Collected Stories Study Guide

Collected Stories by Roald Dahl

BOOKRAGS

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Chapter 1 - An African Story: An old European man who operates a small farm in Africa becomes enraged when his simple-minded servant beats his dog, breaking his back. The old man is then forced to kill his dog with a crowbar. He notices a huge Black Mamba snake that comes out of the grass to suck milk from his cow's udder in the early morning hours. He orders the servant to stand watch by the cow. Next morning, the Mamba slides out of the grass, sees the servant, and strikes him, causing a hideous, painful death.

Chapter 2 - Only This: During World War II, a woman lies half-asleep in her bed in the early morning. She goes to the window and opens it to the chill winter air. A distant rumble becomes a deafening roar as bombers darken the sky on an attack mission. She utters a prayer for her son who pilots one of the war machines, then sits down in her chair. Her fear takes her into the cockpit when the plane is hit by flak and spins toward earth. All is flames as the bomber spirals out of control. A while later the roar of the bombers comes from the opposite direction, as the men return. But the woman is already dead when they pass overhead.

Chapter 3 - Katina: RAF pilots discover a nine-year-old Greek girl sitting on a rock after a German air raid on her hometown of Paramythia. She is wounded, and the fliers pick her up and carry her to the field medic. When the Germans attack the British airfield, Katina stands in the middle of the runway, shaking her fists. Once again, the airmen rescue her before she is hurt. The squadron moves to another small airfield to mount an attack, but before they can get into the air, the Germans attack them on the ground. Katina runs out again to scream and shake her fists at the Germans and is hit and killed.

Chapter 4 - Beware of the Dog: A British Spitfire pilot is hit by enemy fire over the English Channel and realizes that his right leg has been torn from his body. Losing consciousness, he manages to open the cockpit, roll the plane over and parachute out on the English coast. Still in shock, he remembers that he was told to give only his name, rank and number if captured. When an RAF official comes to his bedside to interview him, the pilot will give only that information and nothing more.

Chapter 5 - They Shall Not Grow Old: A popular pilot named Fin is scrambled in his Hurricane to fly up the coast and see where two French destroyers are headed, then head immediately back. Two days later, Fin lands and greets his mates as if nothing is amiss. They demand to know where he's been, but he replies that he's only been gone a few hours. He tells about flying in thick cloud and seeing a line of airplanes flown by all the pilots killed in the war. They all turn and land in a green clearing, but his plane climbs as if under the control of some invisible force. He notices the French ships still in

harbor as his plane turns for home. Fin is then shot down and killed in a dogfight with German Junkers.

Chapter 6 - Someone Like You: Two fighter pilots and old friends run into each other in a pub They switch from beer to whiskey and down several shots before they can begin speaking. The two pilots recollect their episodes of "jinking," or attacking areas slightly out of the target probably out of boredom, and killing innocent civilians. They both complain about the whiskey, then take a taxi to another pub to try its whiskey. There is nothing for them to remember or discuss except killing.

Chapter 7 - Death of an Old Old Man: Charlie is a seasoned RAF pilot who is told that he is next in line to go up into combat with the Germans. He feels fear in the pit of his stomach when he realizes he is being pursued by a German Focke Wulf . The two pilots aim their planes directly at each other; the wingtips hit and the Spitfire loses one of its wings. Charlie bails out and as he floats down he realizes that the German pilot also is parachuting almost to the same spot—a lake in the middle of a green pasture. They land at almost the same time, and soon the German is strangling Charlie and holding his head underwater. As Charlie drowns, he feels very relaxed and wishes the same for his enemy.

Chapter 8 - Madame Rosette: Three British RAF pilots—Stag, William and Stuffy— take a 48-hour break from fighting Italians in Libya. They decide to go to Cairo and look for women. Stag tells his chums to contact Madame Rosette, the predatory head of a whore house. He informs them that Madame Rosette keeps ninety percent of the girls' fees while abusing them. The three gather in her office and call her "a filthy old Syrian Jewess" and "a lousy old bitch." The fliers quickly lock her inside her office and tell the fourteen prostitutes to follow them. The fliers invite the girls to a pub where everyone gets slightly drunk.

Chapter 9 - A Piece of Cake: A British aviator goes up in his ancient Gladiator. The ground crews that refuel his aircraft warn him to be careful, but he waves them off saying, "It's a piece of cake." Not long after the pilot is airborne, machine gun fire strikes the Gladiator's wood and canvas wings and both fuel tanks start to blaze. The pilot slowly figures out how to get out of the burning plane just before it hits the ground, and parachutes into the desert sand. Scorched and burned, he touches his face and realizes his nose is missing.

Chapter 10 - Yesterday was Beautiful: Shot down over a Greek island, an RAF pilot hikes to the nearest town to search for a boat to take him to the mainland. The islanders he encounters are old and resigned to their fate after their village is almost wiped off the map by Luftwaffe aircraft. "I do not understand why the Germans come to us, Inglese," an old man tells the pilot. The aviator continues into the village and finds the wife of a boat owner whose home has been destroyed and her daughter killed by the bombing. She admonishes him to "kill them all. Go and kill every man and every woman and baby. Do you hear me, Inglesus? You must kill them all."

Chapters 1-10 Analysis

In these stories, Dahl describes the ever-present threat of death in wartime and transmutes it into a dark, malevolent inevitability. Whether those confronted with violent death face it heroically or filled with fear, death always has the upper hand. This is epitomized nowhere better than in "Katina," about a young Greek girl who defiantly stands on an airfield shaking her fists at marauding German planes. Her brazen actions are inspiring to British pilots and very life-affirming, but ultimately she is shot and killed in an air raid. The author uses this story to communicate a sense of absurdity about life that is highlighted in time of war. Noble ideals and human dignity clash with hellish destruction and ultimately are destroyed. Pilots faced with the inevitability of death hallucinate as their planes go down in flames; death for some becomes a deranged but desirable relief; "normal" perceptions and values are deformed beyond recognition.

This view of reality as only a thin veneer to hide the hideous, the bizarre, the darkness of the human heart, sets the stage for Dahl's later stories that are as strange and unexpected as life itself. He is a master of conveying a sense of dread even in the midst of peace and sunshine—the awareness that death and destruction can cause unimaginable loss and suffering at any moment. His descriptive powers and ability to catalogue details in encyclopedic accuracy give his stories an immediacy and freshness that keep the reader turning pages out of sheer curiosity. A good example of this power is evident in "Madame Rosette", in which a bunch of brash young soldiers "liberate" prostitutes from the clutches of an evil, oppressive madame, much the same as they liberate most of Europe from the evil of fascism. Once the young women experience freedom, the reader senses that they will never allow themselves to become enslaved again.

Chapters 11-20

Chapters 11-20 Summary

Chapter 11 - Nunc Dimitis: Lionel Lampson learns that the woman he has has been dating—Janet de Pelagia—is spreading word among his circle of friends that she thinks him a crashing bore. Lionel contacts a portrait painter famous for his pictures of society women painted in layers, from their underwear to the final portrait fully clothed. He agrees to paint Janet. Using a solvent, Lionel carefully removes the outer layer of paint, leaving Janet posed in her underwear. He invites his friends for dinner, and sets up the portrait at one end of the table. The room is quite dark, lit only by a few candles. During desert, the lights come on as Lionel slips away in his chauffeured car. He returns and opens a note from Janet forgiving him and telling him she loves him forever. At this point Lionel, feels positively ill.

Chapter 12 - Skin: An old man named Drioli pauses in front of an art gallery window in Paris to notice a painting by his old friend Chaim Soutine, who paints an image of Drioli's wife on his back, then tattooes it into Drioli's skin. Drioli enters the gallery but is quickly told to leave. Drioli protests that he has the best Soutine picture of all on his back, then rips off his shirt to expose the now-sagging tattoo of his wife. The gallery owner gasps, then tells him he wants to buy the picture and offers him $250,000 francs if he'll allow a surgeon to remove the skin with the picture from his back . He agrees. Shortly afterward, the Soutine painting turns up for sale in Argentina.

Chapter 13 - Man from the South: An American soldier on leave in Jamaica goes to a local resort. He takes a break and sits under a parasol near a small, dapper man dressed in a suit. When the sailor lights a cigarette, the old man asks if he wants to bet that the lighter will ignite ten times. The sailor agrees, and asks whether an American dollar or two would be a good bet. The old man points to a shiny new Cadillac then asks the sailor if he will bet his little finger against the car. The sailor agrees and the old man lashes the sailor's left hand down with the little finger extended. Just then the old man's wife enters and realizes what's going on. She pushes her husband down on the bed with a volley of loud curses. She apologizes and as she frees the American's hand; he notices her right hand has only a thumb and one finger.

Chapter 14 - The Soldier: A man named Robert with an apparent case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or "battle fatigue," becomes disoriented to night and day, time and place. His conversations with his wife Edna illustrate that she has given up trying to communicate with him, and she deeply resents his progressive deterioration. After a walk with the dog, he hallucinates the sound of warplane overhead and grabs a knife on his way to the bedroom, ready to fight the enemy. He awakens his sleeping wife, and she takes the knife out of his hand by some quick trickery. She runs to summon the police.

Chapter 15 - The Sound Machine: Klausner secretly builds an unusual machine that can record the sounds of pain given off by plants whenever a flower is clipped or a tree limb sawed off. The machine has the capability to tune into ultra-high frequency sound waves well beyond the range of human hearing. His friend, a physician named Scott, drops by Klausner's workshop and sees the piles of tangled wires and radio parts scattered everywhere, and a large heavy box that contains the sound machine. Klausner later calls Dr. Scott and tells him to come over at once. They haul the heavy box to a nearby park; a large limb from the tree falls sixty feet to the ground. As the two men scatter, the limb crashes into the box and destroys it. The two men head home, leaving the wreckage of the machine on the ground.

Chapter 16 - Mr. Botibol: Mr. Botibol sells a business inherited from his father, for $100,000. Botibol returns home, turns on the radio and, swept away by a concert, stands up in the dark and "conducts" the orchestra, arms flailing. He meets an awkward young woman at the music store who also professes a love of Chopin; he invites her to come to his home and listen to his newly-purchased collection of Chopin. After the meal, they proceed into the mini-concert hall where he tells her of his thrill in imagining himself both composer and conductor of great works. Botibol asks her to return the next day for another session. She says she can't because she teaches piano lessons at the arts academy.

Chapter 17 - Vengeance is Mine, Inc.: A couple offers their services to wealthy people who've been attacked by the newspaper columnist, Lionel Pantaloon, and who would like revenge. They print up business cards and stationery under the name "Vengeance Is Mine, Inc." and offer a range of services, from punching the columnist in the nose, to putting a rattlesnake in his car. Their first commission to punch Pantaloon comes off without a hitch, and they are soon counting the thousands of dollars coming and and are likely to come. They decide to go on a vacation to Florida. As they relax in the Pullman car, they realize their money will make them targets of Lionel Pantaloon.

Chapter 18 - The Wish: A little boy carefully picks a scab off his knee and flicks it into the huge, brightly colored hall carpet. He decides that if he can make it across the carpet without touching the black areas (which are filled with poisonous snakes) or the red areas (red-hot coal lumps), he will get a new puppy for his birthday tomorrow. The boy advances slowly, frightfully, across the carpet, placing his little feet only in the yellow areas. As he nears the end, he loses his balance and falls into a black area and lets out a loud cry while his mother looks for him outside in the sunshine.

Chapter 19 - Poison: Timber Woods comes home late one night to the bungalow in India he shares with Harry Pope. Pope tells him to be quiet and not make any sudden moves because there is a krait—a small poisonous snake—coiled asleep on his stomach. Woods summons a physician, who gives Pope an injection of a snake antivenom, which he admits is probably useless. Next he runs a small tube very slowly under the sheet close to Pope's stomach and pours chloroform into it until the whole room reeks. Woods and the doctor carefully lift the sheet and find there is no snake. The physician tells Woods his friend needs a holiday.

Chapter 20 - Taste: Richard Pratt is a connoisseur expert at identifying obscure wines. Each year, he is invited to the home of Mike Schofield and his wife in London for a special dinner. During the meal, the host reveals that he usually opens a bottle before dinner and lets it breathe atop a green filing cabinet in his study. Mike Schofield asks Pratt if he wants to make a bet on whether he can identify another bottle of wine by taste. Pratt puts on a dramatic tasting and smelling routine when presented with a small glass of the wine. At last he finally correctly identifies the wine as a product of a very small winery in a small German town. The Schofields are aghast as the maid brings in a pair of glasses, and tells Pratt that he left them on the green filing cabinet when he was in the study before dinner. The Schofields' shock turns to anger, and Mike moves toward Pratt with a murderous look in his eye.

Chapters 11-20 Analysis

With this batch of short stories, Dahl makes a full transition to tales that are macabre, where the paranormal exists side-by-side with reality and madness easily disguises itself as sanity. The self-obsessed, the hypermanic and the deceitful create their own downfall with a careful, deliberate kind of madness. For example, in "Nunc Dimitis", an upper-crust Englishman who seeks revenge on a friend for what he sees as a social snub ends up causing himself pain and embarrassment while his friend is unscathed. A sadistic old man from South America who gets his kicks chopping off people's fingers is prevented at the last moment from repeating the offense by his wife, who herself is missing fingers from previous wagers with her husband.

"The Sound Machine" almost reads like science fiction, a la H.P. Lovecraft, because it depicts an engineer whose occupation and hobby involves sound. So far, so good. But the more the engineer tinkers with his device, the more apparent it becomes that plants can not only feel pain but can also express it with strange sounds audible only on his machine. This raises the curtain on a taboo part of human consciousness: that we humans can cause great pain and suffering on other living creatures, plants and animals, just by going about our normal activities of daily living. This realization practically drives the inventor mad before his machine is crushed by a falling tree limb. Once again, the author pushes the reader's awareness to the absolute edge of sanity simply by answering a simple "what if?" question.

In "Mr. Botibol," the reader meets a pathetic middle-aged man who has never known wordly success, but who compensates for it by living in his rich fantasy world where he is a composer and conductor of great music. To live out this fantasy, he even coaxes a young woman into playing along with him, literally, at a dummy piano. When she reveals that she is a real musician and piano teacher, Botibol's elaborate dreamworld comes crashing down; he, and the reader, comprehend how his unfulfilled need for approval has taken him to the edge of insanity. There seems to be no way to return to the "real" world for this unhappy man. Dahl's penchant for mordant humor is in evidence here: Botibol comes across the lips sounding very much like "butterball."

Chapters 21-30

Chapters 21-30 Summary

Chapter 21 - Dip in the Pool: William Botibol is a passenger on a cruise ship in the Atlantic that hits rough seas. Botibol is determined to win the betting pool on when the ship will reach a certain point. After the storm passes, the ship moves straight and fast toward its destination. Aware that the change of weather means he cannot win the pool, Botibol decides to jump overboard and delay the ship. A woman watches as he jumps. The woman's traveling companion arrives, and she tells her she just saw a man jump overboard fully clothed. "Nonsense," her companion says as she leads the woman back to their cabin.

Chapter 22 - "The Great Automatic Grammatizator,": Adolph Knipe comes up with the idea for the company he works for to offer writers a contract for an income in exchange for use of their names on machine-generated novels. Soon they have most best-selling writers under contract. The narrator reveals that he is a struggling writer with nine children—and an unsigned contract from Adolph Knipe on his desk.

Chapter 23 - Claud's Dog (The Rat Catcher) A grizzly old ratcatcher, who resembles a rat with his two yellowed prominent front teeth and darting eyes, arrives at the front door. He says he is on special orders from the Health Office to rid the barn of rats. The strange man discusses the difference between sewer and field rats, the various methods of killing them, then lays out poisoned oats around the barn. When he returns the next day, the ratcatcher pulls out a large sewer rat and ties one of its hind legs to the windshield wiper of a nearby car. The man slowly moves toward the rat, his eyes fixed and menacing. When he is only a few inches from the rat, he opens his mouth wide and strikes like a cobra, biting the rat on the neck and killing it. As he spits blood and fur out of his mouth, the ratcatcher says that rats blood is surreptitiously put into licorice. He collects his money, and ambles off in a rat-like movement.

(Rummins) Claud Cubbage is a dim-witted farmer who runs into his neighbor Mr. Rummins while walking his dog one morning. Claud points to Rummins' hayricks (haystacks) and says his farm already has been visited by a ratcatcher hired by the health department and wonders whether Rummins has rats in his hayricks also. Rummins expresses doubts, but says they'll know soon because he will be taking the piles apart and selling them. As they separate the bales, rats run out of the hayrick and scurry to hide in nearby shrubbery.

(Mr. Hoddy) Claud Cubbage, about to marry Clarice Hoddy, tries to impress her father with his business acumen. He tells Mr. Hoddy he has a unique idea to make money, raising maggots. After expressions of outrage die down, Cubbage explains that maggots make excellent fishing bait. Thousands of fishermen would be pleased to have a tin of maggots arrive on their doorstep the day before a big fishing expedition, Cubbage

explains. When Mr. Hoddy scoffs at the idea, Clarise tells her father not to be so unkind to her fiancée. Taken aback, Claud excuses himself and trudges home.

(Mr. Feasey) Claud and Gordon, two dog racing regulars, figure out a way to clean up at the races. Claud buys a dog that looks exactly like the dog he usually races. The new dog is slower, and with the help of a crooked odds-maker, they rig the race so they can clean up with a big pile of money. They quickly spirit the dog into their van after the race so no one can get a good close look, and drive home with their ill-gotten gains.

Chapter 24 - My Lady Love, My Dove: A wealthy middle-aged British couple—Pamela and Arthur Beauchamp—who enjoy bridge, invite a younger couple—Henry and Sally Snape—who are also bridge lovers, to their home for the weekend. Before they arrive, Pamela convinces her husband to rig up a secret microphone in the guest room. The foursome plays bridge until after midnight, and the young couple wins most games. As they go to their bedroom, Arthur and Pamela hear Henry berating his wife for not playing well enough and frustrating their plans to capture a load of cash from "that rich bitch." Pamela, shocked, tells her husband they should listen and learns the card tricks practiced by the other couple. Both Sally Snape and Arthur Beauchamp plead with their spouses to quit practicing bridge and go to bed as they are driven on mercilessly into the night by their spouses.

Chapter 25 - Neck: A social columnist for a London newspaper gets himself invited to the country estate of a wealthy Fleet Street publisher, Sir Basil Turton and his wife. Lady Natalia Turton is a pushy, domineering woman who rules the roost and her husband with a firm hand and plenty of verbal insults. As Sir Basil and the columnist stroll around the estate after dinner, they notice Lady Turton and a friend, Jack Haddock, taking pictures of each other at a wooden Thomas Moore sculpture. Lady Turton pokes her head through a hole in the sculpture and gets stuck. Her husband tells the butler to quickly bring him a saw and an axe. The butler hands Sir Basil both tools, but presses the axe a bit closer than the saw. Sir Basil chooses the axe and raises it high above his wife's head, then comes to his senses and lowers it. He then successfully saws her head free.

Chapter 26 - Lamb to the Slaughter: Mary Maloney, six months pregnant, anticipates with pleasure the afternoon arrival of her policeman husband at the usual time. Patrick Maloney enters, has a drink, then another and still another. He tells her he's leaving. Mary goes into the kitchen and he follows, sitting down at the table. She takes a big frozen leg of lamb out of the freezer and cracks it over his head, killing him. She then runs to the grocery store to pick up a few items and returns home as if nothing has happened. When she sees her husband on the floor, she screams and calls the police. Several detectives come to her house, she cries hysterically, they give her a drink and comfort her. One notices the roast in the oven and tells her it looks done. She begs them to stay for dinner to keep her company. As they finish off the leg of lamb, the police puzzle over what and where the murder weapon is. In the living room, Mary Maloney giggles under her breath.

Chapter 27 - Galloping Foxley: A commuter is one day startled to find himself sitting near another commuter who seems familiar. After stealing a few close looks, William Perkins convinces himself the man is Bruce "Galloping" Foxley, who attended the same preparatory school and was a merciless bully—especially to the younger classmen. Perkins relives the horrors of beatings, verbal abuse and mistreatment at the hands of Foxley and realizes he is still resentful after all these years. He determines to say hello to his old nemesis. "Excuse me," he says. "My name is Perkins—William Perkins—and I was at Repton in 1907." The other man drops his newspaper, peers into his eyes and says,"I'm glad to meet you.Mine's Foretescue—Jocelyn Fortescue, Eton 1916."

Chapter 28 - Edward the Conqueror: Edward builds a bonfire of yard waste; his wife Louisa comes outside to call him to lunch and they notice a cat sitting close to the fire. The cat follows them into the house. Louisa begins her daily piano recital after lunch and the cat jumps up on the piano stool, its ears cocked and eyes wide. The cat seems to respond to all music but especially Liszt. The woman decides the cat is the reincarnation of the famous pianist and must be treated great reverence. Edward tells her she's nuts, and goes back outside to continue his yard work. Louisa notices the cat is gone and rushes out to her husband, staring at him with steely eyes. As he lights a cigarette he notices for the first time a deep scratch that runs across the top of one hand. "EDWARD!!" his wife shrieks.

Chapter 29 - The Way Up to Heaven: Mr. and Mrs. Foster are a New York City couple in their seventies. She is a worrier who becomes particularly tense when traveling. He is a dawdler whose procrastinations aggravate her anxieties. Mrs. Foster is going to Paris to see their daughter and grandchildren, but as usual her husband is slow getting into the limousine. The flight is postponed a day because of bad weather. The next morning, Mr. Foster decides he has to run into the house for a moment before they depart. Mrs. Foster loses her patience and orders the driver to take her, alone, directly to the airport, where she boards her plane and flies to Paris. After a visit of several weeks, she returns home to a quiet house with no sign of her husband. She notices that the lift is stuck between the second and third floors, and with an expression of satisfaction, calls for a repairman.

Chapter 30 - William and Mary: William Pearl, a philosophy professor and controlling husband to his wife Mary, is stricken with inoperable pancreatic cancer. He agrees with a surgeon friend to allow him to remove his brain and a single eye just at the moment of death and attach them to an artificial heart-type pump that will circulate oxygenated blood to keep the organs alive. Before he dies, William drafts a letter to Mary directing her what to do and not to do (no smoking) after he passes. The two organs are placed in a transparent tank; the eyeball rests in its own separate plastic case. The brain can see and process thoughts, but neither speak nor move. When Mary visits her husband's brain, she puts her face up close to the eye, lights a cigarette, slowly drags on it and blows the exhaled smoke directly into the tank. She turns to the surgeon and says: "Isn't he sweet? I just can't wait to get him home."

Chapters 21-30 Analysis

In this group of stories, Roald Dahl demonstrates his ability to find the demonic in daydreams, the sinister in the simplest of souls, the nuttiness that passes for normal. By taking the basic elements of the human personality and demonstrating how well—or badly—individuals cope with stress, anger, disappointment, and fear, Dahl illustrates for the reader the thin line between sanity and madness with often hilarious and usually frightening results. In "Dip in the Pool," a passenger on a cruise ship allows his greed to carry him into realms of insanity as he devises a way to cash in on the daily betting pool over the actual speed of the ship. His plan seems perfect except for one detail that causes him to lose his life. Dahl seems to be offering an object lesson in how the unbridled ego coupled with a deluded intellect can carry us swiftly into insanity.

Although "The Great Automatic Grammatizator," first published in 1952 and seems hallucinatory and unreal, it is in many respects prescient of the decreasing diversity of voices in the media that would come fifty years later with concentration of publishing power in the hands of a few corporate operatives focused solely on "the bottom line" rather than literary quality. In "My Lady Love, My Dove," Dahl gives us a portrait of a passive, emasculated man who is nothing more than a house pet to his wealthy and domineering wife and enabler of her crazed will to power. In "Neck," a brazen woman and social climber who has married into wealth symbolically as well as physically gets her head stuck in a piece of modern sculpture, while her husband hesitates darkly before chopping the wooden sculpture to free her head.

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is a prime example of Dahl's wicked sense of humor. Its violence is at first shocking, then hilarious, not unlike the random and self-defeating violence of a couple of thugs in the film "Fargo." The betrayed housewife who bludgeons her unfaithful husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb then bakes it and serves it to police detectives is more comedienne than victim. The story serves to gauge the fury of this scorned woman as well as her craftiness in getting guilt-free revenge on her husband. If there is a moral in this story, it seems to be the ancient one of respect for women.

Chapters 31-40

Chapters 31-40 Summary

Chapter 31 - Parson's Pleasure: Antique dealer Cyril Boggis dresses in clerical garb and patrols the English countryside on Sundays, looking for valuable pieces of furniture that he can buy at a fraction of their value and then re-sell at a much higher price in London. He makes a good living with this ploy. At one farm, he runs across an old Chippendale chair, a heretofore missing piece of a three-piece set. Instinctively, he knows it's worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. He haggles the three farmers to a minuscule price by telling them he only wants the legs. Once they strike a deal, Boggis goes down the road to get his van and come back. While he's preoccupied, the three men decide to cut off the legs and smash the piece into firewood with an axe.

Chapter 32 - Georgy Porgy: A thirty-one-year-old pastor named George has a deep fear of women. At a social gathering, he is strongly attracted to one of the women named Miss Roach. She serves him fruit punch that makes him giddy, then asks him to go for a stroll. She throws her arms around him and demands a kiss. Her open mouth reminds him of his mother, and in a break from reality, he convinces himself that she swallows him. In the final scene, George is in a psychiatric hospital telling his doctor that he, too, has been swallowed by Miss Roach.

Chapter 33 - Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat: Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Bixby live modestly in New York City on his "average" income as a dentist. Once a month, Mrs. Bixby boards a train for Baltimore to visit her Aunt Maude in Baltimore—but her "aunt" is a secret lover known as The Colonel. After one of her visits, the Colonel's servant rushes up to Mrs. Bixby at the train station on her way home and gives her a large gift box. She opens it on the train and finds an expensive mink coat inside, with a note from her lover saying he wants to end the relationship. She leaves the coat with a pawn broker, then tells her husband she found a pawn ticket on the train. He calls her to tell her she's a "lucky girl" because of what's in the box. She comes at lunch time to her husband's office to get the item, opens the box and finds a small mink wraparound muffler—not the coat. Astonished, she storms out of the office and passes her husband's assistant, Miss Pulteney, luxuriating in the mink coat the Colonel had given her.

Chapter 34 - Royal Jelly: Albert and Mabel Taylor have a sickly baby girl who begins losing weight after birth. She has dull, lifeless-looking eyes. Albert has been a bee keeper since childhood and reads an article in an apiary magazine about the amazing growth-stimulating effects of royal jelly—a hormonal secretion that nurse bees feed a particular larva that will become the queen bee—an enormous, egg producing freak that populates the hive. Albert begins adding royal jelly from his hives to the baby's milk, but only tells his wife after the infant has started to grow. Mabel notices a patch of very fine yellow hairs on the baby's stomach, not unlike the ring of thicker yellow hairs around Albert's neck. She points it out, and he admits he's been taking royal jelly for months.

Chapter 35 - The Champion of the World ; Gordon and Claud close their gas station early to set out on a poaching mission in the fields of a wealthy man named Victor Hazel not far from Oxford, England. They soak raisins to make their skins soft, then treat them with a dollop of the seconal sleeping pills that Gordon has from a previous back injury. After nightfall, they scatter the raisins in an area where the pheasants cluster; when they come back later they collect more than 100 birds that drop drugged from the trees. The next morning, their accomplice Bessie Organ delivers the pheasants in the bottom of a baby stroller in which her infant is having a screaming fit. As she races to the gas station, the birds escape and fly as far as the roof of the garage and a line of cars appears bearing the curious. In a panic, the two men decide to close the gas station early and send Bessie home before the expected arrival of Victor Hazel.

Chapter 36 - Genesis and Catastrophe: A thin, anemic-looking woman named Klara gives birth to a son at a hospital in Braunau, Germany. She is extremely anxious about the size and health of her baby, telling her doctor the horrors of losing three babies in four years. The doctor tries to get her to calm down and believe that her son is healthy, even if it is a bit on the small side. She tells him that she and her husband have decided on a name—Adolf. Her husband is a drunkard named Alois who sports a huge moustache. Soon, he arrives at the hospital. "Herr Hitler!" the doctor greets him. "Congratulations. You have a son." The father peers closely at the child. "My God, Klara, this one is even smaller than Otto was." Klara starts to weep, and the doctor puts a firm hand on Herr Hitler's shoulder, squeezing hard and telling him the baby is fine and that he should be kind to his wife. "All right, Klara," the father says. "Now stop crying."

Chapter 37 - Pig: An infant boy named Lexington is orphaned when his parents are accidentally shot to death by New York City police. He is adopted by an aunt who lives in the mountains of western Virginia and is a strict vegetarian. He learns all the rural skills he can, and becomes a very accomplished vegetarian chef. When he is seventeen, his aunt dies and he buries her on the property. He finds a letter from her with two $50 bills inside, telling him to visit her lawyer in New York City about her estate. The lawyer tells Lexington he has inherited $500,000 and proceeds to cheat him out of all but $15,000. Lexington eats at a restaurant where he tastes meat—pork—for the first time and loves it. He asks the waiter and chef about how pork is made, and they advise him to go to the slaughterhouse where pigs become pork roasts. As he watches the gruesome assembly line death of pigs while they are hoisted by a large chain and dropped into a boiling vat of water, Lexington's leg becomes caught in the same chain. He cries out for help, a worker slits his throat; he is lifted high up and dropped into the rendering vat.

Chapter 38 - The Landlady: A young man takes the train from London to Bath to start a new job. Unfamiliar with the town, he wanders a bit until he sees a sign for a bed and breakfast. He feels strangely compelled to knock on the door; as soon as he does, the door opens and the landlady invites him inside with a friendly smile. The price is less than he expects to pay and the lodging is more than adequate. The landlady tells him he can have the entire second floor. When he signs the guest registry, he notices the last two names are dated two and three years earlier. He also remembers the names

from some news account, but is foggy on the details. He asks the landlady whether they are "famous," and she replies in the negative but adds that they were both handsome, "just exactly like you." She tells him they are still staying at her place, on the third floor. He notices that a parrot in a cage and a dog curled up by the fireplace are both stuffed. "I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away," she explains. He asks if there have been no other guests in the last couple of years to which she replies, "No my dear. Only you."

Chapter 39 - The Visitor: A wealthy Englishman drives his classic Lagonda sports car through the Sinai Desert. He stops at a broken-down gas station run by an Arab who evidently has late stage syphilis. The mechanic tells the driver he had a broken fan belt but that one could be ordered from Cairo and arrive the next morning. An Egyptian in a large Rolls Royce drives up and offers the Englishman, Oswald Cornelius, comfortable lodging at his extraordinary castle a few miles away. Cornelius finds the man's wife and daughter voluptuously sexual and imagines having them both in his bed. Late that night, the door to his room opens and a woman climbs into bed with him, putting her hand over his mouth and telling him to be quiet. All night they make passionate love, and Cornelius tries to read the faces of both mother and daughter the next morning to see which is his concubine. A telephone call informs him that his car is ready. The Arab drives him back in his Rolls Royce and tells his visitor that he has another daughter who lives upstairs and almost never comes downstairs because she has leprosy.

Chapter 40 - The Last Act: Ed and Anna Cooper are a middle-aged couple still madly in love after more than twenty years of marriage. Ed is killed in a car accident; Anna becomes hysterical and is drugged. When Ann calms down a bit, the love and attention of family and friends fail to help and she becomes seriously depressed. She contemplates suicide, but is jerked back to life by a friend who asks her to help at the adoption agency where she work. Having recovered a fragile stability, Anna goes to Dallas, Texas on business. Lonely, she calls Conrad, an old high school boyfriend who is now a successful doctor and divorced. They have drinks and go back to her hotel room where the handsome medic becomes quite sexually aggressive. Anna screams and throws him off, fleeing to the bathroom, muttering "Ed, Ed, Ed." As Conrad dresses to leave, he hears the medicine cabinet door open in the bathroom and quickly departs.

Chapters 31-40 Analysis

The first two stories of this group strike at the very roots of human belief and expose the sham and trickery involved with organized religion. The first, "Parson's Pleasure," provides a lesson in how the mere presence of a clergical collar can disarm the unsuspecting. Posing as a priest, a manipulative antiques dealer makes a comfortable living by deceiving rural people, buying valuable furniture on the cheap and profiting from sales in London. He gets his comeuppance, however, when two of his victims destroy a Chippendale and along with it, the "parson's" hope of easy profits. In the second, "Georgy Porgy," a seemingly sincere clergyman with latent issues about women, becomes psychotic when one woman in the church kisses him. In both cases,

the reader gets a glimpse of the fragility of human trust and the truth of the adage, "We are betrayed by what is false within."

In "Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat," the futility and hopelessness of deceit is presented in the context of a man and wife who both cheat and deceive each other. The reward for both is a profound sense of chagrin, shame and futility. "Royal Jelly" is one of Dahl's stories that seems to merge two genres: science fiction and the grotesque. In this story, the parents of a sickly infant fret over her failure to thrive; the husband surreptitiously starts to feed her royal jelly as a growth and appetite stimulant. The baby starts to grow, but her mother notices a yellowish, bee-like peach fuzz on her body. It's as if her husband's underhanded motives and pride in trying to act as physician to his daughter manifest themselves with an immediate, physical deformity.

"Pig" shows off the author's ability to weave a a string of implausible events into coherent, if completely unpredictable, story line. An innocent young man who seems at first to triumph over a harsh fate is suddenly killed in a mechanized hog rendering factory. The young man's only sin, it seems, is gullibility and a kind of backwoods optimism. He seems reminiscent of Voltaire's "Candide," in which a trusting and vulnerable young man is tortured by an evil and spiteful world. Once again, Dahl's message seems to be that the slightest turn of fate can sometimes prove deadly to the unsuspecting and innocent.

Summary for Chapters 41-48

Summary for Chapters 41-48 Summary

Chapter 41 - The Great Switcheroo: Jerry and Victor, neighbors and social acquaintances, decide to switch wives under cover of darkness while their spouses are sleeping. They work out an elaborate plan, improvised by Victor and presented to Jerry. Victor, lusting after Jerry's wife Samantha, slips into her bed and has a wild night of lovemaking. The next morning, Victor's wife Mary sends the children from the kitchen and thanks her husband for awakening her to the joys of sex—something she had never enjoyed before. Now that her needs are fulfilled for the first time, she says, she is overjoyed about keeping their love burning.

Chapter 42 - The Butler: George Cleaver and his wife give lavish dinner parties as part of their social climbing efforts, but they are usually a flop. Tibbs the butler suggests the Cleavers serve fine wines instead of the crude Spanish port they always drink. Cleaver orders cases of rare and expensive wines. Tibbs tells his employer in front of ten people at a dinner party that he should not serve a vinegar salad dressing because it destroys the palate. Cleaver and his guests are stunned as the butler says he's always served them nothing but the cheap Spanish wine. Tibbs the butler and Monsieur Estragon the chef drank all the fine wines because, Tibbs says, he doesn't believe Cleaver knows the difference. Both chef and butler finish loading their small car and drive away.

Chapter 43 - Bitch: Oswald Cornelius decides to invest in the research of a French olafactory chemist named Henri Biotte, who is working to develop a scent that will unleash the primitive sexual urges of men as a kind of perfume to be worn by women. Biotte suffers a fatal heart attack, but one ounce of the substance remains, and Cornelius takes the sample with the intent of using it to disgrace the US president. He plans to put it in a corsage for the head of the Daughters of the American Revolution, before which the president is to speak. The DAR head, a huge ugly hippopotamus of a woman, tries to put the corsage on her dress but punctures the hidden capsule containing the perfume. Oswald then goes wild and climbs all over her. When the drug wears off, the society dame tells him as he races out of her hotel room, "Young man, you've certainly done me a power of good."

Chapter 44 - Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life: A man takes his cow to Mr. Rummins's dairy farm to be mated with a bull. Rummins asks whether the man wants a heifer calf or a bull. Astonished, the man asks how he can know the sex ahead of time. Rummins says it all depends on whether the cow is facing toward or away from the sun, because if facing the sun, the female sperms swim faster than the male. Incredulous, the man examines Rummins's records over a thirty-year period that show 2,516 Heifer calves to fifty-six bull calves born. The man asks if his method will work with humans, "Just so long as you remember everything's got to be pointed in the right direction," Rummins says. Proof that it works, he says, is the fact he has four sons to work on his farm, and no girls.

Chapter 45 - The Hitchhiker: The narrator, a writer, is driving to London in his new BMW sports car when he stops to pick up a hitchhiker. The man has darting eyes, grey teeth and pointy ears. He reminds the driver of a rat. He asks the driver how fast his car will go; he replies 120 mph, but the hitchhiker doesn't believe him. So the writer pushes the gas pedal to the floor until the BMW hits 120, but a police officer, atop a BMW motorcycle, pulls up ahead of the car and hands the driver a speeding ticket. He looks suspiciously at the rat man and says he wants to check on him when he gets to headquarters. Under questioning by the driver, the rat man confesses he is a "professional fingersmith," a pickpocket. He shows the driver what he has already stolen from him—as well as the ticket book the policeman used to write the speeding ticket and another black book in which he'd written a description of the fingersmith.

Chapter 46 - The Umbrella Man: A mother and her twelve-year-old daughter are caught in a rainstorm while shopping. They stand on the street, trying to hail a taxi, when an old man comes up and offers to give them his fancy silk umbrella for a pound—an umbrella, he says, that cost twenty pounds. The woman gives him a pound note and the girl notices him scurrying across the street and turning briskly this way and that. He ends up at a pub, where through a window they watch him order a triple whiskey, drink it down, and while getting his coat and hat, pick up someone else's umbrella. He repeats the scam, then heads for a new pub.

Chapter 47 - The Bookseller: William Buggage and his assistant/lover Muriel Tottle, operate a rare book store in London, which is really a cover for a scam in which they find obituaries of recently deceased wealthy men, then send a bogus invoice to the widow for books allegedly purchased by her husband. The fake titles reflect his hobbies, such as fly fishing, but also pornographic and potentially embarrassing subjects. The widows, to avoid any public hassle, pay promptly and fully. Buggage and Tottle are millionaires through this scheme. One day a sixtiesh woman comes into the store and challenges Buggage by asking whether her deceased husband's books had been purchased in Braille, since he was blind. Detectives move into his office to arrest both Buggage and Tottle for fraud.

Chapter 48 - The Surgeon: Robert Sandy, a surgeon at an Oxford, England hospital, saves the life of a Saudi prince after a car accident. Reluctantly, he accepts a diamond worth at least $500,000 from the Saudi king for saving his son's life. The surgeon and his wife decide to hide the gem in an ice cube tray. They return after going out for the evening to find their home burglarized and ransacked; the police can't find the diamond. In an operating room at the hospital, another surgeon named William Haddock takes an obstruction from the bowel of a young man that turns out to be the diamond. With one of the nurses, he takes it to the same jeweler who first appraised the stone for Robert Sandy. He calls Sandy to ask if he's lost his diamond; when Sandy says yes the jeweler tells him to call the police. The police rush into the jewelry store and handcuff the surgeon and nurse. Sandy arrives and tells the police to release the two, because the real thief is recovering from surgery at the hospital.

Summary for Chapters 41-48 Analysis

Often we suffer the burden of our sins in this life, according to Roald Dahl, as he fictionally works his way through the seven deadlies—plus quite a few more. In "The Great Switcheroo," for instance, the two men in an elaborately secretive wife-swapping maneuver quickly find they must face the prospect of heightened sexual expectations by their wives, although the women know nothing of the adulterous scheme into which they have been thrust. In another tale of lust and deceit, "Bitch" illustrates the unseemly result when a young man sets out to use a synthetic perfume to improve his chances of success with the opposite sex. In "The Hitchhiker," the exuberant driver of a new BMW picks up a hitchhiker who is a consummate pickpocket. When the driver is stopped and ticketed by a motorcycle policeman, the hitchhiker steals the cop's two ticket books so there is no record of the arrest. More scams include a flimflam artist who cons people into buying his umbrella for a few dollars on a rainy day. He then runs to the nearest pub and spends the money on liquor. On his way out, the con artist grabs another umbrella and repeats the scam. In "The Bookseller," a pair of con artists who operate a successful shakedown of the wealthy are arrested at their bookstore for fraud. In all these stories, Dahl interjects a knowing chuckle at the way the world often exacts revenge on the lustful, the greedy and the prideful.

Characters

Stag, Stuffy and Williamappears in Madame Rosette (Chapter 8)

Stuffy, Stag and William are three RAF pilots who go into Cairo on a forty-eight-hour leave from combat in Libya looking for women. They encounter Madame Rosette, an exploitative and predatory whorehouse operator who keeps her "girls" in near-slavery. The three soldiers are outraged at the injustices perpetrated on the young women forced to sell themselves to survive. Instead of buying their services, the men decide to lock Madame Rosette in her office and to let the prostitutes escape her clutches. They buy the women drinks and then carry them each home in rented horse-drawn carriages. All three are rather simple yet honest young Brits whose sense of injustice is stronger than their lust or the effects of alcohol.

Lionel Lampsonappears in Nunc Dimitis (Chapter 11}

Lionel Lampson is a British aristocrat who fancies himself a true citizen of the world, a sophisticate and art collector, a ladies' man and a dashing fellow. He becomes silently enraged when one of his social acquaintances, Gladys Ponsonby, tells him that the woman he's been dating, Janet de Peagia, thinks him a crashing bore. Cunningly, Lionel arranges with a popular artist to paint Janet in his usual manner: first a nude, then a fully-clothed figure. Lionel then washes off the top layers of paint with a solvent to reveal a nude Janet. He invites his friends to a special dinner party, where he suddenly and shockingly reveals the nude portrait. By this time, he's already fled for a "vacation." Upon his return to London, Lionel learns his friends are not amused; they think him a creep. He feels even worse when he gets a forgiving note from Janet.

Carlosappears in Man from the South (Chapter 13)

Carlos is the strange, sadistic old man of uncertain South American origin who enjoys making bets that permit him to chop off a finger of his opponent if he is victorious. Carlos offers to bet a shiny, sleek new Cadillac that a vacationing soldier in Jamaica can't get his cigarette lighter to fire ten times in quick succession. Just as the venal old man is about to chop off the soldier's pinkie, his wife enters their hotel room and screams at him to stop. She tells the soldier that her husband has made a lifetime habit of making such bets; the Cadillac belongs to her and is not even his to give away.

Klausnerappears in The Sound Machine (Chapter 15)

Klausner is a sound engineer, "a frail man, nervous and twitchy, with always moving hands," who builds in his tool shed a device that can detect and amplify sounds from

plants. For example, when a rose is clipped in a nearby garden, the machine registers a high-pitched scream. Scoot, his physician friend, drops by one evening and Klausner asks him to help with an experiment. He chops a tree with an axe, the machine picks up a great roaring sound of pain, and a giant branch falls crushing his machine. Klausner feverishly demands that the doctor paint the wound with iodine, as the physician tries to calm his nerves.

Mr. Botibolappears in Mr. Botibol (Chapter 16)

Mr.Botibol is a tall, thin man with no shoulders who inherits a piece of commercial property. In the process of selling it, he confides to his attorney that he has, at the age of fifty-eight, never known a single success in his life. But Mr. Botibol has a secret outlet—he "conducts" classical music over the radio. Soon be buys a conductor's wand, black tails, and has a mini-concert hall built in his home where he can conduct. He meets a young woman at a music store and invites her to dinner; he then shows her the concert hall complete with a piano whose keys produce no sound. She goes along with his fantasy and "plays" the piano while he "conducts" the orchestra to recordings over loud speaker. She then reveals that she is a music teacher, and Mr. Botibol's fantasy world is quickly shattered.

Adolph Knipeappears in The Great Automatic Grammatizator (Chapter 20)

Adolph Knipe is a computer nerd and an inventor who has a secret desire to become a writer. After many failed attempts to sell a magazine story, he invents a machine that can write stories on demand tailored to each magazine. Using fictitious names, he floods magazines with the computer-written stories and they sell like hotcakes. He offers large sums of money to established writers in exchange for using their names on his stories. Knipe corners the market in fiction writing and the narrator, a struggling writer who has been approached by Knipe, asks at the end for the integrity to starve his children—if need be—to succeed by his own talents and efforts.

Mr. Botibol appears in Dip in the Pool (Chapter 21)

The hapless Mr. Botibol makes another appearance, this time on an ocean liner where he schemes to win the $7,000 daily pool where passengers bet on the actual speed and location of the ship. When it appears that his miscalculation will cause him to lose, he jumps overboard in hopes of delaying the ship. But he slips away in the sea and is forgotten. In both manifestations, (Chapter 16 and Chapter 21), Mr. Botibol is a stereotypical loser whose attempts to become real fail because they are based on deception and manipulation of others.

Arthur Beauchamp appears in My Lady Love, My Dove (Chapter 24)

Arthur Beauchamp is a mild-mannered butterfly collector who is persuaded by his wife, Pamela, to rig up a microphone in their guest room so they can eavesdrop on their weekend guests. They hear the couple fighting over how they lost a card game to their hosts. As the guests go over their catalogue of tricks to relieve the Beauchamps of their money, Pamela and Arthur listen intently and learn all of their tricks so they can't be duped again.

Mary Maloneyappears in Lamb to the Slaughter (Chapter 26)

Mary Maloney is the pregnant wife of a policeman. Her husband comes home from work one day and tells her he is leaving her. Suppressing her emotions, Mary asks him to stay for dinner anyway, and while he is sitting at the kitchen table, she takes a frozen leg of lamb from the refrigerator and bludgeons him to death. She then goes to the local grocery story to pick up a few items to provide herself with a cover story, and puts the lamb in the oven. When police detectives arrive, she serves them the lamb as they ponder what the murder weapon could have been.

Bruce Foxley appears in Galloping Foxley (Chapter 27)

Bruce (Galloping) Foxley is the name of a preparatory school boy who once made life hell for William Perkins, who now commutes on the same train every day to his job in London. Perkins notices another passenger who he is convinced must be Foxley, the bane of his youth. In his mind, Perkins relives the torture and abuse of his school days at the hands of the sadistic bully Foxley. Perkins determines to introduce himself, which he does. The other man does likewise, but he is not Foxley.

Cyril Boggisappears in Parson's Pleasure (Chapter 31)

Cyril Boggis is a shrewd London antique dealer who travels through the countryside of England searching for undiscovered and highly-valued pieces that he can buy cheap and sell for a huge profit in the city. He dresses in a clergyman's robe and drives to the smaller rural towns on Sundays, looking for hidden treasures. This form of a swindle provides Boggis with a comfortable living, and one day he comes upon an extremely valuable piece of furniture in a farmer's barn. He offers the farmer a pittance, telling him he only wants the legs from the cabinet. Trying to be helpful, the farmer and his friends chop off the legs and smash the rest of the antique into firewood.

The Colonelappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat (Chapter 33)

Identified only as "the colonel," he is the man who as a longstanding affair with Mrs. Bixby, the wife of a dentist in New York City. When he breaks off the affair, he gives her a mink coat that becomes the focus of this story of double betrayal.

Oswald Corneliusappears in The Visitor (Chapter 39)

Oswald Cornelius is the British aristocrat who drives his sports car through the Sinai Desert and encounters a wealthy Arab with a magnificent mansion, a wife, and two daughters. One of the daughters is beautiful, while the other is a leper who is hidden away in her room.

Objects/Places

Paramythia, Greeceappears in Chapter 3

The Mediterranean outpost during World War II where British pilots encounter Katina, a beautiful young Greek girl who stands in the middle of the airfield shaking her fists at German aircraft as they strafe her town.

Lancasters, Halifaxes, Hurricanesappears in Chapter 5

Royal Air Force fighter/bomber aircraft used in World War II.

Messerschmidts, Junker 88s, Heinkelsappears in Chapter 5

German Luftwaffe aircraft flown mostly against Allied air forces over Europe in World War II.

Spitfireappears in Chapter 7

A British fighter plane used against the Germans in World War II.

Focke Wulfappears in Chapter 7

A type of fighter/bomber aircraft flown by Germany during World War II.

Londonappears in Chapters 11, 19

The capital city of England figures prominently in several of Roald Dahl's stories. London is always presented as the pinnacle of wealth, social status, achievement and culture. It is the standard against which other, smaller British towns are measured.

Jamaicaappears in Chapter 13

The Caribbean island, formerly owned by the United Kingdom, is the setting for the odd tale of Carlos, the mysterious Latin American man who makes bets against strangers for the pleasure of chopping off their fingers.

Sound Machineappears in Chapter 15

The sound machine is a device cobbled together by an electronics wizard named Klausner. It can detect sounds from plants when they are in distress or pain.

Leg of Lambappears in Chapter 26

A frozen leg of lamb is the murder weapon that Mary Malone uses to club her policeman husband to death in "Lamb to the Slaughter." She then bakes the roast and serves it to the detectives who are trying to figure out what weapon was used in the killing of her husband.

Royal Jellyappears in Chapter 34

Royal jelly, the substance produced by honey bees, is fed to the egg-laying queen bee to keep her producing eggs. In the process, she grows to enormous scale. Albert Taylor, a part-time beekeeper, feeds royal jelly to his infant daughter who is tiny and refuses to eat.

Lagondaappears in Chapter 39

The Lagonda is a British-made sports touring car, driven by Oswald Cornelius through the Sinai Desert in "The Visitor."

Themes

Karma

The idea of retribution as a natural consequence of causing another pain or suffering (karma) appears throughout many of these stories. A bizarre and humorous example is "William and Mary", about an instructor at Oxford University who is a judgmental, controlling and demeaning presence to his wife. William, a compulsive neurotic, lays down all sorts of rules that he expects his wife, Mary, to follow. Among the list of forbidden pleasures is smoking; anything that seems to bring Mary pleasure is quickly added to the list. She suffers greatly because of her husband. Faced with a swift and certain demise, William agrees with a surgeon friend to let him remove his brain at the moment of death and keep it alive—with one eye stalk—in a nourishing solution inside a glass beaker. The surgeon summons Mary to his lab to see William's remains. She peers at the familiar scornful eye and lights a cigarette, blowing smoke all through the brain container, smiling when she sees William's eyeball dilate with speechless anger.

In "Vengeance is Mine", a couple develops a means of offering revenge to those who feel wronged by a newspaper gossip columnist. For the wealthy and powerful who are subjected to ridicule in print—especially the newly rich—the couple forms a business offering various forms of retribution, from a punch on the nose, to a black eye, even to kidnapping. Fees for these services rise according to the difficulty and severity of the punishment. The couple watches for unflattering mentions of their wealthy in the newspaper column, then mails out a letter outlining the services available for revenge. The couple does a brisk business punching out this columnist and others who offend the mighty. They grow wealthy themselves by selling revenge, and decide to reward themselves by a train trip to Florida. It then dawns on them that they will soon become targets of the gossip columns themselves, in a kind of reverse karma.

A group of British soldiers takes karmic revenge on a predatory madame in Cairo in "Madame Rosette." During a night out on the town, they encounter the proprietress and, realizing how she exploits her prostitutes, call her a "filthy old Syrian Jewess," lock her in her office and liberate the enslaved sex workers. The story closes with an image of the soldiers and whores walking light-heartedly through the streets of Cairo.

The Unexpected

The element of the unexpected, the sudden turn of fate, is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in "The Visitor." In this story, an eccentric and wealthy Englishman whose hobbies include collecting scorpions drives his sports car through the Sinai Desert. When he stops for gas at a remote outpost, the diseased Arab gas station attendant suspiciously informs him that his fan belt is broken and that he can't get a replacement until the next day. Serendipitously, a wealthy Arab appears out of nowhere, driving a Mercedes, and offers the driver, Oswald Cornelius, a free overnight stay at his

desert mansion. Oswald finds himself drawn to the man's alluring wife and daughter. When his door opens in the middle of the night and a woman enters his bed, he is overjoyed. With his car repaired, Oswald is driven the next morning to the gas station. On the way, he learns that there is a plausible chance his overnight companion might have been the man's other daughter who has leprosy.

For this kind of unexpected turn of events, Dahl's pervasive technique of the surprise ending works well. An eccentric narrative line,as in the case of "The Visotor," full of small surprises, turns out to be only a prelude to a shockingly unexpected ending.

Another example among many of the recurrence of the unexpected in this collection of stories is "Royal Jelly." In this off-center tale, a mother frets to her husband that their infant daughter seems to have no appetite and is failing to thrive. The husband and father, an amateur bee keeper, reads several publications about the business of apiary and is eager to tell his wife about royal jelly, a substance fed to bees to turn them into queens—huge egg-laying insects around which the hive is organized. His description of the hormone royal jelly takes on a fevered tone as he raves about it to his wife. He suggests putting royal jelly from his hive into the baby's milk, but the wife balks. He goes ahead and adds it to her formula, and before long the infant is growing and taking on weight. The mother is delighted but puzzled by a fine growth of small, yellow hairs on her belly. The father confesses to his wife that he has been giving her royal jelly, that he himself has been taking it for some time. His wife pleads with him not to overdo it. Then, as he turns to leave the room, she notices a thick patch of the same yellow hairs around his neck. The reader is left to wonder whether the royal jelly will turn both husband and child into huge, grotesque insects.

What seems a joyous development for the mother quickly turns into a horrifying premonition, unexpected by the wife and certainly the reader.

Deception

Although these stories are not framed as morality lessons, in many instances the action within the story is centered on character flaws such as dishonesty, deception, lust, greed and revenge. In "Parson's Pleasure," the story concerns blatant deception by an antiques dealer who puts on a fake clerical robe and cruises rural England on Sunday afternoons, looking for fine furniture he can buy cheap and sell high. The con artist has perfected his act so well that he is quite convincing and successful in prying old valuables away from farmers and other trusting, gullible people. The morality lesson, if there is one, comes with a quick jab at the end of the story when the crown jewel of his career—an extremely valuable Chippendale chair—is hacked to pieces before his eyes because of a miscommunication. He has succeeded only in deceiving himself.

In "Mr. Botibol," a chronic loser with no self-esteem finds his niche in impersonating classical music conductors as he listens to symphonic music on the radio. A man of means, Mr. Botibol even has a mini-concert hall built in his home and buys himself a tuxedo with tails and a conductor's wand. Then he places a dummy piano on the stage

that sounds no notes when it is "played." He finds a young woman with equally low self-esteem to help him act out his fantasy, as he conducts and she plays the piano. After they finish, she reveals that she is a real musician. Mr. Botibol's deceptive world in which he deluded only himself comes crumbling down around him.

In "Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat," a married New York City woman carries on a carefully controlled affair with a man called "the colonel" in Baltimore by taking the train to see him while lying to her husband that she is going to visit an aunt. After years, the colonel abruptly breaks off the affair but gives the woman an expensive mink coat as a parting gift. Upon her return, she puts the mink coat in a pawn shop and gives her husband the claim check, telling him she found the ticket on the train. He retrieves the coat and gives it to his secretary, but buys his wife a small mink stole, telling her that she is "a lucky girl" because of what was in the pawn shop. The deceiver is thus deceived and rendered mute at once when she sees the coat that the colonel gave her on the dentist's secretary. The wages of dishonesty, Dahl seems to tell us, are endless frustration and discontent.

Style

Point of View

In the majority of these stories, the author maintains a mordant detachment. Each of the characters is presented like a clinical specimen whose dissection reveals another, darker dimension to the human heart. The stories are related in the detached voice of the narrator/author, who remains at arm's length from his characters and narrative lines. There is no authorial intrusion in this collection—instances where the author becomes the center of interest and thus loses his role as objective observer. Even as the rustic innocent in "Pig" is subjected to the most outrageous insults and abuse by the world, and finally butchered like a hog in a processing plant, the author maintains his detached point of view—almost to the point of indifference.

Dahl assumes the reader is intelligent enough to get the messages in his stories without any hand-wringing or exclamation points by the author. This technique adds an eerie kind of immediacy to the stories; the reader is immersed in the action—however bizarre—without any emotional support or rationalization from the author. The effect is an immediate and compelling involvement with the story, driven both by curiosity and a gathering sense of doom.

In this Wizard of Oz fictional world, it is important that the word wizard remains out of view as the story unfolds and that the tale breathes with a freshness and energy of its own. These are the literary rewards for the reader of Dahl maintaining his cryptic control over plot and characterization at a distance.

Setting

Each short story has a different, and appropriate, setting. For example, in "William and Mary", most of the action takes place within a hospital laboratory where a surgeon has removed a friend's brain and one eye to keep them alive in a liquid solution. In the first ten stories, the settings are various places in the Mediterranean such as Greece, Italy and North Africa, where Allied pilots are stationed and from which they engage in combat with Axis forces. Some of the settings include rural England ("Claud's Dog"), London, ("Nunc Dimitis"), New York City ("Pig") , Jamaica ("Man from the South"), Kenya ("An African Story"), Paris ("Skin"), and Bath, England ("The Landlady").

The settings themselves lend an emotional color, or tone, to the stories that increases their effectiveness. Jamaica, a resort island in the Caribbean disconnected to the familiar mainlands of either America or England, seems the perfect netherworld for the strange occurrences in "Man from the South." The social climbing and snubbing of London society seems the perfect setting for "Nunc Dimitis," a story of egocentric revenge gone amuck. Where else but deep in the rural roughness of the English countryside would one be likely to encounter an outré rat catcher who bears more than

a passing resemblance to a rat? The competitive, snobby world of Paris art galleries and salons is a natural setting for someone to sell a masterpiece tattooed on their back, if there is such a place anywhere other than the imagination of Roald Dahl.

Language and Meaning

The language throughout is colloquial English, written in a straightforward narrative style. With the occasional flashback or flashforward, the stories are written in the past tense. Each of the stories in this collection uses language and dialect that serve to add tone and color. For example, in "The Rat Catcher," the filthy man who comes to dispatch rats from Claud's farm uses a local dialect that seems fitting for his trade. He holds up a tin to his face and peers around at Claud to tell him how he will get rid of the rodents: "'Poison!'" he whispered. But he pronounced it 'pye-zn,' making it into a soft, dark, dangerous word. 'Deadly pye-zn, that's what this is! Enough here to kill a million men!'"

Dahl uses language to enhance characterization, as in "Man from the South", in which a strange little man named Carlos convinces a British sailor to bet his little finger that his lighter will ten times in succession. "Certainly," Carlos says. "Dat is de bet. But I tink you are afraid." The quaintness of his speech suggests evil just below the surface. "Come on now pleess," he says to the maid when he asks that a chopping knife be brought to his room, continuing, "You can find dose tings surely for me."

Overt British-isms help to wrongly convince commuter William Perkins that a man he sees on the train must be an old schoolmate. "Well," the man says, settling back in a seat next to Perkins. "It's a topping day. The man's dress, mannerisms and speech combine to convince Perkins he's an old school bully named "Galloping" Foxley. "D'you mind the pipe?" the man asks, in his upper crust speech. Confident that this must be Foxley, Perkins identifies himself by name and school. The other man introduces himself, too, but he is not Foxley—rather Jocelyn Fortescue. Similarities in speech patterns stir up old memories in Perkins, but ultimately mislead him.

Structure

Dahl's stories have an unexpected twist at the end, reminiscent of the short stories of the American writer O. Henry and the French writer Guy du Maupassant. Although these surprise endings come as a shock to the unsuspecting reader, a careful review of the author's technique reveals how Dahl has meticulously and subtly laid the groundwork for the final outcome. This effect is magnified by Dahl's ability to tell a convincing story that is slightly off-center, so that the narrative line is unpredictable. The craft in this kind of writing is the creation of "the willing suspension of disbelief," often cited as a necessary ingredient in successful fiction and drama. Because of the cunning way in which Dahl constructs his stories, the reader is impelled to continue out of curiosity that only grows as the story progresses. As the reader constructs various ideas about what is happening in the story and what it may mean, at the end, the author pulls the rug out

from any reasonable assumptions the reader may have by presenting a shocking yet believable denouement.

This type of construction contrasts diametrically, for instance, with the so-called "inverted pyramid" that is the structure of a news story, in which the most important information—the news—is fired at the reader in condensed form in the first paragraph or two. In Dahl's fiction, this is reversed so the most important missing piece of the story comes at the end, often with a sardonic or darkly humorous flavor. Examples of this structure abound in this collection—the housewife who kills her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, the desperate man who jumps off a cruise ship in an insane effort to win a bet, the unhappy deluded man whose delusional sense of himself as a great musician is shattered when he meets a real musician, the beekeeper who feeds his sickly daughter and himself royal jelly so that both develop fine yellow hairs like those on a bee's body, and the adventurous British traveler through the Sinai Desert who suddenly realizes he may have had clandestine sex with a leper.

Usually the unexpected punch at the end of Dahl's stories serves as a dramatic device to illuminate how some defect of character, obsession or delusion can swiftly and suddenly bring about that person's downfall. Although these stories are by no means morality lessons, the combined effect of this collection is a blazing series or revelations about human foibles that include but transcend the proscriptions of religion, civility and even common sense.

Quotes

"The Spitfire was not a Spitfire but a part of his own body; the muscles of his arms and legs were in the wings and in the tail of the machine so that when he banked and turned and dived and climbed he was not moving his hands and his legs, but only the wings and the tail and the body of the airplane; for the body of the Spitfire was the body of the pilot, and there was no difference between the one and the other." Death of an Old Old Man, p. 90

"There was the smell of Cairo, which is not like the smell of any other city. It comes not from any one thing or from any one place; it comes from everything everywhere; from the gutters and the sidewalks, from the houses and the shops and the things in the shops and the food cooking in the shops, from the horses and the dung of the horses in the street and from the drains; it comes from the people and the way the the sun bears down upon the people and the way the sun bears down upon the gutters and the drains and the horses and the food and refuse in the streets. It is a rare, pungent smell, like something which is sweet and rotting and hot and salty and bitter all at the same time." Madame Rosette, p. 99

"Anyone would think the son of a bitch had done this before, I told myself. He never hesitates. Table, nails hammer, kitchen chopper. He knows exactly what he needs and how to arrange it. He would the string around the boy's wrist, then several times around the wide part of the hand, then he fastened it tightly to the nails. He made a good job of it and when he'd finished there wasn't any question about the boy being able to draw his hand away. But he could move his fingers." Man from the South, pp.188-89

"Rats is suspicious. Terrible suspicious, rats is. So today they they gets some nice clean tasty oats as'll do 'em no harm in the world. Fatten'em up, that's all it'll do. And tomorrow they get the same again. And it'll taste so good there'll be all the rats in the district comin' along after a couple of days."
"Rather clever."
"You got to be clever on this job. Clever'n a rat and that's sayin' something." The Rat Catcher, p. 318

"'Maggots?!,' he said, aghast. 'Maggots? What on earth do you mean, maggots?' Claud had forgotten that this word was almost unmentionable in any self-respecting grocer's shop. Ada began to giggle, but Clarice glanced at her so malignantly the giggle died on her mouth.
'That's where the money is, starting a maggot factory.'
'Are you trying to be funny?'" Claud's Dog, p. 339

"My wife's house. Her garden. How beautiful it all was. Now if Pamela would try to be a little less solicitous of my welfare, less prone to coax me into doing things for my own good rather than for my own pleasure, then everything would be heaven. She can be a trifling irritating at times, the way she carries on. For example, those little mannerisms of hers—I do wish she would drop them all, especially the way she has of pointing a finger

at me to emphasize a phrase. You must remember that I am a man who is built rather small, and a gesture like this when used to excess by a person like my wife is apt to intimidate. I sometimes find it difficult to convince myself that she is not an overbearing woman." My Lady Love, My Dove, p. 372

"'That's a 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 than they need.'
One of them belched. 'Personally, I think it's right under our very noses. What do you think, Jack?'
And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle." Lamb to the Slaughter, p. 412

"'So what 'm going to do is to notify all the important living composers everywhere. It's my duty. I'll tell them Liszt is here, and invite them to visit him. And you know what? They'll come flying in from every corner of the earth!'
'To see a grey cat?'
'Darling, it's the same thing, It's him. No one cares what he looks like. Oh, Edward, it'll be the most exciting thing there ever was!'
'They'll think you're mad.'" Edward the Conqueror, p. 443

"It was a queer sensation peering into her husband's eye when there was no face to go with it. All she had to look at was the eye, and she kept staring at it and gradually it grew bigger and bigger, and in the end it was the only thing that she could see—a sort of face in itself. The pupil was large and black with a little spark of light reflecting from one side of it. You know what, she told herself, looking behind the eye now and staring 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." William and Mary, p. 484

"I had a good grip with my fingers on the edge of the teeth, and in spite of the suction I was managing to haul myself up slowly towards the daylight when suddenly the upper teeth came down on my knuckles and started chopping away at them so fiercely I had to let go. I sent sliding back down the throat, feet first, clutching madly at this and that as I went but everything was so smooth and slippery I couldn't get a grip." Georgy Porgey, p. 511

"'Isn't it a 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." Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat, p. 552

"'Quick! Save me!' our hero cried.
'With pleasure,' the sticker said, and taking Lexington gently by one ear with his left hand, he raised his right hand and deftly slit open the boy's jugular vein with a knife.

Suddenly our hero started to feel very sleepy, but it wasn't until his good strong heart had pumped the last drop of blood from his body that he passed on out of this, the best of all possible worlds, into the next." Pig, p. 614

"The boxer had just passed the two-metre mark when the smell hit him. He stopped dead. Suddenly he started making noises through his nostrils, queer little snorts and grunts that reminded me if a pig sniffing around in its trough. 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 broke loose." Bitch, p. 766

Topics for Discussion

In "Nunc Dimitis," what motivates Lonel Lampson to publicly humiliate Janet de Pelagia? What effect do his actions have on her, and on him? What message does the author hope to convey in this story?

When the inventor Klausner builds a special machine and discovers that plants can feel and express pain in "The Sound Machine," what effect does it have on him? On others to whom he tries to explain?

In "Vengeance Is Mine, Inc." a couple becomes wealthy by offering revenge to prominent people who have been publicly humiliated by a gossip columnist. What is the twist at the end of the story that turns the tables on them? What does Dahl say about revenge in this piece?

Is Dahl's technique of surprise endings in these stories effective? Can you think of another structural device or technique that would be more effective? Does predictability in a short story weaken its impact and message?

What is the author's point of view toward the many grotesques who appear in his stories —such as the Arab gas station attendant in "The Visitor," or the backwoods vegetarian chef in "Pig," or the feral rat exterminator "The Rat Catcher"?

What is the character flaw in William Botibol, who in "Dip in the Pool," leaps overboard from a cruise ship in the middle of the ocean? Does his fate seem a just reward for that character flaw?

When Mary Pearl discovers that she can torment her dead husband's living brain in "William and Mary," does this give her freedom from his years of constant disapproval or does it create a new form of imprisonment?