Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life: The Country Stories of Roald Dahl Short Guide

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life: The Country Stories of Roald Dahl by Roald Dahl

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Contents

Characters

Although some readers might consider Dahl's characters stereotypical, such universal personalities as exhibited by Claud, Rummins, and Bert appear hilarious in their specific individual meanderings.

Claud's thinking skills are revealed as less than perfect through his involvement in a sequence of get-rich-quick schemes.

Unable to recognize the difference between faulty and accurate information, Claud is easily led astray. As he and the rest of the Rummins family begin to believe Boggis in "Parson's Pleasure," Claud becomes increasingly fascinated with the valuable tidbits of information the parson offers. As the narrator tells us, "Any information of this nature was valuable, in his opinion. One never knew when it might come in handy." Although Claud is not Dahl's main focus in this story, he is pivotal in highlighting the distinctions between the other characters and in providing the necessary irony. At the first hint of the story's greatest irony— when Claud convincingly suggests that Rummins quickly chop off the legs of the furniture before he loses a quick buck—the narrator describes how "Claud's flat bovine face glimmered with a mawkish pride."

The depth of his pride, however, is not as great as that of Boggis, who will soon regret it.

In courting Clarice Hoddy, Claud must prove not only his love and ability to support her, but also hold a job that meets her her father's standard of respectability. In "Mr. Hoddy," Claud appears unable to get ahead through get-rich schemes undertaken because of his desires not to undertake a boring job. As Hoddy begins questioning his potential son-in-law, Claud becomes increasingly excited and unfolds a ridiculous scheme because he has promised Clarice not to mention the truth: that he plans to win a sufficient amount of money by racing dogs. The pressures that Hoddy puts on Claud because of Hoddy's respectable class force Claud to realize that: This man and all those like him were his enemies. It was the Mr. Hoddys were the trouble. They were all the same. He knew them all, with their clean ugly hands, their grey skin, their acrid mouths, their tendency to develop little round bulging bellies just below the waist-coat; and always the unctious curl of the nose, the weak chin, the suspicious eyes that were dark and moved too quick. The Mr. Hoddys.

Although his thoughts appear to focus on the physical description of Hoddy, Hoddy's daughter shares many of the same traits, which Claud can overlook in her.

Hoddy's middle-class need for respectability is what Claud truly resists. The young man's nervousness forces him to imagine and share uncomely details about starting up a maggot factory that ironically distances him even more from his goal of getting Hoddy to accept Claud as a suitor for Clarice.

While "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life" first introduces us to Rummins, it is the story bearing his name that most clearly explores his character. The slow unraveling of the horrifying

truth of the town drunk's disappearance some time ago is fully uncovered in "Rummins" when the men tear down the hayrick as a means of pest control.

Ironically, all the initial participants, who overlooked the initial disappearance, will discover the horrible truth of why the rats are gathering in the hayrick.

One can hardly consider Rummins without remembering the grown son who always appears by his side. Repeatedly Bert's eyes are described as vacuous, not only because one eye is sightless. Because of his son's limited intelligence, Rummins' directives might be overlooked, but his fatherly demands cross the line into the grotesque when we discover that he encourages son Bert to continue shoveling through the wheat, knowing full well that the corpse of the town drunk is beneath it. Bert's willingness to listen to his father and his repulsed response, compared to Rummins' quick getaway, becomes macabre in the suggestion that the father will use the son to do things that he cannot bear to do himself.

Social Concerns

The title story of this collection, "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life," presents not only a physical glimpse at the characters who repeatedly appear in Dahl's stories about England's Buckinghamshire countryside but a view of their thought processes as well. Humorous interpretations of such common events as mating, pest control, and nightly recreational activities appear throughout the stories. Because the narrator himself is new to the art of dairy farming, he offers a believable voice to relate his recent encounters with the reality of life on the farm. On this particular morning, he visits the local dairy farm to arrange for the impregnation of his one and only cow.

The narrator's trusted friend Claud Cummins accompanies him and forewarns him of the secretly successful practices that the dairy farmer Rummins undertakes to assure that he produces heifers, not bulls—a definite advantage on a dairy farm.

That Rummins seems to have uncovered a new law of physics, with his correlation between the sun and the reproduction of all mammals, including humans, does not phase interested onlookers; Rurnmins' proclamation that "facts is facts" and the undeniable calving records are sufficient enough.

His grown son Bert, a man with limited intelligence, will accept anything presented by Rummins as truth. Claud, always looking for a good story or get-rich quick scheme, cannot resist believing in the possibility that Rummins is on to something. The initial incredulity of the narrator, who acquires the excitement of his friend Claud as the facts are made clear to him, leads the reader to the final laugh.

Limited to the narrator's point of view and what dialogue he chooses to relate, the reader is left to gather the facts and interpret the mysteries of Buckinghamshire life.

Dahl's stories provide more telling facts about country life than do the careful calving records Rummins maintains. Clearly there is a correlation between humor and the mysteries of life in Dahl's depictions.

The true mystery is how people convince themselves to believe what they do.

The way of life in rural England provides ample opportunity for Dahl to break down moral distinctions between the upper and lower classes of England, a technique particularly apparent in "Parson's Pleasure." Masquerading as a clergyman, the antique dealer Mr. Boggis develops an elaborate method of entering the run-down homes of poor country folk who have seen better days. Once gaining admittance to a home, he perfects ways of examining old furniture without expressing true interest in it, thus extracting the minimum price from the owners. Boggis's ability to overcome the innate suspicion of these country folks and garner a bargain he can resell for a handsome profit is his greatest pride.

Entering the Rummins' farmhouse, the "nice old parson" meets his match when he sights an extremely rare Chippendale commode. Although it is covered in layers of paint and is currently being used to store rabbit snares, Boggis slowly works toward acquiring the prized antique as cheaply as possible. Using his expertise, the parson knowingly misleads the Rummins' to believe their furniture is of little value. Full of irony, Dahl allows Boggis to make such exclamations as "my dear friends, you've no idea the trouble these rascals will go to to imitate the hard beautiful bronze-like appearance of genuine patina." But even with such intricate layers of deception, Boggis himself will lose out in the end.

From the opposite end of greed, Rummins desires to profit from the sale of a worthless piece of junk to a foolish man. To assure the sale will occur, Rummins and his sons chop off the legs of the Chippendale to allow an easy fit in the car and prepare the rest for firewood. Although we might judge as stupidity the action of these country bumpkins in chopping up the precious wood, Dahl explores how those who desire such material trappings are just as strapped by the confines of their knowledge. As Claud reminds his father when the two hastily decide to chop the furniture into firewood to be ready when the parson arrives with the car, "A parson's just as cunning as the rest of 'em when it comes to money, don't you make any mistake about that." Little does Claud realize how accurately his statement reflects the truth.

Such irony and sharp satire appear in the remaining stories, and no social class is spared. Even such a seemingly forthright moral role model as the clergyman's wife in "The Champion of the World" finds herself in a predicament because of her part in delivering a brace of pilfered pheasants that Claud wishes to share. Individuals who have moved between classes are also not spared by Dahl. Victor Hazel, the owner of the estate from which the pheasants are pilfered in "Champion of the World," is a self-made man, a status others strive to gain as well. Nonetheless, Hazel is "with no charm at all and precious few virtues. He loathed all persons of humble station, having once been one of them himself, and he strove desperately to mingle with what he believed were the right kind of folk." Dahl uncovers the foibles of each and every human, regardless of class.

The satire present in "Mr. Feasey" showcases the many abuses to animals that men will inflict in order to make money betting at the track. Claud, who has frequented the track since a child, knows all the tricks and we learn of them as he informs his buddy Gordon, the narrator.

Techniques

Although all but the title story of this collection was published previously, Dahl's 1989 preface offers some telling notes about the impetus behind his stories. When read alone, the stories are quite satirical. The satire is tempered, however, by the tone of the preface, which actually adds ambiguity to the author's intentions. Because the author states an affinity and friendship with these laughable characters, particularly Claud, we are encouraged to laugh at them rather than despise them.

By using two basic narrative techniques Dahl provides a consistent thread of believability between his stories. Although a number of the stories were originally separately published in magazines, his preface Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life: The Country Stones of Roald Dahl ties them together. In the late 1940s Dahl spent time living in Buckinghamshire and became friendly with a number of its inhabitants, who enjoyed various types of gambling and petty theft they considered sporting.

Named only occasionally, the first-person narrator of most of the stories seems to be Claud's friend, Gordon Hawes, who owns the filling station. At other times this firstperson narrative melds with an omniscient narrator who reveals telling information about the characters' thoughts and feelings.

Even with such effective narrative devices, the real strength of the stories appears in the believable dialogue among characters as they find themselves in various unexpected situations. One example: When Claud, Rummins, and Bert discuss the best way to prepare the Chippendale for Pastor Boggis.

The stories in this collection offer a gentler satirical tone than Dahl employs in such volumes as Kiss Kiss and Switch Bitch, stories that acridly explore such topics as malefemale relationships. Oftentimes Dahl employs irony to intensify the satirical tone of his stories and "Parson's Pleasure" remains one of the best examples of such irony. As Boggis intricately lays the groundwork to dupe Claud, we laugh at his ironical comments regarding those who would pass off faux furniture as genuine. The climax of irony, when Claud and Bert prepare the Chippendale for transport by unbelievably chopping it into firewood, is perfectly balanced by Claud's final statement; "'I'll tell you one thing,' he said, straightening up, wiping his brow. That was a bloody good carpenter put this job together and I don't care what the parson says.'" Repeatedly in Dahl's works, through such ironic twists covetous desires and deceitful undertakings will be thwarted.

Most of these stories also contain elements of the grotesque, particularly in the story "Ratcatcher." Although combating rat infestation is certainly not an uncommon aspect of farm life, few farmers will encounter the character showcased in this story. The first paragraph indicates the ratcatcher's unusual gait, as "he came sidling up the driveway with a stealthy, softtreading gait, making no noise at all with his feet on the gravel." The ratcatcher's reactions to the conversation always appear to be instinctual and physical, similar in fact to an animal aligning itself with the prey that it seeks. What Dahl explores here is the simultaneous human response to grotesqueries—curiosity and revulsion.

The narrator relates to us how he unwillingly bets with the ratcatcher, who has bullied him into it. As the ratcatcher undertakes winning the bet, the narrator describes how: The tension was considerable and I wanted suddenly to cry out and tell him to stop. I wanted him to stop because it was making me feel sick inside, but I couldn't bring myself to say the word. Something extremely unpleasant was about to happen—I was sure of that. Something sinister and cruel and ratlike, and perhaps it really would make me sick. But I had to see it now.

Dahl's greatest success appears in the description and actions of the ratcatcher himself. The horror of the rats, however, does not reach its height until a later story, when the reason for the rats swarming around the hayrick becomes apparent.

The original illustrations by John Lawrence enhance the text in much the same way as Quentin Blake's do for many of Dahl's publications. For example, the seemingly pastoral scenes accompanying "Rummins" belie the awful truth of what occurred on that spring day months before the narration. Ironically, the only hint of potential danger is the one with Claud, ready to shoot any rats, holding the rifle.

Instead, the surprise will come from another source. The illustration of Claud about to chop up the Chippendale is the only one that strongly hints at irony. In addition, the illustration of the rat-catcher supports the story but does not outdo the grotesque physical description and actions that Dahl provides.

Themes

Gambling and risk-taking appear repeatedly in Dahl's work, most centrally in "Mr. Feasey." Once again, Claud has cooked up a scheme to run dogs and win that would make his father proud. Having discovered ringers—two dogs that appear to be identical—Claud first races the slower dog which comes in last place, then waits for the perfect opportunity to bring in the ringer that will not only win the race but upset the betting odds. The narrator is the one who will work with Claud to bet and collect the money for a profitable turn.

Although one might consider this the classic storyline of the trickster getting tricked, one does not simply laugh at Claud's ruse and admire the cunning of Feasey. As hard as the individual tries to beat the system—in this case, Claud's attempt to outwit the odds of winning at the makeshift dog track—the ones in control will make certain they profit. Because Feasey's reputation to spot a ringer is threatened, Claud and the narrator's scheme is derailed by Feasey's bookies, who know that part of the crowd's enthusiasm, which they rely on for their profits, is Feasey's ability to identify the ringers.

Dahl once referred to "Mr. Feasey" and other stories originally published in the collection Someone Like You ("The Ratcatcher," "Rummins," and "Mr. Hoddy") as "Claud's Dog" stories. The central focus, however, more often rests on Claud's thinking habits and his humorous misadventures. "Mr. Hoddy," for example is not so much about Hoddy as the town butcher as it is about his being Clarice Hoddy's father and Claud's less-than-satisfactory interactions with Hoddy as he seeks Clarice's hand in marriage.

Claud and the narrator finally succeed in a risky undertaking in "Champion of the World," at least until the results are hilariously made public. Knowing the totality of Claud's misadventures, as we do by reading them together in this collection, adds humor to the story of how even this triumph goes awry. Claud spends his days preparing for nights spent stealing pheasants from the grounds of a local businessman who raises them for annual hunts. A favorite unofficial sport of the locals is to steal these pheasants under the noses of the groundsmen paid to protect the birds. Although they will not let the game go to waste, the most satisfying results are when the upper-class hunt yields little game. Not only does Claud proudly reveal his buttocks scarred from past skirmishes, but he excitedly predicts that Gordon's suggested plan will set a new standard for successful pilfering.

The excitement and fear of the nighttime attempt to experiment with the new plan is sprinkled with the narrative humor of Gordon, who is undergoing the experience for the first time. The humor escalates the next morning, when the plan falls apart as the pheasants revive from their midnight snack.

Most often prompted by material gain, Dahl's characters never receive what they expect. Other times, their desire for high adventure, perhaps a result of this seemingly boring farm life, leads his characters to great risk-taking, such as when Claud introduces a buddy to the tricks of his illegal trade.

Key Questions

Compiling an author's short fiction together in a book format oftentimes emphasizes or uncovers particular recurring themes or characterizations. Dahl's preface to a recent edition of this book provides some illumination as to the impetus behind these satirical works as well as his intent.

1. How successfully do the same characters, such as Claud and Rummins, reappear in these various country stories?

2. Is it necessary to have experienced farm life to fully understand these stories?

Or are they universal?

3. How does the novel Danny, the Champion of the World differ from the earlier short story "The Champion of the World"?

4. In the early 1950s, the New Yorker turned down a number of short stories about Buckinghamshire that appear in this volume, including "The Ratcatcher," "Rummins," and "Mr. Hoddy." What did the Knopf publishers see that the New Yorker editors overlooked?

5. Many critics claim that Dahl's later work for adults is of lesser quality. Should all of the author's work be published because of his reputation and other successful stories or only the ones deemed worthy of publication?

6. How does Dahl's preface enhance the reader's understanding of these stories?

7. Is the title of the collection fitting? In what ways?

8. Is satire an acceptable form for children to read? In other words, should libraries allow children to check out books that include stories that maintain a voice that is not politically correct, even when the author provides strong indicators that his intent is satire?

Literary Precedents

Unlike the common sentimental pastoral stories of farm life, such as James Herriot's depiction of the Yorkshire countryside and its inhabitants, Dahl depicts the secrets and deceits that lurk behind every country face he portrays. A number of passages appear similar to the introduction to "Rummins": The sun was up over the hills now and the mist had cleared and it was wonderful to be striding along the road with the dog in the early morning, especially when it was autumn, with the leaves changing to gold and yellow and sometimes one of them breaking away and falling slowly, turning slowly over in the air, dropping noiselessly right in front of him on the grass beside the road.

Not only does this introduction provide a seemingly pastoral setting, but it also subtly indicates that Claud restlessly desires high adventure, when the wind rustles the leaves that murmurs "like a crowd of people." The readers soon learn that Claud hankers for the day when the crowd will be amazed by his dog's placing first and his garnering unusually high odds.

Related Titles

Like the character Boggis, Dahl maintained interests in collecting and repeatedly used his knowledge to craft his stories.

Other art collectors appear in "Nunc Dimittis" and "Neck." An unusual collector of butterflies is pivotal in "My Lady Love, My Dove" and a nouveau-riche collector appears in "Taste."

Risk-takers and gamblers also reappear in Dahl's oeuvre. "Taste" is based on a gamble between an up-and-coming young man and a stockbroker, who wages his daughter's hand. Other characters are willing to risk their lives or body parts, such as "Dip in the Pool" and "Man from the South."

Such deceits for personal gain are satirized by Dahl and infrequently appear without a touch of irony.

After writing very little during the 1960s and early 1970s Dahl hoped to return to writing adult fiction. He recycled much of his earlier work from the short story "The Champion of the World," including creating the children's novel Danny, the Champion of the World.

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