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ANALYSING *THE VISITOR* BY ROALD DAHL

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ABSTRACT

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) was a British short story writer famous for his contribution in short stories for children and adults. His works feature the idea of macabre and in the stories of adult fiction he explores the psyche of the characters at different situations and mental conditions. In 1965, *Playboy* published a short story by *Roald Dahl* called *The Visitor*. Being a work of adult fiction, the story is gripping and the plot tightens to the extent where the reader is breathless with panic. *Lamb to the slaughter* published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953 explores the breached relationship of Patrick and Mary which causes Mary to kill her husband with the lamb initially thought to have been a delicacy for their dinner but later becomes the weapon which she subtly gets rid of by offering it to the policemen who came to investigate the crime scene. Roald Dahl witnessed the turmoil caused during and after the years of war. As an artist, he weaved the broken selves and the damaged psyches of the characters for us readers to psychoanalyse them and understand the impact that the war has deeply set in their minds. Dahl's stories are known for their unexpected endings, macabre and darkly comic moods underlying each warm sentiment.

Keywords: The Visitor, Roald Dahl.

The Visitor by Dahl is a short story told by the closest surviving relative of the fictional Uncle Oswald whom nobody knew for the last thirty years. The story unfolds with the chivalrous accounts of Uncle Oswald's life who never married and kept on going through innumerable thrilling experiences as he travelled around the world and never cared for his family or relatives. The narrative initially glorifies the life of Oswald Hendricks Cornelius because of his 'Ulysses' like vigour to achieve the unachievable and mock the mainstream men of society. Ulysses in *Tennyson's* poem *Ulysses* wanted to explore the world, to follow knowledge like a sinking star and make life worth living. The narrator receives a letter dated 10th March, 1964 and a casket of books from this Uncle and is thrilled to find twenty-eight volumes of his private diaries which details the journey of this man who "cannot rest from travel". The family was flabbergasted to find these details of his life and the narrator conceives a plan to publish few of his accounts by keeping the details from being direct and maintaining anonymity because he eventually turns out to be a sociopath indulging in loose morals with a tinge of sadism. The story is narrated by three narrators; Dahl himself, the kin of Oswald and then Oswald himself in the last episode which has a first person narrative voice. This marvellous Uncle Oswald with exceptional vitality was known to be always on the move having travelled from city to city, from woman to woman and from country to country. He had a knack of

collecting spiders of scorpions, pedipalps and was enthusiastic about women. The symbol of spider with women creates a tension as the narrator and reader tries to look into the character of Uncle Oswald. For *George Bernard Shaw*, woman is the aggressor in the game of love, the energy that stimulates the life force. Shaw opines in his Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman* that "it is assumed that the woman must wait, motionless, until she is wooed, nay, she often does wait motionless. That is how the spider waits for the fly". Oswald's love for deadly creatures like spiders and scorpions symbolizes his love for the poisonous, dangerous and the uncanny. Oswald's collection of walking sticks is quite a fascinating thing, he had beautiful and plain walking sticks featured in his collection some with silver or golden tops and others with curly handles. The walking sticks are the symbolic phalluses which he boasts about and can be equated with his phallogocentric character with an undertone of misogyny always desiring to dominate female sexuality. The incident which describes his intimacy with a Moorish lady of aristocratic descent in Cairo is sufficient proof for the readers to understand his carefree handling of women.

Oswald's game of polygamy is defying the Life force, he is waiting for the spider to intervene only to use her for his own benefits and then get rid of her within few hours. Shaw's Don Juan explains that the Life Force seeks to create a Superman and that humanity's highest goal is to serve that purpose by attaining a philosophical mind and intellect is necessary because without that man "blunders into death". This is exactly what happens to Uncle Oswald. He tried to be a Superman by "blundering" deliberately and wilfully to defy the natural laws of nature that man should try to attain a philosophical goal, and this brings his own "death". The fact that Oswald turns out to be a hero initially is because of his energy that does not reject sexual instincts. In his hands, morality and women are puppets.

Unfortunately, the Sinai Desert Episode gives a twist to the ending depicting the victimization of Uncle Oswald who falls prey in the webs of his own slyness. The Sinai episode was the only one which the narrator wanted to publish and this episode with first person narrative brings us in direct contact with the narrative voice of Cornelius. The Sinai episode is the last account in his fifty-one year old life after which it is not known if he was alive anymore. The incident takes place while he was travelling through Sinai and after reaching a filling station and he finds out that his fan belt was broken and he would have to wait for the next morning in order to replace it. Stuck in the middle of a desert with no human being or transport available, Oswald started to panic as he would have to wait for the next car which would arrive at 10 in the next morning. The sight of two 'dreadful' Arab men-Omar and Saleh and temperature rising every minute at the station did not impress him. Surprisingly, few hours later he finds himself in the beautiful and luxurious house of a rich man named Mr Aziz, blooming with swimming pools, elaborate cocktails, rich meals, huge spacious rooms, cool interiors and dazzling women in the form of hostesses. It awes the reader how Oswald managed to find this man at the filling station and accept his hospitality but as Oswald mentions, he was not a bit surprised. The beauty of Dahl's description is enthralling and Oswald was basking in divinity and finally one of the angelic women, he was not aware who, gently walked in his room at midnight and the moment culminated into carnal fulfilment. Feeling victorious by cuckolding his host Mr Aziz, Oswald overslept and was wondering who the woman was- the wife of Mr Aziz or his daughter. Next morning, he was sure that the love bite he had placed on the neck region would tell him her identity but as it turns out, both women had scarves on their necks and they flirted casually to tease him out of his wits. While Mr Aziz was dropping him at the station, Oswald comes to know the presence of a third woman in the house, the elder daughter of Aziz who is suffering from anaesthetic leprosy. The ending is open ended and the reader is as shocked as Uncle Oswald himself. It can be concluded that he got intimate with the third woman with anaesthetic leprosy whom he never saw because this story marks the ending of his volumes of diaries. The subtlety of such an ambiguous ending becomes obvious when we trace the character of Oswald. Being a germaphobe, and a sanitation freak, and perversely addicted to manhandling women, Dahl manipulates his subtle villainous hero into circumstances which makes him fall prey to as deadly a disease as anaesthetic leprosy. If Dahl is not preaching morality, he is surely telling us something very practical that each action has its own reaction and repercussion.

Oswald's obsession with cleanliness and hygiene is repeatedly mentioned and ironically he falls prey to illness only after intimate contact. His love for spiders strike a note here because he is the fly waiting

preposterously throughout the Sinai episode only to be mocked at and ridiculed by the family of his host while the spider hunts him down in the darkness of the night when he is off his guard in the middle of a soundless desert and Oswald is baffled. His passion for collecting spiders can be interpreted in another light where he is the prey to the lady spider or the mysterious woman whose protector, Mr Aziz skilfully 'catches' Oswald to make a fool of him by adding another man in their list of victims meant to satisfy the woman sexually.

The readers are baffled too but unlike Oswald the ending is bitterly satisfying for us because Dahl tells us that nobody can escape their bad deeds. Milton's words stand out to be true as Satan says in *Book One of Paradise Lost* that "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n." In this story, Oswald's situation before meeting Mr Aziz was one like hell but he is soon rescued and taken into the house which instantly becomes a heavenly situation. But after he learns that the woman he had been intimate with, was suffering from a deadly disease, he begins to experience a hell like existence.

Billy Weaver in *The Landlady*, rejects 'Bells and Dragons' for 'Bed and Breakfast', and ironically causes his own doom, like Oswald who chooses luxury of richness in the house of Mr Aziz rather than the hospitality of Omar and Saleh at the filling station. Billy Weaver at the end of the story fell in the clutches of the demonic landlady who had a passion for taxidermy and the manifestations were found in the embalmed pets and two young men. This makes the reader think that probably Weaver too would meet his own death like Oswald who fell in the clutches of the mysterious woman with a disease and she might have transmitted it to Oswald after indulging in physical relationship.

Even though we see the vigour and enthusiasm of Oswald in the initial part of the story because he is a manipulator who couldn't care less about emotions and feelings, yet the abrupt ending is spine-chilling because of the explicit sexual overtones where the reader least expected a deadly outcome. Being immersed in worldly pleasures, he found his heaven but the outcome of incidents and his fate shocked him. The manifestation of hell is quite apparent in Dahl's use of language. The darkness of Oswald's bedroom is symbolic of the Freudian ID in which no light penetrates, being the bed of evil and dark desires it takes the form of slimy lust. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Chapter three starts with the description of appetite or the sin of gluttony according to Christianity and ends with the visual presence of demonic power which weakens Stephen. Much in the same manner, the Sinai episode starts with an elaborate dinner in the presence of beautiful women but the night emerges as living hell after which Oswald is supposed to pay for his "violent sins". During the three days of retreat, Stephen Dedalus tells us that he was shaken by fear after attending a lecture on the "last things" that happen to people – "death, judgement, hell and heaven". The Judgement Day Sermon is taken from *Ecclesiasticus* 7:36, and it penetrates Stephen's heart when he comes to know the judgement one would receive for sin of lust is one would die suddenly. The death of Oswald is presumed by the readers to be sudden too and the description of the woman's body as a serpent is symbolic. The narrative takes turn when Oswald tells us that a woman's palm rests like a piece of raw fish when tries to kiss them but the palm of his hostess had a gripping effect because the thumb was beneath his palm. It is worth noticing that Oswald commodifies women and equates them with raw flesh. Oswald slowly becomes repulsive as the Sinai episode progresses because he reveals about himself. The "jet-black" hair and curvy body made his "lips wet". The women in the scenario are presented as temptresses sporting heavy animal perfume and a diabolical air. Oswald was losing himself in the moment of ecstasy after being situated in the castle among "two dazzlingly beautiful females" and "watchdog husband". The irony lies in the fact that the evening which he thinks was designed solely for his entertainment was designed solely for using him as an entertainer. The castle set in the middle of a desert, away from civilization and English society alludes to Satan's pandemonium which he sets up after being thrown out of Heaven. Abdul Aziz creates his castle in the underworld, in the middle of nowhere which mimics a modern-day Garden of Eden with the swimming pools and the lush green which the devil creates to lure its victims. Aziz might be looked at as a devil-like figure too or the manifestation of the devilish sides of man. One can interpret that the sudden appearance of Mr Abdul Aziz with his Rolls Royce at the station after the man at the filling station had called someone up (we don't know whom he had called up) was previously planned and perhaps Aziz trapped men from this station to take them up for the night at his house so that the woman with the disease would gain through physical satisfaction. It is well understood when Aziz mentions that the daughter with disease was the reason for his

staying in a desert, away from city. Perhaps it was impossible to create such an arrangement in the cities and the desert was a safer place where Omar and Saleh would be working as his informers and nobody would know anything about it as people rarely came to stay in such a place. So the idea to trap visitors from this station was possible. The 'Visitor' in the title of the story is Oswald himself who visits the house of Aziz, and on another level, the visitor could be the woman who visits Oswald in his bedchamber at night.

Oswald's confidence in him is remarkable when he talks about seducing the wife of a Pope, if he had any. Dahl's sarcasm is subtle when Oswald's confidence mocks him into the coils of the temptress but his tongue remains tied. He could not open his mouth about the incident to anyone but die slowly out of shock. It looks like, that Dahl deliberately makes a fool of Oswald because he was intensely obsessed with external manifestations of beauty and luxury, sophistication, pretensions and this makes him the prey of lust at the mercy of lady predator who slowly traps Oswald in the web of ostentatious world ornamented with money, beauty and power. Oswald becomes a slave to money, beauty and power and the shock at the end denotes the psychological castration of his symbolic phallus.

The third woman can be interpreted as the 'femme fatale' of Dahl's story. The French phrase *femme fatale* (lit. deadly woman) represents male sexual fantasies and fears as well as the sexual empowerment of women. She has been described as mysterious, subversive, unloving, predatory, tough-sweet, unreliable, irresponsible and manipulative who is often portrayed as a woman who is extremely attractive with a sultry voice, a provocative body and a complex character. She tends to be very intelligent, in addition to her beauty she often speaks, behaves and dresses in an unusual and striking manner designed to attract male attention. *The Landlady* by Dahl explores the aspect of femme fatale in the character of the landlady where the landlady can be viewed as the mysterious and dark 'Other', manipulating young men into her trap and then killing them only to embalm their bodies.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo* studies the psychology of the waif-like femme fatale in the character of Madeleine-Judy who leads to the downfall of protagonist Scottie through his emotional loss. A *femme fatale* being extremely dangerous; often involves devastating consequences for a man. The writings of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung provide an illuminating understanding of the psychological significance of the *femme fatale*. Jung defined the *anima* as the feminine component in a man's personality and the totality of all the unconscious feminine psychological qualities that a male possesses. It can be concluded that the encounter of Oswald with his *anima* only provides us an image of his subconscious; dark, deadly, mysterious, dangerous and diseased.

Oswald's perspective of the 'orient' or his westernized gaze is critiqued here by Roald Dahl. Oswald's condescension and disgust at the Orient is prominent and Dahl critiques this because, the true white man saves the East by uprooting its vulgarities and teaching them the art of government, transport and culture. In his 1978 work called *Orientalism*, Edward Said says that orientalism allows the rationalization of western colonialism of the East as the East requires to be rescued by the white hero. Contradictorily, Oswald the 'white' man exploited the 'other' and reaped the bitter harvest and sore fruits because of his unethical investment.

This reminds one of the Biblical messages which changed Augustine's vision of life:

"Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh"- Romans13:13:14.

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