Mrs Bixby and the Colonel’s Coat and Nunc Dimittis. The first two are from Dahl’s first collection published in 1960, Kiss Kiss, whereas the latter is from his collection Someone Like You, (1974).

Edward the Conqueror deals with a middle-aged couple who find a cat which they have never seen before. They find the cat quite peculiar and take it inside, as they do not want to keep it around the bonfire which the man has made outside. Apparently the woman is living in a fantasy world, as she imagines herself to be a concert pianist. At one point she is delivering a great performance:

One of her special little pleasures was to make every day a kind of concert day, with a carefully arranged programme which she worked out in detail before she began. She never liked to break her enjoyment by having to stop while she wondered what to play next. All she wanted was a brief pause after each piece while the audience clapped enthusiastically and called for more. (139)

On this particular day she decides to begin with Vivaldi and this catches the cat’s attention. Then Schumann follows and the cat seems to listen very carefully. She has not played more than three or four bars when the most peculiar thing happens: ”The cat stood up, walked to the end of the sofa, sat down again, listened some more; then all at once it bounded to the floor and leaped up to the piano stool beside her. There it sat, listened intently to the lovely sonnet, not dreamily this time, but very erect, the large yellow eyes fixed upon Louisa’s fingers.” (142)

Louisa is absolutely thrilled by this unexpected reaction from the cat. She believes the cat to be a reincarnated Franz Litz. Edward however, her husband, does not hide his scepticism. In fact he gets quite annoyed by his wife’s silly theory. They put the cat through a lot of musical tests and each one of them suggests that it really is a reincarnated Franz Litz that they have brought to their house. Edward however, still refuses to believe in this crazy theory. He gets sick and tired with all the attention the animal gets so when Louisa goes to the kitchen to find some food for the cat he goes out to see how his bonfire is going. When he comes back he meets his wife who is in a terrified condition:
But the way she was staring made him uncomfortable. What is it he said, lowering the lighter. Then he looked down and noticed for the first time the long thin scratch that ran diagonally clear across the back of one hand, from the knuckle to the wrist. Edward! (153)

Out of jealousy, Edward seems to have put an end to the life of an innocent cat. This incident occurs in the middle of the couple’s midlife-crisis. This seems like an unnecessarily cruel way to seek revenge, but perhaps it was the most convenient and certainly the most definite method. There is a connection between this story and the aforementioned William and Mary. Dahl develops in both of these stories female characters who are very similar in type.

Louisa has to be seen as perfectly normal, in spite of her fantasy of being a great pianist. One can, however, discern a tiny glimpse of madness in her obsession with the cat. Towards the end, of the story, this glimpse of madness develops into slight insanity when she imagines the fate of the cat. We can view Mary in the same light. As she has been a wife, she cannot cope with being a free woman. In her oppressed situation one can not claim her to be anything but normal, in spite of her unhappiness. However, when her husband dies she cannot feel anything else but joy and hatred. This is later reflected in her ironic glance when she looks down at William’s pitiful eye. The irony develops into sadism and finally their relationship becomes the opposite of what it has been previously. Now Mary is the dominant partner. There is a slight difference, however. The dominant individual now seems to be insane.

The story, Nunc Dimittis, from Someone Like You, also contains an exaggerated degree of cruelty. Lionel, quite a wealthy man, because of an inheritance from his father, is told some rather upsetting news from his friend Gladys Ponsonby. She tells him that Janet de Palagia has told her how she finds Lionel to be such a bore. This annoys Lionel and the more he thinks about the matter the more he considers enacting revenge:

I can remember with what terrifying swiftness my hatred of Janet de Palagia now began to grow. It all happened in a few minutes - a sudden, violent welling up of hatred that filled me till I thought I was going to burst. I tried to dismiss it, but it was on me like a fever, and in no time at all I was hunting around, as would some filthy gangster, for a method of revenge. (582)

Lionel now makes up a scheme. He knows about a painter called John Royden who has a
rather odd way of painting portraits. He always paints women and he always starts painting them in the nude, after which he dresses them with layer upon layer of paint. Lionel begs Mr Royden to paint a portrait of his “beloved” Janet. Four months later Mr Royden himself delivers the painting to Lionel. Lionel who is an expert cleaner and restorer of paintings now sets to work. With the right mixture of alcohol and turpentine he very gently begins to “undress” Janet de Palagia. After some patient work he is finally done with the painting:

It was truely an astonishing sight! This woman, Janet de Palagia, almost life size, standing in her underwear - in a sort of drawing-room, I supose it was - with a great chandelier above her head and a red-pluch chair by her side; and she herself - this was the most disturbing part of all - looking so completely unconcerned... Also I noticed, with something of a shock, that she was exceedingly bow-legged, like a jockey. I tell you frankly, the whole thing embarrassed me. (586f)

His next move is to write invitations to a carefully selected group of high-class people like Janet de Pelagia and himself. Lionel is a very highly regarded man so naturally everybody accepts. Dinner is served in the same room where the painting now hangs. The room is in darkness except for the little glow produced by six candles placed on the table. Lionel himself is firmly watching the candles waiting for the great moment to come. The time has come for his revenge:

Oh, Mary, switch on the lights, will you, please.... At that point I got up from my chair and slid quietly from the room, but as I went I saw a sight that I shall never forget as long as I live. It was Janet, with both hands in mid-air, stopped, frozen rigid, caught in the act of gesticulating towards someone across the table. Her mouth had dropped open two inches and she wore the surprised not-quite-understanding look of a person who precisely one second before has been shot dead, right through the heart. In the hall outside I paused and listened to the beginning of the uproar, shrill cries of the ladies and the outraged unbelieving exclamations of the men;... Out in the street the chauffeur helped me into my car, and soon we were away from London and bowling merrily along the Great North Road towards this, my second house, which is only ninety-five miles from Town anyway. (590)

There is, in this story as well as in William and Mary and Edward The Conqueror, a similar development phase, the development of the main characters, in this case Lionel. In a similar manner to Mary and Louisa, Lionel develops from being sane to more or less insane. He puts
himself into a position of becoming an outcast, simply because he wishes to revenge a non-confirmed slander.

In *Mrs Bixby and the Colonel’s Coat* the central theme concerns, not so much the urge for revenge, as the matter of getting even in the name of justice. However, it is obvious that the male character achieves the upper hand. The story deals with a married couple who both have an affair. Mrs Bixby often meets a wealthy Colonel when she is supposed to be visiting her aunt and Mr Bixby is having an affair at his work. Mrs Bixby gets a mink-coat from her lover the Colonel and has to make up a plan of how to be able to wear it in front of her husband. She goes to a pawnbroker and asks to borrow fifty dollars on it and gets a ticket without any name or description of the article. She gives the ticket to her husband and asks what it is: “He began explaining to her exactly how a pawn ticket worked, with particular reference to the fact that anyone possessing the ticket was entitled to claim the article. She listened patiently until he had finished his lecture.”(79) They decide that Mr Bixby will go to the pawnbroker and as soon as he can he will telephone home and tell her what it is:

What is it?
Try to guess.
Mrs Bixby paused. Be careful, she told herself. Be very careful now.
A necklace, she said.
Wrong.
A diamond ring.
You’re not even getting warm. I’ll give you a hint. It’s something you can wear.
Something I can wear? You mean like a hat?
No it’s not a hat, he said laughing.
For goodness sake, Cyrill! Why don’t you tell me? (82)

Eager to get confirmation that she will get her coat, Mrs Bixby is driven crazy by her husband’s witty little guessing-game. He wants to wait and come home after work with the present as a surprise. She, however, is so excited of getting hold of her mink coat that she decides to meet him at work and get her present there. He tells her to close her eyes while he brings the present out of his cupboard:

Mink! he cried. Real mink!
At the sound of the magic word she opened her eyes quick, and at the same time she actually started forward to clasp the coat in her arms. But there was no coat. There was only a ridiculous fur neckpiece dangling from her husband’s arms. (83)
Mrs Bixby has a hard time hiding her anger and disappointment. She believes the pawnbroker has cheated her. It is only a few moments before she finds out who the real scoundrel is. At the same moment as she leaves her husband’s office she hears him saying:

Did I tell you I was going to be late home tonight? Cyril Bixby said, still washing his hands.
No.
It’ll probably be at least eight-thirty the way things look at the moment. It may even be nine.
Yes, all right. Goodbye. Mrs Bixby went out, slamming the door behind her.
At that precise moment, Mrs Pulteney, the secretary-assistant, came sailing past her down the corridor on her way to lunch.
Isn’t it s gorgeous day? Miss Pulteney said as she went by, flashing a smile. There was a lilt in her walk, a little whiff of perfume attending her, and she looked like a queen, just exactly like a queen in the beautiful black mink coat that the Colonel had given to Mrs Bixby.(84)

In this story Dahl stresses the element of getting even more than the thought of seeking revenge. However one can hardly miss the definite element of revenge that becomes obvious towards the dramatic end.

2.3 Sex as a source of the absurd or mortality

Over a period of time, Dahl wrote several short stories which were meant to be published in Playboy magazine. This magazine was quite wealthy, thus there was a lot of money to be made if the stories were accepted. Not suprisingly many of his Playboy-stories allude to sex. Roald Dahl has in his writings formed a special attitude towards the subject of sex. Jeremy Treglown has written the following about this particular aspect of Dahl’s work: “However humorous the intention, these stories - especially those collected as Switch Bitch (1974) - depend unmistakingly on a repelled, vengeful, invasive attitude to sex.” (17)

In a number of short stories we get introduced to a certain Oswald Hendryks Cornelius - Uncle Oswald. The Visitor (327) is one such story. Uncle Oswald leaves a collection of his diaries to his closest relative. It is with great excitement that the relative sits down and starts reading about the adventures of his uncle. He starts reading about an event from the Sinai Desert. It soon becomes obvious that Oswald has never got married for the simple reason
that he never keeps to one woman alone but goes from one to another with the frequency of the normal man changing his underwear. Oswald has a way of attracting women that has an almost electric effect upon them. Dahl describes this quality in almost animalistic terms, which gives us an example of what Treglown has called a vengeful attitude to sex:

It appears that when Oswald was aroused, something odd would begin to happen around the edges of his nostril holes and revealed whole areas of the bright red skin inside. This created a queer, wild, animalistic impression, and although it may not sound particulary attractive when described on paper, its effect upon the ladies was electric. (331)

At one point in the story Uncle Oswald is filling his car with gasoline in the Sinai Desert. A not too charming Arab fills Uncle Oswald’s Lagonda up and discerns that the fan-belt will soon break. Due to this he orders a fan-belt from Cairo and Oswald has to stay the night at this horrid place. One thing leads to another and soon Oswald finds himself sitting in a Rolls Royce on his way to a very generous man, Mr Aziz, who has invited him to stay at his house until the new fan-belt reaches the filling station. They soon arrive at a most impressive building built in the shape of a castle. Even before he gets introduced to Mr Aziz’s beautiful daughter we get a hint of Oswald’s thoughts:

And the beautiful Princess is imprisoned within its walls by her strict and jealous father, King Abdul Aziz, who refuses to allow her the pleasures of masculine company. But watch out, for here comes Prince Oswald Cornelius to the rescue! Unbeknownst to the King, is going to ravish the beautiful Princess, and make her very happy. (353)

Despite his chivalrous thoughts he does not show the chivalrous behaviour which goes with being a true knight. When meeting the beautiful wife of Mr Aziz his fantasy scam is transferred to the queen herself: “There and then, Prince Oswald Cornelius decided that he cared not one whit about the beautiful Princess who was held captive in his castle by the jealous King. He would ravish the Queen instead.” (354)

The story now enters the element of seduction. Uncle Oswald describes how he enjoys every part of the scenario, the two beautiful ladies, Mrs Aziz, her daughter and their watchdog, Mr Aziz. After dinner and a refreshing bath in the pool the party goes to bed. During the night Oswald experiences a most pleasant female visit. The mystery of it all is that she never reveals whether she is the daughter or Mrs Aziz herself. Oswald is dying to know who he has been spending these wonderful hours with. He is quite confident that he will know
eventually, as during the passionate act he bit his beloved on her neck. He believes that this will surely leave a mark, in which case he will be able to discover with whom he has spent the night.

When the morning comes Oswald ends up in a most delicate situation. Both mother and daughter have tied a scarf around their necks so carefully that no part of the skin is visible. Soon the time comes for Oswald to leave. During the trip back to the filling station Mr Aziz reveals a secret to Oswald. He tells him about his second daughter. She is five years older than the daughter Oswald has already met. The reason why they did not get introduced is that she suffers from anaesthetic leprosy. Uncle Oswald naturally gets rather worried but Mr Aziz tries to calm him down:

   But my dear fellow, you mustn´t alarm yourself like this. Calm yourself down, Mr Cornelius, calm yourself down! There´s absolutely nothing in the world for you to worry about. It is not a very contagious disease. You have to have the most intimate contact with the person in order to catch it... (366)

As Treglown has commented, it is not difficult to find the element of disgust in this particular story or in Dahl´s other short stories concerning sex. One might even go as far as to interprete this as the female way of getting even. Uncle Oswald has, as becomes quite clear in the story, seduced many beautiful women and then simply leaves them. Female revenge is therefore quite an obvious theme in Dahl´s fiction.

Another story in which Uncle Oswald appears is Bitch. This is an example of a Dahl story where sex is a source of mortality. The story takes place in Paris. Uncle Oswald gets a phone call from his friend Heri Biotte. Henri is truly excited and believes he has finally achieved the goal of his life. Heri has devoted his life to the study of olfaction. He always introduces himself as being an olfactory chemist, that is, an expert on smells. Henri has been experimenting for a year in order to get a smell which will produce a revolting sexual desire in any man. Uncle Oswald who is obviously a rather wealthy man agrees to sponsor this project if Henri can convince him that he knows what to look for:

   There is an eight pure primary odour which they don´t know about, and an eight receptor site to receive the curiously shaped molecules of that odour!
   Ah-ha-ha! I said. I see what you´re driving at.
   Yes, he said, the eight pure primary odour is the sexual stimulant that caused
primitive man to behave like a dog thousands of years ago. It has a very perculiar molecular structure. (420)

Once again Dahl uses an animalistic metaphor when writing about sex. Uncle Oswald is hooked on the idea. They write a five-year contract with a fifty-fifty split of the profit. A year goes by but nothing happens and then finally Uncle Osald gets a phone call. They meet in the laboratory and Heri starts describing what a revolting experience he has had after taking just a tiny little sniff on the scent. Here again we see the connection between sex and animals:

Oh, my God, Oswald, it was fantastic! I completely lost control of myself! I did things I would never in a million years have dreamed of doing! Such as what?
My dear fellow, I went completely wild! I was like a wild beast, an animal! I was not human! The civilizing influences of centuries simply dropped away! I was Neolithic!
What did you do?
I can´t remember the next bit very clearly. It was all so quick and violent. But I became overwhelmed by the most terrifying sensation of lust it is possible to imagine. Everything else was blotted out of my mind. All I wanted was a woman. I felt that if I didn´t get hold off a woman immediately, I would explode. (424)

By now Heri is quite sure that he has succeeded but he wants to make one last test of his invented fluid. He engages a professional boxer as a guinea-pig. As he wants the test to be as scientific as possible he asks his assistant to play the female part of this quite absurd experiment. He and Uncle Oswald are meant to be observers and can under no circumstances whatsoever interrupt the scene which will take place right in front of them. The male boxer does not know exactly what kind of test he will be involved in, apart from the fact that he will get a lot of money. As Dahl describes the experiment the reader once again recognizes the animalistic imagery that Dahl so often uses in his passionate scenes:

The boxer had just passed the five-metre mark when the smell hit him. He stopped dead. His eyes glazed and he swayed on his legs as though he had been tapped on the head with a mallet. I thought he was going to keel away but he didn´t. He stood there swaying gently from side to side like a drunk. Suddenly he started making noises through his nostrils, queer little snorts and grunts that reminded me of a pig sniffing around its through. Then without any warning at all he sprang at the girl. He ripped off her white overall, her dress, and her underclothes. After that, all hell
Due to a series of circumstances Henri dies before he gets the formula written down. The last drops of Bitch, as they call the fluid, now belong to Uncle Oswald. For some reason Uncle Oswald is sick and tired of the President who always seems to escape from every fishy business he has ever been engaged in. During a visit to New York he gets the perfect opportunity to enact revenge on the president. The latter is about to make an appearance on national television together with several women. His plan is to plant Bitch on Mrs Ponsonby whom he knows will sit right next to the President. Uncle Oswald sneaks his way up to Mrs Ponsonby and gets quite shocked by the following, impressive sight:

The door was opened by the most enormous female I had ever seen in my life. I have seen giant women in circuses. I have seen lady wrestlers and weight-lifters. I have seen the huge Masai women in the plains below Kilimanjaro. But never had I seen a female so tall and broad and thick as this one. (435)

He claims to bring gifts from the President himself which makes Mrs Ponsonby absolutely thrilled. The gifts are orchids that are meant to be pinned on one’s clothes like a brooch. Uncle Oswald has attached a small capsule containing Bitch to the orchids themselves. As Mrs Posonby tries to hook the orchids onto her enormous bosom she puts the pin right into the capsule, which makes a tiny stain of Bitch hit Uncle Oswald! The result is disasterous:

Suddenly the stars and stripes on Mrs Posonby’s dress began to wobble and bobble about... When I came around again, I was standing naked in a rosy room and saw that my beloved sexual organ was three feet long and thick to match. It was still growing. It was lengthening and swelling at a tremendous rate. At the same time, my body was shrinking. Smaller and smaller shrank my body. Bigger and bigger grew my astonishing organ, and it went on growing, by God, until it had enveloped my entire body and absorbed it within itself. It was now a gigantic perpendicular penis, seven feet tall and as handsome as they come. (437)

This absurd, terrifying end is to be seen in a two-dimensional way. First the female sex somehow gets its revenge on the male one and in addition it suggests that mankind is not meant to seriously experiment with these kinds of matters. I agree with Warren when he argues that no matter how strange or absurd the plot might be Dahl is a master in
suspending disbelief and in this particular genre that has to be of major concern.²³

3. Lonely Children

The third theme I will develop in this essay is the theme of lonely children. Note, not lonely as in alone without any friends or people to turn to, but lonely in regard to the outside world. This particular loneliness poses a threat to the child itself. The manner in which Dahl handles the child-theme differs quite prominently from the former themes I have examined, the macabre- and relationship-themes. It differs in its complete lack of humour. As I have previously mentioned, in stories like Dip in the Pool and Bitch Dahl’s tragicomic humour is an essential element. As will be seen, the theme of lonely children tends to emphasise elements like protection (of the child) and the youngster’s state of mind.

3.1 Protection

The first story in this category is Katina,\textsuperscript{24} which takes place during the time when the Royal Air Force (RAF) fought the Germans in Greece. This is one in a number of more or less documentary-style stories which Dahl wrote. They all concern his war-time experiences when he was enlisted in the RAF during World War II and are collected in his collection Over To You.

The story Katina describes both the tragedy of the war and the lack of meaning which the men sometimes feel. In this apparently meaningless and tragic war the soldiers find an abandoned child, Katina. Katina becomes a source of happiness for the soldiers. The soldiers take her to the camp where she is taken care of as if she was their own daughter. The soldiers feel like if it is up to them to protect her from the war. This feeling is mutual as is shown in the following passage where Katina counts the returning aircrafts:

To Fin, as he walked in, she said, ‘Tha girisis xana’.
Fin said, ‘What does it mean, Pericles?’
‘It just means ”you are back again”’, and he smiled
The child had counted the aircraft on her fingers as they took off, and now she noticed that there was one missing. We were standing around taking off our parachutes and she was trying to ask us about it, (263)

\textsuperscript{24} Roald Dahl, Over to You (Great Britain: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1946) All the subsequent references are to this edition and will be inserted into the text with parenthesis.
This story consists of two diametrically opposed forces. On the one hand the weak helpless little girl and on the other the great evil war which lacks mercy even for the innocent. The RAF:s hangars are naturally often under attack by German aircraft and at one time Katina is caught in the middle of such an attack:

Down came the Messerschmitts with their guns blazing, swooping so low that you could see the noses of the pilots sticking out under their goggles. Their bullets threw up spurts of dust all around and I saw one of our Hurricanes burst out into flames. I saw Katina standing right in the middle of the field, standing firmly with her legs astride and her back to us, looking up at the Germans as they dived past. I have never seen anything smaller and more angry and more fierce in all my life. She seemed to be shouting at them, but the noise was great and one could hear nothing at all except the engines and the guns of the aeroplanes. (263f)

The relationship between the soldiers and Katina is in many respects a father to daughter relationship. Given the war-time situation one easily feels as if Katina becomes a substitute for the soldiers’ own daughters at home. After the German attack the RAF has to move and build a new camp. At the new camp they prepare a tent for Katina and this is the one occasion when the father to daughter relation comes into focus: “We showed her the tent which we had prepared for her and we showed her the small cotton nightdress which Fin had obtained in some mysterious way the night before in Athens. It was white with a lot of little blue birds embroidered on the front and we all thought that it was very beautiful.” (266)

Towards the end of the story the RAF are once again caught on the ground by German aircraft. This is a massive attack and the RAF can do nothing but take cover in their trenches. One by one the grounded hurricanes are shot into flames by the germans. Suddenly, without anyone being able to stop her, Katina runs up from the trench shouting madly at the German aircrafts:

Now as she stood there, I remember seeing one of the Messerschmitts turning and coming in low straight towards her and I remember thinking that she was so small that she could not be hit. I remember seeing spurts of flame from his guns as he came, and I remember seeing the child, for a split second, standing quite still, facing the machine. I remember that the wind was blowing in her hair.
Then she was down. (278)
It is fair to say that *Katina* is Dahl’s most touching story. In the above passage one gets a feeling of great grief and deep lament. However, the strongest feeling remains the one of failure. The soldiers let themselves down by their failure to protect an innocent girl from the destruction of war.

The matter of protection also arises in the story *Genesis and Catastrophe* from Dahl’s collection *Kiss Kiss*. However, as will be shown, this story differs from the previous story *Katina* in the tone which Dahl uses. The tone in *Katina* is sad and touching whereas the tone in *Genesis and Catastrophe* is cruel and slightly ironic.

In the following passage Klara has delivered her fourth child; the previous three have all tragically died soon after their birth. Her military husband has on every occasion pointed out that the child was too weak to survive. These tragedies have affected Klara who naturally is afraid that her fourth child will suffer the same fate as her previous children:

> The doctor bent down and pulled the sheet up a little higher over the patient’s chest. ‘You have nothing to worry about,’ he said gently. ‘This is a perfectly normal baby.’
> ‘That’s exactly what they told me about the others. But I lost them all, Doctor. In the last eighteen months I have lost all of my children, so you mustn’t blame me for being anxious.’ (131)

Klara clearly expresses a protective instinct towards her child. Her husband Alois on the other hand has a more sceptical approach to his children. The following passage shows how Klara, with fright, recalls Alois reactions when he saw Otto a former child for the first time:

> He put his head right into Otto’s cradle as though he were examining a tiny insect and he said, ”All I am saying is why can’t they be better speciems? That’s all I am saying.” And three days after that, Otto was dead. We baptised him quickly on the third day and he died the same evening. And then Gustav died. And then Ida died. All of them died, Doctor. . . and suddenly the whole house was empty. (133)

The relationship between Klara and her husband is, if anything, based on fear rather than love. It is implied that Klara’s husband, Alois, might have something to do with the death of their children. Naturally Klara is very protective regarding her newborn child. This baby-girl has to be protected, not from the war, as was the case in *Katina*, but from her father. The story unfolds into an emotionally charged scene when Alois (the father) sees his child for the first
'But my God, Klara. . .'
'What is it, dear?'
This one is even smaller than Otto was!
The Doctor took a couple of quick paces forward. 'There is nothing wrong with that child,' he said.
Slowly, the husband straightened up and turned away from the bed and looked at the doctor. He seemed bewildered and stricken. 'It’s no good lying, Doctor,’ he said. ‘I know what it means. It’s going to be the same all over again.’ (135)

It is suggested by the title of the story that the genesis of the child will lead to a catastrophe. Ironically the boy will be called Adolf and their family name is Hitler. Moreover the name of the father is Alois. Obviously one can draw the conclusion that this child will actually survive. One can also see similarities between the father’s thoughts and facist ideas concerning the human race.

The third and last story concerning the protection of a young child is Royal Jelly also from Kiss Kiss. All his life Albert Taylor had been fascinated by bees and this fascination has became more and more obsessive. As a young boy he has started up a small business in order to indulge this fascination. He has lived a successful life with one exception; he and his wife have tried for nine years to have a child. They have recently succeeded but there is still one major problem.

The child will not eat properly, and has in fact lost weight ever since it was born. This is naturally very worrying for both the mother and the father. Mabel, the mother, is on the verge of a major emotional breakdown and therefore Albert finds it better to keep his own worries to himself. At one point Albert notices an article about Royal Jelly in one of his many bee-journals. He finds out that Royal Jelly is used to increase the growth-speed of the bee larva and that this substance has a tremendous nourishing power:

That was probably about right, he thought, although for some reason it never occured to him to consider larval growth in terms of weight before.

This is as if a seven-and-a-half-pound baby should increase in that time to five tons.
Albert Taylor stopped and read that sentence again. He read it a third time.

This is as if a seven-and-a-half-pound baby... (89)

The passion for his child and the eagerness to see his child growing makes Albert start an implausible experiment, all without his wife’s knowledge. He starts to mix small doses of Royal Jelly into the child’s milk. To his and his wife Marbel’s pleasure the infant starts to slowly recover. Albert’s experiment has to be seen as a harmless and panicky attempt to save his beloved baby. Given his background one can hardly blame him for not knowing what actual effects his Royal Jelly would have on the infant. Marbel is naturally pleased with the sudden growth of their child but cannot help wondering about this sudden turning point in the infants’ life. Albert who knew that these questions would come up decides to reveal his little secret. Mabel gets terrified and Albert tries to calm her down by referring to the medical articles he has been reading concerning the good effects that Royal Jelly can have:

A waiter in the Café Jena, also in Mexico City, reported that his father, after taking minute doses of this wonder substance in capsule form, sired a healthy boy child at the age of ninety. A bullfight promotor in Acapulco, finding himself landed with a rather lethargic-looking bull, injected it with one gramme of royal jelly (an excessive dose) just before it entered the arena. Thereupon, the beast became so swift and savage that it promptly dispatched two picadors, three horses and finally... (102)

Confident about the good effects that Royal Jelly will bring to the child, he keeps on feeding the infant with this substance in spite of his wife’s unwillingness. There is no doubt about the good intention behind his actions and as his actions have positive results, no one can blame him for using the substance. Nevertheless, no matter how good his intentions are the result is disastrous. The following passage describes what effect the substance ultimately has on the infant:

Curiously, though, the arms and the legs did not seem to have grown in proportion. Still short and skinny, they looked like little sticks protruding from a ball of fat.

‘Look!’ Albert said. She’s even beginning to get a bit of fuzz on the tummy to keep her warm!’ He put out a hand and was about to run the tips of his fingers over the powdering of silky yellowy-brown hairs that had suddenly appeared on the baby’s stomach. (107)
This macabre conclusion follows an event where Albert apparently gives his beloved a little too much of the wonder substance Royal Jelly. The end of the story resembles the conclusion of *Bitch* which is mentioned in my discussion of relationships. Both stories consist of a more or less medical experiment which eventually ends in a most unfortunate way. This element forms an important part in the following stories where children suffer or will come to suffer from some sort of mental insanity.

### 3.2 Insanity

One of Dahl’s most thrilling and most devastating stories is *The Wish* from *Someone Like You*. This is Dahl’s shortest published story, consisting only of a modest three pages. In this story Dahl succeeds in elucidating a fantasy of a young boy and the reader comes to understand the concept of madness, despite the fact that the fate of the young protagonist is unknown. Note, that one can see a similarity with the previous discussion about Dahl leaving implicit ideas for the reader, ideas which offers a mysterious flavour to the plot.

The child in the story *The Wish* is at this point exploring, as he calls it himself, the magnificent kitchen-carpet (probably of no bigger size than the common kitchen-carpet, except in the boy’s eyes). At this moment the boy creates his fantasy:

> You see, he told himself, I know how it is. The red parts of the carpet are red-hot lumps of coal. What I must do is this: I must walk all the way along in to the front door without touching them. If I touch the red I will be burnt. As a matter of fact I will be burnt up completely. And the black parts of the carpet... yes, the black parts are snakes, poisonous snakes, adders mostly, and cobras, thick as tree-trunks round the middle, and if I touch one of them, I’ll be bitten and I’ll die before tea time. And if I get across safely, without being burnt and without being bitten, I will be given a puppy for my birthday tomorrow. (542)

In the second part of the above quotation, (from: as a matter of fact...), there is a careful but still noticeable suggestion that there is something obsessive or insane about the boy’s thoughts. The boy mentions “I will burn up completely” and the word “completely” suggests a hidden thrill in the image of himself burning up. This sense of excitement appears once again later on in the same passage when he fantasizes about the snakes. Note the italicizing of the word *them*. It makes the reader stop, as probably Dahl wants to show that the boy stops thinking, even for just a moment. This momentary stop suggests once more how the
boy enjoys the thought of his assumed fate. All in all this seems to be a little more vivid than a normal child’s fantasy. With extreme caution the boy starts his heroic walk. Step by step he advances on his carpet of death. Suddenly he finds himself nearly surrounded by black (snakes):

The black was what made him nervous. He glanced quickly over his shoulder to see how far he had come. Nearly halfway. There could be no turning back now. He was in the middle and he couldn’t turn back and he couldn’t jump off sideways either because it was too far, and when he looked at all the red and all the black that lay ahead off him, he felt that old sudden sickening surge of panic in his chest - like last Easter time, that afternoon when he got lost all alone in the darkest part of Piper’s Wood. (543)

His obsessive nature is what makes him keep going. His game is tormenting him, he could call the whole thing off but yet he keeps on playing. The whole atmosphere of this story is of insanity. Small phrases like “the darkest parts of Piper’s Wood” makes one wonder what it is that will eventually come out of this game. The torment and the boy’s conviction that something is actually happening to him is reflected in the boy’s yelling: ‘I’m not touching you! You mustn’t bite me! You know I’m not touching you!’(544)

This part is really the most significant part of the story. It suggests that from this moment the boy does not control the game anymore. From now on the snakes are alive and they are likely to break the rules. Due to the snakes changed behavior, the boy finds the second part of the carpet much harder. He staggers on wobbly legs as he is about to finish his carpet of death:

He was going over to the right, quite slowly he was going over, then faster and faster, and at the last moment, instinctively he put out a hand to break the fall and the next thing he saw was this bare hand of his going right into the middle of a great glistering mass of black and he gave one piercing cry as it touched.

Outside in the sunshine, far away behind the house, the mother was looking for her son. (544)

Since this is the very last passage of the story the fate of the young boy is not revealed. However, Dahl leaves various hints about his fate. The piercing cry could be his cry of death and this feeling is intensified by the very last sentence where the mother is looking for her son. This suggests that she will not find him alive or even more likely, she will not find him at all.
In *Gorgy Porgy* from the collection *Kiss Kiss* we meet George. George who is the story’s narrator, is an adult but he starts his story by telling about the time of his youth. This period is for George, as for other people, the most important one of his life. This is the time that shapes certain characteristics which George and others carry throughout the rest of their lives. One such characteristic is the attitude that George has towards women:

I could go further than that and say that any sort of physical contact with them, even when the skin wasn’t bare, would disturb me considerably. If a woman stood close to me in a queue so that our bodies touched, or if she squeezed in beside me on a bus seat, hip to hip and tight to tight, my cheeks would begin burning like mad and little prickles of sweat would start coming out all over the crown of my head. (109)

For a teenager such an attitude towards women might be seen as being normal. However, at this particular stage George is an adult and still suffers from such an attitude. One could easily believe that due to his opinion of women he would be the kind of man who isolates himself from the female gender. However, this is not the case. George’s acquaintances seem to consist more of females than of men:

My flock, you understand contained an inordinate number of ladies. There were scores of them in the parish and the unfortunate thing about it was that at least sixty per cent of them were spinsters, completely untamed by the benevolent influence of holy matrimony.

I tell you I was jumpy as a squirrel. (110)

Since George is an only child he has been given a lot of attention, especially from his mother and therefore George has become heavily dependent on her during his childhood. She has a theory of learning by experience. She tells him stories about everything of value in life. In George’s eyes there is nothing that his mother does not know and eventually she will have given to her son her endless well of knowledge. In the passage below George and his mother are watching how their rabbit Josefine is giving birth to a baby rabbit. The following scene should be seen in the light of George’s close relationship to his mother. In this passage we find a way of unwinding the twisted questions that appear in the obscure ending. George’s mother comments as follows:

Now I want you to imagine, my pet, that the baby is *you* and Josefine is me...
'See how she’s fondling it and kissing it all over! There! She’s really kissing it now, isn’t she! Exactly like me and you!'  
I peer closer. It seems a queer way of kissing to me.  
'Look!' I scree. ‘She is eating it!’  
And surely enough, the head of the baby rabbit is now disappearing swiftly into the mother’s mouth.  
'Mummy! Quick!'  
But almost before the sound of my scream has died away, the whole of that tiny pink body has vanished down the mother’s throat. (114f)  

After this passage there follows an episode even more revolting which is also of great significance to the story. At this point, George turns around and sees his mother, who is trying to tell him something:  

... but all I see is the mouth, the huge red mouth opening wider and wider until it is just a great big round gaping hole with a black centre, and I scream again, and this time I can’t stop. Then suddenly out comes her hands, and I can feel her skin touching mine, the long cold fingers closing tightly over my fists, and I jump back and jerk myself free and rush blindly into the night. (115)  

This particular event ends up with the death of George’s mother. When chasing her son madly in the dark she gets hit by a car and dies. Even if this happened to a child whose parents were of equal importance this particular event would turn things upside down. In this case the death of George’s mother is even more traumatic. He really does not seem to have any close relationship at all to his father. Nevertheless, even if the tragedy of losing ones’ mother appears harsh and cruel, the real significance of this event is perhaps less obvious. Firstly, it is important to note and pay special attention to the mother rabbit and the description of how George’s mother seems to be trying to eat her own child, (George), alive exactly the way the mother rabbit did with hers’. Secondly it is important to remember George’s thoughts of his mother as being an endless well of knowledge. In this light one can easily imagine the boy interpreting his mother just a little too literally (when she wants him to see her as the rabbit-mother and himself as the baby-rabbit). So far there is really nothing abnormal about George.  

However, the story makes a slow but obvious turn after the death of George’s mother.
George’s character becomes more withdrawn. One has the feeling that he sees life as if it consists of him against all living females. There are no males in George’s story except for his father, who is only mentioned in a brief manner. George seems to be somehow obsessed with women. His personality slowly develops towards insanity. As I have pointed out the key-event in the story is the one when George’s mother dies. This happens when George is a child and it will influence his behaviour all through the story. This childhood experience is the real reason for the insanity which will later blossom in George’s life.

George is, as a grown-up, quite isolated. Not physically but mentally. When he becomes a priest he meets a lot of people but he always keeps his distance. The following quotation shows his attitude towards the female gender:

I would see them eyeing me covertly across the room at a whist drive, whispering to one another, nodding, running their tongues over their lips, sucking at their cigarettes, plotting the best approach, but always whispering, and sometimes I overheard snatches of their talk - ‘What a shy person... he’s just a trifle nervous, isn’t he... he’s much too tense... he needs companionship... he wants to loosening up... we must learn him to relax.’ (116)

According to George these women in his flock become more and more impertinent. However, from the spectator’s point of view the incidents which have happened can only be considered as most trivial occurrences. The impertinent element which George experiences clearly lies in his interpretation. The same moment that one realizes this one starts to question George as a narrator. He does not appear to be as trustworthy as he did before: ”All I can tell you is that when that arm of hers came sliding in under mine, it felt exactly as though a cobra was cooling itself around my wrist. I leaped away, pulled open the front door and fled down the drive without looking back.” (117)

The animalistic metaphor which emerges so often in Dahl’s descriptions of sexual relations appears once more. The incidents caused mainly by middle-aged spinsters become more and more impudent and the reader easily feels empathy for George as the story progresses. He starts to get short messages on the bills from morning service and gets exposed to more insolent approaches. As he ponders upon what to do about his growing female problem he undertakes an experiment with rats. Separating a group of female rats from a group of male ones with an lethal wire-fence he wants to judge whether it is the male or female gender who has the most self-control. It turns out that the female side makes the most fatal mistakes and this comes as a relief to George:
In one stroke I had laid open the incredibly lascivious, stop-at-nothing nature of the female. My own sex was vindicated; my own conscience was cleared. In a trice, all those awkward little flashes of guilt from which I continually been suffering flew out of the window. I felt suddenly very strong and serene in the knowledge of my own innocence. (121)

Being a minister clearly evokes a feeling of guilt. George’s desire to get his innocence confirmed is therefore immense. Having solved his guilt he still struggles with the lascivious spinsters in his parish. Although they appear lascivious to him, he seems to be the one who has got the real problem. He appears to be obsessed with women:

What I must actually do now, I told myself, was to weave around me a sort of invisible electric fence constructed entirely out of my own personal moral fibre. Behind this I would sit in perfect safety while the enemy, one after another, flung themselves against the wire. (121)

The previous event involves a complete change in George’s personality. He becomes very self confident. In a way he guards his emotions with this fence-image. He does not share his emotions with the world outside. The feeling of insanity now becomes more intense. The final part of the story elucidates this development in two ways. Through the actual events that happen the story becomes less structured. It is important to remember that the story is told by George himself and therefore the structure is highly relevant. The feeling of George’s madness is confirmed at the very end where he believes he has been swallowed by a lady from his parish. Swallowed, in the same way the baby-rabbit was, and just the same way that he for a moment believed his mother would swallow him. At this very moment it is symptomatic that he shouts; ‘Don’t, Mummy, don’t’. (126) This is where George completely loses his trustworthiness. From his story one gets hints that what he believes happens and what actually happen are two different matters. Clearly, he does not actually get swallowed even if that is what he believes. The truth is that he ends up in some kind of mental ward even though he describes it as if he lived inside a human being: “It is a small chamber situated in what is almost certainly the primary section of the duodenal loop, just before it begins to run vertically downward in front of the right kidney.” (128)

When George subsequently describes the interior of his new living-area it is quite obvious that he is in some kind of a mental ward. This is evident from the description of the walls:
Personally I prefer oak furniture and parquet flooring. But there is anyway one thing here that pleases me greatly, and that is the walls. They are lovely and soft, like a sort of padding, and the advantage of this is that I can bounce up against them as much as I wish without hurting myself. (128)

The definite confirmation that George is in some kind of mental ward comes when he tells us about the other people who also have been swallowed by this human being:

There are several other people about, which is rather surprising, but thank God they are every one of them males. For some reason or other, they all wear white coats, and they bustle around pretending to be very busy and important. (128f)

The two former stories, that I have discussed *The Wish* and *Georgy Porgy*, both concern the element of insanity and the similarities are obvious. Dahl successfully provides the reader with hints that something is happening that is beyond the limit of what is normal. These hints eventually become more and more evident and Dahl tends to increase the element of insanity towards the end. This is not only true for these stories but is a visible pattern in most of Dahl’s fiction. His stories often begin as a slow painting process; this process eventually intensifies and explodes in the most unpredictable fashion.

**Conclusion**
Dahl’s fiction for adults has by no means attracted as much attention as his children’s fiction. With this essay I hope to have enlightened those who have not already explored Dahl’s adult fiction about the true contribution of art that he leaves behind with his stories for adults. By studying Dahl’s macabre stories it is impossible not to notice the humorous ingredients within the plot. I have shown the manner in which Dahl balances the macabre element with a sense of humour. This accomplished without compromising either the humorous aspect or the one of horror. In the macabre plot the leading character often uses bodily sacrifice in order to gain money. The process frequently emerges from a betting scene or a similar situation. In many respects the chief character is depicted in a somewhat ridiculous manner, thereby the macabre fate that often follows can be seen in it’s sardonic intention. As for the actual presentation of the macabre element there are two different techniques that are perceptible. Firstly the implicit method which is the one most adopted by Dahl, the implicit method has its counterpart in the explicit one, used more infrequently and always combined with an ironic touch.

Furthermore, I have focused on the relationship theme that often appears in the stories of Dahl. A pattern that reveals itself is the one of vengeance. The venegful atmosphere permeates the plot and the antagonism between the two sexes is repeatedly present. The act of revenge is what leads to the harsh, revolting twist at the end of these stories. Whenever there is an allusion to sex, Dahl depicts the male character as a more or less obsessive one, regarding his sexual drive. The animalistic metaphor, which Dahl frequently applies, is a prime example of the repellant attitude that Dahl uses in his depiction of sex. The male “animal” takes an invasive approach towards the opposite sex and in some cases, as I have shown, this act leads actually to death.

In a number of stories Dahl describes the fate of young children. The plot involves either death or insanity and in *Genesis and Catastrophe* the child is the primary cause of many peoples death. The element of humour which so easily can be detected in Dahl’s other fictional works is not present in these particular stories. Here Dahl emphasizes sadness and remorse, particularly the latter as adults feel that they have not been doing enough for the child. The child is in obvious need of protection but the external threats will eventually prove to be too strong.

There are two stories in which Dahl provides his young protagonists with certain characteristics of insanity. The first that I have mentioned is *The Wish* in which the whole atmosphere is reminiscent of insanity. This story produces, at the end, a feeling of loneliness,
mourning and great loss. In *Gorgy Porgy* insanity is depicted in a more straightforward style. Here the odd quality develops solely inside the protagonist himself and not as a combination between person and plot. The one constant which permeates most of Dahl’s fiction for adults is that of perverse deaths. The plot meanders towards an outcome which certainly will prove to be unpredictable and it is frequently flavored with a touch of the most sophisticated black humour.
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