

The Sinister Truth in Roald Dahl's story "The Landlady"

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Abstract: "The Landlady" by Roald Dahl is a dark story where deception and evil lurks in every nook and corner behind the charade of hospitality and generosity. If considered from the perspective of Indian mythology and culture, the concept of "Atithi Devo Bhava" has been thoroughly violated here in this story. The host, The Landlady, is the Yama, the god of death, and Billy Weaver unknowingly gets entangled in her conspiracies and is trapped in the den of death. The warm exterior of the inn and the friendly attitude of the landlady are very welcoming but they only constitute the appearance; for the landlady's trickery and deception comprise the reality of the situation. The story draws on parallel with certain European folk tales which start with young children being taken in by supposedly well-meaning grownups ("Hansel and Gretel" or "Babes in the Wood" being prime examples). The youthful innocence of Billy Weaver does not allow him to think that there is anything sinister about the landlady. Being barely out of school, the young man does not have a thought that there is anything ominous in his situation. He seems to be unaware of the dark side of the real world. Through him, we see the way in which the good and innocent are taken advantage of by wicked and devious minds.

Keywords: Deception, Sinister, Trickery, Conspiracies

I. INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl's *The Landlady*, published in a collection of short stories *Tales of the Unexpected* had already appeared in various magazines and collections like *Someone like you* and *Kiss Kiss*. His scary short stories belong to the horror genre and take us to a world of suspense, foreboding, irony and fear. *Tales of the Unexpected* is a "definite collection by one of the great masters of the short story. Macabre, unsettling and, deliciously enjoyable, these stories make the perfect bedtime read -but be warned, once you have started reading you won't be able to stop... from the book cover."¹

Roald Dahl's *The Landlady* narrates the dark story of Billy Weaver, a seventeen years old boy who travels from London to Bath on business. In his youthful exuberance, he disregards his own instincts and chooses the warmth of the Bed and Breakfast instead of his first choice, the pub, Bell and Dragon. It is his haste that leads him into the wily trap. The neighbourhood in Bath is full of ruined buildings save the Bed and Breakfast which is decorated with green curtains and colourful flowers. The vase of chrysanthemums, "tall and beautiful" and the fireplace that could be seen through the window gives the place a welcoming appeal. "The scene is gloriously inviting:... a bright fireplace in the hearth and in front of it a pretty little daschund... curled up asleep."² The dog and parrot inside the building add a sense of action and bustle. With satisfaction, Billy tells himself, "animals were usually a good sign in a place like this."³

"Dahl's story is a masterclass in atmosphere. Through delicate hints and details ...he shows us how it is possible to tell a whole story by indirection. The setting itself is a coup de grace: that which at first seems so delightfully cosy and inviting is revealed, as the story unfolds, to be nothing more than a stage

set; a rickety façade whose charm throws into relief the horror of what's concealed behind it."³

The distinction between appearance and reality in the story's setting deceives Billy and lull him into a false sense of security. It is because of extreme cold weather and bleak setting that Billy is lured to the warm and "brilliantly illuminated"⁴ window of the landlady's Bread and Breakfast. The dog and parrot which were considered by Billy to be a good sign turned out to be dead and stuffed – a very bad sign indeed. Although Billy is attracted to the coziness of the Bread and Breakfast, he does confess that he was a "tiny bit frightened"⁵ of boarding houses. He is also sure that staying at the Bell and Dragon would be a livelier and more "congenial"⁶ experience. Despite his better judgement, however, Billy is drawn to the Bed and Breakfast due to its welcoming appearance. The menacing power of deception and illusion is unveiled by the difference between Billy's initial views of the Bread and Breakfast and the incidents that take place later inside its enclosed walls. Dahl highlighted the perils of first impressions by demonstrating the flimsy and superficial nature of appearances.

II. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Through out the story there are elements of deception. Except for the Bread and Breakfast, which is adorned with cosy feelings and vibrant flowers, the neighbourhood in Bath is full of abandoned houses. Inside the Bread and Breakfast there are many dark secrets that are hidden from plain sight. The landlady seems like a perfect amalgamation of pleasantness and safety. To the protagonist she "looked exactly like the mother of one's best school friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays."⁷ She tells Billy that she was worried about his arrival. Her worry is selfish: she was desperate for a visitor it seems. She deliberately calls Billy Weaver by the wrong names – Mr. Perkins and Mr. Wilkins – to show that she is a forgetful and distracted person who cannot harm anyone. By her warm and generous conduct, she is able to seduce young Billy and manipulate him the manner she wants. Beneath her kind and charming exterior, she has a murderous lust. She brainwashes young Billy by complementing his youth and appearance.

He is compelled to sign the entry records, potentially giving over his freedom and his life. Her sinister motives become clear at the end of the story when she mixes cyanide in Billy's tea. However, Billy sees no danger at all and is totally taken in by the generosity and pleasing appearance of the landlady. He tells himself:

"After all, she not only was harmless—there was no question about that—but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul."⁸

All in all, Dahl suspense and mystery in this thrilling plot conveys the idea that nothing is always as it seems. He is able to accomplish this by moulding specific characters to portray the main theme, "hidden evils". Roald Dahl contrasts Billy's sense of youthful innocence to the shrewdness and cunningness of the middle aged landlady. While the landlady and her

boarding house seem to be harmless and inviting in the beginning of the story, they turn out to be extremely dangerous towards the end. Billy's trust on the landlady proves to be the reason for his downfall. He makes the fatal blunder of staying at the secluded boarding house in spite of all the ominous signs of danger surrounding him. The first striking thing is the signboard which hypnotizes Billy and draws him to the boarding house. Next, he is shocked at the instantaneous response of the landlady after the ringing of the doorbell. There is a premonition that something sinister is about to take place. The landlady lures him with an extremely low rent. It is surprising that he does not become suspicious when the landlady scrutinizes every inch of his body and tells him that he is "exactly right"^{P12}.

While Billy finds the landlady only "slightly off her rocker"^{P13}, there is a clear indication that she kills and stuffs her guests just like her pets and puts them in her collection. She is a deadly taxidermist who specifically targets young men whose skin is without blemish. In the guestbook, Billy finds two other names: Christopher Mulholland and Gregory W. Temple. These two names appear to be very familiar to him, and somehow connected; however, when he asks the landlady if her two previous guests were somehow well-known, she does not agree to him. She does, however, tell Billy that the two "boys" were about the same age as him, and takes great delight in describing their physical appearance.

"... They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you"^{P16}

When the landlady informs Billy that her two previous guests have not yet left, they are on the fourth floor, "both of them together"^{P17}, readers get a clear hint that the two men have been murdered and then stuffed by the landlady. The readers get a clear hint that something sinister is about to happen.

The idiom "do not judge a book by its cover" is often used when meeting new people and basing opinions on stereotyped appearances. Prejudgment leads to false impressions that can have negative consequences. In the short story *The Landlady*, Roald Dahl uses foreshadowing to effectively develop the thematic idea that what appears to be reality is not always absolute.

This idea is seen in many of Dahl's other stories also. In *Lamb to Slaughter*, the reader never imagines a simple ordinary housewife like Mary Maloney has a killer hidden in herself. She murders her husband in cold blood after the latter tells her that he is leaving her. She did not have the least clue that the husband whom she loves so devotedly and blindly, would betray her. He tells her that he is leaving her and she should not fuss too much about that. The question that arises is how blind was Mary to her own reality. She did not know that her marriage was all a charade and she was blind to her own reality. The story gives a message that people should not be

judged by their external looks, they may cheat you, backstab you or even kill you. The sinister truth is scary.

The Way up to Heaven is another masterpiece of Roald Dahl which describes the dark side of human nature. Mrs Foster desires to take the flight to visit her daughter and first grandchild but her husband who is a sadist, deliberately tries to slow her down so that she misses the flight. As a result she misses her plane but she decides to take the next flight in the morning. Mr Foster puts effort to delay her again but when he himself is caught up inside the lift, she takes the revenge on him.

Similarly, in *The Landlady*, the author illustrates the shallow and superficial nature of appearance, highlighting the danger of first impression. Truth which is scary but undeniable should be recognised and accepted. Billy Weaver is presented as an innocent and youthful man, who has just left school. He is gullible and seems to be ignorant of the evils of the outside world. He does not perceive the landlady's sinister intentions. He is completely taken in by her friendly manners. Although he strongly tries to remember the names of the two guests who have disappeared, he treats it as an intriguing riddle rather than a hint of peril. It can be assumed that the landlady puts poison into Billy's tea and kills him. He will end up being stuffed just like the dachshund and parrot displayed in the house.

CONCLUSION

In our humdrum existence, we mortals come across all kinds of people who are not what they seem. In few of his stories, Roald Dahl clearly depicts that characters around the world seem to be one way but end up being just the opposite. A person cannot be judged by the first impression. One never knows what he does or who he is. The landlady is a starking example in this case. It can be concluded most aptly by the following words. "Dahl's chilly little tale cuts straight to the heart of what's truly scaring: the real world and the people living in it. There is no flashing neon sign above the heads of society's killers, they don't dance out of the shadows wearing clown masks or come at us flashing razorblade gloves. Chances are they will look just like you - and you won't notice anything up until its far, far too late."⁴

References

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