

The Writer's Craft

Your story idea:

Must it suggest action as exciting as a video game?

Does it need to be funny or violent or romantic?

How can you turn an "ordinary" idea into an extraordinary story?

Here's how Roald Dahl does it.



A TASTE OF ROALD DAHL

by Robert S. Boone

A host challenges his guest to identify the variety and the year of the wine being served for dinner. After a large bet is placed, the guest goes on to guess correctly. But before he can collect his prize, an outsider enters and announces that cheating has taken place.

How does this story idea strike you? A little boring? Maybe. After all, it does not promise violent action, sexy characters, or laughs. The situation might appeal to an older reader, but not to students of the '80s. You have Pac-Man® and Pam Ewing.

But this material, in fact, *does* excite students when Roald Dahl turns it into a short story. The action, while slight, pulls you into the plot. The characters are easy to understand. And there are laughs, too. If you have read "Taste," you can appreciate Dahl's skillful writing; even if you have not read it, you still can delight in how cleverly he molds his setting, his characters, and his plot.

SETTING

All of "Taste" takes place inside the dining room of an Englishman named Michael Schofield. As the

narrator tells us on the first page, the room exudes elegance and coziness:

The tall candles, the yellow roses, the quantity of shiny silver, the three wine glasses to each person, and above all the faint smell of roasting meat from the kitchen brought the first warm oozings of saliva to my mouth.

As the story develops, Dahl reminds us that we are in a society in which people eat from expensive china, not from cheap plastic. As Michael and the guests begin to quarrel over the exact terms of the bet, the narrator observes that "the roast beef lay before us on our plates, slowly steaming." Later, the narrator points to the maid "standing in the corner holding a dish of vegetables, wondering whether to come forward or not." A maid! What a civilized setting!

We can even imagine what Dahl has not described—the silky oriental rugs, the shining mahogany table, the dark walls with portraits, the low golden light, and the sounds of Bach drifting through.

And the people—sitting erect and conversing in low voices—add more to the tone of the setting.

We can picture the three men in black tuxedos with white ties and the three women in tastefully elegant gowns. Of these six individuals none blends in more effortlessly than Richard Pratt, the guest of honor and the man who bets his host he can name the wine. Pratt is a well-known London gourmet. He belongs to the scene as surely as do the tall candles and the yellow bees.

POINT OF VIEW

Dahl could have appointed a third-person narrator to tell this story. Or he could have used one of his principal characters—Michael Schofield or Richard Pratt. Instead, he selects an unnamed guest sitting at the same table. What does this choice accomplish?

For one thing, because the guest is an insider, he can pass onto us inside information, such as the fact that Pratt has dined here two other times. At both of these occasions, he collected small prizes for guessing the name of the wine.

This unique first-person point of view also gives us a close look at the subtle action. As readers, we sit at the table. We experience the sumptuous atmosphere. We watch Pratt engage Michael's daughter in deep conversation. We observe Pratt maneuver his host into a foolish bet. We scrutinize his every wine-tasting quirk. From afar, this activity might appear ordinary. But we are up close. It is compelling.

CHARACTERS

The characters in "Taste" are not complicated. Nor are they especially well-developed. Like the characters in most short stories—as opposed to characters in novels—each of these people represents one or two definite traits. These dictate the character's behavior.

Michael Schofield, the host, is a stockbroker "somewhat embarrassed, almost ashamed to find that he has made so much money with so little talent." He is determined, therefore, to make himself into a "man of culture" by winning the respect of true men of culture like Richard Pratt. Nothing—not even Michael's family—is more important than winning Richard Pratt's approval.

Sitting across the table is Pratt. Pratt is a detestable snob, a conceited show-off whose sole concerns are himself and his effect on others. Nothing gets his attention faster than the sound of his own name.

To impress people with his special talent, he describes wine in human terms. He calls it "prudent,"

"different," or "slightly obscene." The narrator considers Pratt's appearance equally hateful:

He was about fifty years old and did not have a pleasant face. Somehow it was all mouth and lips. . . .

Add to Pratt's conceit a heavy touch of cruelty. We witness it early in the story: the dinner begins with a perfectly prepared fish course that Michael, naturally, hopes Pratt will praise. But instead of savoring the fish, Pratt literally turns his back to talk to Michael's attractive eighteen-year-old daughter. Only when the maid is about to remove his untouched plate does Pratt pivot and wolf down the food with "rapid, jabbing movements of the fork." He then turns to resume his conversation with the daughter. The narrator notes that Michael's face "seemed to loosen slightly and to sag."

The others in the story—the narrator, his wife, Michael's wife, and his daughter—have no distinguishing qualities. We see clearly only the eager host and his mean and manipulative guest.

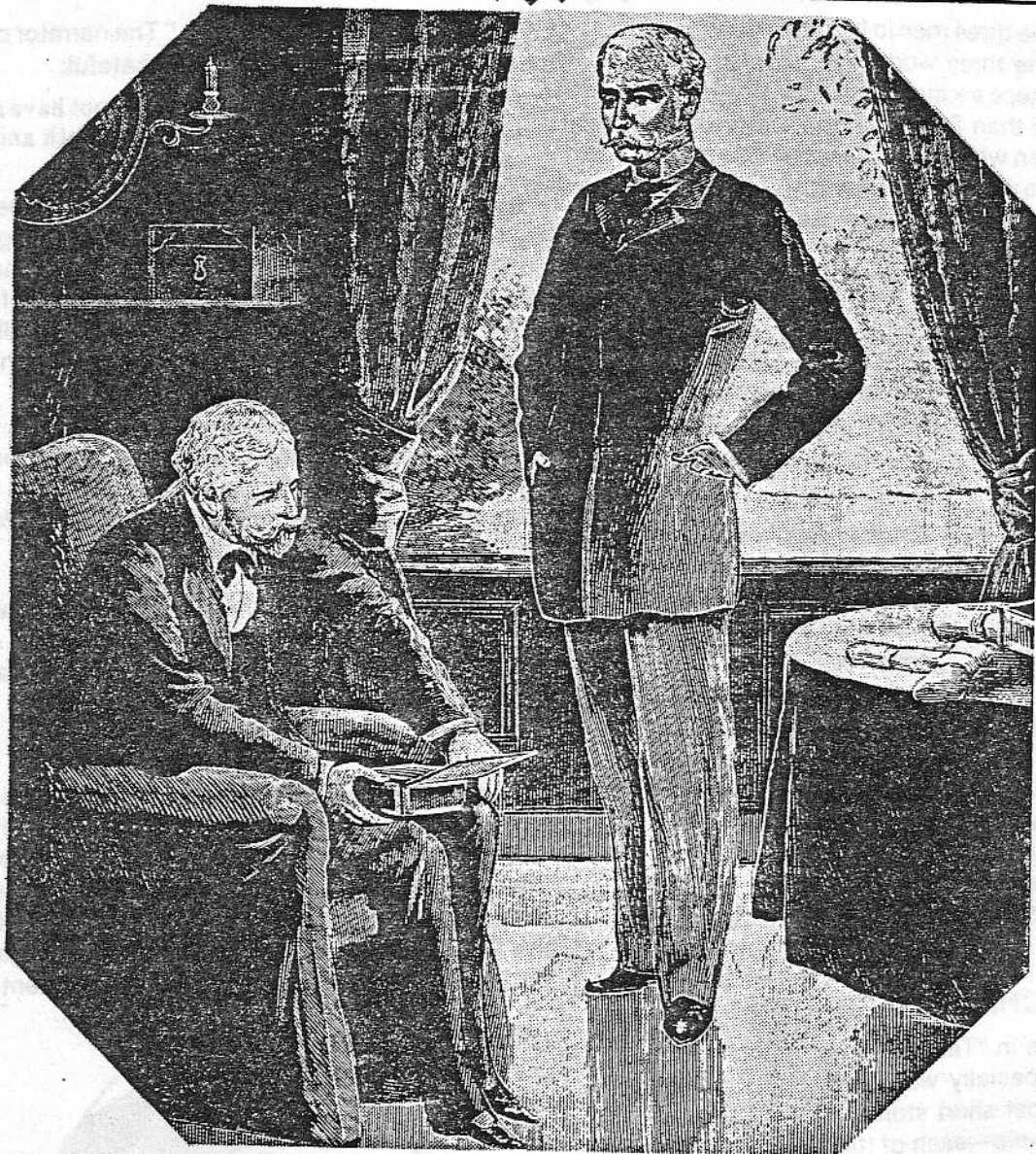
PLOT

Shortly after the fish episode, Michael brings out a bottle of wine and challenges Pratt to identify it. "What about this one, Richard? You'll never name this one." Pratt, "looking exceedingly bored," shows little interest at first but grows curious when the bet is increased. Then, taking advantage of Michael's lingering anger over the fish incident, he



Photo: Courtesy Mark Gerson, Alfred A. Knopf Publishers

Roald Dahl



maneuvers Michael into exclaiming, "I'll bet you anything you damn well please."

"So you say I can name the bet?" Pratt asked again.

"That's what I said."

We know Pratt has something in mind. But what? Dahl could tell us right away, but instead he first describes Pratt looking around the table. Next, Michael's wife issues a short protest. Then, Dahl focuses our attention upon the maid in the corner. Finally, only after Michael and Pratt exchange a few more words, does Dahl have his character tell us what we are dying to know:

Pratt nodded and again the little smile moved the corners of his lips and then, quite slowly, looking at Mike all the time, he said, "I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Michael's daughter becomes frantic, especially when she realizes that Pratt is deadly serious. But Michael, taunted by Pratt and convinced no one can name his obscure wine, manages to persuade his daughter to be the prize. Besides, when Pratt fails, according to the final terms of the bet, she will win *both* of his houses.

From this point until the end of the story, Dahl forces us to watch Pratt in all of his grotesque splendor moving slowly toward the right answer. As he takes his first sip,

the point of his nose entered the glass and moved over the surface of the wine, delicately sniffing. He swirled the wine gently around in the glass to receive the bouquet. His concentration was intense. He had closed his eyes, and now the whole top of his body, the head and the neck and the chest, seemed to

become a kind of huge sensitive smelling-machine, receiving, filtering, analyzing the message from the sniffing nose.

For the next several minutes, Pratt stalks his prey.

"It cannot be a Margaux. It has not the violent bouquet of a Margaux.

"It is not a great wine. The quality, the — the — what do you call it? — the radiance, the power is lacking."

Once the narrator observes that Pratt is "becoming ridiculously pompous." As he nears the end of his quest, Pratt is suddenly taken aback by the daughter who is about to light a cigarette. "Please don't do that! It's a disgusting habit, to smoke at the table." Her reply is silent:

She looked at him, still holding the burning match in one hand, the big slow eyes settling on his face, resting there for a moment, moving away again, slow and contemptuous. She bent her head and blew out the match, but continued to hold the unlighted cigarette in her fingers. . . . She didn't look at him again.

At last, a few minutes later, Pratt finally comes to the end of his search.

"Ah," he cried, "I have it! Yes, I think I have it!" For the last time he sipped the wine. Then, still holding the glass up near his mouth, he turned to Mike and he smiled, a slow, silky smile, and he said, "You know what this is? This is the little Chateau Branaire-Ducru."

Mike sat tight, not moving.
"And the year 1934."

The daughter explodes in agony. "But Daddy, you don't mean to say he's guessed it right?" Michael's wife fumes. The guests sit speechless. The beef remains uneaten, and Pratt stares through his little pink eyes with the "arrogance of the winner." Bewildered, Michael asks Pratt to leave the room for "a little chat."

Then, at that very moment, the maid, "a tiny erect figure," suddenly is standing beside Pratt, holding out a pair of eyeglasses he has evidently misplaced. But instead of quietly exiting, she continues to stand next to Pratt. What does she want? Why has Dahl put her into the story? And why now? Typically, Dahl delays the desired information to tease us, but finally we discover what she is up to.

"You left them in Mr. Schofield's study," she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. "On top of the green filing cabinet in his

study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner."

The green filing cabinet, as the reader knows, is where Michael kept the wine before dinner. While the guests prepared for the evening, Pratt had slipped into the study, read the label, and memorized the name and the year. What appeared to be a superhuman feat was all a lie.

So now we know, and Michael knows, and Richard knows that Michael knows. But what will happen? How will Dahl end his story? Pratt could sprint terrified from the room. Michael could hurl the roast beef across the table. Louise Schofield could light up her cigarette and then snuff it out on Pratt's skinny white arm. But instead, to ignite our curiosity one last time, Dahl *suggests* what happens next:

I became aware of Mike and how he was slowly drawing himself up in his chair, and the colour coming to his face, and the eyes opening wide, and the curl of the mouth, and the dangerous little patch of whiteness beginning to spread around the area of the nostrils.

"Now, Michael!" his wife said. "Keep calm now, Michael, dear. Keep calm!"

The story ends.

Write Now . . .

- Write a short story using *one* element from each list:

IDEAS

- A parent loses the rent money betting on horses.
- A child is unable to go to the same school his best friend attends.
- A blind date leads to an unusual event.
- A gossip becomes her own victim.

SETTINGS

- a fast-food restaurant
- a school gymnasium
- a city apartment
- a football stadium

POINTS OF VIEW

- First person: you are the storyteller.
- First person: one of your characters is the storyteller.

Introduce only as many characters as you need to develop a plot. Give each character one or two distinct traits so that your readers can identify each one by *characteristic*, rather than by name.