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Contemporary legends in the short stories of Roald Dahl¹

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The British writer Roald Dahl is perhaps best known as the author of children's classics such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), and *The Witches* (1983), but he also carved out a reputation for himself as the author of memorable short stories that have been collected and adapted for television as *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979-84). More than ten years after his death, Dahl (1916-90) is still one of the most famous writers in the world. His books have been translated into more than fifteen languages and have become worldwide bestsellers.

Throughout Dahl's literary work, folklore is a major source of inspiration. That his books for younger readers are inspired by folklore is obvious at first glance: witches, giants, talking animals and magic feature prominently in many of his children's books. Two of those, *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) and *Rhyme Stew* (1989), are adaptations of well known fairytales and nursery rhymes. *The Witches* (1983) may be read as a twist on the widespread subversion myth about a conspiracy of hook-nosed individuals, who plot to take over the world and do sinister things to children. *Esio Trot* (1990) is based on a classic practical joke: a woman is led to believe that her pet tortoise is growing at surprising speed; she is unaware of the fact that someone regularly substitutes a tortoise that is slightly bigger than the last one.² Although, as mentioned above, Dahl is perhaps best known for his children's books, in this essay I will focus on the way Roald Dahl used contemporary legends both as a conversationalist and as a writer of prose fiction.

Dahl's short stories and his two novels, *Sometime Never* (1948) and *My Uncle Oswald* (1980), are indebted to contemporary legends for anecdotes, episodes and story plots. But the similarities between Dahl's literary work and contemporary folklore go beyond the borrowing of story material. His short stories also resemble contemporary legends in their structure, subject matter, and mood. This family likeness makes them not so much literary *versions* of individual contemporary legends (though some are), as the literary *equivalent* of contemporary legends as a genre.

Conversational storytelling for profit and fun

Dahl's short stories typically began life in conversation. Roald Dahl liked to tell stories, and he told them well. People who heard him perform describe him as a gifted storyteller (Harskamp 1984). Contemporary legends disguised as personal experience narratives were part of his repertoire, as were his own short stories that he would give a test run by telling them as true stories to unsuspecting listeners (Treglown 1994:71).

Stories meant a great deal to him. They meant money, and they meant fame. In Dahl's writings, the connection between tall tales, fame, and money is a recurring theme: for example, he often told how he started his writing career by writing down his strangest adventure as an RAF fighter pilot for which he unexpectedly received a cheque for 1,000 dollars (Dahl 1977:224-29; Treglown 1994:52-53).

Roald Dahl used stories as currency. They paid his way into society; they even got him into the White House: during the war, when Dahl held the post of Assistant Air Attaché in Washington, Eleanor Roosevelt read his book *The Gremlins* (1943) to her grandchildren and invited him to dinner (Dahl 1977:231). Dahl was always looking for stories that he could "dine out on," but the way he used them makes one wonder whether he got invited to the same place more than once.

The Stomach Octopus

Roald Dahl loved to play the part of the Big Friendly Giant, but there was a nasty side to his personality as well. Most people Jeremy Treglown interviewed for his 1994 biography of Dahl agree that Dahl

was vain, demanding, sadistic and inclined to public tantrums. His American publisher Robert Gottlieb got so fed up with Dahl acting like a spoilt child that he even threatened to terminate his contract, which is remarkable, seeing that Dahl was one of his bestselling authors (1994:215-16).

As a storyteller, too, Dahl could be obnoxious, telling stories to badger and to bully. In a 1982 interview (Bibeb 1982) Dahl tells a story about a woman who swallows a tiny baby octopus while swimming in the sea—the octopus grows and lives in her stomach and ultimately has to be removed by a surgeon. It was told to him “a long time ago” by a publisher, the alleged victim being the nanny of the writer Rosamond Lehman. The story is a variant of the bosom-serpent legend—listed in Brunvand’s type-index as “Octopus eggs impregnate swimmer” (1993:331)—and seems to have been more popular in the twenties and thirties than nowadays.³ Dahl had used this story to upset a table companion who was eating smoked salmon:

“The sinister eyes of the octopus had already been noticed on the x-ray picture, but the animal turned out to be alive and fixated the surgeon with an unblinking stare[. . .] And do you know what food this nanny was particularly fond of, I asked the man who sat next to me—smoked salmon! No wonder he could not stomach his salmon. Ha ha.”⁴ [Bibeb 1982:7]

The very same story turns up in Dahl’s novel *My Uncle Oswald* (1980:78-80), where it is put to the same use by the narrator, Uncle Oswald.

Tapping the Admiral

“The Octopus in the Stomach” was not the only revolting story on Roald Dahl’s repertoire. When he met Franklin D. Roosevelt in the White House, he was delighted by the President’s love of pranks. As Dahl once told an interviewer: “Roosevelt had a quality that I share, a desire to shock” (Bibeb 1982:7). Roosevelt demonstrated this quality when he told his dinner guests a story about an Englishman

who died some time during the nineteenth century and was sent home from the colonies in a barrel of rum. After four weeks at sea, the captain notices an appalling stench. It turns out that the sailors have helped themselves to the rum every night. "Franklin Roosevelt let out a great roar of laughter. Several females at the table turned very pale and I saw them pushing their plates of boiled white fish gently away" (Dahl 1977:233).

"Tapping the admiral" (a.k.a. "The Corpse in the Cask") clearly was one of Dahl's favourites. He used it in a novel (*My Uncle Oswald*, 1980:80-82), an essay ("Lucky break: How I became a writer," in Dahl 1977), and in interviews (Bibeb 1982; Harskamp 1984).

The Crushed Dog

The most striking example of Dahl's antisocial storytelling is recorded in an interview by a Dutch journalist. In 1972, Dahl visited Amsterdam, where he found himself besieged by the press. When interviewed by Bibeb (her pen name), a Dutch journalist known for her soul-searching interviews, Dahl became irritated by her insistence on cruelty as one of his major themes. Later that same day, when Bibeb was present at his press conference, Dahl ignored her questions, told her that he had granted her enough of his precious time, and compared her to a ferocious animal that had sunk its teeth in his neck. Then, having made sure that his audience understood who he meant, Dahl told a story about a journalist who is so eager to secure an interview with a famous writer that she overlooks his little dog, sits on it and squashes it. She stuffs the dead dog into her handbag and on the way home she chucks its body in a trash bin. "But she's got the interview" (Bibeb 1980:148).

In most versions of this contemporary legend (known as "The Crushed Dog"), the person who kills the dog is a young man on a first time visit to his girlfriend's parents, and the dog belongs to his future in-laws. Presumably, Dahl knew the story and substituted the journalist for the fiancé (Brunvand 1989:135-37; 1993:277).

As these examples make clear, Dahl was, as a conversational storyteller, fond of stories with shock value. As a writer, he also exhibits the same quality. This made him a natural collector of contemporary

legends which are, moreover, the sorts of stories that typically possess another quality he appreciated—a tight plot.

Literary versions/literary equivalents: plot

Plot, in fact, was all-important to Dahl: “To me, the most important and difficult thing about writing fiction is to find the plot. Good original plots are very hard to come by” (Dahl 1977:233-34). Dahl was always hunting for story plots and when he found one, he held on tight: “The trick is to write it down at once, otherwise you forget it” (1977:234). Plots were so precious that he sometimes used them more than once. A frugal craftsman, Dahl would often recycle story material, making no firm distinction between his children’s and his adult audiences.

He gleaned ready-made plots from stories that people told him. Some of those stories were contemporary legends and thus found their way into his fiction. Trying to identify the sources of a writer like Roald Dahl is partly guesswork. It is almost impossible to follow the rules for the identification of folklore in literature laid down by Richard Dorson in 1957. Dorson asked for biographical, internal and corroborative evidence to show the author’s personal exposure to actual folk traditions. So, one would have to make sure that the legend in question was current where Dahl lived and that the corresponding short story or novel looks sufficiently like the legend to be sure that the legend was really its source, and, ideally, all of this would be confirmed by Dahl in interviews, in letters, or in his diary (Dorson 1957; Rosenberg 1991:57-58).

Sometimes, as in the case of the stomach octopus, it is possible to satisfy all these demands, sometimes it is not. In the end, however, as Daniel Barnes (1972) has observed in a paper on different versions of the bosom serpent legend, Dorson’s rules are important when studying literature with the expectation of finding a “faithful recording of folkways,” but less so when studying an author’s creative use of folklore. In order to compare Hawthorne’s story “Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent” with its folklore analogues, the student of literature does not need to know exactly which version of the “Bosom Serpent” Hawthorne knew or even if he had firsthand knowledge of the tradition.

Gremlin Folklore

In the case of Dahl's first book, *The Gremlins* (1943), the oral provenance of the material is obvious. During the war, Dahl, who had served in the RAF as a fighter pilot, wrote a children's book based on air force folklore.⁵ Originally written as a filmscript for Walt Disney, it was never made into a film but, in 1943, *The Gremlins* (originally titled *Gremlin Lore*) was published as a children's book with Disney's colour illustrations.⁶

In their mischievous meddlings with human affairs, gremlins resemble the fairies of older traditions. Sabotaging planes in mid-flight, causing engine trouble and other mechanical mishaps, they are like a supernatural Fifth Column, thus reducing tension between airmen and ground crews (Treglown 1994:57). Gremlins had been an established part of RAF lore since the twenties. Who coined the name is unknown, but the word *gremlins* first appeared in print in 1929 (Hobbs 1997:11).⁷

Under the pressure of war, it seems, the evolution of the species was speeded up and the personnel of Fighter and Bomber Command soon told stories about a whole fauna of specialized diminutive saboteurs, that (according to another wartime writer) included the "bomb-sight buglet," the "ground walloper," and the "Lincolnshire Gremlins." The last "are said to have particularly sharp teeth, and are very fond of biting the control wires" (Partridge 1948:176).⁸

During the war, Dahl had acknowledged the traditional nature of the gremlins, but later, he happily agreed with people who looked upon him as the inventor of both the species and their name (Treglown 1994:62-63). In newspaper and radio interviews and in his writings, Dahl claimed the invention for himself (Dahl 1977:229-31; Bakkenhoven 2004:49; Tjoeng 1982:260; Ward 1993:67-68).⁹

The gremlins also play a leading role in Dahl's science fiction novel *Sometime Never* (1948). It is his worst book by far, primarily because it lacks both a plot—problems of plot sometimes also shadowed his children's books which had to be re-plotted and sometimes rewritten by his editors (e.g. Treglown 1994:233)—and a protagonist. At his best as a short story writer, Dahl's second novel, *My Uncle Oswald* (1979), is more a series of anecdotes than a traditional novel.

"An African Story"

During the war, Dahl started writing short stories. Published in 1945, his collection *Over to You* contains a number of legend elements. Three are ghost stories ("Death of an Old Old Man," "Only This," and "Katina") and one ("They Shall Not Grow Old") is built around a pilot's near-death experience and vision of heaven. "An African Story" will serve as an example here. Set in 1939 Kenya, it is about an old man who lives in the Highlands of Kenya and owns a cow. He employs a farmhand called Judson. Judson is cruel to dogs, and for this the old man hates him. One day, the old man finds that his cow has no milk, so he sits up at night and keeps watch, expecting to catch a thief. Instead, a snake appears, the deadly black mamba, and drinks from the cow's udder. The old man, however, tells Judson that he has seen a thief and asks him to hide himself near the cow and to jump the thief when the old man shouts. When the snake shows itself, on the old man's sign Judson jumps it and is killed. The story is an early example of Dahl's preference for sadistic punishment.

Where did this story originate? Dahl himself probably added the decisive twist of revenge and deceit, but the milk-drinking snake is traditional. Dahl may have picked up this item of animal lore in Africa. Before the war, Dahl worked for the Shell Oil Company in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; in 1939, he enlisted in the RAF at Nairobi. The belief has been attested to in other parts of the continent:

We do not believe that cobras or any other snakes ever suck milk from cows. This tale is a good old die-hard and crops up from time to time with little variation of the details. A cow is reported as mysteriously "dry", a watch is set and the next night a large cobra is seen and killed. Its battered body is observed to exude "milk" (perhaps the contents of the eggs it was about to deposit in some warm manure heap) and the story receives a fresh impetus. During March, 1949, the *Cape Times* gave the account of an "eyewitness" who claimed that in his early youth he had seen two cobras drawing milk from a cow, one coiled up each hind leg. The snakes were killed and the cow long remained inconsolable at the loss of her scaly foster twins, with which she had kept a daily rendezvous in a distant corner of her field. [Rose 1950:247]

Maybe Dahl did not hear this story in Africa, but he may have come across it elsewhere because it is widespread and has a long history.¹⁰ Or he may have read it in a British newspaper. For example, in the *Daily Mirror*, 11 April 1938, appeared the following:

“Cow ‘mothers’ deadly snake”

Queer story came in from Reuter yesterday. A farmer near Capetown, it said, sat up one night to watch one of his cows because he suspected that her milk was being stolen.

After some time a long ringhals (flatheaded, deadly snake, like a cobra) came from the scrub and started drinking from the cow. The animal made no attempt to deter it. And when the snake had finished, the cow turned and licked its head.

The farmer considered there was something “unholy” in such a friendship. Next day he shot the cow.

I have no reason to doubt this. When I was living in South Africa I heard two similar stories. [Ives 1980:9]

On the whole, there is enough circumstantial evidence to say confidently that Dahl’s “An African Story” is inspired by folklore.

“The Ratcatcher”

After the war, when Dahl lived in Buckinghamshire, he made friends with the butcher Claud Taylor, who possessed valuable knowledge of country lore. Both men also shared a passion for poaching and for gambling on horses and greyhounds—in other words, for the country versions of the get-rich-quick schemes that obsessed Dahl all his life. Dahl wrote down Claud’s jokes, poaching yarns,¹¹ and pieces of rural lore and used some of them in the short stories he wrote in the late forties (Treglown 1994:76). Eventually, the Claud stories were collected in *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life* (1989).

One of those stories is about a sinister ratcatcher (“The Ratcatcher,” originally in *Someone Like You* (1962[1954])). To show off his skills, the man puts a rat tied to a string on the bonnet of a car and bets the narrator and his friend that he can kill the animal without using his hands. The ratcatcher wins; he kills the rat by biting its throat.

Just as Dahl's "The African Story" might be linked through newspaper reports with traditional versions, so might "The Ratcatcher":

"Horrible occupation"

A man named Malone, who was fined at Northampton yesterday for breaking hotel windows was said to earn his living by going from place to place exhibiting freshly-caught rats. These he tethered to a table with string, giving them a certain latitude, and then, with his hands tied tightly behind him, he fought and killed a rat with his teeth. Nine times out of ten he was said to succeed, but frequently the rat bit him severely. [*Daily Chronicle*, 1 September 1908, reproduced in Ives 1980:26]

Dahl's ratcatcher has an unhealthy appetite for rat's blood. But, according to his expert opinion, other people like it too: "Penny sticks and lickerish bootlaces is all made from rat's blood" (1962:208). In his autobiography, *Boy* (1986:29-31), Dahl elaborates on this contamination rumor: when little Roald was nine years old, his friend, Thwaites, told him that he should not eat liquorice bootlaces. When Thwaites' father, a doctor, had caught him eating a liquorice bootlace in bed, he told him that ratcatchers take their catch to the liquorice bootlace factory, where thousands of rats are dumped in a huge steel cauldron and boiled for several hours. The pulpy substance is steam-rolled into the shape of a huge black pancake, from which, finally, the bootlaces are cut.

Since other instances of this rumor are lacking in the literature, it could be something that was made up on the spot by Thwaites' father to stop his son from eating sweets in bed—or Dahl himself. But even if it is a fake rumor, it is hard to distinguish from the genuine article (the Kentucky Fried Rat, McDonald's Wormburgers, or the rumors about rat meat, dog meat and cat meat in Chinese meals).¹²

"Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat"

Bill Ellis praised Dahl for his "keen observation of performance dynamics" in his account of "Tapping the Admiral" as told by

President Roosevelt (1994:27). That Dahl had an implicit understanding of how and why contemporary legends are transmitted is borne out by his introduction to the story of "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat" (from *Kiss Kiss*, 1978[1959]). Here, Dahl uses the genre characteristics of contemporary legends to authenticate his story. In fact, without using the term legend, he presents his story as a contemporary legend.

Painting a sad picture of American manhood in the fifties, the first paragraphs demonstrate Dahl's trademark misogyny. The males of the species either work themselves to death trying to satisfy the pecuniary demands of their wives, or, if they survive, they are faced with a divorce and have to pay huge sums of alimony. The men huddle together in bars and clubs, drinking and trying "to comfort one another with stories." These stories are about cuckolded men who, by a cunning move, turn the tables on their adulterous spouses:

There are many of these stories going around, these wonderful wishful-thinking dreamworld inventions of the unhappy male, but most of them are too fatuous to be worth repeating, and far too fruity to be put down on paper. There is one however, that seems to be superior to the rest, particularly as it has the merit of being true. It is extremely popular with twice- or thrice-bitten males in search of solace, and if you are one of them, and if you haven't heard it before, you may enjoy the way it comes out. The story is called "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat", and it goes something like this:[. . .]" [Dahl 1978:86-87]

Dahl employs the standard rhetoric of the legend-teller, localizing his story and establishing its veracity. In the story that follows, Mrs. Bixby, a dentist's wife who lives in New York City, receives an awkward farewell present from her Baltimore lover, who is known as the Colonel. On the occasion of their last rendezvous, he gives her a beautiful mink coat. To obscure the origin of this expensive gift, she pawns it on the way home and hands the pawn ticket to her husband, telling him that she found it on the seat of a taxi. The next day, on his way to work, her unsuspecting husband walks into the pawn shop to redeem the ticket. Unable to wait any longer, Mrs Bixby hurries to

his office, but to her dismay, all she gets is “a ridiculous little fur neckpiece” (1978:101). The whitewash operation has failed, but she has to keep a pokerface. On the way out, she meets her husband’s assistant. “There was 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” (1978:102).

This story, with its clever twist and its themes of adultery, deceit and poetic justice, had already achieved the status of a classic by the time Dahl published it in 1959. It is included in a 1946 collection of “101 overused plots” and in a 1948 collection of anecdotes (Young 1946 and Cerf 1948); both are cited by Mikkelsen 2001. In Cerf’s version, the cuckolded husband returns from the pawnshop bringing a book (Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*). The story can also be found in Bill Scott’s collection of Australian urban legends (1996:144-45).

“Parson’s Pleasure”

Of the three short stories discussed so far, the plot of “Mrs Bixby” derives, in all probability, from a contemporary legend, “An African Story” has an obvious folkloric source, and “The Ratcatcher” is probably inspired by folklore. For the last story I would like to discuss in some detail, “Parson’s Pleasure” (*Kiss Kiss*, 1959), the link with legendry is more tenuous.

In the story, Mr. Boggis is an antique dealer from Chelsea, but he introduces himself to simple folk as a clergyman, the Reverend Boggis, president of the Society for the Preservation of Rare Furniture. One Sunday, visiting a farmhouse, he discovers an 18th-century Chippendale commode worth fifteen or twenty thousand pounds. He tells the owner that he could use the legs for a coffee table of his own, noting the rest is good only for firewood. He also tricks him into believing that the commode is a cheap reproduction and cannot be more than sixty years old. The owner agrees to part with the priceless piece of furniture for twenty pounds. Mr Boggis walks off to fetch his car and, in the meantime, worried that the commode will not fit in the car and Boggis will back out of the deal,

the owner and his friends neatly saw off the legs and smash the rest of it to pieces.

"Parson's Pleasure" has a folklore analogue in a story about a cunning antique dealer who gets his comeuppance in a similar way. It appears in two Dutch collections of folktales (Geldof 1979:196-97; Portnoy 1980:146, 213)¹³ and in a 1947 (first published in 1945) collection of anecdotes and legends (*Try and Stop Me*) by the American publisher and columnist, Bennett Cerf:

In front of an East Side delicatessen, a well-known art connoisseur noticed a mangy little kitten, lapping up milk from a saucer. The saucer, he realized with a start, was a rare and precious piece of pottery.

He sauntered into the store and offered two dollars for the cat. "It's not for sale," said the proprietor. "Look," said the collector, "the cat is dirty and undesirable, but I'm eccentric. I like cats that way. I'll raise my offer to five dollars." "It's a deal," said the proprietor, and pocketed the five-spot. "For that sum I'm sure you won't mind throwing in the saucer," said the connoisseur. "The kitten seems so happy drinking from it." "Nothing doing," said the proprietor firmly. "That's my lucky saucer. From that saucer, so far this week, I've sold thirty-four cats." [Cerf 1947:148]

"The Lucky Saucer" could be the inspiration for Dahl's short story, or it could be no more than an analogue. Still, there is sufficient reason for saying that "Parson's Pleasure" exhibits a family likeness to contemporary legends (as do Dahl's short stories in general). But Dahl's short stories have more in common with contemporary legends than a number of individual story plots. They also have the same structure and a similarity in subject and mood.

Literary versions/literary equivalents: structure

The similarities between contemporary legends and short stories have been noticed before. Daniel Barnes puts it succinctly:

In both urban legends and detective stories, what is to be discovered (un-covered) is the "real plot," as opposed to the

“apparent plot.” Plots themselves thereby become metaphors for mystery. [Barnes 1984:70]

Urban legend plots are unlike *Märchen* plots, but very much like detective plots or mystery plots—and Roald Dahl short story plots. The listener to “Snow White” knows that the old woman offering an apple is really the evil stepmother; the listener to “The Hairy-handed Hitch-hiker” does *not* know that the old woman asking for a ride is really the mad axe-murderer. Likewise, Dahl’s audience typically shares the innocence of his victims: the reader of “The Landlady” (*Kiss Kiss*, 1959) does *not* know that the nice old lady with her houseful of stuffed animals is really a psychopath who poisons and stuffs her lodgers.¹⁴

Writing about urban legends in *Folklore and Literature: Rival Siblings*, Bruce Rosenberg says:

The narrative relies on the revelation of the unexpected for its effect. Roles and/or situations are commonly reversed, and we the audience do not learn the true nature of the characters, who are defined by their intentions, until the end of the story. That revelation, in fact, determines the end.” [1991:233]

In contemporary legends, as in Dahl’s stories, the protagonists’ true identities usually remain hidden until the end of the story. In the legends, the pursuer turns out to be a good Samaritan, whereas the real killer is hiding on the backseat (“The Killer in the Backseat” in Brunvand 1984:58-59). Similarly, in Dahl’s “tales of the unexpected,” the old landlady is a homicidal maniac and the newborn baby, doted on by his mother, turns out to be little Adolf Hitler (“Genesis and Catastrophe,” in *Kiss Kiss*, 1978[1959]).

Literary versions/literary equivalents: subject matter and mood

The subject matter of Dahl’s short stories also has much in common with that of contemporary legends. Dahl’s short stories and his novel, *My Uncle Oswald*, like contemporary legends, are about snakes, rats, cannibalism, adultery, embarrassment, revenge, deceit, murder, dead

bodies, mutilation and aphrodisiacs. They are, in other words, about "the extremes of experience—unusual, bizarre, inexplicable, unexpected or threatening incidents," used by participants in the legend-telling situation "to explore, test, and redefine their perspectives on the 'real' world" (Ellis 2001:11-12).

Dahl treats these subjects with a mixture of the horror and humor that they share with a number of contemporary legends. In the legend of "The Runaway Grandmother," for example, the body of a recently deceased close relative is stolen by thieves. Summarized like this, it sounds like a story that must be universally regarded as completely unfunny; yet, it is usually treated as if it were hilarious. The same conflicting moods have been observed in Dahl's work: "[. . .] Roald Dahl seems early in his career to have recognized his own talent for playful horror rooted in a teasingly circumstantial reality that both supports and mocks bizarre narratives" (Kendle 1980:417).

Just as "The Runaway Grandmother" would not be out of place in one of Dahl's story collections, some of his stories would make successful contemporary legends. Take, for example, "The Visitor" (from *Switch Bitch*, 1974). The plot was suggested by Dahl's friend David Ogilvy, the advertising guru, who told it to Dahl as something that happened to a friend of his. This friend's car breaks down in the middle of the Sinai desert, but a rich man takes him home and introduces him to his beautiful wife and daughter. At night, a woman slips into his bed but, because of the dark, there is no telling whether she is the mother or the daughter. The next day, his host casually mentions his second daughter, who always keeps to her own apartment when visitors come to the house. "Why?" the guest asked. 'Oh, because she has leprosy'" (Treglown 1994:56).¹⁵

There is more than a hint of "Welcome to the AIDS Club" (also titled "Welcome to the World of AIDS" (Brunvand 1989:195-202) in "The Visitor," but in this case the possibility of a genetic connection between the contemporary legend and the short story is remote, the story having been published about fifteen years before the legend emerged. The folk imagination and Dahl's imagination, it seems, worked along the same lines.

Dahl's short stories as popular art

The fact that Dahl's short stories have so much in common with contemporary legends may be responsible for both their popular appeal and their lack of critical acclaim. Although there can be no doubt that Dahl was, and still is, a highly popular writer, he never received a prestigious literary prize for his short stories, and he is conspicuously absent from major books of literary history. He received his first British literary award only in 1983, when he was awarded the Whitbread Prize for *The Witches* (Treglown 1994:231).

The reason may be that his work shares both the genre characteristics and the low cultural status of legends. Numerous critics have compared Dahl's short stories and novels in uncomplimentary words to jokes, fairytales and urban legends. Dahl's novel, *My Uncle Oswald*, merited no more than a few lines in the *Times Literary Supplement* and was compared to "a joke of short story length" (Clayton 1979). Around 1960, the American critic Robert Phelps said that Dahl's short stories were like sick jokes: you can pass them on, but (as with such jokes) they do not bear a second reading. Dahl's characters, Phelps thought, were like the stereotypes of comic strips (Treglown 1994:122). Others have compared his stories to fairytales because of their black and white, flat characters. True, Dahl was not interested in character development, and in this respect, too, his stories resemble contemporary legends: "Characterization and its subsumed feature, psychological motivation, are to be found neither in most oral narratives nor in the romances. [. . .] Folk narratives today [. . .] rely heavily on active events—and repetition—for their effects" (Rosenberg 1991:149).

Finally, the British writer Jenny Diski, reviewing Dahl's biography, dismissed his short stories by saying:

Those stories for adults are clever, cruel [. . .] But they are, as Treglown points out, stories that can be extracted from their writing and told, all of them, like bar-room jokes. More than anything they are like those urban myths that go around, which have ghostly hitchhikers stopping a friend of a friend on a dark country road. They are indeed *tales*, which lose their capacity to shock in their desire to do little more than just that. [Diski 1994]

Diski's judgement is unduly harsh: there is more to Dahl's stories than their plot. "Parson's Pleasure," for example, is a twenty-four page short story, not a legend or a joke. The appeal is as much in its punchline as in the suspense and humor of the negotiations between Mr. Boggis and the farmer, with Boggis trying to convince the owner that his priceless Chippendale commode is really a cheap reproduction.

Diski's judgement is beside the point. She applies the standards of serious literature to stories that, for all their literary sophistication, could be argued to belong rather to popular art. In his study of folklore and popular art, *The Bosom Serpent*, Harold Schechter defines popular art as: "mass-produced art whose primary goal [. . .] is to reach out to (and into) the widest possible audience by telling a story that triggers a very basic and powerful emotional response: wonder or terror, laughter or tears, suspense or erotic arousal" (1988: 7-8).

Schechter's observations on popular art and folklore, although based on splatter films, horror comics and supermarket tabloids, can be applied to Dahl's stories as well. Considering the way serious and popular artists use folklore, Schechter writes:

The difference between the serious and the popular artist in relation to folklore is that, almost invariably, the former will utilize a folk motif as a way of achieving some larger (frequently thematic) end. [. . .] What we tend to get in popular works, on the other hand, is pure folklore cast, to be sure, in contemporary terms and communicated through sophisticated, technological means, but essentially unmodified. In short, whereas serious art transforms the raw material of folk literature, popular art simply transmits it. For the most part, popular narratives are nothing more (or less) than folk stories: the same spooky or amusing or salacious or cautionary tales that people have always wanted, or needed, to hear. [Schechter 1988:19]

"The same spooky or amusing or salacious or cautionary tales that people have always wanted, or needed, to hear"—Schechter could have been talking about Dahl's short stories. Compared to other,

more "serious" authors, Dahl indeed transmits, rather than transforms, "the raw material of folk literature." The only exception is his one attempt at a novel of ideas, *Sometime Never* (1948), in which the gremlins take over the earth after mankind has destroyed itself with nuclear and biological weapons. This pacifist novel was a complete failure, and Dahl never tried anything like it again.

Typical of the way Dahl used contemporary legends is the octopus story in *My Uncle Oswald*. He tells it straight, without hinting at a moral or symbolic dimension. In this respect he differs from the writers discussed by Daniel Barnes in his 1972 essay on the bosom serpent legend in literature. In Hawthorne's story, the snake is a symbol of the protagonist's selfishness; Hawthorne does not tell us whether it is really there or just imaginary. This sort of ambiguity is quite unlike the oral versions of the story and quite unlike the way Dahl tells it.

Conclusion

Contemporary legends appealed to Roald Dahl because his ambition was writing short stories that had the same sort of effect on his audience. He used legends in his short stories the way he used them in conversation, straightforwardly and with a desire to amuse and to shock.

In time, some of Dahl's short stories may turn into legends themselves: their plots remaining in circulation, as the memory of their literary origin and their author vanishes. Sometimes, when I mention contemporary legends, people will respond, "You mean like those stories by Roald Dahl?" and tell me his stories as if they were legends or jokes: "Do you know the one about the dealer in antique furniture who thinks he's going to make the deal of his life?" "Do you know the one about the man who is invited to this house in the desert and thinks that the woman who slips into his bedroom at night is his host's beautiful daughter?"

Ironically, the writer who craved fame and claimed credit for the gremlin folklore he did not invent may have to accept posthumously that the short stories he did invent are taken from him by the folk.

Notes

¹ I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Conference in Innsbruck in 1998.

² This vintage practical joke is mentioned by Caradec and Arnaud in their giant hoax encyclopedia (1964:317) and by Rose (1995:81), who draws on the book *Most Secret War* by R. V. Jones (1978). Like Dahl's rendering, all versions are set in Paris. Dahl had already used the same ploy in *The Twits* (1980), which features a size-changing walking-stick.

³ Brunvand 1984:110-11; Ives 1980:108 (reproducing a clipping from the English *Daily News* of 24 September 1924); Jacobson 1948:23 (a rumor that "flooded the Atlantic seaboard states in 1934").

⁴ All translations of Dutch sources are by me.

⁵ Dahl's first published work was sort of a legend, too. In his autobiography *Going Solo* (1986), Dahl tells how a lion carries off the wife of his African cook. She escapes unhurt; the lion has carried her as carefully as a cat carries her kittens:

The story of this strange happening with the lion spread in the end all over East Africa and it became a bit of a legend. And when I go back to Dar es Salaam about two weeks later, there was a letter waiting for me from the *East African Standard* (I think it was called) up in Nairobi asking if I would write my own eye-witness description of the incident. This I did and in time I received a cheque for five pounds from the newspaper for my first published work. [1986:49]

Note the connection of tall tale, fame, money, and boasting (Dahl's claiming to be the source of a legend).

⁶ This hard-to-find collector's item is reproduced in its entirety on <www.roalddahlfans.com>.

⁷ Cf. Partridge (1948), s.v. gremlin and spandule. In fact, the Walt Disney representative who drew up a report about the proposed animated film version of Dahl's gremlin book had his doubts about the name precisely because of this tradition. Because the creatures were not a product of Dahl's imagination, but were known throughout the RAF, he was worried that the name could not be copyrighted (Treglown 1994:58). These fears were not unfounded; others claimed to have been the first to

use the word “gremlin,” and other movie studios were working on gremlin films. At the same time, Warner Brothers was producing a film originally titled *The Gremlins from the Kremlin*, which has Russian gremlins sabotaging Hitler’s plane (Treglown 1994:58-59), and in the 1943 Bugs Bunny propaganda cartoon *Falling Hare*, Bugs battles a gremlin in a military airplane.

⁸ Eric Partridge’s *Dictionary of Air Force Slang* quotes Charles Graves’ 1943 book *Seven Pilots*:

“Then [. . .] there were spandules, who enjoy being tangled up in the airscrews. . . . Fortunately, however, they can only operate at 9,999 feet, so one is only vulnerable to them for a fraction of a second. By contrast, the Cavity Gremlin is a little brown job like a mole who lurks by the taxi track and makes a great big hole just as you are coming in to land. The Lincolnshire Gremlins are said to have particularly sharp teeth, and are very fond of biting the control wires.” [Partridge 1948:176]

⁹ One example, from a 1972 Dutch newspaper interview, notes:

“During the war, I had invented the sabotage chaps. Whenever something went wrong with a plane, I would say that the gremlins did it, a kind of malicious dwarfs. Their wives were called Fifinellas and their children Widgets. You know how a thing like that can catch on. After a time an aircraft couldn’t have the smallest problem, or everybody in the RAF would say: the gremlins have been at it again.” [Bakkenhoven 2004:49, my translation]

¹⁰ See, for example, Bermanni 1991:179-85, 400; Briggs 1991:765-66; Morris & Morris 1968:89-90; Poggio 1968:47 (Tale No. 30); Sébillot 1984:284-86.

¹¹ In “The Champion of the World” (from *Kiss Kiss*, 1978[1959]), poachers catch pheasants using raisins filled with sleeping pills as bait. The story makes a reappearance in Dahl’s children’s book *Danny the Champion of the World* (1975). Hunting geese and other birds with raisins soaked in strong liquor is identified as a legend motif in Van der Kooi’s index of Frisian folktales (1984:582).

¹² The same doctor’s son provides Dahl with the answer to the question: Why do Tonsil Ticklers, hard brown lozenges, smell so strongly of chloroform?:

"My father says Tonsil Ticklers were invented for dangerous prisoners in jail," he said. "They give them one with each meal and the chloroform makes them sleepy and stops them rioting."

"Yes," we said, "but why sell them to children?"

"It's a plot," Thwaites said. "A grown-up plot to keep us quiet." [Dahl 1986:33]

This makes for an interesting variation on the familiar rumour about the addition of saltpeter to the food of prison inmates, mental patients, and military conscripts.

¹³ In her early collection of contemporary legends, *Broodje Aap*, Ethel Portnoy mentions "Parson's Pleasure" as a variant of the "Lucky Saucer" story. She also gives another variant: in a tobacco shop, a professor of art history spots a painting by the famous Dutch artist Breitner and offers to buy it for a small sum. The shop owner says, "Professor, I'm amazed—can't you even recognize a Breitner?" (Portnoy 1980:213).

¹⁴ There are exceptions; in "An African Story," the reader knows all along that the old man tricks his farmhand into jumping a poisonous snake.

¹⁵ Does the second daughter exist? Wendy Doniger suggests another possible reading: "Did the host of 'The Visitor' invent the story of a leprous daughter to punish his guest for actually seducing the host's wife or daughter?" (2000:490).

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