

ROALD DAHL'S LOOK AT THE BRITISH EMPIRE THROUGH HIS TWO SHORT STORIES "POISON" AND "MAN FROM THE SOUTH"

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ABSTRACT. *The aim of this paper is to analyze two of Roald Dahl's short stories, "Poison" and "Man from the South", beyond the classical approach to Dahl's fiction. If Dahl's adult fiction is most often read in terms of its extraordinary plots, as well as its macabre nature and unexpected endings, my intention is to look into both stories in the light of postcolonial studies. Not only is this approach justified on account of the setting where the stories take place, India and Jamaica, once part of the British Empire; the pertinence of such a reading is underlined by the presence of a number of elements that are commonly found in colonial travel narratives and which therefore place Dahl's stories in relation with a very different literary tradition, colonial literature.*

Keywords: Roald Dahl, short stories, British Empire, colonial(-ist) literature, postcolonial studies.

LA MIRADA DE ROALD DAHL SOBRE EL IMPERIO BRITANICO A TRAVÉS DE LOS RELATOS “POISON” Y “MAN FROM THE SOUTH”

RESUMEN. *El propósito de este artículo es analizar dos de los relatos de Roald Dahl, “Poison” y “Man from the South”, más allá del tratamiento clásico que suelen recibir sus relatos para adultos. Si en estos se suele destacar la existencia de unos argumentos fuera de lo común, así como la presencia de acontecimientos que se definen por su naturaleza macabra y unos finales sorprendentes, mi intención aquí es llevar a cabo una lectura a la luz de los estudios postcoloniales. Tal aproximación se justifica no solo por el entorno en el que se desarrollan las dos historias, India y Jamaica, que fueron parte del Imperio Británico, sino también por la presencia de una serie de elementos que con frecuencia aparecen en los textos coloniales de viajes y que de esta manera sitúan estos dos relatos en relación a una tradición literaria muy diferente, la de la literatura colonial.*

Palabras clave: Roald Dahl, relatos, Imperio Británico, literatura colonial, estudios postcoloniales.

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When Roald Dahl published his first collection of stories, *Over to You: Ten Stories of Flyers and Flying*, there was very little in it to predict the path that his literary career would follow as a short-story writer. Apart from signaling his inclination to work on the genre of the short story, this first collection stands alone in its extreme variety of backgrounds and diversity of plots. Indeed, this very carefully arranged collection begins in the skies of Europe, then moves to the Nairobi Highlands and the Libyan Desert, touches upon Cairo, Greece, Palestine and finally returns to France and England. It goes without saying that this volume of stories is heavily autobiographical and that all plots develop inside, and are conditioned by, the most important event of that time, World War II, of which Dahl was an active participant. The approach to such tragic events is carried out from a realistic perspective, though it is true that there is some room for fantasy and narrative experimentation.

Someone Like You, his next collection, published first in the USA in 1953 and one year later in Great Britain, is very different. One of the main differences probably lies in the repetitive nature of the stories, which has led West to underline the similarities in terms of plot (“seemingly respectable characters are confronted with peculiar problems or opportunities and respond by committing, or at least, contemplating, cruel or self-destructive acts” (West 1992: 36) as one of the most conspicuous elements. The same feeling of repetition would apply

to a string of elements which have become staple features of his narratives, among others black humour, the grotesque, subliminal violence, unexpected twists of plot and surprise endings. It is precisely on the basis of these recurrent features that critics have agreed that with these stories Dahl was shaping his very personal short-story pattern — whether understood in terms of its macabre nature (Grigsby 1994: 44) or its uncanniness (Makman 1987: 215).

Another significant difference in this second collection, perhaps as a result of the priority given by Dahl to shocking and surprising his readers, is the attempt to avoid, to a large extent, any explicit references to the socio-political context in which they were set. Understandably, the war is no longer a central element of this collection — still present in a couple of stories, the role it plays is rather parenthetical — although it is a little more striking to find no references to the war's consequences; not only do the 18 stories that make up this collection refuse to reflect on the state of emergency in which it left the country — conditions of war that would last until early 1950 (Marwick 2003: 3) —, but they also seem to avoid referring to the huge transformations Great Britain underwent in the 1950s, both internally and externally (Lloyd 1989). Indeed, sixteen of the stories, what we could label as his domestic tales, show very little of the most significant developments that marked this period of rapid social change (Royle 1994: 9-ff). This being true, my interest lies in his remaining two stories, "Man from the South" and "Poison", what I have called his two Empire stories, where Dahl simply averts reflecting the country's loss of status as an Empire, as well as any references to the complex relationship between the metropolis and the colony, let alone the issue of independence.

And although it is true that anyone familiar with Roald Dahl's life would have been surprised to find that his fiction was participating of the project to critically and subversively scrutinize the colonial relationship and therefore resisting in one way or another colonial perspectives (Boehmer 1995: 3), the writing of both stories was simultaneous to the process of decolonization that swept the British colonies after World War II, reached its most symbolic moment in 1947 — when Britain was forced to grant India, the crown jewel, independence — and continued for a couple of decades. That Dahl refuses to refer to aspects inherent to processes of independence does not mean that he succeeds in silencing other related issues. As I will try to show throughout this paper, I believe that both stories do say a lot about the British Empire and imperialism, about issues central to the colonial experience and practices which supported it, "including unequal power relations, nationalism, race, cultural confrontations, economics, warfare and ideology" (Jackson 2013: 3-ff.).¹

¹ Although Dahl's Children's books were the first to be subjected to this type of analysis — this is especially the case of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Bradford 2001; Corbin 2012) — his adults' stories are also opening to similar ideological readings (Butler 2012).

Indeed, Dahl, a beneficiary himself of the imperial project, cannot have remained unaware of the process of decolonization and the impact it was having, especially, on the British Empire. The reasons for his silence are probably to be found in his affinities and sympathy with the Imperial project, expressed in his autobiographical *Going Solo*. Written in 1986, this second autobiographical account sheds light mostly on his beginnings as a writer, on his first collections of stories, but our interest is here with the first quarter of the book, which provides details about both his apprenticeship and work for Shell Company. To the first voyage of this modern version of the chartered companies, Dahl refers in the following terms:

What I still remember so clearly about that voyage is the extraordinary behaviour of my fellow passengers. I had never before encountered that peculiar Empire-building breed of Englishman [sic] who spends his whole life working in distant corners of British territory. Please do not forget that in the 1930s the British Empire was still very much the British Empire, and the men and women who kept it going were a race of people that most of you have never encountered and now you never will. I consider myself very lucky to have caught a glimpse of this rare species while it still roamed the forests and foot-hills of the earth, for today it is totally extinct. (1986: 1-3)

I believe that this open confession, a heavily ideologically-charged statement which openly expresses Dahl's truthful opinion and feelings towards the British Empire — that of unbounded pride towards a project, the building of the Empire, which is defined mainly as a male experience and which is possible thanks to the amalgam of concepts such as breed, race, class and nation — is a good starting point to approach his two Empire short stories.

It is therefore my initial contention that both short stories, “Man from the South” and “Poison”, are much more interesting and complex if read in relation to what Boehmer has labelled colonialist writing, “the literature produced in and about the British Empire” (2009: 10). It would certainly be difficult to argue that both stories were produced *in* the British Empire, unless one was willing to extend the concept in time and include former colonies like the United States of America, which is where both stories were written and published (both in New Yorker based *Colliers*, in 1948 and 1950 respectively). It is less problematic to agree that both stories are *about* the Empire: “Man from the South” is set in India, which received the first East India Company ships in the 17th century and remained under British control until 1947, and “Poison” is located in Jamaica, part of the Empire from 1655 until its independence in 1962. In fact, each story might be read as a different example of the non-settler colonialism, whether it is the mode of the Indian Empire or that of the scores of territories dispersed

throughout the globe (Jackson 2013: 22-ff): "Poison", a story which features the interaction between the Indian character, a doctor, representative of the Indian middle-class, and two Englishmen, seems to mirror the Indian model of colonization, which resulted from the colonizer's arrival at a land with a large local population, socially organized and with an existing political system, and which therefore had to be taken into account; "Man from the South", which unfolds at a holiday resort in Jamaica and whose action concerns only non-local people, seems to reflect a very different model, as the Caribbean island, taken from the Spaniards in 1655, was centre and paradigm of the slave trading system for over 200 years, a process that dramatically changed the demographic constitution of the island.

Given this unequivocally colonial background, it is my intention to read both stories as narratives that connect and make use of some of the most relevant features of colonialist literature, in particular, the encounter between the First world and the Third world. If in "Poison" this encounter is openly staged through the tense relationship between the two Englishmen and the Indian doctor, in "Man from the South" the clash of these two worlds takes place in an implicit (darker and more brutal) way, through a bet that brings face to face the white man and the cannibal.

"Poison" seems a rather simple story both in terms of characters (only two other characters besides the narrator) and plot (based on the apparently false belief that a serpent has sneaked into a house). Timber Woods tells the story of Harry Pope, motionless in bed because he believes that under the covers a poisonous snake is lying asleep on his stomach, and Dr Ganderbai, called by Woods to try and help his English companion. The anti-climax with which the story threatens to end (when Harry Pope stands up and discovers that no serpent is to be found) gives way, at the very end, to a bitter confrontation between Harry Pope and the Indian doctor, through which we unexpectedly seem to access one of the hidden and dark facets of Pope's personality.

Indeed, Pope's abuse of Dr Ganderbai, to whom he first refers as "you dirty little Hindu sewer rat" and immediately after that as "you dirty black", may be interpreted in terms of personal instability, a common element in Dahl's stories, thus proving Grigsby's contention that Dahl's "skillfully composed plots [...] convey powerful insights into the frequently negative depths of the human psyche" (1994: 43). In a similar line of argumentation, West has suggested that "it seems quite possible that the crisis with the snake brought out Pope's true personality" (1992: 39), which would be that of a hostile, aggressive, unthankful and, especially, racist person. This psychoanalytical reading, which focuses on one of the characters, that of Harry Pope, and moves the other two to secondary

positions (his friend Timber Woods is little more than a witness, as well as narrator, to the events taking place, and Dr Ganderbai plays the role of passive victim of Pope's verbal abuse) makes little of the story. However, by considering the nationalities of the characters, two British and one Indian, and especially the confrontation that takes place between them, "Poison" may be seen as a story that explicitly problematizes the encounter between the West and the non-West by giving voice to "experiences of exclusion, denigrations, and resistance under systems of colonial control" (Boehmer 2009: 340), a story that reveals the project of colonization in terms of the inequality and exploitation by white upon non-white peoples (Thorn 2000).

If we therefore acknowledge that "Poison" does address issues typical of postcolonialism, there are a number of elements in the story that deserve a second reading. First of all there is the krait, a highly venomous snake of the Cobra family to be found in the jungles of the Indian subcontinent, which may be interpreted as a multi-layered symbol. The krait may be said to represent India, and the way it manages to sneak into Pope and Woods' place could work as a reminder that no absolute control of the colonized space is possible; furthermore, its deadly presence does question the sentence with which the story begins, "It must have been around midnight when I drove home" (p. 117), a word "home" now heavily charged with irony. Likewise, the last sentence of the short story "'All he needs is a good holiday,' he said quietly, without looking at me, then he started the engine and drove off." (p. 128) might deserve some further comment. Timber Woods closes the narrative by quoting the Indian doctor and referring to his behaviour: Dr Ganderbai's understanding statement that all Harry Pope needs is a good holiday must perforce be seen in the light of the political context and the independence achieved by India in 1947, one year before the short story was written. Furthermore, Dr Ganderbai's gesture of not looking at the narrator when leaving — "as though neither of us was there" (128) —, seems to speak loud and clear about the abyss that separates English and Indians, colonizer and colonized, thus addressing one of the central issues of postcolonial studies, which is the gulf between West and non-West.

Naturally, it is the very confrontation between Harry Pope and Ganderbai, the native doctor, which becomes the most relevant element in this reading. In this sense, West's statement becomes very appropriate:

[t]he stories in *Someone Like You* suggest that the modern world is not nearly as civilized as it makes itself out to be. Most of Dahl's characters, though they at first appear to be paragons of civilization, are really savages at heart. An element of savagery can also be found in most of the social and cultural institutions that figure in Dahl's stories (43).

West's comment was probably done more in relation to his other stories, his domestic short stories, and the people that inhabit them: whether it is the nobility of "Nunc Dimittis", which ends with the narrator suspecting that he has been poisoned after humiliating one of his own social ranks; or the high classes of "Taste", where host and guest, two leading elements of high society bet on the former's daughter in marriage; or the middle classes of "Lamb to the Slaughter", which recounts the murder of a husband by her model housewife. And yet, when applied to "Poison", the choice of words is extremely revealing: indeed, his reference to Dahl's characters as "paragons of civilization" is most appropriate when referring to both Harry Pope and Timber Woods, whose presence in India cannot but be interpreted in their role of representatives of the British Empire, that is, in their role of settlers, agents of colonialism, bringers of progress and civilization. If this is so, it seems most convenient to recall that the whole process of colonization was reasoned and defended in terms of the assumed superiority of the Western world: the nineteenth-century European empires were built and sustained upon an overwhelming industrial and technological preponderance, as well as on the military power that underpinned it; inevitably, these ventures of conquest and dominion were backed by explicit ideologies of moral, cultural and racial supremacy (Boehmer 2009: 24).

This tendency of Western thought to look at the world in terms of binary oppositions is of course a central element in imperial ideology (Ashcroft *et al* 2000: 19), one which lends itself extremely well to establish relations of dominance. This way of conceptualizing the world, through binary oppositions, works horizontally, by suppressing any state or activity that does not fit, and also vertically or downwards, creating collective oppositions: the West is thus connected with colonizer, white, civilized, advanced, good, human... whereas the non-West becomes fixated with colonized, black, primitive, retarded, evil, bestial... Following this same line of argument, Boehmer has pointed out that "in their representation of the colonized peoples these were represented as lesser, less civilized in a variety of ways, as opposed to the white man, archetypal worker and provident profit maker, paradigm of a European language of reason" (2009: 76). Harry Pope's personal breakdown, his losing his mind, his very *unreasonable* behaviour must be seen in the light of these anthropological theories that justified Western superiority: ironically, it is Pope who loses control and behaves contrary to reason, whose cruelty towards the Indian doctor defines him as less human; though one must assume that only temporarily, Pope's losing his head brings him closer to the stereotypical images of the colonized peoples, whether "child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass" (Boehmer 2009: 76). Conversely, Ganderbai — the indigenous character, the native, the savage

— remains calm and patient, uses reason and understanding and shows himself as a most civilized human being, thus reversing the classical picture completely.

In this final scene — which subverts the traditional stereotypes ascribed to colonisers and colonised, and thus questions the supposed superiority of white over non-whites — there is yet another element which should be taken into account, and that is Timber Wood, the narrator. His inability to fully acknowledge the racism implicit in the scene he witnesses can only be interpreted in terms of a shared interest: Wood is blind to Pope's racism because he partakes of the same feeling of superiority, though this time expressed through a very different behaviour, a paternalism implicitly acknowledged by himself when stating that "Ganderbai went out of the room as though neither of us was there and I followed him and put my arm around his shoulder as he walked across the hall and out on to the balcony" (128). Wood might believe that his arm around Ganderbai's shoulder reveals true concern for the native character, but readers should remain suspicious of a behaviour that was central to the colonialist ideology: a condescendence and paternalism that resulted from directly accepting the superiority of white over non-whites (Young 2003) and justified the need for the colonial project (Jackson 2013). That Timber Wood does not lose control and seems to behave in a civilized way does not mean that he fares any better: Pope's explicit racism and Wood's open paternalism are to be understood as just two faces of the same coin, two attitudes which stem from the same assumed feeling of Western superiority.

"Man from the South" — "the quintessential Dahl story: civilized, unexpected, even savage, yet perfectly assured and balanced, the ending shocking yet entirely appropriate" (Warren 1985: 122) — is a different story, much more complex and extremely disturbing. In "Poison", readers are transported to the domains of the British Empire, India, to witness an explicit and telling confrontation between the West and the non-West while in "Man from the South" we are taken to another extreme of the British Empire, the West Indies, to read about a (most extraordinary) bet, as is customary in Dahl (Makman 1987: 217). After listening to a young American sailor boasting that his cigarette lighter never fails to work, an elderly south American gentleman suggests that they make a little bet on that: after some hesitation on the American's behalf, it is agreed that if the latter strikes the lighter ten times successfully the old man will give him his Cadillac but if he fails, the south American man will chop the little finger on his left hand! The bet, in fact, provides the peculiar atmosphere and tone which has led critics to define his stories as macabre, or, to use Warren's terminology, *conte cruel*, but minus the bloodshed (p. 120), never truer than here.

Just like "Poison" may be said to be a tale about racism, "Man from the South" could be a story about greed. The bet becomes from the very beginning

the element around which the story spins: it completely destabilizes what has been until that moment a pleasant and peaceful afternoon at a holiday resort, and threatens with a bloody and messy finale. And despite the old gentleman's protestation that he only wants to "have some fun" (38), there seems little doubt that the wager works as a symbol of greed, and both the finger and the Cadillac are external representations of that greed. Thus seen, "Man from the South" may be defined as a moral tale, a cautionary tale that warns against the dangers of this capital sin; the bet is the central element in as much as it establishes a clear opposition between the American sailor and the south-American man, between youth and adulthood, and therefore works as a rite of passage that signals the transition from innocence to experience: the inexperienced and young naval cadet looks at his finger and sees little else ("Come to think of it, I can't remember ever in my life having had any use for the little finger on my left hand" [42]), and therefore feels there is no need to worry. In line with his most well-known writings, his books for children, this change of status is not perceived in the story as positive or beneficial but as rather harmful and dangerous. Dahl's tales for children have been recurrently analysed in terms of the confrontation between children and parents, whereby children, profoundly unsatisfied with their parents, must dispose of them in one way or another and adopt parental substitutes. The children's disappointment with parents reflects a wider frustration with adults in general and the society they run, and that's why children not rarely establish new relationships with non-human beings. Hollindale's statement that in Dahl's fiction "clearly the status of adult humanity is under fierce attack" (1999: 143) fully applies to "Man from the South", whether it is by considering the presence of Carlos, an adult who threatens to chop one of his fingers off, or the unnamed narrator, unable to provide some kind of protection or warning.

But Carlos stands for something more than, and different from, a menacing and castrating adult. From the very beginning there is something mysterious about him. In what is mostly a realistic narrative, the character of Carlos, the south-American gentleman, significantly stands out more as a caricature, thus underlining his symbolic nature. The narrator's first reference to him is as follows:

Just then I noticed a small, oldish man walking briskly around the edge of the pool. He was immaculately dressed in a white suit and he walked very quickly with little bouncing strides, pushing himself high up on to his toes with each step. He had on a large creamy Panama hat, and he came bouncing along the side of the pool, looking at the people and chairs (p. 36).

Despite his immaculate white suit, there seems to be something devilish about this character, whose origin remains uncertain: from his accent the narrator

cannot say more than he is either Spanish or Italian, but his wife's comment as to living "down" could also be read in symbolic terms, thus stressing their connection with some kind of hell or underworld. Likewise, apart from constantly being referred to as "a little man", his physique is defined by two significant features: transparency ("with the colourless eyes standing there in his immaculate white suit drinking his Martini" [41-2]) and invisibility ("she shook him so fast you couldn't see him anymore. He became a faint, misty, quickly moving outline, like the spokes of a turning wheel [45]). Inevitably, his diabolic and demonic nature becomes more relevant when his wife enters the hotel room and reveals that Carlos' intentions were real, and not just part of a game; when getting a finger chopped off is not any longer just a theoretical possibility but a real menace and the shedding of blood is also a genuine threat.

Carlos' wife's sudden and unexpected appearance works as an extremely disturbing event. If suspense has been the key element of the story, her entering the room and taking control of events puts an end to the bet and cancels all tension: "I'm sorry,' the woman said. [...] where we live at home he has taken altogether forty-seven fingers from different people, and he has lost eleven cars" (45). Although it is true that her entering the story seems to bring about an anti-climax, she definitively gives the story more than she takes, as both her words and, especially, her presence are highly unsettling:

"He hasn't anything left to be with,' the woman said. 'He hasn't a thing in the world. Not a thing. As a matter of fact I myself won it all from him a long while ago. It took a time, a lot of time, and it was hard work, but I won it all in the end.' She looked up at the boy and 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" (p. 46)

The mutilated hand, apart from being an extraordinarily powerful and unsettling image with which to close the narrative, is also the element that opens the story to new readings; the maimed limb is to be seen as part of what Piatti-Farnell has defined as Dahl's tendency to include in his fiction images of exploration, discovery and horror, which are a key to the narrative formula in colonial tales of cannibalism. In her enlightening reading of one of Dahl's less known short stories, "Pig" — which tells the story of Lexington's journey from a bucolic farm in Virginia to New York, where the main character is slaughtered and thrown into a boiling cauldron together with the other pigs — one of Piatti-Farnell's working hypothesis is that by considering the hint of "undiscovered" territories and exploration in the plot, it is possible to read "Pig" as a mock colonial

travel narrative (2010: 9). In "Man from the South" there is no such colonial travel, but the story does contain some of the ingredients of colonial travels; it is precisely a close analysis of the last scene of the story which reveals that Dahl's tale does include at least two elements which unmistakably connect this narrative with colonial literature, the island and the very cannibal himself. Indeed, it is my claim that this last scene, "this hand of hers [with] only one finger on it, and a thumb" should be seen as a variant of the archetypal cannibal scene, thus introducing the concept of cannibalism and shedding new light on the story. If this is so, Dahl's choice of the Caribbean (one of the classical American sites inhabited by cannibals, the other being the Pacific islands of New Guinea and Fiji [Hulme]) as the geographical *topos* in which to set his story seems rather appropriate.

In his introductory chapter to *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* Peter Hulme refers to Burroughs' famous novel and the moment when Tarzan finds some human skull on the floor when entering a native house, and defines such scene as the archetypal cannibal scene. In his analysis of such scene, Hulme points out two interrelated aspects: first, that the act of cannibalism is never actually witnessed, "the primal scene of 'cannibalism' as witnessed by Westerners is of its aftermath rather than its performance; secondly, that the evidence that allows for this reconstruction of cannibalism are the discarded human bones" (1998: 2). In "Man from the South" Dahl puts an end to his story with what we could call a very particular cannibal scene, one that does include both characteristic elements, though with an important variation. As to the first of these elements, Dahl's story moves within a traditional approach: the eating/consumption (in this case acquisition) of flesh is never actually witnessed and can therefore only be recreated, either retrospectively, by trying to recreate the way in which Carlos chopped off his wife's fingers (as well as the other forty-seven fingers from different people!), or hypothetically, by imagining the way in which Carlos would have chopped off the young American's little finger. Much more relevant is the second of these characteristic elements, the presence of the human discarded bones which, as a rule, function as evidence of the cannibal act: on this occasion, however, such a "presence" is problematic, since it is the bones (the fingers) that are missing, while the rest of the body is very much present, and alive; and yet, it is the absence of the fingers — what may be termed as an inversion of the cannibal scene — that works as evidence of the cannibal act.

This last scene reveals itself as a heterodox version of one of the paradigmatic elements of colonial narratives, and in doing so unexpectedly signals the meeting between the West and the non-West. The encounter between these two worlds

in not carried out through an explicit confrontation between a Westerner and a native — as happens in “Poison” — but in a more subtle, and brutal, way. Indeed, coming to terms with the nature of Carlos, the agent of this macabre scenario, is a slow process; yet, in the light of the amputated hand, an accomplished fact by the time we reach the end of the story, the south-American man reveals himself to be something more than a devilish and comical figure, he is a very peculiar anthropophagus, a consumer of fingers, and although we do not know what he does with the fingers and there is no reference to actually eating them, his wife has proved that he does chop off the fingers he wins, thus making of him a modern version of the cannibal. All of a sudden, the little man has become an atypical version of the non-Westerner, the primitive other, the demonized savage, the man-eater cannibal, face to face with a number of Westerners.

The opposition between these two concepts is not as clean and neat as it may initially seem; very much like in “Poison”, where it is the Indian who behaves most civilized and therefore best represents the alleged values of the Western world, in “Man from the South” Dahl seems again to reverse the stereotypical representations of these characters. Most ironically, this modern version of the cannibal is the only character who has been given a name, Carlos. And not surprisingly, his way of behaviour lies far from the stereotype: his consumption of flesh is not carried out through the cruel exercise of physical strength and violence, but rather through reason, intelligence and cunning, very humane qualities; likewise, the brutal amputation of the fingers is carried out through an expert use of basic technological tools: “He never hesitates. Table, nails, hammer, kitchen chopper. He knows exactly what he needs and how to arrange it” (p. 43). Facing him stand the group of white Westerners, the girl, the narrator and the naval cadet, the three of them significantly devoid of a name, as if underlining their dehumanized nature. Naturally, it is their involvement to different degrees — as mere witness, as referee, and as participant — in this cannibal scene which further underlines their savage, that is, uncivilized, behaviour.

Nevertheless, the element that truly underlines the encounter between the West and the non-West is the concept itself of cannibalism. Truly, if we look into the trope of cannibalism as an element that is commonly used to speak about the accumulation of wealth (Jerry Phillips 1998: 183), “Man from the South” results in a much more interesting and complex narrative: not only does it reflect on the material/economic nature of both colonialism and its sequel neocolonialism, but it also seems to denounce the consumerist tendencies of capitalist societies. In the first place, the encounter between Carlos and the young American unavoidably relates to the supposedly true encounters between white Westerners and indigenous savages, between the colonizing metropolis

and the colonized territory, that is, between the West/First/civilized world and the non-West/Third/uncivilized world. Indeed, the bet, a moment of extreme tension between both the cannibal/Carlos and the white naval cadet, may well work as a metaphor that reflects on the difficult and complex relationship between the West and the non-West, both of colonialism and neocolonialism. The presence of the cannibal, by inevitably evoking the dangers and fears of the white man when arriving at the new world, may well work as a reminder of the times in which the different colonial powers were forged, and especially of the different reasons that justified/explained the subjugation, control and exploitation of new lands and the people that inhabited them (Ferro 1997, Chamberlain 1999). Given that the story revolves around the bet, it would seem that "Man from the South" is underlining the economic argument as one of the main motives behind colonialism and would thereby seem to allude to the process of exploitation carried out by the Western powers and which was an integral part of the program of colonization (Judd 2001).

Whereas the concept of cannibalism points into the past, thereby defining the relationship between colonial powers and colonized territories in terms of (mostly economic) exploitation, the presence of this very modern cannibal would seem to suggest that this unequal relationship is still a very contemporary issue. Certainly, if readers expect to read about an exotic tropical island, characterized by exuberant vegetation and a varied wildlife, there is none of it: the contact with the cannibal does not take us into the wilderness, as the meeting takes place at a holiday resort, initially at the swimming-pool and later in the hotel room, what may be termed as a small recreation of Western standards of comfort and wealth. Indeed, the presence of the holiday resort may be read as a comment on the phenomenon of decolonization that was to follow a couple of centuries later: thus, the presence of the vacation centre, only setting where the story unfolds, may also be understood in terms of this new status quo between the metropolis and the colonised lands, between the First and the Third World; a new world order that does not depend any longer upon direct rule (Loomba 2001), but where the different processes of independence have led to a position of in-dependence, of subordination to the colonial powers, mainly in terms of economic inequality (Young 2003). Similarly, the nationality of the characters could also be taken into account; apart from Carlos and his wife, who come from the South ("down where we live"), the rest of the characters in the story belong to first-world countries, and may be said to represent different modes of neo-colonialism: whether it is economic, represented by the hordes of tourists that trample upon every corner of the globe, as would be the case of the British girl and her fellow travellers, or military, embodied by the USA navy, one of whose

members is the young American naval cadet challenged by Carlos. As to the narrator, it would seem that his identity also provides him with a role to play: a representant of the now extinct British Empire, both the confusion with which he witnesses the events and the pessimism with which he closes the story seem to express the post-war general feeling of defeat and gloom among British citizens.

If setting the story in this Caribbean island and featuring an encounter between a cannibal and some Westerners necessarily raises questions which were central to the process colonization-decolonization, "Man from the South" also seems to have something to say about the capitalist system which was consolidating after World War II. Despite the implicit journey that has taken all characters to Jamaica, the truth is that the holiday resort seems to work as the perfect place in which citizens of first-world developed countries may make a display of their consumerist nature. Indeed, if in sociological terms, consumption is understood as "the uses people make of commodities or goods, items, elements all of which interact with one another to shape 'consumer identity'" (Lupton 1996), the concept of consumption soon proves to be central to the story. The initial scene with which the story begins, when we are told about the different activities that a group of tourists are intent on carrying out, whether it is smoking, swimming or sunbathing, is one that sets up an atmosphere of generalized consumption. It is the narrator himself who in the opening sentence addresses the idea of consumption: "I was getting on towards six o'clock so I thought I'd buy myself a beer and go out and sit in a deckchair by the swimming pool and have a little evening sun" (35); shortly afterwards, he returns to his intention of consuming the beer as well as a cigarette. Likewise, it is the desire to smoke/consume a cigarette that draws the young American cadet towards the narrator.

When Carlos shows up and suggests doing a little bet just for fun, he seems to be finding his own way of consuming some time in an agreeable manner; obviously, the peculiarity of the bet, the exchange of a finger for a Cadillac, comes to problematize the notion of consuming and consumerism. Indeed, the young naval cadet's willingness to give away his finger in exchange for the Cadillac, explained above as resulting from his innocence and youth, reveals his readiness to sacrifice a part of his body for a commodity. It could have been any commodity, and the equation would be substantially the same, but the choice of a Cadillac is significant enough: not only does the Cadillac, a luxury vehicle, work as a permanent icon of American culture and the American way of life, but circumscribed to the 1950s it acquires further significance. In this sense, the Cadillac may be seen to represent the automobile industrial sector that lies at the heart of the modern American capitalism and which became central to both

the process of mass production and mass consumption. Carlos' wife's amputated hand, which stresses the connection between the acquisition of a luxury item and the amputation of a piece of flesh, is a most powerful symbol that comes to underline the brutal consequences that consumerism has for the human being and thereby denounces the insatiably carnivorous nature of capitalism, thus proving Piatti-Farnell's (2010) contention about Dahl's use of metaphors of cannibalism to draw attention to consumerist tendencies and greedy commodity consumption, important aspects of his fascination with American consumer economies. That such a display of consumption takes place in what was once a colonial territory would come to underline the deep and complex relationship between colonialism and capitalism, a reminder that modern Western colonialism was not just some transhistorical impulse to conquer but an integral part of capitalist development (Loomba 2001: 20).

"Man from the South", the story of an inexperienced naval cadet with all the world to conquer and willing to impress the opposite sex, may initially be read as a reflection on the power of individual greed, symbolised by his little finger. However, at the end of the story, the little finger which the young American was willing to forfeit has been replaced by an eerie and macabre hand, missing three fingers. If the finger seems to allude to some kind of innocent and harmless greed, the mutilated hand is a much more powerful symbol, one that explicitly underlines the harmful implications of boundless greed, whether it is that of the colonial powers in their (both past and present) relationship with their colonized territories or that of post-war capitalist societies and the citizens which inhabit them.

It has been the aim of this paper to contribute to the reevaluation of Roald Dahl's work, a project whose main exponent would be Alston and Butler's *Roald Dahl (New Casebooks)* published in 2012. In the case of his adult short stories, it is my belief that the presence of a series of characteristic elements — which in fact are generally acknowledged to define his short story pattern — overshadows alternative possible readings. Within what constitutes a rather homogeneous collection, especially if we take into account the domestic setting of the different stories, I have chosen to focus my attention on the two only stories which are set in a non-British/domestic background. This common trait, the fact that both stories unfold in what not long ago constituted the British Empire, has allowed for a reading in the light of postcolonial studies; a reading that shows that both stories make use of some significant features of colonialist literature.

In "Poison", Dahl reenacts the encounter between the First and the Third World through the dispute between the Indian character and the two Englishmen, but reverses the roles traditionally ascribed to the representatives of each of these

worlds; in doing so, Dahl manages to establish a fruitful dialogue with a large bulk of colonial narratives, thereby denouncing the prejudices/principles which constitute the theoretical framework of the colonial project. A similar strategy is followed in “Man from the South”, a short story which again reproduces the confrontation between First and Third Worlds. However, on this occasion, the connection with colonial literature is underlined by the unexpected presence of an act of cannibalism. Such an element may inevitably be read as a criticism of the exploitation, both of human and material resources, which characterized the process of colonization upon which the British (and other) Empires were founded; nevertheless, given the special nature of the bet (flesh in exchange for a Cadillac), the self-destructive impulse of both the naval cadet and Carlos’ wife seems to speak loud and clear of the brutality and virulence which define the extreme consumerism of capitalist societies. In the case of the young American, the cannibal is only latent, on the point of waking up, but Carlos’ wife is portrayed at a very different stage, her amputated hand being the result of a brutal process of self-consumption. The presence of Carlos, a heterodox version of the cannibal, unmistakably works as a metaphor of consumption and reveals the extreme violence that lies beneath capitalism.

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