

## **LOOKING INTO THE PATRIARCHAL WORLD OF ROALD DAHL'S SHORT STORY "TASTE" THROUGH AND BEYOND ITS NARRATOR**

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### **Abstract**

This article reflects on the presence of narrators in Roald Dahl's short stories for adults, especially those in which the account is carried out by one of the characters. After underlining a number of features common to these narratives, it's my aim to analyse the presence of the narrator in one of his most well-known short stories, "Taste", and my main contention is that a careful consideration of this presence enriches the reading of the story. Even though the narration is carried out by a secondary character, whose role in the development of events might be minimum, his participation as narrator/commentator of the events allows to address both gender and class issues; furthermore, John Berger's concept of gaze becomes a very useful element with which to uncover the narrator's sympathies with a society ruled by patriarchal and classist parameters.

**Keywords:** Roald Dahl, adult short stories, narrators and focalizers, gender, class.

### **Resumen**

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la presencia de los narradores en las historias cortas para adultos de Roald Dahl, de manera especial sobre aquellas en las que la narración está en boca de alguno de los propios personajes. Tras subrayar la presencia de elementos comunes a estas narraciones, mi propósito es analizar la presencia del narrador en uno de sus relatos más conocidos, "Taste", y mi principal hipótesis es que un análisis cuidadoso de su presencia enriquece en gran medida la lectura. Si bien la narración corre a cargo de un personaje secundario, cuyo papel en el desarrollo de la acción podría considerarse mínimo, su participación como narrador/comentador del relato permite abordar cuestiones de identidad, ya sea de género o clase; es más, el concepto de mirada de John Berger se muestra como un elemento muy útil para develar las simpatías del narrador con una sociedad rígida por parámetros patriarcales y clasistas.

**Palabras clave:** Roald Dahl, relatos para adultos, narradores y focalizadores, género, clase.

Laura Viñas's departing thesis in "The narrative voice in Roald Dahl's children's and adult books" is that Roald Dahl does not write very differently when he writes for children than when he writes for adults; Viñas proves her thesis by focusing on the role of the narrator, and after showing that in his

children's books the narrators could be defined as "intrusive, all-knowing and overtly in control of the narrative" (2008, 293), she then considers the presence of these same features in his stories for adults, contending that if there are any differences, these are to be seen in terms of gradation; thus, she also claims to provide evidence that Dahl is not an author with two heads. Given his zest for the macabre, I don't dislike this image of Dahl; my aim, however, is not to discuss this but to analyse one of his most well-known adult short stories, "Taste", and to do so by bringing attention to the role played by the narrator, whose attitude and comments on the events taking place allow a reading that raises class and gender issues, and thereby goes beyond a merely neutral account of the events surrounding a most unorthodox bet.

"Taste", which was first published individually in the March 1945 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* and a few years later in the *New Yorker*, on December 8 1951, was to become the opening story of his 1953 collection *Someone Like You*, which together with *Kiss, Kiss*, published six years later, are generally considered his best short-story volumes.<sup>1</sup> Although most of the twenty-six short stories included in these two collections are heterodiegetic narratives, that is, told by narrators not present in the story as characters, there is still a small group of ten stories that feature a narrator who is also a character in the story, what is popularly known as first-person narratives.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside his two countryside short stories,<sup>3</sup> the other eight stories could be seen as made up of two different groups. The first group consists of three stories ("Gallop Foxley", "Nunc Dimittis" and "George Porgy") which seem to answer to a similar narrative approach: the three autodiegetic narrators—that is, narrators who are also the central characters, the heroes, of their accounts (Genette, 1980, 245)—are William Perkins, a Repton former student, whose daily routine is suddenly disturbed when he believes to have recognised in the commuting train one of his bullying classmates; Lionel, a "wealthy, leisurely, middle-aged man of culture" (1970, 117) who lives on the fortune inherited from his father; and George, a vicar who defines himself as "in most respects a moderately well-matured and rounded individual" (165), three well positioned figures in society whose narrations aim to explain a series of extraordinary events in which they have been involved recently. These narratives go well beyond their authors'

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<sup>1</sup> *Over to You. Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying*, a worthy collection consisting mainly of fictional recreations of his experiences during World War II, had been published before, and two further collections, *Switch Bitch* and *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, would come later.

<sup>2</sup> Despite the wide acceptance of terms such as first- and third-person narrators, I am here following Genette's contention that "[i]nsofar as the narrator can at any instant intervene as such in the narrative, every narrating is, by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person [...] The real question is whether or not the narrator can use the first person to designate *one of his characters*" (1980, 244).

<sup>3</sup> These are "Claud's Dog" and "The Champion of the World": the latter, published in *Kiss, Kiss*, is an entirely different story that returns to Claud, the gas-attendant who is at the centre of the four loosely related stories known collectively as "Claud's Dog" and more concerned with portraying the habits and behaviours of rural lower middle-class Englanders. They were appropriately collected in *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*.

intentions, some kind of explanation or justification, and end up offering a rather accurate picture of their personalities: by the end of the story the reader comes to terms both with their instability as characters as well as their unreliability as narrators.

The second group would be made up of the remaining five, "Taste", "Man from the South", "My Lady Love, My Dove", "Neck" and "Poison", stories where the events are recounted by homodiegetic narrators, narrators who only play a secondary role (Genette, 1980, 245) and which are therefore, in principle, at a certain distance from the main events. In "My Lady Love, My Dove", a story about a couple who bug their guest's bedroom during a weekend visit and listen to their conversations, this is not completely so, as the plot revolves around a couple, one of them being the narrator; however, each member of the couple has a different role: the wife is the domineering character, the one who seems to drag her husband to do things he is not very sure/proud about, whereas the husband, pushed by his wife, is also the teller of the tale. With this exception, the other four stories would seem to conform with Viñas's contention that "some first-person narrators are merely eyewitnesses to the story; they keep to the background reporting what is happening without taking part in the action (2008, 302). Indeed, in "Poison", Timber is the character-narrator who tells the story of his housemate in India, Harry Pope, who believes to have a poisonous serpent in his bed and lies there terrified, unable to move but deeply transformed inside; "Neck" features as narrator a column writer telling about his visit to Sir and Lady Turton, a visit that ends in a symbolic beheading of Lady Turton by her husband, an apparently mild man who spends his time peacefully collecting art; and both "Taste" and "Man from the South" feature a nameless narrator who becomes witness to a bet, though no ordinary bet. "Taste" is the story of a dinner party where a traditional and innocent bet has skilfully been turned into a diabolical wager: the host has agreed to give his daughter's hand if the guest identifies the wine's breed and vintage, but if the guest fails, he agrees to sign over both of his houses. In "Man from the South", a pleasant afternoon by the pool quickly turns into a macabre scene: here the terms of the stake are set unmistakably from the start, when the old man proposes that if the young American's lighter works ten times in a row he will give him his Cadillac, but if it fails just once, he will chop off one of the sailor's little fingers.

Makman has underlined Dahl's proneness to include in his narratives elements such as gambling, wagers, and other games involving risk (1997, 217); indeed, the bet should be considered a recurrent element in Dahl's short fiction, both thematically and structurally. It may be a central element, as is the case of stories such as "Deep in the Pool", "My Lady, My Love" or "Mr Feasey", the last of the Claud series, or it may be of a lesser importance, subsidiary to the main action, as happens in "Neck" or the other Claud stories. When of primary importance, it also becomes an ideal ingredient around which to articulate stories with a discernible pattern, stories whose initial pleasant and civilised atmosphere suddenly dissolves as some of the central characters reveal a rather uncivilised behaviour, a process which usually brings with it a degree of implied violence

and surprise endings (West, 1992, 36). In “Taste” and “Man from the South” the likeness in the plot comes together with a similar narrative structure, as in both stories the narrators are secondary figures, first-hand witnesses to the events, and therefore with apparently little participation in them. This initial impression is what probably has led Viñas to state that

These first person eyewitnesses would be omniscient narrators were it not because the observations they make are introduced by an ‘I’ which reminds the reader that they are actually a character in the story. The role as mere spectators and onlookers of the unravelling events can be appreciated in the static actions they are associated with. Hence, “Taste” and “Man from the South” are full of ‘I saw’, ‘I noticed’, ‘I could see’, ‘I felt sure’, ‘I was conscious of’, ‘I thought’, ‘I stood watching them’, ‘I had a feeling’. (2008, 302-3)

But it is my contention that this equation between first-person eyewitnesses and omniscience is very questionable. To begin with, the very expression omniscient first-person narrators seems a little contradictory, an oxymoron, since the very presence of these narrators within the story would question their theoretical omniscience, the capacity of having complete or unlimited knowledge, awareness or understanding. In fact, this contradiction is not only theoretical but takes place on a practical level, as both nameless characters have acknowledged their fallible nature as narrators: in “Taste”, it does not take long for the narrator to state, when referring to one of the guests, that “there was something strange about his drawling and his boredom” (13), a feeling he underlines a little later when he affirms that “again I saw, or thought I saw, something distinctively disturbing about the man’s face (13); this situation is very similar to that which occurs in “Man from the South”, when the narrator openly confesses that he “didn’t know what to make of it all” (42), fully accepting that he has no complete knowledge or understanding of the events he faces. It would therefore seem that lack of omniscience is —and it could not be otherwise, independently of whether the narrator confesses or not— consubstantial with narrators inside the story.

More significant for my analysis is Viñas’s statement that these narrators could be thought of as mere spectators of the stories they tell. It is true that both stories begin with a narrator underlining his second-rate position in the events he is going to recount, of which he seems to have been a mere onlooker or spectator, a first-hand or privileged witness, a fact pinpointed by the use of the verb to see (“I could see that the table was laid for a feast” [9], in “Taste”, and “I could see the clusters of big brown nuts hanging down underneath he leaves” [35] in “Man from the South”). In “Taste”, to which I would like to narrow my analysis from now onwards, the presence of this “I could see”, shortly after the narrative begins, is entirely coherent with the opening scene, where the narrator wishes to introduce readers into his setting, and he does so in a rather conventional way, by offering himself as the eyes through which we are going to see the story. As a character, as a guest to this dinner, he might be thought of in terms of just a mere spectator or onlooker, but as a narrator this is not possible:

seeing and telling are two very different activities, as John Berger has made clear. John Berger begins *Ways of Seeing* by underlining the difference, the distance, between seeing and understanding, and explains that seeing is previous to understanding, and that the latter takes place when we try to put words to what we have seen (1977, 7).<sup>4</sup> Should this guest not be the narrator, his point of view would probably remain hidden for us, but being the narrator of the story, matters are different, since his words openly reveal his point of view, and thereby much of his own ideology; indeed, together with what we may imply from his comments on the evening events, his role is central as character focalizer,<sup>5</sup> since “to tell a story from a character’s point of view means to present the events as they are perceived, felt, interpreted and evaluated by her at a particular moment” (Niederhoff 2013). Even though a minor or secondary character, his are the words and eyes through which we perceive this dinner reunion, a gathering which offers a satire of the upper classes, of their behaviour, attitudes and values; and most importantly, by offering a portrait of this specific world, he inevitably reveals his own position in/towards this society, his social identity, very much defined in terms of gender and class.

“Taste” is certainly not one of Dahl’s paradigmatic stories if we think of his fiction in terms of grotesqueness and grimness, but it is faithful to Dahl’s intention of showing “a world not nearly as civilized as it makes out to be” (West, 1992, 43); in this case, this civilized world is that of the upper classes, of which the narrator does not feel too distant: “There were six of us to dinner that night at Mike Schofield’s house in London: Mike and his wife and daughter, my wife and I, and a man called Richard Pratt” (9). Despite underlining his presence in the story the truth is that his participation is very small. His real function as a guest is to look, to observe, to witness the events which he will later make into a story, and it is therefore not surprising that during the dinner he only intervenes once (in what is a completely irrelevant sentence, were it not because it hints at the surprise ending that closes the story), as if purposely having limited himself to the role of mere observer of an ordinary evening. It is Berger’s contention that the act of looking cannot be considered as a single event isolated in time, since the way we see things is affected by what we know or believe (1977, 8): when we look at something, and naturally try to understand it, our previous experience determines the way we construct meaning. In “Taste” the narrator opens his account with a presentation of the six diners, but very soon remembers that he “had been to dinner at Mike’s twice before when Richard Pratt was there, and on each occasion Mike and his wife had gone out of their way to produce a special meal for the famous gourmet [and] remembered that on both Richard Pratt’s previous visits Mike had played a little betting game with him over the claret”

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<sup>4</sup> Although John Berger’s unconventional book (a collection of seven essays based on the BBC television series) addresses questions about art and how we look at works of art, I believe that his reflections are still useful when applied to other spheres of our lives.

<sup>5</sup> The term was first coined by Genette (1980) thinking about amount of information or knowledge, but my use of it is more in line with Bal’s reinterpretation in terms of point of view (1988:100).

(9). It turns out that the narrator's guess is right, and shortly after these memories cross his mind the terms of the bet are established; in fact, although "Taste" seems to be the account of an upper-class dinner reunion, it almost centres exclusively around a bet: the cosy and agreeable atmosphere surrounding the dinner has been replaced by the tension and stress of this unorthodox game. The bet works as a kind of play inside the story: not only are the terms set, but also established the leading roles, given to Mike and Richard, as well as the supporting roles, one of them given to the narrator. The supporting roles basically amount to looking: "There was a pause while Pratt looked slowly around the table, first at me, then at the three women, each in turn. He appeared to be reminding us that we were witness to the offer" (14). This peripheral position is in fact a position of privilege from which he may observe and recount this very peculiar scene, and which allows him not to interfere in a situation which has its ethical implications; indeed, it would seem that Pratt's look has put the narrator in a position of safety, as he may just observe events and await an outcome: his role is just to look at the contest that host and guest wage. Nevertheless, it is my contention that this is not quite so: the bet is no irrelevant and innocent pastime, but it addresses issues of both gender and class identity, and it is my belief that the narrator's comfortable acceptance of the role given to him should be understood as a sign that underlines his own endorsement of, if not complicity with, the mechanisms that uphold society.

The bet certainly becomes a critical moment in the story, of a rather epiphanic nature; it is one of those typical moments in Dahl's stories when "very often seemingly respectable characters confronted with peculiar problems or opportunities and respond by committing, or at least contemplating, cruel or self-destructive acts" (West, 1992, 36). The quote applies fully here, since this idea of respectable characters committing cruel or self-destructive acts is especially true of both host and main guest, the two most prominent members of this upper-class microcosm, whose dark side seems to have surfaced here: their rivalry, their greed and cruel competitiveness; but it is also true in the sense that there are other people contemplating these cruel events, as is the case of the narrator and the three women sitting at the table, whose behaviour seems to have been characterised by a policy of non-interference. My interest lies here with the narrator, one of the silent contemplators, since it is his point of view that we get and therefore know. To the claim that he does not participate, I would like to bring forward Berger's statement (1977, 8) that the act of seeing is active, it is an act of choice, and more importantly for our purposes, that the act of seeing things is affected by what we believe; that is, we see and subsequently understand things by what we are, by our beliefs and opinions, by our own ideology and position in the world. It is my viewpoint that the narrator's position as witness reveals precisely his affinities, his comfort, with the circumstances in which he is involved, or rather, not involved. It is his lack of action as a character, his unproblematic presence as narrator, which gives him away.

In the first place, the bet clearly brings to the surface the power structures upon which Western society is founded. It initially does so by underlining that

one's place in society becomes essentially defined by one's wealth; indeed, when host and guest begin their game everyone at the table is very much aware that they are being automatically excluded from it, as they cannot afford to take part in such a competition. Although economic aspects are also addressed here, money, making a profit, is clearly not an issue here. Both host and guest are members of a similar social status, and when Pratt challenges him, 'So you don't want to increase the bet?', the host retorts, 'As far as I'm concerned, old man, I don't give a damn,' [...] 'I'll bet you anything you like (14). Host and guest might be rivals, but at the beginning of the bet they both share a common purpose, that of stressing their economic potential and therefore their superior social status. Naturally, their common interests do not hide the fact that they are also rivals, enemies; for Mr Schofield and Richard Pratt, this private contest has become a clash of greed and desire to humiliate one another, a fight of egos, of masculine egos, of machos. Once again, despite appearances, the bet brings both characters together, as it reveals that they share more similarities than differences; both are representatives of a patriarchal society and their battle for superiority is in fact a way of perpetuating the structures of this society.

West was one of the first critics to point out that Dahl's short stories were more and more concerned with portraying the relationship between men and women, especially within marriage, in terms of conflict and control; this is particularly true in his collection *Kiss, Kiss*, where most of the stories focus on the tense and unhappy relationships between men and women (44). Makman goes a little further and underlines Dahl's interest in turning his perverse gaze on domestic partnership in which power relations are imbalanced; however, she seems to argue that these violent behaviours, whereby "men and women play the roles of both victimizer and victim" (1997:218) are individual, and therefore not ascribed to an specific environment, to the social structures they inhabit. I believe that the analysis of this unorthodox wager is most fruitful if seen from a gender perspective: what is relevant is that both host and guest are men, and what is at stake is the host's daughter, in what is an explicit reminder that men and women do not relate to one another in terms of equality, but in terms of male superiority and female subordination, and it would seem that marriage has become one of the most effective tools with which society allots different roles to both men and women (Millet 1977).

Unexpectedly, the bet pivots around the daughter's future. The father, unable to refuse Richard Pratt's challenge, soon agrees on his daughter's price: conceived of as yet another commodity, he worth turns out to be two houses. The father, falsely claims that his real concern is his daughter's independence, and to the objections that she doesn't want two houses, he answers "Then sell them. Sell them back to him on the spot. I'll arrange all that for you. And then, just think of it, my dear, you'll be rich! You will be independent for the rest of our life!" (16). His words seem more like an afterthought, a way of justifying his despicable behaviour: his sudden concern for his daughter's independence is just a way of hiding his real intentions, which are to win the bet, to beat and humiliate his guest, whom he considers a *nouveau riche*. However unlikely the

marriage is to come through, it does reveal a number of questions: in the first place, that the daughter has undergone a process of cossification, proven by both the value given to her as well as by the way she is being passed down from father to potential husband, from former owner to present owner. Matters are made worse by the nature of this marriage, hinted at by the scene in which her attempt to light a cigarette receives Pratt's harsh, almost violent, reaction:

'Please!' he said. 'Please don't do that! It's a disgusting habit, to smoke at table!'

She looked up at him, still holding the burning match in one hand, the big slow eyes settling on his face, resting there a moment, moving away again, slow and contemptuous. She bent her head and blew out the match, but continued to hold the enlightened cigarette in her fingers.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' Pratt said, 'but I simply cannot have smoking at the table'. (19)

Logically, the marriage, after being transformed into a mere economic transaction, pure business, can only be just another element which brings to the light the different roles of men and women in a patriarchal society: men doing business, and women silently accepting. The whole evening not only shows how women are given the role of passive accepters, but it also reveals how this behaviour is learnt, transmitted from mothers to daughters. The mother's lack of objection to the bet is, to say the least, surprising: it is only when Louise says that she thinks this is silly, that the mother states "'[y]ou ought to be ashamed of yourself, Michael, ever suggesting such a thing! Your own daughter, too!'" (16). One may assume that the mother was conveniently silenced/married some time ago, and now she is witness to her daughter's similar process. After such a mild complaint, the reader more easily understands the daughter's similar acceptance of the whole affair: from her mother she has learnt that this is no big issue and from her father she has learnt her real worth: she agrees to the price put on her (her worth is two houses) and therefore accepts herself as just another commodity.

If we accept that the bet represents the unequal relationship between men and women, as well as the different roles assigned to each —men are active and decision makers, and women are passive and decision accepters— I would like to bring attention to what would seem a discordant element: the narrator, this nameless male whose eyes guide us throughout the whole evening. It is through his eyes that we, readers, have come to realise how both one's socio-economic status as well as one's gender define one's identity (and possibilities of action) in our Western society; furthermore, this story reveals that both concepts are interrelated, and that the lack of one of those elements affects the other. In the case of Mrs Schofield and Louise —upper-class citizens— it is their gender that conditions their (marginal) place in society whereas in the case of the narrator — a man— it is his inferior socio-economic status that conditions his gender. The narrator is part of the group of diners seated around the table, and, being a man,



one is forced to question his involvement, or rather, lack of involvement, in such an unethical bet. There is little doubt that his silence is explained on account of his socio-economic status: an acquaintance of the host, he is clearly no match, a fact perhaps underlined by his lack of name. But what I find most revealing is how the narrator refers to his passivity, his silence, not in terms of his (lack of) wealth, but by stating his proximity to the female world, and thereby unconsciously putting his own masculinity at stake: 'the three women and I sat quietly, watching the two men' (14). This comment, which might initially pass unnoticed, is a most accurate description of his position in society: he might be a man, but he has been forced to align himself with the women and therefore his role is accordingly more that of a woman: sitting down, passively and silently, and watching the two men. In this hierarchical organization of society one would well understand that the wife of such a man should deserve few comments; indeed, of the diners around the table she is certainly the most marginal member: she does not belong to the upper classes and is a woman. It is therefore not surprising that she remains utterly silent and invisible throughout the dinner, a lack of presence which is further underlined by not even having been given a name (by her own husband, the narrator himself!).

The bet, especially all the evening in which it occurs, also offers a picture of a society rigidly structured by social classes: the six diners, on the one hand, and the maid, on the other. Class tension is present in the story from the very beginning, initially through this private game —staged by the two most prominent members of society and witnessed by the others— but more importantly through the presence of the maid. Not only is she the person who has full responsibility for a perfect development of the evening, in the end she also proves to be crucial for uncovering Richard Pratt's scheme, thus further "serving" her own masters. But again, I would like to support this reading by paying attention to the way in which this character has remained invisible throughout the story; that is, how the narrator has "chosen not to see" this character, thus revealing his own class consciousness and thereby his own special participation in the story, or rather, when seeing/understanding the story. There is little doubt that she has been there all the time, physically present, within the visual frame of each and every diner but she is hardly referred to or acknowledged by anyone: her presence, defined exclusively by her social function, is taken for granted. There are only two occasions in which the narrator feels it is necessary to refer to her: the first time when he explains that once they had finished their fish, "the maid came round removing the plates. When she came to Pratt, she saw that he had not yet touched his food, so she hesitated, and Pratt *noticed her*. He waved her away, broke off his conversation, and quickly began to eat" (my italics, 11). This quote is significant because it underlines the air of superiority felt by Pratt, and probably shared by the other diners, revealed both by the way he dismisses her and also by the word *noticed*, which implies that the maid does not deserve to be looked at, does not deserve to be seen, considered or understood, she is just 'noticed', passingly, as a nuisance in this case. It is not only Pratt who notices her, but also the narrator, who at one moment states that "I *noticed* the maid standing in the background holding a dish

of vegetable, wondering whether to come forward with them or not” (my italics, 14). The maid’s hesitant attitude, on both occasions, underlines her weak social status, which is further emphasized by the way she is perceived by the others. But the evening progresses and the bet takes an unexpected turn, which brings events to a moment of extreme tension, and it is at this precise instant that the maid claims to be seen, not only noticed, but fully perceived and, what is more, listened to:

Then this happened: the maid, the tiny, erect figure of the maid in her white-and-black uniform, was standing beside Richard Pratt, holding something out in her hand. ‘I believe these are yours, sir,’ she said.

[...]

‘Yes, sir, they’re yours.’ The maid was an elderly woman – nearer seventy than sixty – a faithful family retainer of many years’ standing. She put the spectacles down on the table beside him.

[...]

But the maid didn’t go away. She remained standing beside and slightly behind Richard Pratt, and there was something so unusual in her manner and in the way she stood there, small, motionless and erect, that I for one found myself watching her with a sudden apprehension. (22)

The maid has finally forced herself into the foreground, and once there, when she has everybody’s full attention, she utters the words that bring about the unexpected ending: “‘You left them in Mr Schofield’s study,’ she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. ‘On top of the green filing cabinet in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner’” (23). The maid’s words reveal Pratt’s scheme (that he had previously been to Mr Schofield’s study, and had thereby acquired the information with which to set the bet to his advantage), but specially they shed light on his true nature, his most despicable nature. The maid’s presence also reveals that, despite its title, this story is not so much about taste and tasting, but about a very different sense, sight and seeing. That the unexpected ending comes about as a result of a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles —forgotten by the main guest, Richard Pratt, in the study— is a clear reminder that seeing is one of the central concepts of this short story. Indeed, “Taste” addresses the issue of seeing in a number of ways: ironically, it is the maid, the socially inferior, (defined as a “faithful family retainer of many year’s standing”), who manages to see better than the other diners (the host, his wife and their daughter) her socially superiors. Further irony stems from the fact that she acquires this vital piece of information from her invisibility, that is, from her inferiority.

A first approach to Dahl’s stories usually privileges those elements that help entertain or shock readers, whether it is in term of content, by using macabre situations and black humour, or form, by using unexpected twists of the plot and anticlimactic endings. This, together with the absence of any actual bloodshed

might prevent readers from realising the conservatism that abounds in his stories.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention that in the case of Dahl's homodiegetic short stories — "Taste", as well as the other stories in which Dahl uses this same formula, "My Lady Love, My Dove", "Neck", "Poison" and "Man from the South"— the reader is further manipulated by the presence of a narrator who also works as a character focalizer (Bal, 1988, 102): indeed, the narrators uncritical comments towards the events taking place in each of these short stories only further stress their own traditional point of view: the passivity that characterises their reaction is an explicit signal that their gaze feels at ease and even endorses the prevalent social structures and behaviours. Therefore, one of the most effective ways of showing the deep-rooted conservatism of these short stories is to scrutinise the figure of the narrator, especially in his role of peripheral character focalizer, which turns out to be one of the most effective ways of counteracting his manipulative capacity.

In "Taste", the evening offers a mild satire of the upper classes' behaviour, shown to be ruled mainly by sexist and classist principles, and although the narrator seems only the camera through which we have access to this peculiar world, the truth is that his passivity, his inaction, his lack of reactions to the events taking place only reveal his conformity and comfort with the general status quo; my point is that his narration is no neutral account of events but a tool which further reveals gender distinctions and reinforces class distinctions. The nameless narrator can in no way be considered a mere witness, an onlooker: as to gender relationships, through his narration he has unconsciously questioned his male identity, having been forced to side with the female characters; as to class issues, he has also been forced to redefine his position as narrator, opening the visual frame he was using at the beginning of the story, and allowing some space to see the maid, thereby considering her relevance and understanding her presence.

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<sup>6</sup> Inevitably, the recurrent use of this narrative strategy seems to open up the path to question Dahl's own conservative ideology; conservatism which has already been pointed out when analysing specific issues such as his use of satire (Holindalle 1999) and fantasy (Hunt 2012).

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