Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected Study Guide

Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected by Roald Dahl

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Roald Dahl's Tales of the Unexpected Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Taste....3

Lamb to the Slaughter....4

Man from the South....5

My Lady Love, My Dove....6

Dip in the Pool....7

Galloping Foxley....8

Skin....9

Neck....10

Nunc Dimiltis....11

The Landlady....12

William and Mary....13

The Way Up to Heaven....14

Parson's Pleasure....15

Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat....16

Royal Jelly....17

Edward the Conquerer....18

Characters....19

Objects/Places....25

Themes....29

Style....31

Quotes....33

Topics for Discussion....34

Taste

Taste Summary

The narrator attends dinner at Mike Schofield's house, where he dines with his wife, his daughter Louise, and another guest called Richard Pratt. The host and narrator often makes bets about the identity of the wine he serves at dinner. However, this evening, Mike is particularly set on having a bet over an unusual wine. In this case, the stakes keep rising until Mike bets his daughter's hand in marriage against two of Pratt's houses. Louise protests, as does Mike's wife, but eventually they agree to it, on Mike's assertion that Pratt will never guess. However, Pratt begins to narrow it down by region, taste, and so forth, until he properly identifies the wine as a Chateau Branaire-Ducru, 1934. The entire table is astounded, until the maid comes in and hands Pratt his glasses, which she said he left in Mr. Schofield's study, where the wine was airing earlier in the evening.

Taste Analysis

The first story in "Tales of the Unexpected," "Taste" sets up several themes that run through the rest of Dahl's stories. The overwhelming theme of the story is that of a character being cheated out of something by the very means through which he or she had hoped to profit. In this case, Mike is convinced that Richard could not possibly identify the wine, but it is his own stubbornness and conviction of his own superiority that leads him to bet extremely high stakes. "Taste" also demonstrates another of Dahl's persistent themes: that of women being used as pawns in men's games (though this does from time to time reverse). Here, the daughter's wedding is treated as an object in and of itself, as valuable as two separate houses. Her own wishes are hardly taken into account. Finally, on a structural level, Dahl leaves the reader (as he often does) with the revelation of an uncomfortable truth, or the unexpected element in the story, and refuses to provide a denouement or resolution for the reader, leaving the characters' reactions to the reader's imagination.

Lamb to the Slaughter

Lamb to the Slaughter Summary

Mary Maloney waits for her husband to come home, thinking about all of the things she loves about him. However, when he comes home from his job as a police officer, he complains that he is tired and does not want to talk. Mary offers him a variety of food, including a leg of lamb she was saving for the best. He tells her that he no longer loves her and is leaving her. Dazed, she goes to get the lamb out of the deep-freeze, and clubs him over the head with it. She then proceeds to order groceries, and pretends to discovery his body on her return. She calls the police - Patrick's friends - who arrive to investigate. They determine that he must have died from a blow to the head from a blunt object. Being polite, Mary offers them some of the lamb she had been cooking for Patrick's dinner.

Lamb to the Slaughter Analysis

Another of Dahl's celebrated themes, that of revenge, comes to the forefront in "Lamb to the Slaughter." His characters very rarely act out of random malice (though they do, from time to time, act out of madness). Here, Mary Maloney thinks only of her husband, how much she loves him, and what she can do for him - therefore, it is easy for the reader to sympathize with her feelings when her husband is dismissive, and announces that he is leaving her. The choice of the murder weapon seems nearly subconscious for Mary, but readers should note the flesh involved in this choice: the visceral, bodily aspect of killing a man with meat should not go unnoticed. Finally, the fact that this meat is part of everyday life, to the extent that the police don't consider it evidence for a second, further highlights the hidden, even nefarious, aspect of everyday events, at which Dahl often hints.

Man from the South

Man from the South Summary

Sitting by the side of a hotel pool in Jamaica, the narrator watches English girls and American cadets flirting in the pool, and makes conversation with the man next to him. A cadet comes out of the pool to smoke, and offers the man his lighter - which "never fails" - to light his cigar. The man, intrigued by this idea, bets him that he can't light the lighter several times in a row without fail. The cadet refuses, but the man offers him a Cadillac if he succeeds. They go up to the man's room, with the narrator as witness, to test the bet, and the cadet finally wins. However, the man's wife bursts in, and tells them that the man has collected 47 fingers and given away eleven cars; she says, as well, that he can't give away the Cadillac he offered, for it is hers. The narrator then notices that she herself only has a few fingers left.

Man from the South Analysis

Dahl moves away from everyday evil and highlights the bizarre aspects of humanity in "Man from the South." Here, the supposed idyll of the Jamaican hotel is contrasted by the darker motives of the man, who wants fingers and seems to delight in getting people to cut them off, or to risk cutting them off, in exchange for the possibility of a car. This car - and the brand name, Cadillac, that Dahl provides - demonstrate the stakes in the game, or what is at risk: simple consumerism. The Cadet is lulled into a dangerous game simply through the promise of a new vehicle. This capitalist desire appears in several other stories as well, as Dahl continually shows to what extent normal people will "up the ante" as risks escalate, simply to attain their desired object.

My Lady Love, My Dove

My Lady Love, My Dove Summary

Arthur and his wife Pamela wait for their evening guests to arrive. They are going to play bridge together; Pamela is extremely competitive about this game, and decides that she wants to bug the guests' room with a microphone in order to spy on them that evening. Once they arrive, the group makes small talk for a time, and then gets to playing bridge. They are a competitive pair, but Sally, the female guest, loses quite a few points in one hand. Later, Arthur and Pamela overhear the "nice" couple in the bedroom, as Harry makes Sally count cards and keep practicing, speaking to her in a harsh and unpleasant tone. Pamela is inspired, and decides that she and Arthur will learn how to do the same thing.

My Lady Love, My Dove Analysis

'Appearances can be deceiving' is the main lesson of "My Lady Love, My Dove." Both Arthur/Pamela and Harry/Sally seem like nice couples; Arthur and Pamela as models of suburban middle age, and Harry and Sally as well-brought-up young people. Nevertheless, both couples have their dark sides. Arthur is weak and at Pamela's control; Harry, meanwhile, has complete control of Sally. Moreover, the controlling nature of both Pamela and Harry is brought out by the very appropriate card game, bridge, which should create bonds but instead upsets the balance in each relationship. In Harry and Sally's relationship, Pamela sees the potential control that she may one day wield over Arthur. Thus, she wants to start learning card tricks with Arthur this instant. This story further reinforces Dahl's theme of cheating, which many of his characters do in one form or the other, given the slightest opportunity.

Dip in the Pool

Dip in the Pool Summary

On board a cruise ship Mr. Botibol decides to take part in the ship's auction, which is a bet about how far the ship will go the next day. He talks to the purser, who tells him that the pool is up to $7,000, with numbers selling for $300 - $400. Mr. Botibol begins to consider the things he could buy with such money, and decides to place a bid. He then, based on information he thinks is accurate, bids on "low field," or all of the numbers/distances lower than the lowest one bid. However, the next day, the ship is making unusually quick progress, and Mr. Botibol realizes that he will lose his money, in addition to not winning anything. He decides that a man overboard would slow the ship down sufficiently, and that if he "falls," they will have to send a boat down. He chats briefly with an elderly woman on deck, to make sure someone sees him, and then goes overboard. Nevertheless, after he jumps, the woman's minders come to fetch her, and don't believe a word she says; she is clearly out of her mind.

Dip in the Pool Analysis

The structure of "Dip in the Pool" follows a very similar form to the other short stories in "Tales of the Unexpected." A character, no better or worse than anyone else, desires something (in this case, money), and concocts a slightly underhanded way of obtaining it - as Mr. Botibol does with the ship's pool. However, the plan then somehow goes awry, and the story ends on a point where the reader realizes just how awry, but before the consequences and reactions have become clear to the characters in the stories. In this somewhat roundabout way, Dahl brings his characters to justice. Notably, it is the characters' desires that make them at once sympathetic and unlikable, and which will bring them to their just desserts in time. The ambiguity of the woman's reaction to Mr. Botibol's "fall" is typical of the ending of stories in this collection, in that the reader realizes that Mr. Botibol shall not be saved, but the character himself has not yet seen this.

Galloping Foxley

Galloping Foxley Summary

The narrator, Perkins, is a businessman who waxes rhapsodic about his commute. He loves the journey into the city, and takes pleasure in writing out the details of his journey to share with his colleagues. One day, though, he is offended to find a new man sitting in his own compartment on the train. The man is handsome and about Perkins' age, and Perkins is deeply upset that his routine has been spoiled. As the man asks if he can light his pipe, Perkins is reminded of a boy back at school, Bruce Foxley, who was cruel and bullied him, beating him for no good reason and seriously disturbing Perkins' formative years. As Perkins fumes, he decides that he will expose Foxley to the train of people and make him answer for his deeds. However, after all of that, Perkins gives his name and tells the supposed Foxley where he went to school, and the man facing him gives his - Jocelyn Fortescue, who went to another school, at another time. It is not Foxley after all.

Galloping Foxley Analysis

In Perkins, Dahl has created an every-man who is, if not sympathetic, at least familiar and of a type with whom the readers will be familiar: the commuting businessman, fastidious, who pays attention to every detail. Unlike in some of his other stories, Dahl does not attach the stakes of life and death to Perkins' desire to confront Foxley; however, for this repressed man, the emotions that Foxley has conjured are very powerful, and his resolution of them would certainly do him some good. This demonstrates the passion - and the unexpected nature - of peoples' natures, which Dahl's stories continuously hint at. The fact that Perkins is mistaken in the identity of the person sitting across from him makes his possible confrontation all the sadder, as he will have to continue dealing with these memories for the rest of his life.

Skin

Skin Summary

After the war in Paris, a poor man called Drioli wanders the streets and sees a picture that reminds him of a friend he had decades ago. A tattoo artist, Drioli had had a particularly good day and came home to his wife, Josie, and his friend, whom they called Kalmuck, whom Drioli had met in a cafe. After this good day at work, Drioli has bought a lot of wine, and the trio get drunk. Drioli decides that he wants a picture by his friend, a talented artist, that will last forever, and convinces him to tattoo a portrait onto his back, which his friend finally does and signs. Later, Josie is killed in the war, and Kalmuck moves away, and has apparently become a famous artist. In the present day, Drioli enters the gallery and tells his story. Though he is initially not believed, he shows off his tattoo and convinces the group. A man at the gallery offers to take the picture in a skin graft, and offers Drioli free residence at a hotel in Cannes called the Bristol, where he can live out the rest of his days in wealth and comfort. Though the group tries to convince Drioli not to go, he does. A few weeks later, the picture shows up for auction in Buenos Aires. There is no hotel, the story tells the reader, called the Bristol in Cannes.

Skin Analysis

"Skin" demonstrates not only a variety of the themes Dahl treats elsewhere in these stories (greed, the unexpected), but also how quickly something that seems to be positive can turn ugly. Here, the work of art that Drioli has on his back can be seen as a wonderful thing: a work by a great artist, a remembrance of his wife, the representation of better days. However, because of the monetary value of the "painting", things quickly turn against him, and he will pay for the work with his death (apparently; as in other Dahl stories, this is only implied, never mentioned outright). The dangers of greed and the act of coveting are the main themes in this story, along with the unexpected misfortune that befalls the possessor of such a seeming treasure.

Neck

Neck Summary

A journalist, a fan of modern painting, meets the wife of a famous collector at a dinner party. This woman, Natalia, had captured Sir Basil Turton, the most eligible bachelor, against everyone's wishes. When the journalist meets her, he forces an invitation to her home, for he very much wants to meet her husband. There, he sees the sculptures on the lawn. The atmosphere in the house is slightly strange, however; for instance, the butler asks for 1/3 of the journalist's winning at cards, rather than a tip, for he tells him that Natalia always overbids her hand. At dinner that evening, a guest called the Major seems to be infatuated with Natalia, as does a female guest called La Rosa. The journalist and Sir Turton spend their time discussing sculpture; in the morning, Sir Basil takes him for a walk in the garden. There, they see the Major and Natalia, as Natalia mocks a sculpture by sticking her neck in it. She cannot get it out, and the butler arrives with an axe to remove it. At the last minute, Sir Basil stops him and, with a smile, takes a saw to the sculpture instead.

Neck Analysis

The fancy milieu presented in "Neck" hides dangerous feelings, as with many of the other settings in Dahl's stories. Here, the tensions beneath the beautiful exterior are hinted at earlier on by the butler, who is willing to betray his employer for some extra money. At the same time, the cheating that goes on at the card table carries over into real life, until Natalia, trapped, is apparently exactly where her husband would like to have her. Note that here, the story is told through the perspective of an outside journalist: a more "objective" source, outside the story itself, watching as a more or less impartial observer, making the shades of jealousy and revenge all the darker.

Nunc Dimiltis

Nunc Dimiltis Summary

A rather pompous older man called Lionel is out to dinner with Gladys Ponsby, who tells him a lengthy anecdote about a new painter in London, the toast of the town, called John Roydon. What makes Royden such a special painter, she tells him, is the fact that he paints women in their undergarments, then adds their dresses on top, for a more realistic look. Later, Gladys lets it slip that the woman whom Lionel has been taking out, Janet, has been gossiping about him and finds him a bit of a bore. In revenge, Lionel commissions Royden to paint Janet's picture, telling Janet that she has been specially selected for her portrait as a sample to show at an exhibition. Lionel then gives a dinner party, having removed the dress from the painting with paint-remover, in candlelight. Once the candles burn down, he turns on the lights, revealing the portrait of Janet nearly nude. However, he concludes, she seems to have forgiven him, for she has sent him a note and some caviar, which he is eating. Nevertheless, he notes, he has begun to feel ill. . .

Nunc Dimiltis Analysis

Dahl goes beyond gender in this story of revenge. As in many of the other stories in this collection, revenge plays a foremost role. First of all, Lionel takes his revenge on Janet; however, the disproportionate response of this, humiliating her in front of her peers, will cause him misfortune later on. Importantly, the revenge he takes on her has a bodily aspect to it, as he reveals her body for the world to see. She makes this more literal in her own revenge, as she exacts revenge on Lionel by poisoning him - the most visceral of all possible strategies. She does this through an everyday object, food (though one appropriate to their setting, caviar), in an unexpected twist.

The Landlady

The Landlady Summary

A young businessman on a trip is looking for a hotel at night in an unfamiliar city. The porter at the train station sends him down a particular road; however, Weaver reaches a bed and breakfast before he finds the named hotel, which seems cheaper and comfortable. He sees a parrot in the window and is taken with the warmth and comfort the place seems to offer. A woman answers the door, and offers him lodging at a cheap price, which he accepts. However, she is strange and as she shows him to his room, she keeps getting his name wrong. She invites him down to tea. When Weaver comes down to tea, he peers into the guest book and sees that there are two rather familiar names listed there from years ago. He tries to place them as he drinks tea with the owner. He realizes that the dog he noticed earlier is stuffed, and she admits that she has a weakness for taxidermy. He asks her about the two men, and she fondly reminisces about them; Weaver then remembers, slightly woozy, that they are young men who were reported missing years ago. He then asks the landlady if she has any other guests, and she tells him that the other two men never left (implying that they have been stuffed, like her dog).

The Landlady Analysis

"The Landlady" is very close to a traditional horror story; readers may note elements of Hitchcock, particularly his film "Psycho", in the plot, characters, and setting of this story. Here, the young man is lulled into a sense of security through the comfort of the lodgings themselves, and chooses to ignore the evil undertones present in the landlady. He, like the reader, might expect her to be innocuous simply because of her appearance, gender, and age: assumptions that Dahl time and again proves untrustworthy in these stories. The nature of her strangeness, taxidermy, once again plays on issues of the body and death/immortality.

William and Mary

William and Mary Summary

After the funeral of her husband William, Mary returns home with a letter he wrote before his death. There, WIlliam (a professor at Oxford) details a strange meeting he had before his death from cancer, with a colleague of his called Landy. Landy came to William with a plan, having learned that the latter was dying of cancer. He told William of an experiment in which a dog's head was kept alive all on its own, separate from its body, for an indefinite period of time, and suggests that they attempt to do the same with William's brain after his death. William at first refuses, but eventually is more and more intrigued by the idea, especially when Landy offers to leave him an eye with which to view the world. Now, Mary receives a phone call from Landy, who explains that this is precisely what happened, and that she can now visit her husband in the laboratory. Mary goes, and watches her husband's brain as she smokes (one thing her bossy husband always hated). As she talks to the brain, the eye watches her, and she becomes sentimental about it. She decides that she will take it home with her, as it is cute and she is attached to it. Landy is extremely uncomfortable, but Mary assures "WIlliam" that she will look after him now, as she does things her way.

William and Mary Analysis

Aside from the major links to the bodily present in the absence of William's earthly body, "William and Mary" is a story about an oppressed woman who finally gets her own way. William's cruelty is only hinted at, and Mary's motives are not obvious (perhaps not even to herself); through the switch in perspective to Landy's opinion, when he starts thinking about his unwillingness to have a woman look after his brain, Dahl underlines exactly how satisfactory this revenge might be for the poor wife - and how uncomfortable for her now near-immortal husband.

The Way Up to Heaven

The Way Up to Heaven Summary

Mrs. Foster has always had a pathological fear of being late, but her husband antagonizes her about this fear. Mrs. Foster is now going to visit their daughter in Paris for six weeks, as Mr. Foster stays at his club. He goes to see her off to the airport, but dallies so long she is afraid she will miss her flight. Once at the airport, however, Mrs. Foster finds that the flight has been cancelled because of fog. She goes back to her home, where she meets Mr. Foster, and tells him that she'll go again in the morning. He orders a car and tells her that she will drop him off at his club on the way. However, the next day, Mr. Foster is very late, antagonizing Mrs. Foster by continually running back into the house for his cigars, presents, and so forth. Finally, Mrs. Foster goes in after him, but pauses at the door and goes back to the car, telling the driver to take her right to the airport. She spends a lovely six weeks in Paris and, when she returns, she places a calm phone call to a service man, telling him to come take a look at the elevator, which seems to be stuck between floors.

The Way Up to Heaven Analysis

"The Way up to Heaven" is a simple story of revenge. Much like "William and Mary," it is the story of a woman held back by her husband, who finally gets her own way. She serves her version of justice simply by letting things take their course. In this sense, the everyday event of a broken elevator becomes something sinister simply by her refusal to fix it.

Parson's Pleasure

Parson's Pleasure Summary

Mr. Boggis, a London antiques dealer, drives around the countryside looking for rare commodities and pieces of furniture he can sell in his showroom. However, he recently discovered by accident that he can get very good deals when he pretends to be a parson, in charge of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture, simply looking for the furniture, rather than wanting to purchase it. On one outing, he is delighted to find a long-lost commode by Chippendale, and is delighted that the farmers in whose home he finds it appear to have no concept of its value. Boggis offers to buy the commode, supposedly to use its legs for a piece of his own furniture, at a low price. He "demonstrates," using a variety of dirty tricks and false information, how their commode is an "imitation." Satisfied, the farmers sell it to him for twenty pounds. Boggis goes to get his car, and the men worry he will renege on the deal if it doesn't fit into the car; therefore, they decide to help him out and chop off the legs of the commode before he returns.

Parson's Pleasure Analysis

Dahl works through several important themes in "Parson's Pleasure," returning once again to the trickster becoming the victim. Here, the first part of the story works on building the reader's interest in Mr. Boggis. If he is not sympathetic, he is certainly a typical Dahl character in his villainous actions and motives, and is thus captivating. His absolute delight at finding the commode is thus a mixed bag, as the reader at once sympathizes with his delight as a connoisseur and pities the farmers who don't know the treasure they have. However, the villain gets his just reward, for his treasure - nearly unique in the world - is destroyed. Note that this punishment comes at the destruction of a treasure: though Dahl has presented a situation in which Boggis gets what he deserves (or doesn't), he does show the damage left in his wake.

Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat Summary

For years, Mrs. Bixby has been sneaking away from her husband in New York City once a month, under the pretense of visiting her Aunt Maude, to have a love affair with a Colonel who lives in the country. On this occasion, however, she arrives at the country station to find the Colonel's groom, waiting for her with a package and a note. The note tells her that they shall not meet again, and that he is giving her a mink coat in thanks. She is delighted with the coat, but doesn't know how to explain it to her husband. Back in the city, Mrs. Bixby takes a taxi to a pawnbroker's and leaves the coat for fifty dollars; she won't let the pawnbroker write anything on the slip of paper. She then goes home and feigns ignorance about the slip she found. Her husband offers to go pick it up for her and see what they "found." He calls the next day to tell her that she will be very excited, and Mrs. Bixby waits in anticipation. However, when she goes to pick it up, he has bought her a mangy fur, very different from the beautiful mink. She then sees his secretary in the new fur, which of course she cannot claim as her own.

Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat Analysis

Desire plays a preeminent role in "Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat": Mrs. Bixby's desire for the Colonel and the coat, the Colonel's waning desire for Mrs. Bixby; and the Mr. Bixby's desire for his receptionist. However, because Mrs. Bixby's desires are presented in such detail right from the start, the reader begins to be carried along with them and fascinated at the ingeniousness of her plan. This is not to say that she should get the coat, but rather that the mechanisms of her plan are such that Dahl creates fascination simply by their very description. Of course, in the end, her desires are thwarted through a loophole in her plan - allowing her husband to satisfy his desires. This is a reversal of the gender roles that Dahl normally presents, for often his protagonists are women who finally turn their husbands' misdeeds to their advantage.

Royal Jelly

Royal Jelly Summary

Mabel and Albert Taylor have tried for years to have a baby to no avail; now that they do, they are terrified that the baby won't eat. She is losing weight in the weeks after her birth, rather than gaining it. The doctor can't find anything wrong with her, however. Meanwhile, Mabel is worried because their beehives, a source of income, haven't produced nearly as much as in years past. Suddenly, though, the baby begins to eat when Albert feeds her, and grows at tremendous rates. When Mabel gets curious as to why, Albert explains the concept of "royal jelly" to her, which is a substance produced to feed the future queen bee. It promotes tremendous growth, "sex appeal," and other good qualities; he has been feeding it to their daughter. Mabel is disgusted and insists that he stop. However, she then notices that Albert has developed some bee-like qualities himself, and he tells her that he had read a study linking the jelly to fertility the year before, and has consumed quite a bit since then; in fact, he has devoted half their hives to its production. Mabel then looks at the baby, and sees her as a grotesque bee-in-formation.

Royal Jelly Analysis

Rather than a question of revenge, "Royal Jelly" demonstrates the side of Dahl's work more concerned with the truly bizarre and unexpected - yet events that are realistic enough, and well-enough researched, to convince the reader of their possible veracity. Readers should note that in this story, the physical process of eating and growing is turned on its head, into something disgusting and grotesque. The slight changes to the baby from its normal development - its faster-than-usual weight gain, for example - become nearly unbearable for Mabel. In this way, Dahl touches upon themes of the visceral, the bodily, and sexual development.

Edward the Conquerer

Edward the Conquerer Summary

Louisa and Edward lead a mundane, ordinary existence until, as Edward clears the field outside their home, Louisa finds a cat. She takes it inside and notices that it responds very strangely when she plays the piano - enjoying some pieces and horrified at others. She tests out various pieces until she becomes convinced that the cat is indeed Franz Liszt. Louisa researches both Listz's life and reincarnation and is certain that the two are the same: they love and hate the same pieces, they even have warts in the same spot. Louisa is intent on showing off their new cat, but Edward demurs. Later, Louisa is cooking dinner for the cat and Edward comes in from the field, having lit an enormous bonfire. She inquires after the location of the cat, and notices that Edward has a long scratch down his arm; he begins to try to quiet her as she becomes hysterical.

Edward the Conquerer Analysis

The last story in "Tales of the Unexpected," "Edward the Conqueror" returns to two themes that permeate the book: the unlikely, and revenge. Of course, it is unlikely that the cat could be the reincarnation of the famous composer; however, Dahl helps to convince his readers of this possibility by slowly introducing the concept, and letting the reader make the same deductions as Louisa. Similarly, Edward's protests may echo the reader's actual reactions. The fact that he is ultimately convinced makes the cat's ultimate fate all the more horrible. As with the structure of Dahl's other stories, the unwritten is as important, if not more so, than what is on the page: here, the cat's murder is only hinted at, yet all the more gruesome for it.

Characters

Mikeappears in Taste

Mike is the host of the party in "Taste"; he is convinced that his guest will never be able to identify the wine he has chosen - to his detriment.

Richard Prattappears in Taste

Mike's guest in "Taste" who cheats at identifying the wine in order to win Mike's daughter's hand in marriage.

Narratorappears in Taste

A guest at the dinner party; an innocent bystander.

Maidappears in Taste

The character who gives away Richard Pratt's game in "Taste."

Mary Maloneyappears in Lamb to the Slaughter

The wife of Patrick Maloney, who ends up killing him with a leg of lamb and then serving the lamb to the investigating officers.

Patrick Maloneyappears in Lamb to the Slaughter

A police officer who has decided to leave his wife - but who gets murdered in the process.

Noonanappears in Lamb to the Slaughter

One of the investigating police officers who eats the lamb - the murder weapon.

O'Malleyappears in Lamb to the Slaughter

One of the investigating police officers who eats the lamb - the murder weapon.

Narratorappears in Man from the South

The narrator is a witness in this story, whereby a cadet and man enter into a bet.

Manappears in Man from the South

The nameless man who is fascinated by betting people's fingers against cars in otherwise meaningless bets.

Cadetappears in Man from the South

The young American man who takes the Man's bet about the lighter. Initially hesitant, the Cadet becomes enamored of the idea of the car and agrees to the Man's conditions.

Wifeappears in Man from the South

One of the Man's victims, who eventually won a car from him.

Arthurappears in My Lady Love, My Dove

The slightly hapless husband in the story, who has some sense of morality yet follows his wife's bidding.

Pamelaappears in My Lady Love, My Dove

Arthur's conniving wife, who both insists on bugging their guests' room and later, on learning how to count cards to cheat at bridge. A stubborn, unpleasant woman.

The Snapesappears in My Lady Love, My Dove

The bridge partners of Arthur and Pamela, the Snapes seem like a wealthy, pleasant young couple but actually make their living cheating at bridge.

Mr. Botibolappears in Dip in the Pool

The protagonist of the story, who decides that he will win the betting pool. He is overwhelmed by his desire for money, and goes to extremes to attain it in this case.

Purserappears in Dip in the Pool

An important member of the ship's crew, who wrongly tips off Mr. Botibol about the following day's progress.

Womanappears in Dip in the Pool

The only witness to Mr. Botibol's fall; she is somehow mentally incapacitated, or believed to be so, and nobody believes her story about the man falling.

Perkinsappears in Galloping Foxley

A straight-laced businessman and commuter, overwhelmed by injustices from the past brought up by the memory of Foxley.

Bruce Foxleyappears in Galloping Foxley

The bully who tormented Perkins back at school.

Fatherappears in Galloping Foxley

A proper man, Perkins' father became the initial reason for Foxley's torment.

Jocelyn Fortescueappears in Galloping Foxley

The actual man who sits opposite Perkins on the train; pleasant, he bears a slight resemblance to Foxley.

Drioliappears in Skin

A tattoo artist, who later becomes destitute and despondent, and then decides to sell the "art" on his back.

Kalmuchappears in Skin

Drioli's friend; a painter who was in love with Josie and who later became famous. The artist who tattooed Drioli's back.

Josieappears in Skin

Drioli's wife; a charming woman, whose portrait is now on his back, and who died in the war.

Sir Basil Turtonappears in Neck

A weak man; an art collector who was a popular bachelor until Natalia "captured" him in marriage.

Narratorappears in Neck

A journalist who desires entry into the Turton home and who gets it by talking to Natalia at a party.

Nataliaappears in Neck

The foreign wife of Sir Basil Turton; a controlling, unpleasant, probably cheating woman.

Lionelappears in Nunc Dimiltis

The pompous narrator of the story, who decides to take revenge for a reported slight by showing a picture of the gossiper nearly nude.

Janetappears in Nunc Dimiltis

The gossiper and lady friend of Lionel, who perhaps poisons him with caviar.

Gladys Ponsbyappears in Nunc Dimiltis

The "friend" of Lionel's who reports Janet's gossip back to him.

John Roydonappears in Nunc Dimiltis

The portrait painter celebrated about town for his accurate and flattering paintings of women.

The Landladyappears in The Landlady

The owner of the bed and breakfast where Bill Weaver stops by; apparently a little looney, the landlady taxidermies her pets as well as her visitors.

Bill Weaverappears in The Landlady

A young businessman traveling for work.

Williamappears in William and Mary

The controlling, pompous, and unpleasant professor who is married to Mary and decides to have his brain preserved after his death.

Maryappears in William and Mary

The put-upon wife of William, who was initially set against his plan to have his brain kept alive in perpetuity.

Landyappears in William and Mary

The scientist who proposes to William that he preserve his brain after his death.

Mrs. Fosterappears in The Way up to Heaven

The nervous and ever-punctual protagonist of the story, Mrs. Foster is driven mad by her husband's lateness and stalling.

Mr. Fosterappears in The Way up to Heaven

The stalling husband of Mrs. Foster.

Mr. Boggisappears in Parson's Pleasure

The cheating antique dealer who pretends to be a parson to lure valuable furniture out of unsuspecting victims' hands.

Rummis, Bert, and Claudappears in Parson's Pleasure

The farmers from whom Mr. Boggis buys the commode. They are a dull bunch, but attempt to be helpful; they think that they are, in fact, duping Mr. Boggis.

Mrs. Bixbyappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

The clever but fading wife of Mr. Bixby, Mrs. Bixby had a long-standing affair outside of the city.

Mr. Bixbyappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

A dentist who appears to be a dupe but is actually having an affair of his own.

Miss Pulteneyappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

The object of Mr. Bixby's affection; his receptionist.

Maud Taylorappears in Royal Jelly

The mother of a new baby, Maud is Albert's wife and horrified by the measures he has taken to feed their baby.

Albert Taylorappears in Royal Jelly

A bee-keeper, Albert has been entranced by the possibilities of using royal jelly for various purposes; he is stubborn and secretive, and has been deceiving his wife for some time.

Edwardappears in Edward the Conqueror

Louisa's husband; a no-nonsense man who does not want to put up with a composer reincarnated as a cat.

Louisaappears in Edward the Conqueror

Edward's musical wife, who discovers that their cat is the reincarnated composer Franz Liszt. A superstitious woman.

Objects/Places

Wineappears in Taste

The substance that Mike and his friend always make bets upon; in this case, his friend was tipped-off by seeing the bottle earlier.

Spectaclesappears in Taste

The giveaway that Richard Pratt inspected the wine before dinner; he left them in the study, where the wine was.

Lambappears in Lamb to the Slaughter

The murder weapon that Mary Maloney uses to kill her husband, and which she then serves to the investigating police officers.

Jamaican Hotelappears in Man from the South

The site of the meeting among the Cadet, the Man, the English girl, the narrator, and - eventually - the Man's wife.

Lighterappears in Man from the South

The object of the bet between the Man and the Cadet.

Cadillacappears in Man from the South

The prize in the bet between the Man and the Cadet, should the Cadet win.

Bridgeappears in My Lady Love, My Dove

The game at which Pamela and her husband excel and often play.

Microphoneappears in My Lady Love, My Dove

The object Albert and Pamela place in the guest bedroom.

Shipappears in Dip in the Pool

The location of the betting pool.

Auctionappears in Dip in the Pool

The betting pool about how far the ship will go the following day.

Trainappears in Galloping Foxley

The site of Perkins' commute, where he believes he re-encounters Foxley.

Reptonappears in Galloping Foxley

Perkins' prep school.

Galleryappears in Skin

The location where Drioli reveals his work of "art" and is seduced by the unknown buyer.

Tattooappears in Skin

A picture of Josie that the artist tattooed onto Drioli's back.

Sculptureappears in Neck

A work by Henry Moore, in Sir Basil's garden, where Natalia gets her head stuck.

Portraitappears in Nunc Dimiltis

A portrait of Lionel's friend Janet in nothing but her undergarments.

Caviarappears in Nunc Dimiltis

The means by which Janet poisons Lionel.

Dogappears in The Landlady

One of the Landlady's pets, which she has taxidermied.

Bookappears in The Landlady

The register of the Landlady's "hotel," with the names of men who have disappeared.

Oxfordappears in William and Mary

The institution where William teaches.

Dog's Headappears in William and Mary

An example of another experiment in which just the head of a being was preserved.

Liftappears in The Way up to Heaven

The location of the husband's death, as he is trapped there for six weeks.

Parisappears in The Way up to Heaven

The location of the wife's visit to her daughter, where she stays for six weeks while her husband perishes.

Chippendale Commodeappears in Parson's Pleasure

The very valuable piece of furniture the art dealer has uncovered.

Mink Coatappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

A very expensive and fine coat given to Mrs. Bixby by the Colonel.

Pawn Ticketappears in Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

The blank pawn ticket that leads to Mrs. Bixby losing the coat.

Royal Jellyappears in Royal Jelly

A substance produced by queen bees to nourish their young and create new queens, which the beekeeper has decided to feed to his daughter.

Catappears in Edward the Conqueror

An animal Louisa believes to be the reincarnation of composer Franz Liszt.

Themes

Revenge

Revenge plays a major role in Dahl's "Tales of the Unexpected." Nearly all of the stories feature revenge in some way, whether it is a husband's revenge on his wife, vice-versa, or other smaller ways in which one person might feel they are getting the better of an oppressor. People who have been wronged, such as Perkins in "Foxley" take great pleasure in planning out the revenge they might take upon former bullies; others, such as Mary in "William and Mary" may not even realize that they are taking revenge. However, Mary's desire to have her husband's consciousness at her beck and call is certainly that. Mary's counterpart is Mrs. Foster in the "Way up to Heaven," who certainly realizes that she is having her revenge on her husband as she lets him suffer in the broken elevator, dying there (most likely) after six weeks. In her view, though, this is entirely justified, given that he has tortured her by always making her late. There are other people who take their revenge by trying to do good, such as the wife in "Man from the South" who punishes her husband by refusing to let him have what he wants (the Cadet's finger). For the most part, people's plans are what cause problems in "Tales of the Unexpected." Dahl presents revenge as a mostly negative thing, though it can have its positive effects; overall, justice and revenge are treated as two separate topics, and the former is left to the reader to determine.

Hidden Evil

The unexpected in these stories usually comes in the form of hidden evil, though it can often take the form of revenge, as detailed above. The "hidden" nature of this evil is what makes it unexpected, as Dahl illustrates very innocuous events, such as dinner parties, bridge games, trips, commuting, and other day-to-day occurrences that would not, in and of themselves, shock the reader. The settings range from the working class to the upper classes, but are not unusual in themselves. Paris does appear in two stories, "Skin" and "The Way up to Heaven"; however, as Dahl is an English writer writing for a primarily English audience, this is not as exotic as it may seem. Yet in these innocuous settings, the darkest things happen: landladies stuff their visitors, wives kill their husbands with legs of lamb or take their brains home with them, husbands perish in elevators. Readers should note that nearly every story illustrates both a normal setting and something distinctly uncanny associated with that setting.

Women's Oppression

Though men are often hard-put-upon in "Tales of the Unexpected," the women and particularly the wives have the hardest time of it. Women often suffer for great periods of time under their husbands' control. In these stories, this occurs most often in middle-class settings, with older couples; upper-class men seem to be more run down by the

women (as with Lionel who has Janet painted naked, or Sir Basil who watches Natalia trapped in the sculpture). In "William and Mary" and "Lamb to the Slaughter", both wives have been under their husbands' thumbs for quite some time, and finally take their own revenge in very different forms. In "Taste," it is the daughter, not the wife, who is oppressed, bartered by her father for a chance at great wealth - and ultimately unable to control her own fate. Finally, in "My Lady Love, My Dove," though Arthur is controlled by his wife, note that Harry and Sally, the young visiting couple, show the classic relationship of a dominant male - and that this is what inspires the more unusual actions of Pamela.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in Dahl's stories varies greatly: sometimes it is in the first person, sometimes in the third. However, readers should note that when Dahl does use the first person, he does so in most cases from the point of view of an outsider - someone uninvolved in the main intrigue, such as in "Taste," "Man from the South," and "Neck." One exception to this is in "Nunc Dimiltis," in which Lionel narrates his own story (this is perhaps so that the first-hand account of being poisoned at the end carries more intensity). His third-person stories often use the close third person, or third person limited, in that they stay with the main character's point of view and rarely, if ever, stray. The cases where they do, such as when Landy's point of view appears in "William and Mary," are in themselves remarkable for that reason. One of the justifications for this close view is that it makes the unexpected elements even more surprising - just as they are in the cases where Dahl uses an anonymous first-person narrator. Overall, the point of views used in "Tales of the Unexpected" are all used for the purpose of highlighting what the title implies: the unexpected and unanticipated aspects of everyday life.

Setting

As an English author, Dahl sets his stories in England, for the most part. This is sometimes replaced by New York, such as in "The Way up to Heaven" or "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat." In other places, England is replaced for the more exotic: Jamaica, in the case of "Man from the South," and France in the case of "Skin." Otherwise, the stories take place in England's small towns, villages, countryside, and London. In this way, they highlight what is, for Dahl's typical reader, the everyday aspects of life. The settings are vaguely familiar, and meant to be so, borrowing from ghost stories and horror films (such as the links between the film "Psycho" and Dahl's tale "The Landlady"), but always emphasizing the homely aspects of these settings. Even the exotic settings are often depicted as vacation locales, rather than actual places for everyday life.

In terms of the time period, the setting of the stories is vague but certainly post-World War II to present day; this is confirmed by various references to technology, such as widely-available television sets, microphones and bugging equipment, and other modern markers.

Language and Meaning

Dahl's language is extremely straightforward, and understandable to the average reader. In fact, the stories are often more eerie for this reason, as Dahl's famous children's stories echo in the voice used in some of his narration. Much of the stories are told through dialogue, and many rely on language as a controlling force. Gossip

spreads this way, inspiring revenge, in "Nunc Dimilitis," while husbands use their words to control their wives in stories such as "William and Mary." Letters appear for very specific purposes, such as in the latter story, and as a way of inserting first-person narration into a third-person story. As an English writer, Dahl uses English terms, so American readers should be prepared for the use of words such as "lift" and "lorry." At times, depending on the setting, the language can be upper-class (as in "Neck"). Overall, the familiar and colloquial language, as with the familiar settings, underscore the darkness of the tales themselves, making them sound like urban legends or horror stories recounted later.

Structure

Dahl's stories, for the most part, follow a similar structure narratively. They begin with a character who is somewhat unlikeable, such as Perkins in "Foxley," and slowly build sympathy towards that character, allowing the reader to sympathize with his or her plans and wishes. However, the character's plans are then foiled by the unexpected. On the other hand, other characters may start out as likeable, such as Drioli in "Skin," and have misfortune slowly begin to befall them, as Dahl builds suspense. Neither the unexpected in the former case or the suspense in the latter case is ever directly addressed; rather, Dahl simply hints at the unfortunate or gruesome outcomes that happen to his characters. The worst is never shown and, in this sense, is all the more terrifying.

Quotes

We all four of us took the game seriously, which is the only way to take it, and we played silently, intently, hardly speaking at all except to bid. (My Lady Love, My Dove)

"Such a nice man," she said. "He waved to me." (Dip in the Pool)

So you can see that I am, in every sense of the words, a contented commuter. (Galloping Foxley)

It wasn't more than a few weeks later that a picture by Soutine, of a woman's head, painted in an unusual manner, nicely framed and heavily varnished, turned up for sale in Buenos Aires. (Skin)

I'm dining with that crashing old bore Lionel Lampson. (Nunc Dimiltis, page 129)

I stuff all of my little pets myself when they pass away. (The Landlady, page 151)

"You left them in Mr. Schofield's study," she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. (Taste)

That's the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick. (Lamb to the Slaughter)

Topics for Discussion

In these stories, the "unexpected" often happens. Why are the stories so surprising? How does Dahl encourage this element of suspense?

How does the language that Dahl uses contribute to the themes of the unexpected?

Why does revenge feature so heavily in a series of stories supposedly about the unexpected in everyday life?

Discuss gender roles in these stories. In what way do women feature as products of their environment?

When gender roles are reversed, how does this change the nature of the story? Use "The Landlady" or "Neck" to support your thesis.

How do the visceral and the body feature in Dahl's stories? What is their significance, and how do they add to the uncanny effect of the stories?

Research Freud's essay on the Uncanny. In what ways do Dahl's stories play off - or contradict - these theories?

Are these stories dark, or humorous? Can they be both? How would you classify the genre of "Tales of the Unexpected"? Give details and examples to support your thesis.

In what ways does Dahl undermine traditional authority figures in his stories?