



## Understanding the Significance and Purpose of Violence in the Short Stories of Roald Dahl

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### Abstract

In this article I argue for new meaning and critical importance to be given to Dahl's short story in his most successful collections *Someone Like You*, *Kiss, Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* by systematising and accounting for its portrayed violence. I first outline the history, importance and contemporary significance of Dahl's short stories. I then show that a strange puzzle attaches itself to these stories: that a number of inconsistent accounts have been attempted in order to explain the tantalisingly meaningful violence within them. I see such attempts to account for the violence and meanings of Dahl's adult writing as failures and argue that they do not critically engage with the recurring contexts and forms of the violence or Dahl's own suggestions for its occurrence. I then remedy such critical deficiencies through an application of the psychoanalytical method and more adequately reformulate the violence by uncovering its relation to unconscious processes which repress innate desires, demonstrating that psychoanalytical theories of repression can engage with and contribute to understanding the significance of the violence, which is predicated on taboo relations between son and mother. I thus rethink the meaning and architecture of the stories psychoanalytically, suggesting for them a new claim for attention.

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### Introduction

#### *Dahl's Short Stories: The Critical Reception*

Roald Dahl's most successful short stories are a savage, sophisticated fusion of stylistic, formal and thematic elements derived from the American short fiction of Edgar Allen Poe, O. Henry and Ernest Hemingway. Such stories combine taut economy with a vivid eye for detail, an elegance of writing and a real virtuosity in plotting. They are also eminently imitable because they characteristically brandish an unexpected, remarkable and quite unforgettable

conclusion. For this reason, these stories are introduced to students of creative writing across Great Britain as master-works of the form, or as models to be aspired to. Dahl's short story has long enjoyed such success and influence, for at their height in the late 1940s and 1950s his collections *Someone Like You*, *Kiss, Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* were remarkable for being best-sellers in a market dominated by novels and autobiographies. His stories seem to have sold all over the world in a number of different languages and they seem to have made Dahl into something of a celebrity (Howard 2004). Some of them were even translated onto the small-screen by Alfred Hitchcock, where they went out to a world-wide audience in the form of *Tales of the Unexpected*. The stories were clearly influential and Philip Howard describes them as "trendsetters of the fashionable 1960s genre of black comedy" (Howard 2004). Their mark may be discerned in other important works of the period such as Ernest Bloch's *Psycho*, which resembles Dahl's short story 'The Landlady' to a remarkable degree and also incorporates the type of unexpected ending Dahl most favoured. The critical reception Dahl's work purchased in this period seems almost unanimously in his favour. He received three prestigious Writers of America's Edgar Allen Poe Awards for the stories and newspapers saw in his work a great achievement. An unsigned reviewer in *Books and Booksmen* described Dahl as "a master of horror" (Warren 1988: 19) and James Kelly acclaimed him in *The New York Times* as "the complete short story writer" (Kelly 1953: VII, 5).

It has now been almost seventy years since the short stories achieved for Dahl "immense popularity as well as critical acclaim" (West 1992: 20). Today, although Dahl is best known for his children's books and "there is considerable disagreement about the overall quality of Dahl's short fiction and the duration of his most successful literary period" (Grigsby 1994: 41), Dahl continues to enjoy popularity and critical standing for his adult short stories. The entire collection has recently been republished as a 'World Classic' in the prestigious Everyman's library as a reflection of the ongoing attention that the work receives and in a recent review of the reissued collection, Dennis Drabelle writes that Dahl has "a magician's touch unsurpassed in 20th-century fiction" (Drabelle 2006). Indeed, the stories in *Someone Like You* and *Kiss, Kiss* have been used to support the claim that Dahl "merits canonical-writer status in literary history" (Grigsby 1994: 44). Alan Warren has similarly written that the stories

*have earned (Dahl) an enviable niche, not only in the genre of mystery/suspense fiction, but among the great short story writers of the twentieth century, including James Joyce, Frank O'Connor, Saki, John Collier, Katherine Mansfield, John Cheever and Ernest Hemingway, among others* (Warren 1988: 9).

Jeremy Treglown echoes this in his biography of Dahl, writing that a “handful of his stories for adults are among the most memorable written by a British author since the beginning of the Second World War” (Treglown 1994: 8). A quotation from a review of *The Times* on the back cover of Dahl’s *Collected Short Stories* claims that he is “(o)ne of the most widely read and influential writers of our generation” and similarly, the *Observer* calls him nothing less than “(t)he absolute master of the twist-in-the-tale”.

Yet, for all the praise lavished upon Dahl, for all the astonishment and excitement at his excellence, for all his influence, in reading his most successful collections *Someone Like You*, *Kiss, Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* there has been an element of sheer incomprehension. I have never been able to decide quite what these short stories of Dahl’s are about; to see any immediate social concern expressed in the work, or any clues as to its other relevance. Indeed, it is possible to wonder if the stories are somehow meant to defeat comprehension. As Jeremy Treglown related in his biography of Dahl, when Ernest Hemingway was asked by Dahl what he thought about the collection of stories he had just given him, Hemingway replied that he did not understand them. Since Hemingway’s reply, however, there have been a small number of critical accounts concerning the meaning of Dahl’s work in the three collections I have mentioned, although it is hardly fashionable to read Dahl academically. Such accounts have been useful to a degree in furthering the understanding of this work of Dahl’s, but there remains a central mystery in the three collections: Dahl’s seemingly inexplicable violence towards his characters.

#### *Critical Accounts of Dahl’s Violence: Overview and Assessment*

In his study of Dahl, Alan Warren writes, “(t)his is the quintessential Dahl story: swift, sardonic – and savage” (Warren 1988: 10). John Grigsby clarifies the point: “Roald Dahl’s stories always have a nasty sting in the tail” (Grigsby 1994: 47). Dahl’s ‘savagery’, or imaginary violence, is indeed an integral part of his short story, as has been widely recognized, but this same violence has also intrigued and perplexed critics and Dahl seems to have evaded any direct questions about it in order to keep the central mystery of the stories intact. Because, or in spite of such a situation, there have arisen a number of attempts to account for the violence in *Someone Like You*, *Kiss, Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* and thus to explain the collected stories away. However, I am not convinced that these accounts are reliable. I will show why I see such accounts as misguided, but must first set out what they argue.

It seems to me that the most popular critical account of Dahl’s violence is that it is essentially moral. Naomi Lewis, of *The New Statesman*, writes of the stories that: “These really are moral tales. Go wrong and you get some very peculiar deserts” (Warren 1998: 10). Similarly, J.D. O’Hara in *The New Republic* writes that:

*Our Supreme Master of Wickedness doesn't know enough about the subject. He is not wicked, not even tempting. In three of the four stories of Switch Bitch, he's not even titillating, since the villains get their comeuppance. He is no longer willing to leave the reader with a vision of nastiness triumphant* (O' Hara 1974: 23).

In a similar vein, Dahl's violence has been theorised as the natural end product of a selfishness and self-centredness (West 1992: 48) which causes characters to lose their moral bearings (West 1992: 37). Mark West has claimed that, in fact, the cruelty of Dahl's stories is based in an investigation of "unusual forms of self-destructive behaviour" (West 1992: 35). Again, most recently, Robert Carrick has suggested that Dahl's "cruelty is seldom gratuitous; it is used to establish a character's despicable nature, and it is usually repaid in kind or worse" (Carrick 2002: 40). However, in stark contrast to these latter readings, which have been most charitable regarding Dahl's intentions, there has also been a second branch of criticism which has explained Dahl's violence "as sadistic, antisocial, and misogynist" (Howard 2004). This branch of criticism has seen the "outlandishly unexpected" nature of Dahl's violence (Warren 1985: 121) to interrupt its rehabilitation into a morally-driven, retribution-based framework. For example, an unnamed reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 11 June 1954 commented that *Someone Like You* has "real narrative ingenuity" but noted the presence of "morbidly and a certain irresponsible cruelty" (Carrick 2002: 40). Victoria Glendinning in *The New Statesman* saw the stories of *Switch Bitch* as violent and unadulterated pornographic fantasies against women, which use a masquerade of morality in order to placate 'lechers' (Glendinning 1974). The difficulty of reading morality into Dahl's work has also resulted in two other reactions to Dahl's work. Some commentators have simply such a reading and have "stated flatly that Dahl, at least in his adult fiction, is unconcerned with morality" (Warren 1998: 10). Malcolm Bradbury, in the *New York Times Book Review*, for example, described Dahl as "no moralist, no profound seer-but a true craftsman" (Warren 1998: 10). Dahl's cruelty is described by such critics as based on stylisation, not meaning. Similarly focusing on the haphazard nature of Dahl's violence, but seeing meaning in this very unpredictability of violence, there has been a branch of criticism which has located Dahl's violence in his personal experiences and world-view. The randomness of the violence is seen to describe Dahl's perspective on life, informed by horrifying chance experiences. For example, Michael Billington guesses that the writer's preoccupation with revenge and sadomasochistic relationships arose from the lashing and other forms of sanctioned brutality Mr. Dahl experienced while a pupil at an English private school (Billington 1990).

Similarly, John Grigsby writes that:

(t)he essential traits of Dahl's perspective and thus his fiction derive from ghastly, horrifying experiences, so it is not surprising that the fiction is bizarre, fantastic, and even grotesque to some (Grigsby 1994: 41).

The violence has therefore been seen variously as moral, sadistic and anti-social, purely aesthetic, or chaotic and existential. There have thus been four major and separate, indeed radically incompatible accounts of what Dahl's violence means - if indeed it means anything at all. It would seem that Dahl's violence has been satisfactorily understood and explained. However, arguably, such accounts do not seem to proceed from serious engagement with the work but, rather, bring their own preconceptions into it. This is reflected by the apparent failure of criticism in appreciating the contexts in which Dahl's violence takes place and the sources from which it springs in the stories. For example, it is clear that Dahl's violence usually involves "some kind of revenge, usually of man on woman or woman on man" (Vannatta 1985: 86). However, apart from the criticism which sees Dahl's work as misogynistic, none of the other branches of criticism have taken this issue of violence arising out of existing gender relations into account.

Even beyond such crucial substantive issues concerning the source, context, and situation of violence, critics have largely ignored Dahl's own theorisation of his work, treating him as an incapable reader of what he has himself created, or as somehow ignorant of its meaning. However, Dahl's discussion of his short stories seems to have crucial weight in understanding its meaning. Such discussion has been rare, but in an early interview, Dahl insisted quite significantly that his writing was "profoundly fascinated and probably influenced" (Wintle and Fisher 1974: 111) by Ambrose Bierce's short story 'The Death of Halpin Frayser'. This story tells, in an indirect manner involving a few obtuse detectives and a disjointed narrative, of a young man who leaves home for a few weeks despite a premonition of foreboding that his devoted mother confides in him. In his absence, her throat is cut by another man and she dies. Halpin avenges her and then wanders through life as a vagrant. The following choice passage reveals that this story, in fact, finds meaning in the unconscious conflict between what psychoanalysis describes as 'innate' incestuous desires and conventional asexual understandings of the relationship of mother and son:

*Between [Halpin] and his mother was the most perfect sympathy...She had always taken care to conceal her weakness from all eyes but those of him who shared it. Their common guilt in respect of that was an added tie between them. If in Halpin's youth his mother had 'spoiled' him he had assuredly done his part toward being spoiled. As he grew to...manhood...the attachment between him and his beautiful mother...became yearly stronger and more tender. In these two romantic natures was manifest in a signal way that neglected phenomenon, the dominance of the sexual element in all the relations of life,*

*strengthening, softening and beautifying even those of consanguinity. The two were nearly inseparable, and by strangers observing their manners were not infrequently mistaken for lovers* (Bierce 1926: pp 14-15).

Dahl, then, confesses a fascination with this short story which resolves an incestuous relationship or desire between a mother and her son through the space of violence. Indeed, he admits that it has probably influenced his work, indicating that the violence in his short stories may similarly act to resolve the desire of a son for a mother, an obvious taboo within society and, from a post-Freudian perspective, an obvious target for repression.

*Reformulating Dahl's Violence: Psychoanalytical Readings*

The scrutiny of the short story Dahl found most influential seems to invite a psychoanalytic reading of his own work. It suggests that his short stories may be best approached as the unconscious working out of a conflict between a son's desire for his mother and normative expectations of mother-son relationships through imagined violence – a process which reconciles the individual to culture. Psychoanalytical thought itself conceptualises violence as having the most intimate, innate relationship with subjectivity, sexuality and unconscious conflict, although analysts disagree on the exact nature of 'aggressivity' and its relation to other drives (Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986: 59). An understanding of the repression and libidinal nature of violence amidst competition for resources characterises Freud's earliest thinking on the Oedipus conflict and the castration complex but his later thinking on violence and its interaction with culture is really the flowering of his thought on this topic. Melanie Klein quickly picked up on the hints in this later work of Freud's to insist on the prominent role played by the (orally-based) aggressive drives from the earliest stages of infancy to write that violence in cultural production could be understood as a jealous "attack on the mother's body and the father's penis in it" (Klein 1986: 86a), an attack in which the subject's dominant aim is "to possess himself of the contents of the mother's body and to destroy her by means of every weapon which sadism can command" (Klein 1986: 95b). Jacques Lacan, with his usual grudging dependency on both Freudian and Kleinian theory, and his characteristically obscure translation of important psychoanalytical concepts, reiterated the importance of symbolic violence in his short summary on this "central knot of ambivalent aggressiveness" (Lacan 2006: 93) which he termed

*... the tendency correlated with a mode of identification I call narcissistic, which determines the formal structure of man's ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world* (Lacan 2006: 89).

Psychoanalytical readings of imaginary violence – even from this brief summary - can therefore be seen to argue that 'murderous impulses' in the

child's mind and in the unconscious as "the still living infantile mind" persisting into adulthood (Jones 1949: 75) cannot be understood according to preconceived, 'mature' or 'rational' standards. Indeed, such impulses must be understood in consideration of "the perverse logic of the unconscious" (Easthope 1999: pp. 127-8). Psychoanalytical readings see murderous impulses created as a fantasy in the workings of the unconscious as conflict-based and functional. They are merely intended to remove a source of human conflict or anxiety between the innate impulses of the child and the gratification of those impulses, or to achieve some kind of imagined autonomy or mastery over the mother's body. The imaginary violence is seen to work first and most firmly in the competition for resources that comes with the familiar order, the negotiation of which art is seen to return to again and again. And of course, psychoanalysts also stress that unconscious mental connections between conflict and murderous impulses are made inaccessible to the consciousness, because of an active process of 'repression' in which the individual unconsciously conceals this active, innate mental material which is

*...most disapproved of by the particular circle of society to whose influence he has chiefly been subjected during the period when his character was being formed* (Jones 1949: 57).

A synthesis of the psychoanalytic reading which incorporates all of these insights therefore suggests that Dahl's imaginary violence may be best reformulated as communicating to and functioning in connection with competition, subjectivity and an outlawed sexuality that persists in the unconscious. According to this synthesis of psychoanalysis, Dahl's fictional violence may be best understood as organised around ideas of sexuality and mastery and the point of entry into Dahl's text as repressed incestuous or transgressing desire may be able to more adequately reformulate the imaginary violence and the central mystery of the stories. This reformulation, I argue, can in fact be established through a consideration of the short stories which contain a surprising, final, ambiguous violence in Dahl's major collections *Someone Like You*, *Kiss, Kiss* and *Switch Bitch* which I will refer to in a recent edition of *The Collected Short Stories of Roald Dahl* (hereafter referred to as CSS). I will establish that the narrative context and function of this imaginary violence in each of the collections in turn is predicated upon taboo mother and son relations and repressed desire for mastery through a discussion of specific acts of violence committed against a body which seem to arise out of a relationship which are encountered in the short stories. My article aims to show that imaginary violence is a crucial point in Dahl's discourse of repression and that, beyond their entertainment value, Dahl's short stories present an opportunity to better understand the workings of the unconscious and the ongoing formation of subjectivity within literature or culture.

## Psychoanalysing Violence in Dahl's Short Story Narrative

### *Narrative and Repressed Violence in Someone Like You*

In *Someone Like You*, the earliest of Dahl's three major collections and the one that signified his break with the realistic, war-based short stories of *Over To You*, the two short stories which contain a final, unexpected, specific act of violence against a body which seems to arise from a relationship are 'Skin' and 'Man from the South'. It can easily be shown that this violence is familiarised. All of these stories involve, at least, a reference to a relationship between a boy and a maternal figure, whether this is explicit or mostly obscure. For example, in 'Skin', the boy is the artist Soutine and the maternal figure is the wife of his early patron, Drioli. In 'Man from the South', the boy is the American and the maternal figure is the wife of the sinister old man.

I argue that one can see a trend developing in the stories which connects the violence to symbolic incest and the issue of control in a symbolic son and mother relationship. For example, in 'Skin', that parable of fleecing and being fleeced, that story of 'hide and seek' which tells the wolf from the sheep and which ends with an uncertainty as to whether Drioli, the former art patron, has been slaughtered and skinned for the valuable tattoo on his back - or sacrificed like a lamb to culture - violence can be shown to find being in the son's restricted movements around the pivotal, all-powerful figure of the mother. First of all, the violence seems initiated by the father's manipulation of the desire of his dependent, the boy painter Soutine for the maternal figure Josie, Drioli's wife. Drioli manipulates the boy Soutine's desire for his wife as he "knew he only had to mention his wife and the boy's thick brown lips would loosen and begin to quiver" (CSS 522). The overly dependent son's desire for the mother - along with his state of submissive intoxication or altered consciousness - is essential in creating the originally worthless tattoo (the taboo) which, making Drioli into a human 'coin' through the exploitation of the son, portrays the image of the mother's head, or the 'Queen's' head.<sup>1</sup> Soutine the painter agrees to tattoo Drioli, the obstruction to his desire, only to invest his skin with the image of the maternal figure, the object of his desire - a sexual act against the canvas of the father through a weak, consensual, superficial act of symbolic violence. The process by which the tattoo is etched onto Drioli, the patron, the father, is as emphatically violent as it is coital, phallic and superficial: "the needle jumps up and down and punctures the skin and the ink goes in and there you are" (CSS 523). Tattooing - tabooing - the sexual act as it stands under the dominance of the father - therefore seems to be the indulgence of a 'cultured stabbing', a weak, repressed phallic hatred of the dependent son against the canvas of the powerful father who is the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth became Queen upon the death of her father, George VI, on 6 February 1952. 'Skin' was first published just a few months later in *The New Yorker* on 17th May 1952 and besides the allusion to the physical change in currency in the story, the collection *Someone Like You* seems to respond in several ways to this transference of power from the King to the Queen.

obstruction to wealth and a union with the mother. The tattooing or tabooing process – the sexual act as well as the economic transaction of art - produces a cultural artefact which is “twisted, tortured” (CSS 525), an unresolved product of violence, madness and pain which is hidden upon the hide and which reconciles the body to culture. It is suggested in the story that this repression of desire and violence must take place in the place of the father – Drioli’s home – but, of course, when Drioli, now a vagrant widower – the father without the possession (or protection) of the mother - enters an art gallery which is saturated with the spirit, the aura of Soutine through his artwork – the place where the son’s power seems absolute, unlimited, Drioli becomes completely the captive to another’s desire and will. Drioli submits to the son’s desire and will of violence and mastery when the painting of the mother’s body which has become clothed, ‘crinkled’ and ‘squashed’ upon the form of the father (CSS 527) - in other words, repressed - is restored to its blazing intensity in an uncanny return as the hidden in the hide comes out of hiding.

The contextualisation of the ending of the story reveals the significance of the indirectly portrayed violence. In the story’s ending, it is Drioli, the sacrificial beast of burden or ‘lamb to the slaughter’ that becomes the child. Under the son’s imagined seizure of the power of the mother’s body (as the painting of the mother begins to belong to the famous artist rather than the obdurate canvas of the father and to take value) it is he the father who becomes like the son. His lips become loose and wet, as Soutine’s had become in the contemplation of Drioli’s wife (CSS 531); it is now Drioli who diminishes, whose form becomes shrunken, while Soutine, who is absent, presumably dead in fact, is resurrected and nonetheless gains the stature of fame and achievement (CSS 527). It is Drioli that now becomes the dependent, the victim, the sheep. He becomes the prey of a hunger who must sell himself in order to satiate it. Drioli is the coin that must be spent, or bought to value. Indeed, the skin must be taken off his back in the economic transaction or he must be ‘ripped off’. Thus, the patron of the artist becomes the patronised, the exploiter becomes the exploited – the fleecer is fleeced by a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Drioli is constructed as becoming the victim of Soutine, the son who has become the father, although through the indirect agency of a disguised, art dealer and through the putting together of ambiguous insinuations in the reader’s mind, for it is nowhere clear that Drioli is dead; it is only eminently probable. Yet, notwithstanding the hint of uncertainty, towards the end of the story, Drioli seems to have been marked by Soutine, the son as the father, as an object of excoriation, as useless flesh occupying the place of the son’s mastery - his artistic fame and wealth as part of his symbolic possession of the mother’s body and the creative resources which flow from it. Indeed, in some wise the son-father-shepherd’s posthumous skinning of the sheep-son-father reflects a confused imaginary position of (Christian) God-like mastery.

The violence that is insinuated in the story’s end therefore seems to unfold of itself in the reader’s mind: the father and at once the son becomes a living

body to be wrenched from ‘the frame’ of the immensely valuable tattoo or taboo – the sexual act - the sign of the mother - which captures the desire of the son for the mother and banks immense imaginary power; that space in flesh that consummates the total desire of the son for the mother including the desire for individualised mastery through the possession of her body. Clearly then, the violence does not resolve the tension between desire and fear. It is ambiguous. It is the father become son that is removed from the unified consummation of the mother and the father: in the violence the son both has his way with the mother and also does not have his way with her. Thus there is both pleasure and pain involved in the violence that is to be (re)constructed by the reader – for the son, the presumed subject of identification, and the father, the presumed rival, are both sacrificed to the aesthetic. Violence signifies doubly between father and son so that anxiety and ecstasy become combined. Not less significantly, the suggestion of violence is also provoked by the image of the mother’s ‘head’ (CSS 531), not simply her portrait. The corporeality behind the image of the mother’s body is stressed in order to stage the suggested violence. Thus the mother’s body sets the scene in this story of violence and power. Such determinations lead to the conclusion that violence itself is coordinate with a story of power relations and an attempt at freedom and individuation: the son’s pursuit not only of the sexual satisfaction and nourishment of a mother’s body but also of the imagined, individualised mastery or power this body is thought to give him, especially vis-à-vis his parents, or their bodies. It is notable that the bodies of son and father around the central body of the mother are all joined at the skin in the story to be paradoxically separated and unified as discrete bodies and tangled bodily constellations in its ambiguous and doubly signifying end. In the unfolding of the story’s own palimpsest through repressed violence the reader witnesses a frustrated grasping of power and a failed cleaving of the son from the powerful mother and father as a discrete body of self-sufficient energy or force.

‘Man from the South’ also seems to link the emerging violence with repressed sexual desire of the son for the mother in a similarly oblique manner. Violence again can be seen to pursue the coordinates of the imagined power banked in the mother’s body. This story begins with a ‘boy’ and a girl (CSS 463) observed in a swimming pool and the narrator relates that they seem to be ‘getting on’ with each other rather well in their semi-nude, frolicking state. The boy is clearly the infant because in the narrative he is a naval cadet who comes to land and thus he is like a baby who is slowly weaned away from the liquidity of milk and the capricious, child-bearing ‘ship’ of the mother’s body towards the solidity of food and the predictability of land (under his own two feet and direction). In this stage of proceedings an ‘old man’, a father figure, intrudes upon the scene, which seems to stand for sexual intercourse, given the conjunction of nudity, play, exercise and communion. In fact, the old man comes at the exact point in the story when the male subject ‘takes the plunge’ and there is the most obvious allusion to the sexual act:

*The American sailors were getting on nicely with the English girls. They'd reached the stage where they were diving under the water and tipping them up by their legs (CSS 463).*

The old man who has already interrupted coitus is soon described in a manner which suggests that he is obsessed with castration: he “produced a knife which had a small scissors in it and he snipped the end off the cigar” (CSS 464). Evidently, the father holds the power of castration because he holds the scissors – those leg-like instruments of the ‘V’ – the vagina. He seems to ‘possess’ the mother because he carries her sign upon his person as in ‘Skin’. Indeed he carries the ‘small’ scissor – the vagina and the power of castration through consumption or devouring of the child which stems from it - within his penis, within his knife. Not surprisingly, the old man traps the boy, who wants to impress the girl, into a gamble for nothing less than a shiny, new Cadillac (CSS 464), a phallic object of incredible status, allure and power as well as the key symbol of independence or individuation in the modern Western world. The gamble is based upon the flaming of a lighter or upon fire – a common symbol for sexual excitation within the western literary tradition – and the boy must stake the little finger on his left hand in order to fulfil his side of the bet and put up his own substitute for the penis. The value behind the gamble therefore becomes clear: (sexualised) mastery and individuation. The son may either play the part of the (symbolically) castrated under the sexual dominance of the father or the position may be reversed, since the father would lose the car if he lost the bet on the son’s virility. Whilst in the middle of proceedings which must decide the outcome of the bet, now more clearly than ever, the maternal figure interrupts:

*...the door opened. We all turned and we saw a woman standing in the doorway, a small, black-haired woman, rather old...She grabbed (the old man's) wrist, took the chopper from him, threw it on the bed, took hold of the little man by the lapels of his white suit and began shaking him very vigorously, talking to him fast and loud and fiercely all the time in some Spanish-sounding language. She shook him so fast you couldn't see him any more. He became a faint, misty, quickly moving outline, like the spokes of a turning wheel (CSS 471).*

The matriarchal figure ruins the father’s game. The mother, the real power-bearer, thus puts paid to the dominance of the father and the mother thus reveals that the father’s gamble is illegitimate. The old man, the father figure, cannot offer the boy the Cadillac; it is hers. He “has nothing to bet with” (CSS 472). Sexual power and mastery itself – which emanates from the vagina in the imaginary of the son - seems to reside with the mother, or to be her gift to give and the narrator of the story immediately offers to give her back the key to her

car – it is she who is capable of igniting sexual desire and conferring the power of dominant sexuality, she who one wants to submit the clearly smaller and inferior phallic object to.

‘Man from the South’ can then be seen up to this stage as a tale about the sexual competition of a boy and a castrating father for the mother and independence and it also seems as though the girl in the swimming pool represents a carefully concealed substitute or splitting of the maternal figure which can be represented as explicitly sexual to the conscious mind. But violence also has another context which must not be ignored: the betraying or rejecting mother. The violence is finally initiated in the text by the powerful mother’s rejection of the ‘puny’ child and his small penis and closes (just as it ambiguously reopens) his presumed attempt at mastery and individuation from the parental body. This is the context of the violence in the story which is now introduced, most indirectly, by the body of the powerful, rejecting and deciding maternal figure when, in response to the son’s sexual advance of offering the small phallus and thus laying his own cards down upon the table, in gambling fashion, she *shows her own hand*, the hand of power:

She looked up at the boy and she smiled, a slow sad smile, and she came over and put out a hand to take the key from the table.

*I can see it now, that hand of hers; it had only one finger on it, and a thumb (CSS 472).*

This shocking conclusion to the story, in which the maternal figure’s mutilated hand is revealed, when she gives the presumptuous infant ‘the back of her hand’, when she seizes mastery and individuation from the infant, combines to suggest to the reader a moment of violence, of castration, of making the child dependent, but indirectly. Because Dahl has so intricately devised an impression in the reader of the means by which the old man carves off the fingers of his victims beforehand (CSS pp. 468 - 470), the moment of violence institutes itself in the mind of the reader by an association of the mutilation, the effect of the violence, with its cause, firstly, at the hands of the old man upon the child, which the mother now also represents. The mutilations are doubly shocking because they seem to signify a symbolic castration and a diminishing of power. The hand has fingers which seem to represent the phallus and the hand itself is also an object of power, but the mutilated hand of one finger and a thumb is disabled, cut across with emptiness or non-being. Secondly, the hand that the mother shows also contains a threat from her: it is a pincer. Thus, when the object of desire is presented, when the mother’s body is seen, it becomes mutilated or confused with the (cannibalistic) threat that the father and the mother represent to the child’s body. Instead of resolving the repressed sexual desire of the son for the mother, the indirectly revealed violence through the mutilation of the mother’s hand acts to confuse the situation, to riddle it with anxiety. Mutilation makes incestuous desire linger

and pre-empts the son from occupying the position of mastery vis-à-vis father or mother. Repressed violence in fact, as in 'Skin', confuses the respective positions of mastery of all concerned by conjoining all bodies. The son's desire for the mother and the mastery over her body therefore seems to transform into an anxiety of castration and disgust, of great tension which centres upon a confusing image playing around the mother and the triangular familial body. Thus, in this story, as in 'Man from the South', the never explicitly uttered violence acts as a conduit which brings together the desire and ambition of the son around the mother's body image, but also describes the mother-son union and the son's usurpation or violation of and cleaving from the powerful mother's body as both desirable and disgusting, as irreconcilable.

The violence in *Someone Like You* therefore seems to act to extend the desire of the son for mastery, individuation, freedom and the mother 'beyond the text'. The ambiguous ritual of the "repressed violence" seems to tie together fantasy, anxiety, ambition, sexuality, taboo and disgust into an associative, imagistic, hallucinatory moment involving the participation of both Dahl and the reader. At this stage of Dahl's writing, the repressed violence lingers over the imagined body of the mother in the text (although it technically conjoins all familial bodies in a triangle mass) and the aspect of the repressed violence which prolongs the desire of the son for the mother's body largely melts into an affect of disgust. The father appears as a significant actor in the ritual of violent repression and it is violence in the immediate moment or in the past that is repressed; the skinning and mutilation are violent (exploitative) acts that have already occurred.

#### *Narrative and Repressed Violence in Kiss, Kiss*

In Dahl's next collection, *Kiss, Kiss*, the stories become increasingly preoccupied with violence, but as we shall see, this violence begins to take on a different shape, although it again follows along the coordinates of a pursuit of the mother and mastery. The collection is marked by violence. In 'Parson's Pleasure', as a notable example, the violence is discharged by a son 'severing' the legs off of a chest and then "fiercely attacking the legless carcass of the commode" (CSS 69) at the behest of his father, frustrating an otherwise successful swindle. The collection also includes the brutal story of 'Pig' where the orphaned seventeen year old Lexington is initiated into the carnal pleasure of meat, a stand-in for a cannibalistic, consumerist sexuality, when his grandmother the maternal substitute dies and he is progressively exploited in the city until, finally, he is presented for consumption or cannibalisation himself, served up or sacrificed to the hostile, capitalistic world of the father as nothing more than flesh. However, the collection only contains one short story which contains a specific act of violence directed against a body which seems to arise from a particular relationship, 'The Landlady'.

In 'The Landlady', a short story which is, amongst other things, concerned with a game of 'peek-a-boo' between son and mother or the aggression and power of the look and the exploitative reductions or mutilations it is capable of as an instrument of sexual excitation, the subject of identification seems to be Billy Weaver, an anxious boy who is seventeen years old (CSS 3). Billy is scared of women, seeing them as dominant sexual 'tyrants':

*He had never stayed in any boarding-houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up images of...rapacious landladies* (CSS 4).

Billy Weaver now strays in the text from the path dictated by the father, represented by Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London (CSS 3) into a ruined house, which reflects, no doubt, the mother's body which he has thought he has overcome. Withdrawing himself from being the servant of the father into the consoling living of the unnamed (the unnameable) Landlady – forsaking even his identity through the forgetfulness of the mother - Billy is led further and further into the seductive bondage of the angry, hungry eye – the hypnotising symbol of the mother's vagina. He is lured into this trap of visual violence by the landlady, a maternal figure who looks "exactly like the mother of one's best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for Christmas holidays" (CSS 5):

*He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell* (CSS 4).

The bed and breakfast, the (sexual) comfort and nourishment of the Landlady, the body of the mother, are all too alluring for Billy who now moves fully into the part of the overly dependent child while the Landlady begins to play the part of the overanxious or overprotective mother who cannot allow the son to leave her home and side. Through the resources that the mother, or more precisely the mother's body can offer, through the large, controlling, black, vaginal eye the mother seems actually to exert a powerful magic upon Billy: "(t)he compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow her into the house was extraordinarily strong" (CSS 5). Billy thus becomes a subject in a domestic scene, the "nest" of the mother (CSS 5) where she is all powerful. Here, Billy becomes flesh. He becomes a sexual object and the mother appraises his body

from head to toe territorially, subjecting him to a sexualised, powerful visual violence. The mother hints at future incestuous, transgressing relations, or ‘the breaking of laws’ (CSS 6). Billy discovers that he is entering a transitional site where two other boys have already been initiated to the ‘heaven’ of the third floor by the mother, a serial killer, or serial temptress. As the story begins to move to a close, it begins to seem as though the mother is drugging Billy through drink or even poisoning him – recovering her total control of his biology and feeding and ushering him through an altered state of consciousness into the reality of things. In this other reality the web of the mother’s eye - her vagina, her magic, nourishment and sexuality is invisible, irresistible and fatal. It is at this suspenseful moment that the violence, the promise of future violence erupts into the close of the story, not allowing the release of any tension, but prolonging it. The captive Billy asks the mother if there have been no guests here except for himself in the last two or three years and:

*Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile. ‘No, my dear,’ she said. ‘Only you.’ (CSS 11)*

This casually invoked drawing out of the suspense in the story, this repressed violence, looks forward from the text to the future initiation of Billy into sex, ecstasy and death, a horrifying, but simultaneously desirable state which cannot explicitly be rendered or communicated, but which is the gradual accumulation of the hints dropped into the story in the reader’s mind. We imagine through the context of the violence that Billy is to be transformed into a stuffed corpse for the visual delectation of the mother. What is noticeable is the exaggeration and ambiguous sexualised reversal of the positions of son and mother through the shape of the violence. The mother is to ‘stuff’ the son – to feed the son beyond limit. However, ‘stuffing’ in the manner of taxidermy – the creative filling of the body’s interior with objects – is also clearly a creative phallic act associated with an imaginary reversal of the roles of son and mother which ‘impregnates’ the son or fills him with a mother’s essence. The son’s rooting to the domestic sphere through the mother’s violence – which casts her as an ingenious artist - also bears the mark of gender inversion because one must remember that when the story was written most (middle-class) women were housewives, not actors in ‘the public sphere’. The mother’s look is full of suggestive violence in this paradoxical ending, but we share and confuse the mother’s look of suggestive violence as she looks forward to the son’s body: the reader’s simultaneous scrutiny of the mother’s body provokes the sense of impending horror as we focus in an intense moment of confused mental ‘snapshots’ upon the son’s body to be transformed and the conflict written upon the mother’s body image: her (vaginal) eyes and smile, which are contrasted as both sharp ‘corners’ and ‘gentleness’. The repressed violence therefore intrudes once again upon the final sexual consummation of the son

with the mother and the desire for union with her body, but it also draws out the anxieties and pleasures of transgressing this powerful taboo, tantalising the reader with an image of the desirable vagina alongside the bad, ‘cutting’ or consuming vagina and making him occupy the multi-identificatory position of the ensnared, threatened son and the dominant mother. Once again, the presentation of the violence censors the actual scene, but it can also be seen that in the story the son submits almost completely to the sexualised dominance of the mother, just as it can be seen that the violence precipitates an identification of the son (the reader) with the powerful mother. Not only this but there seems to be virtually no desire for individuation from the mother’s body that is evident in the text. In fact, the son clearly wants to become the mother. The only freedom that is desired is freedom from the father. Submission to the maternal body is therefore just past the violent, ambiguous, open crack in the story’s end.

It may be seen then, that violence functions in *Kiss, Kiss* as in *Someone Like You*, preventing the incestuous and usurping act of the son’s possession over the mother and the assumption of mastery vis-à-vis the father from actually taking place, but that it now takes on a different, more disturbing shape. In general, the ritual of violence bypasses the active, personified father-figure (as no doubt, the father’s death is desired and imaginarily enacted) and the desire for autonomy and individuation or integrity from the mother’s body and is a violence that will be instituted in the future. The violence is therefore repressed because only a premature hint of it is given; it hangs over the story’s ‘end’ and is simply temporally repressed in the narrative. The violence is the allusion to, or the covering over of, a future scene of violence allied to the sexual union or consummation of the body of the son with the body of the mother, which involves not only hurt and death, but also ecstasy and power. There is also another contrast of this form of violence to that of *Someone Like You*. The incestuous, usurping and transgressing desire in *Kiss, Kiss* seems to have become greater in the articulation of this violence or foreground and disgust for the transgressing union with the mother now seem to occupy a diminished position in the text.

#### *Narrative and Repressed Violence in Switch Bitch*

In *Switch Bitch*, the violence emerges in an overtly deadly form for the last time before Dahl’s most tame later collection of short stories *Eight Further Tales of the Unexpected*. However, it is more pronounced in its difference to the preceding types of violence in *Someone Like You* and *Kiss, Kiss*, a difference, perhaps, which should be immediately evident from the misogynistic title of this collection and from the fact that some of the stories were first published in *Playboy*.

In *Switch Bitch*, violence seems to emerge in the ‘The Last Act’. In this latter story, the conjoined body of mother and son is punished by imaginary, individualising, misogynistic violence, thus forbidding from the text the

identification of the son (the subject) with the mother. In the beginning of the story, Anna is released from the physical possession of the father, who has died. Initially, Anna cannot bear the loss. She has an ‘intense’ and ‘overwhelming’ attachment to her dead spouse (CSS 389). Anna now becomes self-punishing, suicidal, eager to rejoin the father in the grave (or the symbolic order). She is only able to come out of her masochistic depression and to begin to move back into the domestic sphere because of the love and attention of her children. However, a new catastrophe now strikes Anna:

*... Her female children leave and get married... And then, to put the lid on everything, her beloved Billy, who had just turned eighteen, went off to begin his first year at Yale (CSS 390).*

When Anna’s son Billy leaves, Anna again becomes suicidal. Anna again desires reunion with the father: she is “impatient to join him” (CSS 392). She wants to ‘sacrifice’ herself to the father so that her anxiety is relieved. It is just after this renewed anxiety that Anna finds herself rescued by work in an adoption agency. Anna now seems to be recast in the role of the overly powerful, betraying mother because what now keeps her living is going to type for an adoption agency, filling in paperwork for mothers who are giving up their children and ‘solving’ this ‘problem’ for them, work which ‘hooks’ and ‘absorbs’ her (CSS 393). Anna thus becomes the rejecting or powerful, unapproachable mother: it is in fact her duty to reject children, to reject the son.

It is at this point in the narrative that Anna is called to Dallas for a technical issue, as one of the rejected boys has had to be sent back to the adoption agency. Here, Anna reunites with her old high-school sweetheart Conrad, one of the Texans who are described by Dahl as “dangerous children who go about trying to imitate their grandfathers” (CSS 395) and who possess a kind of sham “professional benevolence” (CSS 395). That Conrad is a kind of resurrection of Billy or the child is now emphasised in the story. Dahl constructs Conrad’s history with Anna in a similar manner to her relationship with Billy, her son. Anna and Conrad we learn used to be sweethearts in high school:

*They were both about seventeen then, and Conrad had been her beau, her love, her everything. For over a year they had gone around together and each of them had sworn eternal loyalty to the other, with marriage in the near future. Then suddenly Ed Cooper had flashed into her life, and that, of course, had been the end of the romance with Conrad (CSS 396).*

Like Billy, Anna’s son, Conrad and Anna had parted company about the time that Conrad had turned eighteen. Like Billy, Conrad the ‘sexless’ or repressed boy who would not ‘neck’ (CSS 397) has been rejected by Anna for the (sexually dominant) father. Furthermore, we are told that Conrad hasn’t aged

at all in the last twenty-five years, although Anna now looks her age (CSS 400). Conrad therefore looks like Billy, the son, and Anna looks like the mother. So it seems that Anna the mother has returned to Billy the son, to a new negotiation of the imagined mother-son (bodily) relationship.

After a dialogue in which Conrad is established as Billy, as the son – and as the father the (sex-obsessed) doctor too (the son as the father - echoing the other sex-obsessed doctor in the story, Dr Jacobs) - and in which he hypocritically, enviously, manifests a concern for the continuing sexual prowess of the mother as well as the imagined ‘wealth’ of her uterus and her reproductive function, Conrad now extracts from her the information that she has been thinking again of Ed, the father, or feeling guilty and contemplating suicide by razor blade: that she is in ‘danger’ (CSS 402). He now persuades Anna the mother through an altered state of consciousness – through alcohol – to move into another plane of reality where role players return to their “unfinished business” (CSS 405) (because Anna’s rejection has almost destroyed him although Anna perceptively, remaining in her role as the mother, terms his reaction to her rejection as the ‘crossness’ of a child (CSS 405)). The scene now shifts to the bedroom of a hotel where Conrad, still substantially the son, is a “trespasser” (CSS 407) on the father’s ‘territory’ of the mother. But Conrad is a conjoined figure: he is also the doctor, the father, in this sexual “plot” (CSS 407) or ‘operation’ against the mother (the military cadence of an ambush is by no means lost on the reader) (CSS 408). At the exact point that Anna and Conrad, that are on one level mother and son, are to consummate transgressing desire, ‘The Final Act’ is unfinalised - it is interrupted and undermined by ‘another voice’:

*...in the middle of it all, somewhere above her, she heard another voice, and this other voice grew louder and louder, more and more insistent, demanding to be heard... (CSS 411)*

Conrad’s voice, a seemingly supernatural voice, ‘this other voice’, transforms into the voice of the angry father rather than that of the son. Anna hears the voice of the father and he now treats Anna like a child, not as a powerful mother (CSS 412), dropping his false ‘benevolence’. Almost divinely, an obstruction to intercourse arises in the body of the mother itself, which the son cannot penetrate. Anna is now described as being ‘pinned’ or caught in the ‘phallic grip’ of a ‘huge’, ‘strong’, an ‘amphibian’ father figure, the son become father (CSS pp. 412 - 3), a being who is also a doctor that has complete mastery over the body and represses hers completely, “gripping and grasping and refusing to let go” (CSS pp. 412 - 3). The father, the doctor, now tells Anna that she has ‘senile vaginitis’ – he clinically, symbolically takes away her sexual confidence, her vagina and her power, marking its dying or decline in power. It is at this point in the story that the repressed sexualised violence, explicitly referred to as “the kill” (CSS pp. 410 - 411) emerges. One remembers

throughout the story that Dahl has described Anna's depression, her suicidal tendencies and her morbid fascination with razor blades. He has also included a confession of hers to Conrad that she has recently been re-experiencing suicidal thoughts. Dahl now writes that Anna in the bathroom:

*...was crying 'Ed! ... Ed! ... Ed! ...' in a queer supplicating voice. The door shut. Conrad lay very still listening to the sounds that came from behind the door. At first, he heard only the sobbing of the woman, but a few seconds later, above the sobbing, he heard the sharp metallic click of a cupboard being opened. Instantly, he sat up and vaulted off the bed and began to dress himself with great speed. His clothes, so neatly folded, lay ready at hand, and it took him no more than a couple of minutes to put them on. When that was done, he crossed to the mirror and wiped the lipstick off his face with a handkerchief. He took a comb from his pocket and ran it through his fine black hair. He walked once round the bed to see if he had forgotten anything, and then, carefully, like a man who is tiptoeing from a room where a child is sleeping, he moved out into the corridor, closing the door softly behind him (CSS 413).*

The still ambiguous, never certain, repressed violence in this remarkable ending hovers over the future – Anna's lonely, supplicating suicide or lacerating symbolic castration by cutting open her wrists on a razor blade - and the ambiguously rendered self-destruction of the mother, or her removal by the divine hand of the Father can be seen to interrupt the scene of a transgressing sexual consummation or conjoining with the son. In fact, this misogynistic violence removes both mother and child from the scene leaving only the male individual, the father: it is significant that Anna is described, albeit somewhat indirectly, in the last breath as a 'child'. This removal of the mother and the child mirrors the pattern in the previous short stories in intruding upon the overthrow of the taboo relation and the usurpation of the mother's body by the son. Idiosyncratically, however, this example of repressed violence in the Dahl oeuvre does not end or resolve the short story. It is not final – there is instead 'A Final Act' which is key to understanding the short story and which the title most probably refers to. Repressed violence is followed by a few lines of narrative which describe Conrad removing the symbol of castration from himself in front of the mirror, narcissistically, individualistically wiping lipstick off his face – removing the marks of the lips from his identity – washing the mark of blood away which links son and mother through the mouth - and then confidently, supremely solitary, exiting the scene of the mother and the son's demise, newly secure and convincing in his role as the father.

There are other differences in the emergence of the repressed violence from the stories of *Someone Like You* and *Kiss, Kiss*. The ritual of repression does now see the return of the father, or his active, personified agency, but the father seems to have become masterful, all-powerful, or God-like. Again, as in 'The

Visitor', the repressed violence is more closely and explicitly connected in the story's narrative to the sexual fantasy which is to be repressed. It immediately punishes, or has an explicit and direct causal connection to this imagined attempt at symbolic incest and usurpation of the mother's body. The arrival of repressed violence is also signified by the voice of the father, not by the image of the mother's body: the click of the cupboard being opened, the signification of the inanimate – notice the passive verb form which circumvents issues of agency - the declared reception of Anna the child for the Father's penetration, could be taken to be the powerful 'voice' of God, the Father which moves throughout the world and man, through solid and liquid, the material and the intangible amphibiously. Thus, the repressed violence is the repression of the father's future punishment for attempting to transgress the incest taboo. In other words, the repressed violence is not only functional in interrupting transgression; it is also morally punitive and calls for the destruction of those attempting to act out taboo relations and usurpations of the mother's body. In 'The Last Act', the mother as child, Anna, is punished for transgressing the taboo. In addition, the violence hangs over the child's body not purely as death or castrating mutilation, but as a quasi-religious and isolating (or individualising) total bodily suffering which appeases God, the Father. Hence, Anna 'the child' is suggested at the end of the story to be about to inflict crippling stigmatic (vaginal) wounds upon her wrists or her hands (the symbols of bodily power) with the razor blades in imitation of Christ, the son of God who was crucified as a scapegoat for 'the punishment of our sins'.

*Summary: Dahl's Narrative and its Violence*

The ambiguously repressed, sacrificial, cannibalistic, castrating, power-allocating and uncannily unexpected violence in Dahl's narrative seems to act functionally in all cases to intrude upon the symbolic transgression of taboo mother-son sexual relations and identifications through incest and the usurpation of the mother's powerful, nourishing and life-affirming body, thus providing relief to the subject from anxiety and lack of mastery. Such violence goes from conveying an (individualistic) irreconcilable anxiety, disgust and desire at such sexualised symbolic transgressions and usurpations to conveying great sexual interest in and anticipation of symbolic incest and maternal possession and recognition (or identification) to a final moralising and scapegoating (individualising) form where it acts to dissolve fantasies involving the son and the mother and to punish the (mother) child for allowing such fantasies and desires to be imagined. Symbolic violence itself seems to find its context in an anxiety-ridden and sexualised desire for mastery. In such formulations or changes of violent repression it seems that the unconsciously imagined power of the father is coordinate with the exact psychical configuration. When the father is first imagined as an old man, or an entity of shrinking power, repression creates an affect of disgust, or extremely painful pleasure for the mother in the son. In the second instance, when the father is

effectively eliminated from the scene of repression, the son's violently repressed desire for the mother becomes more anticipatory and induces more pleasure than pain. In *Switch Bitch* where the father returns as an all-powerful entity in the scene of repression, questions of desire and anxiety are bypassed: the child must be punished for any transgression against his authority and violence is retributive, or 'morally' pleasurable. The violence expresses the greatest desire for incest when it is provoked by the image of the mother's body and it expresses the most disgust for incest when it is provoked by the voice of the father.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have familiarised the central mystery – the violence - of Dahl's short story and thus arrived at its explanation. I have argued in this essay that the Dahl short story re-enacts in literature ritual slaughter: the sacrifice of an imagined infantile self – an outcome which is fabricated publicly in published form between the role-playing of a cannibalistic, sadomasochistic reader and writer. I have shown that Dahl's short fiction culminates in a mastering, social-symbolic violence which represses taboo relations and which reconfigures the anxious, victimised body in society and I have suggested that the narrative is organised around this limiting medium of repression.

Such a reformulation of climactic, repressed violence produces not only a number of reinforcements to psychoanalytical theorisation but also further conclusions. Firstly, most importantly, the analysis proves that stories and images – even if they lack any great originality - are fundamental to the organisation and continuing existence of power and that the relationship with jealousy, revenge and the symbolic mother and father is of paramount importance to being and culture and literature as is the drive towards mastery and slavery and control. Secondly, if it may be assumed that Dahl's literary formations of subjectivity mirror those cultural formations of subjectivity incorporated or inscribed by the negotiating (male) individual in society, it seems to emerge from analysis that (male) repression is a continuous, never completed process within cultural life; a finding which confirms Freud's later speculations. It seems that the socially-approved male subject seeks out and requires repressions which painfully reconfigure body and mind according to contingent, grand narratives of being and also that there is an unending struggle of subjectivity between anxiety and relief, slavery and mastery, secret existence and public life. Of course, such a conclusion relies on the assumption that Dahl's short story has gained its success because it functions cathartically as a deadening of pride, revenge, incestuous desire and rebellion and also as a social reconfiguration of being but I cannot see how this assumption can be incorrect. It is always the plot of Dahl's short story, the plot of repression, that is praised first and foremost and it is the ending, above all, that is most unforgettable. As Alan Warren writes, "(i)t is this cathartic effect, which no

plot summary can convey, that makes Dahl's stories unique" (Warren 1988: 27).

The analysis of Dahl's short story also reveals another crucial point. Repressed violence itself appears to occupy an integral symbolic space in the text of repression and the ritual (re)production of the self, as suggested by its climactic position. This seems to be because it is founded in the repressed individual's (conscious) 'self'-formation through the repeated 'consuming' or 'devouring' of a liberated, imagined, fictional (unconscious) 'self' that is imagined as threatening a stable social identity. Because it is the child that is always devoured in the plot of repression, even if this is only so in an indirect manner in 'The Last Act', it seems that the repressed self perpetuates itself in the unconscious act whereby one tier of unconscious mental processes, signifying 'adult', 'sexually normal', individualised selfhood, consume and therefore eliminate the signified 'infantile', 'sexually aberrant' and 'dependent' (or non-autonomous) self created by another 'deeper' tier of the unconscious, or excise such a subjectivity from another socially-approved discursive construction of subjectivity. Repressed personhood and subjectivity therefore seems to be the arena and outcome of a dynamic representational, self-sacrificing struggle which is in constant flux and in which imagined (oral) aggression plays a formative role in individuation and socialisation or discursive codification, which most probably replays an infantile awareness of separation from the mother's body or breast and a first experience of existential loneliness, powerlessness and individual placing into the world and allows the opportunity to negotiate being and resurrection again and again.

Literature's importance in this self sacrifice is evident in Dahl's work which is simply one small testament to the enduring popularity of repressed violence and the symbolic punishment of the subject in its many forms in cultural production. The popularity of such work and its uncanny, repetitious preoccupation with violent themes seems to prove that the subject is not only fundamentally insecure or unstable but also constantly craves the punishment of discipline, of order, society and the state and is literally bitten, cut out or shaped by hurt. Indeed, the subject seems insatiable in this regard: he does not merely desire but also inflicts the pain of culture upon itself and cultural production itself sculpts a consumable personhood from mere flesh. Thus, if man is himself perversely violent then literature is barbaric. Culture is cruel. They derive their force and being from violence, from cannibalism, from the violent remedy of anxiety. And, alongside this, no less, as was sung in a Hindi song of my youth, it even seems to be the case that beauty is itself present for love's punishment.

In the end, one can make no very great elementary distinction between Dahl's refined work of the twentieth century and crudest primitive sacrifice of human flesh.

If such conclusions and speculations – some may say such grand claims - are correct, then climactic repressed violence, a pervasive feature not only of

Dahl's short story, but also of other texts, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* may be seen as one of the more important and undeservedly neglected features or functions of the discourse of repression. There has been an almost purposeful blindness in the critical analysis of literature towards the formative, 'wilful', cannibalistic, sadomasochistic craving in the reader and the writer and the roles of each in the power-giving negotiation of a continuum of sacrificial, symbolic violence. It is not difficult to see why this great neglect has occurred: the literary critic prides himself on his divorce from savagery and his sophistication. However, there is also a need for brutality in a reading. The study of violence in the text has the potential to illuminate the status of the literary text as a conduit of (bodily) force or energy – an avenue of investigation which psychoanalysis has always offered but which the literary critic has never followed up on. In terms of psychoanalytical theory also, it seems that the role of violence in the realisation of desire must be reassessed. The psychoanalyst seems to have forgotten, no less than the literary critic, that there is an initial bond not only of love and nurture but also of pain, slavery and mastery between mother and child. In fact, the mother only delivers the child in an agony in which the baby is almost suffocated and the infant is parasitical upon the body of the mother. In any case, an analysis which posits ontogenetic regression and rejuvenation as the solution to a constant (bodily) anxiety in society must take the infantile situation in the work of art much more seriously.

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