

Representation of War in Roald Dahl's "They Shall Not Grow Old"

Swati Punia

*Ph.D, Research Scholar, Deptt. of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila
Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat (Haryana)*

Abstract : Literature has often been referred to as a mirror to the society. War, though, is not a mainstream social event, and thus has seen failure in its proper representation. Stalwarts of literature, through the ages, have presented war in relation only to "valour" and "pride" that established its status of being beyond the seams of interrogation. Thus, the other experiences related to the battlefield remained "voiceless" and had to wait for the twentieth century when they would be provided "space" by writers like Hemingway, Flaherty, Dahl, etc. Interestingly, an experience which took volumes of books at the hands of the ancient masters was captured in a few pages as covered in one of the smallest genres, Short Story. The writers were aware that the "space" that had been denied to other emotions would need to be allotted to them. Yet, it is "time" that plays pivotal role in the exercising of those emotions. One such short story is Roald Dahl's "They Shall Not Grow Old". The paper strives to provide "space" to the basic human emotions through a chronologic study of the story. It aims at foregrounding the role that 'time' and 'space' play in building of the readers' ideas through the narrative.

Keywords: War, Time, Space, Chronotope

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Literature shares an intrinsic connection with life. This relation germinates from the fact that life provides raw material to literature which is presented, sometimes, laced with various artistic features, and at other times, as naked as life. With an insight into its subject, the ideas that have dominated human life since ever have persistently been brought to the fore by literature through the subject and the form. The classic notion of civilization that finds a reflection of itself in Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest" has remained one of the favourite subjects in the hands of writers of prowess like Homer, Virgil, etc. *Ulysses, Aeneid, Iliad* among other classic works deal with this idea of survival through building upon the horrifying fact called "war" that has for the longest time been an object of feeding the reader's imagination with the glorious representation associated with honour and chivalry.

The shimmering galvanization done to the quasi-explored niche of fascination that resulted from the age old representations contributed in creating a collective consciousness in the readers who found a convenient truth in associating war with the masculine values of heroism. With time the glories of war mellowed and the "ugly" came to dominate the war narratives. The twentieth century brought with itself the conviction to shatter the glass-ceiling and provide "space" to the brutal realities that were till then presented with a gloss to the general readers. The marginal side to life thus, started claiming its share in representation.

Roald Dahl penned his experiences of war as a soldier in the form of short stories. Having served in the Royal Air Force as a fighter pilot in 1942 in the Second World War, his tales are authentic representation of gory realities of war. "They Shall Not Grow Old" introduces the readers to a pilot in the air force who takes a plane out for a brief time period, as what he thinks, and finds out about his having gone missing for time longer than he thought.

As war varies in its kinds, the manner of representing it too alters accordingly. Here, it becomes necessary to elucidate that representation is not merely readdressing a thing once portrayed. It might, in the simplest form, be defined as a sign that denotes something else. However, it is somewhat more than it appears to be in the simplest form. There is a complexity involved as signs, according to Saussure, are arbitrary and depend on the culture, war in this case, in which they are implicated. The words that generate language are the ultimate signs. This, in turn, indicates that meaning is not pre-existent but is created by the juggling of signs in a context. Thus, representation comes out as a process that constructs meanings depending on the culture that it is situated in, thereby, inevitably getting affected by the time of the setting of the events and the time of its readership, both.

Representation has since eternity played a significant role in literature. Scholars of the class of Plato and Aristotle have burnt midnight oil in elaborating the concept through the idea of mimesis. Plato believed in literature's capacity to build a world of illusions by imitating an imitation, i.e., a doubly shifted imitation. And Aristotle found in it a seminal aspect of the Plot. Modern times are the times of experiment with no exception to literature. Contrary to the pre-twentieth century criticism which focused on the representation of social aspects in a work, the new age theory saw a shift to form and language. Language and the perennial play of signs have been in the spotlight in the readings of New Critics, Post-Structuralists and Post-Modernists whose focus shifted from theme to form as form 'begins to speak for the theme.'

The twentieth century opens with the linguistic revolution brought about, majorly, by Saussure who emphasizes that 'we exist inside a system of signs' and thus, cannot defy their existence. He contests Plato by remarking that language constitutes reality rather than imitating or reflecting it. This transports one from the 'discursive' to the 'semiotic' part, i.e., the effects of representation. The set up becomes disturbed as it gives rise to the question of authenticity as language is dependent upon the context and the setting. Moreover, the pre-existent meanings attributed to 'signs' also determines their authority regarding a particular meaning.

Language, as it becomes a carrier of representation, helps in creating registers resulting in ideological constructions. These ideological constructions are the ones on which the working of human mind depends. It not only helps in lending meaning to words but also relates the connection between how certain things are represented and studied, thus, offering an objectivity to the object.

In regard to the nature of novelistic discourse, Bakhtin states that "a literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope." He further asserts that the novelistic motifs and other structural aspects "enter as constituent elements into plots, not only of novels of various eras and types, but also into literary works of other genres... (although it is true the chronotope is developed in different ways in the various genres)" (97). Thus, chronotope becomes a useful tool to analyse the narrative structure of any genre, be it short story. Perhaps, the concepts propounded by Bakhtin in regard to the workings of time and space in a narrative provide a broader understanding of how Dahl constructs his story for maximum effect. He manipulates time and space in the narrative and entwines it with an assumingly supernatural phenomenon related to human mind, thus lending itself to be examined in the wake of Bakhtin's theories of chronotope.

Chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term (space-

time) is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity" (84). He though limits the horizon of his definition by clarifying that, "what counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)" (84). For him, in "the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole" (84). 'Time', as its effects are visible, gains artistic stance. Similarly, 'space' becomes a witness to time and history. When the two aspects fuse into each other artistic chronotope emerges. The difference in the usage of time and space in most linguistic analyses occurs as chronotope gives upper hand neither to 'time' nor to 'space, thus establishing their interdependency.

Bakhtin also insists that "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (85). He supports his claim with Immanuel Kant's idea in *Transcendental Aesthetics* saying that, "Kant defines space and time as indispensable forms of any cognition, beginning with elementary perceptions and representations. Here we employ the Kantian Evaluation of the importance of these forms of the most immediate reality" (85).

Roald Dahl's "They Shall Never Grow Old" which by the virtue of narrating events belonging to a different time and stationed in various different "spaces" provides wide scope to the study in relation to chronotope. Fin, a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force, is reported dead by the seniors as he does not return from a regular flight that the pilots take over the cities of the Middle East. As he returns after two days of having gone missing he finds himself into taking his comrades' concern over his disappearance and his sudden return as a joke, "'I've seen you organize much better jokes than this one,' he said. 'It isn't so funny. It isn't a bit funny'"(269). He is unable to establish a relationship with everyone's knowledge. Contrary to their claim, he believes his flight to have ended in the usual one and a half hour.

In the mind of each of us was the certain knowledge that here was Something that concerned us greatly. Fin knew it, although that was all he knew, and the others knew it because one could see it upon their faces. There was a tension, a fine high- drawn tension in the room, because here for the first time was something which was neither bullets nor fire nor coughing of an engine nor burst tyres nor blood in the cockpit nor yesterday nor today, nor even tomorrow.
(272)

Though through the course of the story *The Stag*, Paddy and the narrator mark their existence in the 'real' chronotope, it is affirmed by the experiences that they relate to. Nikki, the cabaret girl, who appears only in their conversations, becomes a major element into establishing the existence of the 'present' that gets diluted time and again into the talks of past and Fin's experiences of the two days that he was lost for.

Coming to the title of the story, it deceives the notion of time. The use of the word "not" with the natural process of 'growth' or of 'growing old' is a denial of the phenomenon that finds itself very intrinsically associated with the concept of time. Also, the usage of words and phrases as "close fire", "hotter than hell" (262) in the description of the station that Fin is deployed at ditches his relation with the place as it contrasts with his recollections of having spent in the "cold clouds" where he could find "no space of time between being in it and being out of it" (276). It blinds the characters and the readers alike of their capacity to judge Fin's experience that defies the logics of station and duration. He explains to his fellows

There was no sensation of speed and for all I know, it was a million miles an hour. Now I come to think of it, I never once during that time felt either hot or cold or hungry or thirsty; I felt none of those things. I felt no fear, because I knew nothing of which to be afraid. I felt no worry, because I could remember nothing or think of nothing about which to be worried.
(278)

His struggle to "fly with the rest" in "the light [that] spread outwards from a centre of brilliance... into the sky and far out over the plain" (280) resonates Fin's ultimate inability, in the 'real' world, to jump out of his plane that catches fire. The lines again blur with Fin's equating his pal, Paddy's crash into the ground after having been shot to his own struggle to land plane as 'all others' did in his days of not being at his place in the 'unit'. The final words "A lucky, lucky bastard" (285) that Fin utters are a chronotopic event where the memories of the two unaccounted days (in the 'real' world) engulf those that mark his presence in the world.

Roald Dahl's stories give an insight into the world of wars, but more intriguing is the study of his narratives. "They Shall Not Grow Old" deals with psychological supernaturalism where Fin struggles to locate his space in the scheme of things days after the experience is over and finds an estrangement between his 'lost' days and his present. His recollections of the two days make space for themselves in a

significant nook of his mind. Thus, the actuality of time and space are blurred. By doing this the fine line that differentiates between 'now' and 'then', and 'here' and 'there' is marginalised.

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