Roald Dahl’s father moved to England from Norway in the 1900s. His wife died leaving him with two children, a young boy and a daughter. He moved back to Norway where he married Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg in 1911. The whole family moved to Wales where they had five more children.

Roald Dahl was born in Llandaff, South Wales on 13 September in 1916. His father’s health deteriorated when his eldest sister died of pneumonia. His dying wish was to have his children educated in English Schools, which was what his wife did. All the children were sent to Elm Tree School. When Roald was seven he was sent to Llandaff Cathedral School. His childhood there was not very happy as he shows in Boy. He was later sent to Saint Peter’s Preparatory School in Weston. His reality at school is thoroughly described in Boy. He was good at sports but he was at the bottom of his class academically speaking. One of his main hobbies was reading, and some of his favourite novelists were the adventure writers Rudyard Kipling, Captain Marryat, H. Rider Haggard, and G. A. Henty. Their books emphasized a kind of heroism that would later influence both Dahl’s life and his own writing.

After completing his education at Repton, he first worked for the Shell Oil Company in Nairobi and at the start of the Second World War he joined the Royal Air Force. He served as a fighter pilot in Africa and was injured in an air crash. In 1942 he went to Washington as a military official and began to have success as a writer. His first collection of short stories, Over to You, were published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1946. In 1953 Dahl married Patricia Neal, an American actress and they had five children. Many of his famous children’s stories came from stories that he had invented for his own children. His collections of stories include Someone Like You (1953), Kiss, Kiss (1960) and Switch Bitch (1974). A number of these were rewritten for television as Tales of the Unexpected. Dahl is most famous for his children’s stories, though. His first, James and the Giant Peach (1961) and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964) were made into very successful films. In all, Dahl wrote nineteen children’s books. His dark sense of humour and the feeling that characters can make anything happen made the books extremely popular with children, if not with adults. Roald Dahl also wrote two highly successful screenplays for the cinema – You only Live Twice (1967) and Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (1968).

Roald Dahl died in 1990.

Summary
All the stories in Taste and Other Tales have a wonderfully inventive story line and Roald Dahl’s trademark ‘twist in the tale’. The characters are all ordinary people on the surface, but have a dark and often cruel side to their nature. Tension is built up around the relationships between the various characters.

Taste
In Taste, what begins as a harmless bet about the name of a wine becomes deadly serious as one man bets his daughter’s future against two houses. When one man is found to have cheated by one of the maids, the other becomes understandably outraged.

A Swim
A bet on the distance a ship will travel makes Mr Botibol take drastic action in A Swim. He bets it will travel a very short distance due to the horrible weather conditions. To his surprise, the weather is considerably better in the morning. In order to slow the ship down, and win the bet, he jumps overboard in front of an elderly woman, sure that she will raise the alarm. But the old lady does not because her friend believes she is inventing the story up. What will become of Mr Botibol?

Mrs Bixby and the Colonel’s Coat
In Mrs Bixby and the Colonel’s Coat, Mrs Bixby escapes from her boring dentist husband every month to be with the Colonel. When the Colonel gives her an expensive mink coat, she realizes that she has to prevent her husband from knowing who it came from so she puts it in a pawnshop. But Mr Bixby finds the ticket. Mrs Bixby
makes him believe she does not know what the ticket is about. In order to justify his curiosity, Mr Bixby goes to the pawnshop instead to collect it. When Mrs Bixby goes to his surgery to collect the coat, he gives her a little fur necklace instead pretending that is the item he received at the pawnshop. Then his assistant comes in wearing the fur coat. Mr Bixby knows that his wife cannot protest.

The Way up to Heaven
In The Way up to Heaven, Mrs Foster’s terrible fear of being late is cruelly used by her husband to put her into a state of panic. When Mrs Foster is waiting in the car for her husband to come out and accompany her to the airport, she recognizes a sound in their apartment and decides to leave her husband behind as he is taking so long … Six weeks later she returns to find the apartment empty and the lift stuck between floors. She phones the technician to come and fix the problem with the elevator. In the meantime she wonders where is Mr Foster?

The Sound Machine
The Sound Machine tells the story of Klausner’s obsession with sound. He makes a machine that he thinks can hear flowers screaming when they are picked. He discovers this when he claims he can listen to flowers screaming when his neighbour cuts them off. In order to confirm his idea, he tests the machine by cutting a tree with an axe and wants the doctor to put stitches on the cut. Finally, he persuades his doctor to put iodine on the cut to cure the tree.

The Leg of Lamb
The Leg of Lamb tells the story of a possible ‘perfect crime’. When policeman, Patrick Maloney, tells his pregnant wife that he is leaving her, she kills him with a frozen leg of lamb. After getting an alibi by going to her local shops to buy vegetables and dessert for her husband while he is lying dead on her kitchen floor, she invites the investigating policemen to have dinner, and they eat the murder weapon.

Birth and Fate
In Birth and Fate, Klara has just given birth to her fourth child, a rather small but healthy baby boy. But her three other children have all died young, and Klara is worried that her drunken husband will think that the baby is too small and weak and will not like him. Mr Hitler considers this one to be even smaller than their previous children but the doctor convinces him telling him this one is perfectly healthy. Mr and Mrs Hitler decide to call their baby – Adolf. Mrs Hitler prays to God hoping this one will survive. And he did survive.

Poison
Poison is a tense story of Harry Pope, a man in bed who says he has a poisonous snake lying on his stomach. His friend phones the doctor, not knowing very well what else to do. While waiting for the doctor, he takes a knife, ready to cut Harry’s skin and suck out the poison if he gets bitten. When Dr Ganderbai arrives, he gives Harry some serum and then puts chloroform into the bed to put the snake to sleep. After a couple of hours, they believe it is safe to pull the bed sheets back. When the sheets are pulled back, Harry jumps up but there is no snake. Has the snake ever been there? Has Harry invented it?

Background and themes
Short stories for adults: Roald Dahl began his writing career retelling his experiences as a fighter pilot in the war. He moved on to write short stories for adults in which the development of the action rather than that of the characters is central. Many of those stories were written for American magazines and were later collected into anthologies. His stories also brought him three Edgar Awards: in 1954, for the collection Someone Like You; in 1959, for the story The Landlady; and in 1980, for the episode of Tales of the Unexpected based on ‘Skin’. His stories are characterized by their unexpected endings and their unusual twist in the tale. Very often, the reader is left guessing what will happen next.

Short stories for children: Dahl moved on to write stories for children and they immediately became very popular. The first was James and the Giant Peach, in which a boy crosses the Atlantic in a large piece of fruit with some very big insects. In Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Charlie goes on a tour of a magical and mysterious chocolate factory and sees four unpleasant children disappear.

Characters: Many of Dahl’s stories present unpleasant characters to whom unpleasant things happen: in George’s Marvellous Medicine (1981) a boy has a mean, unkind grandmother, but in return for her unkindness, he gives her a medicine which does some strange and unpleasant things to her. Another extremely famous book was Matilda which became a film.
Taste and Other Tales shows us seemingly ordinary people, a housewife, a retired couple, an expectant mother, etc, but they all have a mysterious, darker side to them.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students what they know about Roald Dahl. Have they ever read any of his books either in English or in their own language? Ask them to tell you the plot of one of his books.

2 Pair work: Ask the students to work in pairs. They read the titles of the different short stories and try to predict what they can be about. Then they share their ideas with the rest of the class.

3 Read carefully: Have students read the Introduction to the book and answer these questions.
   a. Where was Roald Dahl born? When?
   b. What nationality were his parents?
   c. What did he do during the Second World War?
   d. Where was he living when he started writing?
   e. What subject did he write about first?
   f. What are Dahl’s two most famous children’s stories?
   g. When did he die? How old was he?

Taste

While reading

4 Pair work: Get students to discover as they read who says these things and who they are speaking to.
   a. ‘An attractive little wine, don’t you think?’
   b. ‘In my study, already open. It’s breathing.’
   c. I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage.
   d. ‘But I don’t want to hear it.’
   e. ‘Just so long as you swear there’s no danger of losing.’
   f. ‘You left them in Mr Schofield’s study.’

Then each pair reports ideas to the class.

5 Role play: Have students do the following activity. Imagine that you are Louise Schofield. Tell the story of the evening to a friend the next day. What do you say?

After reading

6 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Get them to discuss what they think Richard Pratt will say and do to get out of the situation at the end of the story. They share their ideas with the rest of the class.

7 Discuss: Get students to, in small groups, continue the story. How will Mike react? What will he do? How will the evening end?

A Swim

Before reading

8 Discuss: Ask students if they have ever been to an auction. If so, did they buy anything? How did they feel during the bidding?

While reading

9 Role play: Ask students to work in groups of five. One of them will play the part of the auctioneer. Another student will be Mr Botibol. The other three will be people also taking part in the auction. Give students 15 minutes to rehearse their parts. Later ask them to perform the scene in front of the class.

10 Pair work: Get students in pairs. Ask them to put the letters in order to make up words, adjectives or nouns that can be connected to the story. After they put the letters in order, they report their ideas to the class while the teacher copies them down on the blackboard. Later, have a class discussion on the following questions: Who do you think these words may be connected to in the story? Why do you think so? Words to be used:
   a. e e i o n n c d f c
   b. o o o u g d h m r
   c. o u e n s r v
   d. a m l c
   e. u o h g r
   f. i e d r p
   g. e u g s s
   h. o s w l
   i. e e u a r p l s
   j. t f a

After reading

11 Discuss: Put students into small groups. Ask them to think of two other ways in which Mr Botibol could have won his bet. The groups discuss their suggestions and decide on the best one.

Mrs Bixby and the Colonel’s Coat

Before reading

12 Discuss: Ask students to predict what the story may be about. Who can Mrs Bixby be? Who can the Colonel be? Are they related? How?

While reading

13 Write: (page 28) Get the students to imagine they are Mrs Bixby writing a new entry in her diary. This time she writes about her coat being at the pawnshop and what she can do to get it back. Ask students to write about her thoughts and feelings at the moment.

14 Discuss: Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss these questions. What will Mrs Bixby do next? Will Mrs Bixby try to get the coat back? How will she do it? What do they think will happen to Mr and Mrs Bixby? Will their marriage last?
After reading
15 Discuss: Have a class discussion based on the following questions. Do you think that Mr Bixby knew about his wife’s affair with the Colonel? What do you think is the relationship between Mr Bixby and Miss Pulteney?

16 Role play: Ask students to get together with another student and act out a conversation between Mr and Mrs Bixby the evening the story ends.

The Way up to Heaven
Before reading
17 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following questions in groups: What is the idea of heaven connected to? Who generally goes to heaven? Do you believe the story will have a religious connotation? Why do you say so?

While reading
18 Write: Ask students to imagine they are Mrs Foster on the plane to France. Ask them to write down her thoughts after what she went through before going to the airport.

After reading
19 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following questions. What has happened to Mr Foster? Will Mrs Foster continue living in America?

The Sound Machine
Before reading
20 Predict: Ask students to work in pairs. They read the title of the story to try to guess what it will be about.

21 Discuss: Have a class discussion on the following question. Do you think that plants feel pain? Students give their reasons.

While reading
22 Pair work: Put students into pairs. Ask one of them to imagine that he is the doctor. Ask him to describe to a friend what happened, how he felt when he first went to Klausner’s house and when he went to the park.

After reading
23 Group work: At the end of the story, the sound machine is broken. In groups, get students to discuss whether Klausner will make another machine. What do they think he will do with his invention? Will people believe him?

The Leg of Lamb
Before reading
24 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following questions. What do you understand by the idea of perfect crime? What characteristics does it have? Have you ever read or heard about a crime which was considered to be perfect?

While reading
25 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs. They talk to a partner to discuss whether Mrs Maloney will be caught or whether she will get away with the murder. How might the police catch her?

After reading
26 Group work: Mrs Maloney thinks she has committed the perfect crime and that the police will not catch her. In groups, students imagine their perfect crime. Will it be a robbery, a murder or something else? How will they do it? What will be involved? Why will they not be caught?

Birth and Fate
Before reading
27 Discuss: Have a class discussion based on the following questions. Do you know anything about Adolf Hitler? About his family? What do you know about his actions inside and outside of Germany? What is your opinion of him? Why do you say so?

While reading
28 Discuss: Tell students that there is a moment in the story in which the doctor tells Mr Hitler ‘Give this one a chance.’ (page 84) Ask students to discuss the following: What do you think he means? What has happened to the other children?

After reading
29 Discuss: This story raises some important issues. How an innocent baby becomes a power-crazy dictator? How do the parents of the baby feel when the baby grows up? Ask students to discuss what factors might influence the development of someone like Adolf Hitler to become the person he did and influence him to do the things he did.

Poison
Before reading
30 Discuss: In small groups, get students to discuss the following question. What would you do if you were bitten by a poisonous snake? They need to think about stopping the poison from spreading through their body, about getting the poison out, about getting help.

While reading
31 Group work: Get students to work in groups of four. As they read they will find evidence to explain the following. Why do you think Harry calls the doctor ‘you dirty little rat’? What do you think are the relationships between Harry, Timber and the doctor?

After reading
32 Pair work: Ask students to role play one of the scenes in the story: the one between Harry Pope and Timber when Timber arrives and finds Harry on the bed, before Dr Ganderbai arrives.
33 Discuss: Get the class to discuss the meaning of the following words and how they think they can be connected or related to the characters in the story.
Words:
- fear
- confidence
- trust
- hope
- imagination
- brave
- courage
- protection
- nervous
- determination

34 Discuss: Get students to express their opinion of Harry Pope. Is he a liar? Why? Why not?

Extra activities
35 Discuss: Ask students the following:
Which of the characters in the stories is the most honest and which is the most dishonest? Ask them to give reasons for their answers.

36 Group work: Ask students to discuss in groups what the main theme linking all the stories in the book is. They should give reasons for their choice.

37 Write: In small groups, get students to choose their favourite story and to write an alternative ending. The whole class can discuss these and choose the best ending to each story.

38 Discuss: Discuss with students what they carry around in their pockets or handbags. Show them what you have in your bag/pocket, and ask them what this says about you as a person. Divide the class up into small groups and give each group a character from the book. They discuss what this character would carry around with them, and why. Have a whole-class feedback session.

39 Discuss: Ask students to discuss whether they consider the characters in all the stories have any element in common. What is it? Why do you think so? Ask them to justify their opinions.

40 Discuss: Select eight students. Each of them will be one of the characters from the different stories. Do not tell the rest of the class who they represent. Give these students ten minutes so that they collect as much information as they can about their character. Get the students to ask each of them 'yes/no' questions so that they discover who each of their friends represents.
Characters:
- Mr Schofield
- Mr Botibol
- Mrs Bixby
- Mrs Foster
- Klausner
- Mrs Maloney
- Ida Hitler
- Harry Pope