

(Article)

A Study of *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* and *The Landlady*

Keigo Deura

Keywords

Roald Dahl ghost stories definition The Landlady the Edgar Awards

Introduction

Roald Dahl (1916–1989), well-known for his children's stories, is also noted for macabre and dark humour stories. In 1983, he edited *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories*^{Note1} which listed 14 ghost stories chosen by himself, and according to him, they were the best of the cream of ghost stories. (This anthology does not include any of his works, so that it is rather misleading when the book's title is *Roald Dahl's*.)

In fact, in much earlier times, there was a foreshadowing to publishing this anthology. Dahl had proposed an idea to an American film producer Edwin Knopf in 1958 to produce together a TV series of only ghost stories, and Knopf and his associates agreed regarding the idea splendid. Dahl's primary task was then to search out 24 good ghost stories for the series, and to write the screenplay for several episodes including the first one (pilot). Unfortunately, however, the TV series did not come to be realised, because the TV network and the advertising people feared the pilot film, involving a Catholic priest, would surely offend the Catholic people in the USA, and after all, the series plan was thrown out. Perhaps, Dahl could not get over this shock of rejection, and then after 25 years from the disaster, he edited this anthology of 14 ghost stories out of the then chosen 24, wishing them not to be obliterated. However, it is also quite understandable he did not include in the anthology *The Hanging of Alfred Wadham* (1929) written by E.F Benson, which the cursed pilot film was based on.

In the 'Introduction' of this anthology, Dahl says: No.1) after reading almost all the ghost stories ever written for the TV series, 749 in fact, he found very few good ones other than his 24 choices (plus another ten good possibles) - 'some of the worst ones were written by the most famous writers'^{Quot1}: No.2) he tried to write one decent good ghost story, but even his *The Landlady* (first appeared in *The New Yorker*, 1959, and later in *Kiss Kiss*, 1960, as a collection of Dahl's short stories^{Note2}) which started

off nicely as a ghost story didn't brought it off – 'I simply hadn't got the secret' ^{Quot2}.

In this research, I shall analyse Dahl's definition of good ghost stories (concerning No.1), and where *The Landlady* failed to be a good ghost story, thus ended as a non-ghost story with altered ending (concerning No.2). Finally I shall study Dahl's *The Landlady's* literary values as a non-ghost mystery, which Atoda, a Japanese mystery writer, says 'one of the best works listed in *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, a Japanese translation, third revision, 2005):' ^{Quot3} For this book *Kiss Kiss*, Atoda also refers to it as 'too important a book to be forgotten ever,' ^{Quot4} and he declares he is a recognised writer by himself and by others, too, who has stolen most from Roald Dahl.

Dahl's definition of good ghost stories

Roald Dahl emphasises in the 'Introduction' of *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* that 'spookiness is, after all, the real purpose of the ghost story' ^{Quot5}, and that it should give a reader the creeps and disturb his/her thoughts. He further describes the definition of a good ghost story as follows, 'The best ghost stories don't have ghosts in them. At least you don't see the ghost. Instead you see only the result of his actions. Occasionally you can feel it brushing past you, or you are made aware of its presence by subtle means. For example, the temperature in a room always drops dramatically when a ghost is around...If a story does permit a ghost to be seen, then he doesn't look like one. He looks like an ordinary person' ^{Quot6} and 'ghost stories, at least the kind I am talking about, are short stories.' ^{Quot7}

This definition goes along with almost all the listed ghost stories in the anthology, as expected, where ghosts were described as shadows, rumours, imaginations when not seen or other forms of ordinary people when seen. (In J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *The ghost of a hand* (1863), however, a part of the ghost can be actually seen moving and crawling rather comically, representing a unique type of a ghost story. And Jonas Lie's *Elias and the Draug* (1902), although there seems to be the supernatural nemesis, we find it difficult to see a shadow of a dead person there. This story could be placed somewhere outside the genre of the ghost story, though obviously it is in that of spooky genre. In fact, *Elias and the Draug* is the favourite of Roald Dahl as 'one of the most compelling of all the stories in the book.' ^{Quot8}) There were not too much shock elements in any of the stories, either, such as frightening bloody appearances or violent revenges by the dead, but certainly they may give us the creeps and disturb our thought, as Dahl endorses.

Here, we can clearly see the taste of Roald Dahl for ghost stories: they should be ones with a lot of spookiness and a bit of hearty elements, and with the twists supernaturally flavoured, and they should be told for the truth and be literarily well told at the same time. And the important matter is that there should be no place for crudeness and gore. This taste agrees with the traditional 'Jamesian criteria for ghost fiction' ^{Note3} by M.R. James, generally acknowledged as England's Master of the Ghost Story (Coffman, 2005). These criteria are specified in the pretence of truth, 'a pleasing terror' ^{Quot9}, no gratuitous blood shed or sex, no 'explanation of the machinery' ^{Quot10}, and the setting: 'those of the writer's (and reader's) own day.' ^{Quot11} Now thinking about Dahl's taste again, his chosen stories are for their traditional, literary values than for their entertainment ones. This seems rather inconsistent with Dahl, however, considering his mastery in entertainment with macabre or maliciously funny short stories. But obviously this literary orientated line is another aspect of his stance towards short-story writing.

On the other hand, a couple of examples are showing Dahl's rather self-indulgent, pompous character in the 'Introduction' to the *Book of Ghost Stories*. One example is seen in that he had been fully confident (before he knew the planned TV series went ill-fated) that the films 'would give the entire nation the creeps...No one would dare to go to bed and turn out the light afterwards, old ladies living alone would be found dead from fright the next morning...Children watching the show would be afraid of the dark for the rest of their lives...Psychiatrists would double the business.'^{Quot12} We see this would be Dahl's peculiar way of exaggeration, but the fact is, all of those films are fairly subtle with indistinct endings, seemingly based on Jamesian criteria. Then, would it really be possible all the watchers would be scared by the films, in particular, small children who cannot understand the subtlety well enough, even if the films are drastically altered for the entertainment purpose? The answer is 'perhaps not all of the watchers in 1958, and surely not all of them today.' In the 21st century, our generation has been much intoxicated with virtual graphic horrors, and thus we may not easily appreciate the subtlety or density of those films made in the 1950s, much less to be scared.

Another example of Dahl's pompousness or bigotry is shown in his comments on selecting quality ghost stories for the TV series. Reading extensively 749 stories, he found most of them utter failures to deliver genuine spookiness. Dahl says, 'I got a bit of shock. The first batch of fifty or so stories I read were so bad it was difficult to finish them. They were trivial, poorly written and not in the least spooky...Some of the worst ones were written by the most famous writers. I read on. I couldn't believe how bad they were. Nevertheless, I carefully recorded every single story I read in a note book and I gave them each one of them marks. Most of them got nought out of ten.'^{Quot13} And after the original research, Dahl found only 24 good stories up to his standards and another 10 possibles for the TV series. He further says 'I have continued to read as many new ones as I could lay my hands on. I may have missed one or two, but nothing I have seen that has been published since then has come anywhere near the standard of the select group in this book.'^{Quot14}

Dahl says the ghost stories were very much the fashion in the last half of the 19th century and in the early part of the 20th century, and that he has read almost every ghost story ever written. Then, certainly, he has read ones written by the 'great names'^{Quot15} such as Dickens, Hawthorne, H.G. Wells, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Hardy, Poe, Maugham, Maupassant, Mark Twain and the likes who he mentions in the 'Introduction'. But except for a work of Dickens, he chose none of the works written by the above-mentioned 'great names'^{Quot15} for his 1958 collection of 24 stories. We wonder whether those ghost stories written by the 'great names'^{Quot15} do belong instead to 'some of the worst works written by the most famous writers'^{Quot13}. Incidentally, the name of M.R. James -the England's master of ghost story- is not even mentioned in the 'Introduction' at all. And only two works of Lady Cynthia Asquith were chosen in his collection. Lady Cynthia was the then celebrated ghost story writer/anthologist, and actually she was the one Dahl called on for advice when he started the research of the good ghost stories in 1958. Surely she must have produced more than two works that would meet the Dahl's requirements for the ghost story collection.

Dahl relentlessly underrates the other writers' abilities for writing ghost stories. But to be fair, we should simply understand he collected 24 good ghost stories according to his preference. And his preference was firstly emphasised on spooky works, being traditional and subtle, and then on less known works than of the famous writers'. After all, readers are always the final ones who decide

the quality of a literary work.

***The Landlady* — a failed ghost story**

As a short story writer himself, Dahl had always longed to write just one decent ghost story, and he tried, indeed, while doing the research of good ghost stories for the TV series. But despite his assiduous attempt, he realised that not everyone was capable of writing this genre, and sadly he was one of those who hadn't got the secret. According to Dahl, his ghost-story-to-be wasn't good enough, and finally he altered the ending and made it into a non-ghost story, which is now called *The Landlady* (1959). It would be of interest where Dahl felt his original ghost story failed to be a satisfactory one.

The Landlady is a story about an aspiring young man called Billy Weaver, aged 17. He is sent to Bath by his company, and while looking for accommodation in the evening after a train ride, he comes across a quite decent, reasonable bed and breakfast, and decides to stay there. The middle-aged landlady is welcoming, too, and seems generous, although she is slightly dotty in her talks and odd in appearances with red finger nails. Later Billy finds that she is a skilled taxidermist, and also finds that he is not the only guest in the very house in spite of the first impression. In fact, there are two other male guests (Mulholland and Temple), staying in the third floor, who have been thought missing for several years. According to the landlady, they are as young and handsome as Billy. (She occasionally uses the past tense referring to these two men, which confuses Billy). In the end of the story, the landlady serves Billy tea with a faint taste of bitter almonds, and replies to his question whether there have been any other guests or visitors in the past few years, saying, 'No my dear... Only you.' ^{Quot16}

M.R. James (1929) writes in the Jamesian criteria for ghostly fiction, '...when the climax is reached, allow us to be just a little in the dark as to the working of their machinery. We do not want to see the bones of the theory of the supernatural,' ^{Quot17} which means there should be one way or the other a supernatural climax in the successful ghost stories.

In *The Landlady*, too, the readers can feel some fragments of the supernatural effects. For instance, Billy is mysteriously and strongly attracted by the notice of the bed and breakfast, as if the letters are large black eyes hypnotising him, and without knowing, almost being forced by some power, he is climbing up to the front door of the house. And the landlady, just like a jack-in-box, swings the door open the moment Billy presses the door bell and hears it far away in a back room. This hardly happens in the ordinary life. The landlady is depicted here as a witch-like woman silently waiting for a victim to come along.

4 However, considering Dahl's changing the ending of his original ghost story into a non-ghost story, we understand, he felt his creation of the supernatural atmosphere was not good enough and in particular that he had failed to insert the very final (climax) supernatural twist, which is vital to make it a good ghost story. Then he admitted with his austerity to himself 'I simply hadn't got the secret.' ^{Quot2} After the alteration of the ghost-story-to-be, the ending of *The Landlady* has very little supernatural touch, and no ghosts are seen whatsoever. The middle-aged woman (as the landlady) only turns out to be, under her smiling face, a demonic psychopath who wants for ever to keep her

favourite animals and beautiful young men stuffed. (Actually the story itself does not tell the readers the death of Billy to be stuffed, and there, the readers are obliged to do a little guesswork.) In any case, what kind of ghost story did Dahl originally want to write before changing it to *The Landlady*?

The Landlady as a non-ghost story

Undeterred by the lack of a ghost, *The Landlady* won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story in 1960 ^{Note4}, which is widely acknowledged in the USA as the most prestigious award in the genre 'short mystery' where the crime is a significant part of a story. *The Landlady* was therefore proved to be a superior crime mystery, not a ghost story. On the other hand, supposing Dahl's original ghost story had been a successful one, however good it would be, it could still have been a ghost story, being out of the mystery genre, and thus there could have been no way to win the Edgar Allan Poe Award. Reflecting this consequence, the lack of a ghost in *The Landlady*, in a sense, could be a blessing in disguise to get Dahl the famous award.

In a commentary to *Kiss Kiss* (Japanese translation, third revision, 2005), Takashi Atoda praises *The Landlady* as a shockingly eye-awakening, first-class short mystery, which he read for the first time in the early 1960s. 'Besides the running idea and the propelling plot in the story, Dahl's description of the opening is truly brilliant: here comes a young man [to Bath] ambitious to be a successful business man, dressed in new clothes, feeling fine, and bearing in mind to be brisk all the time...he is looking for accommodation in an unknown town. The readers will be caught up straightaway in the story.' ^{Quot18} As Atoda says, the opening of *The Landlady* will surely help the readers to get immediate interest in the story. The story starting with a security of happy young man Billy but with a rather unfriendly, dark atmosphere, the readers will inevitably become anxious, expecting something ominous is coming up on him soon.

The Landlady, as a non-ghost story, is also collected in a book of *Haunting Ghost Stories, Octopus Books 1987* (Octopus Books, 1987) ^{Note5} oddly enough – but presumably here, the title 'Ghost Stories' only refers to a wider sense of scary, spooky stories, since there is no significant supernatural element or no apparent ghost in *The Landlady* itself. This means accordingly *The Landlady* has gained acclaim for its outstanding scare and spookiness.

Indeed, Dahl is conscious of creating a scary, spooky atmosphere of the story from the opening, putting in the setting situations such as the place of Bath, a beautiful old city but Billy knows no one to call for help there, the time at night when Billy is looking for accommodation alone in the darkness, the bed and breakfast, fairly decent but with a slightly weird landlady, and the only two other previous guests, both having arrived over 2 years earlier than Billy and he finds their names vaguely familiar, perhaps from a newspaper and both of them somehow famous for the same thing. Lastly, Dahl effectively places the cleverly-done stuffed animals as scary items, about which the landlady tells Billy, 'I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away.' ^{Quot19}

Dahl also works hard to keep the readers suspended and tantalised. In particular, he describes Billy too naively innocent to realise the spookiness of the landlady at all, although all the readers are apparently aware of it, which makes them truly tantalised and frustrated. And after unnoticeably slow building-up of tension, the readers are all of sudden left on the edge of the cliff in the end of

the story, and they are not told what will happen next. The author does not reveal the end of the mystery, without telling them whether Billy is going to be killed and later be stuffed by the landlady. The readers are left to imagine the consequence themselves, and then realise a gradually tormenting heavy fear welling up rather than a simple primitive fear. Naturally, most readers will remain puzzled what message the author is really trying to convey, and feel ill at ease with the seemingly half-done ending.

In addition, the readers may vaguely feel the combined notion of sex and death drives running in the story ^{Note6}, the most basic but rather taboo human instincts (as Freud suggests in 1920, translated by Strachey 1961). We can see the female sexuality of the landlady in some of her gestures and comments as to her carnal interests, for instance, 'her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again', ^{Quot20} 'She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over,' ^{Quot21} "'There wasn't a blemish on his [Temple's] body...His skin was just like a baby's.'" ^{Quot22} And we can also easily see her pleasure of preserving death – or rather eternal life after death in the forms of stuffed pet animals (and stuffed favourite handsome young men). However, these sex and death drives intertwining, are refusing to interpretation, so that the notion of them keeps us uneasy and therefore strengthens the uncanniness of the book when the sex-death notion knocks on the door of our suppressed but surly existing psychological darkness. The only thing we know is that the landlady is the one who has got the absolute power to control these two drives, sex and death. That's why we feel deep sinister awe in her.

The Landlady is thus not a mere crime mystery. In a short reading of 10 pages, there is incorporated a subtle psychological uneasiness, too, together with various scare techniques. Perhaps, this could be the reason why it won the Edgar Allan Poe Award, appealing its versatile aspects of the story.

Postscript

Dahl's 'Introduction' to *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* (1983) is basically meant to show how Dahl came to publish the book, not wanting all the good ghost stories (selected by himself for the unrealised TV series in 1958) to be forgotten. There in addition, he mentions his criteria of a good ghost story and that, unfortunately, his *The landlady* (1959) was after all a failed ghost story despite his ardent efforts to write a good one himself.

6 But *The Landlady* actually turned out to be his successful one in a mystery genre instead, winning the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story in 1960, and being dramatised at least twice, notably by Alfred Hitchcock in 1961. ^{Note7} For publication, besides being in *Kiss Kiss* (1960), it has been collected in at least 20 other anthologies. ^{Note8}

And considering *The Landlady* is the only one work of Dahl's mentioned in the 'Introduction', it is without doubt a particularly memorable short story for Dahl himself. Indeed, again, the lack of a ghost in *The Landlady* proves to be 'a blessing disguise' to make it one of his representing macabre and crime short stories.

Notes

Note 1 *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* (Dahl,1983)

This anthology of the 14 ghost stories was edited by Roald Dahl in 1983, (the listed stories were further selected from the 24 previously handpicked by himself in 1958 for a US TV series, which was not actually materialised, though.) The stories range in time period from J. S. Le Fanu's *The Ghost of a Hand* (1863) to ones written in the 1950s, over nearly 100 years. Eight of these stories were written between the 1920s and the 1950s. Eleven of the authors are British, one Irish (Le Fanu), one American (Edith Wharton) and one Norwegian (Jonas Lie). Therefore, the anthology is rather biased towards traditional British ghost stories of the 19th to 20th century. From this anthology, 10 of the 24 original stories are omitted, including Dickens' work (unnamed in the 'Introduction') and *The Hanging of Alfred Wadham* (1929) by E. F. Benson.

Note 2 *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl,1960)

Kiss Kiss was published in 1960, as a collection of short stories by Roald Dahl, and most of the constituent stories had been published elsewhere. The Japanese version, *Kiss Kiss* was first translated into Japanese by Ken Kaiko in 1960, and the second revision was published in 1975, and then the third revision in 2005. In this third revision, Takashi Atoda, as a commentary writer, says *The Landlady* is one of the best three short stories collected in *Kiss Kiss*, and the others two are, *The Way Up to Heaven* (1954) and *Person's Pleasure* (1958).

Note 3 Jamesian criteria

M. R. James was a British specialist in the genre of literature of horror and the supernatural. Frank Coffman (2005) overviews James' commentary in *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories* originally written for *The Bookman for the Christmas Issue* (1929), and summarises the Jamesian criteria for ghostly fiction into five key features.

Note 4 Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story

The Edgar Allan Poe Awards (the Edgar Awards) are sponsored and bestowed every year by the Mystery Writers of America, an organisation of most major writers of crime fiction and non-fiction, as well as screen writers, dramatists, editors, publishers and other professionals in the field.

The Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story is one of several categories of the Edgar Awards. Dahl won this award for the second time for *The Landlady* in 1960, following the first winning of the award for *Someone Like You*, a collection of short stories for adults, in 1954. However, since then till now, Dahl has not won any award for his adult short stories, though he won over a dozen awards for his children's stories such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *The BFG* (1982), *The Witches* (1983), *Matilda* (1989), and so forth. (Mystery Writers of America, Roald Dahl Fans.com)

Note 5 *Haunting Ghost Stories, Octopus Books 1987* (Octopus Books,1987)

This anthology, *Haunting Ghost Stories, Octopus Books 1987*, lists Roald Dahl's non-ghost story *The Landlady* for its spookiness, despite its *Ghost Stories* title. There are 28 short stories altogether in this book, and amongst them, the 'great names' works were included, such as M.R. James' *Haunted Dolls' House* (1925), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-tale Heart* (1843), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Brown Hand* (1899).

Note 6 Sex and death drives

Sigmund Freud argues in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that people are driven by two conflicting central desires: the life drive (including sex) and the death drive. These drives are struggling within us, but at the same time the sex drive serves the death drive, which means the death instinct fuses with sexual activity. As an analogy, we see a female praying mantis biting off the head of her partner while mating.

Note 7 Dramatisation of *The Landlady*

Alfred Hitchcock dramatised *The Landlady* for a TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* in 1961. In this televised version, however, at the end of the drama, Billy is actually paralysed to become one of the landlady's stuffed collections. Another televised version of *The Landlady*, in a TV series of *The Tales of the Unexpected* (1979) which Roald Dahl himself presents, also shows in the ending the stuffed bodies of the previous guests (Mulholland and Temple) and paralysed Billy ready to be stuffed in a moment. Regrettably, these explicit endings are sure to deprive the viewers of their imagination, and thus they feel almost no subtle spookiness which can be only sensed when the end of this horrific story is imagined. In both of these televised versions, the spookiness of the woman is accordingly lessened and her madness is pronounced instead. On television, different from the written story, the shocking scenes of stuffed bodies and the mentally deranged woman will win over the subtly imagined eerie ending in terms of attracting the viewers.

Note 8 *The Landlady* in anthologies

According to Roald Dahl Fans.com, *The Landlady* appears in 21 anthologies, *Kiss Kiss* as the best known of them all. Amongst these 21 anthologies, however, the story also appears in *Penguin Classic Crime* (1984), *Murderous Schemes* (1996). This indicates *The Landlady* has been recognised in the crime-mystery genre as well as in the horror and spooky one. The anthologies in foreign versions are counted out, which may be plentiful.

Quotations

Quot1~2: from 'Introduction' of *Roald Dahl's Books of Ghost Stories* (Dahl, 1983): pp11-19

Quot3~4: from the commentary by Takashi Atoda of *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, Japanese translation, third revision, 2005): pp314-324

Quot5~8: from 'Introduction' of *Roald Dahl's Books of Ghost Stories* (Dahl, 1983): pp11-19

Quot9~11: from *Excerpt From 'Some Remarks on Ghost Stories' by M. R. James* (Coffman, for the college course in imaginative literature, 2005)

Quot12~15: from 'Introduction' of *Roald Dahl's Books of Ghost Stories* (Dahl, 1983): pp11-19

Quot16: from *The Landlady* in *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, 1960): pp9-18

Quot17: from *Excerpt From 'Some Remarks on Ghost Stories' by M. R. James* (Coffman, for the college course script, 2005)

Quot18: from the commentary by Takashi Atoda of *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, Japanese translation, third revision, 2005): pp314-324

Quot19~22: from *The Landlady* in *Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, 1960): pp9-18

References

Atoda, Takashi (2005): *Commentary of Kiss Kiss* (Dahl, Japanese translation, third revision, 2005), Hayakawa Shobo

8

Coffman, Frank (2005): *Excerpt From 'Some Remarks on Ghost Stories' by M. R. James* (originally published in *The Bookman* Christmas Issue, 1929) for the college course in imaginative literature, retrieved from <http://ednet.rvc.cc.il.us/~fcoffman/103/Horror103/MRJamesRemarks.html>

Dahl, Roald (1960): *The Landlady* in *Kiss Kiss* (1960): Penguin Books

Dahl, Roald (1979): *The Landlady* for a TV series *The Tales of the Unexpected*, retrieved from YouTube

Dahl, Roald (1983): *Roald Dahl's Books of Ghost Stories*, Penguin Books

Freud, Sigmund (1920): *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (translated by James Strachey, New York: Liveright, 1961)

Hitchcock, Alfred (1961): *The Landlady* for a TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, retrieved from YouTube
Mystery Writers of America: Retrieved from <http://www.mysterywriters.org/>

Octopus Books (1987): *Haunting Ghost Stories*

Roald Dahl Fans.com: Retrieved from <http://www.roalddahl.fans.com/>

(受理 平成24年 1月10日)