Lamb to the Slaughter

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROALD DAHL

Roald Dahl was born in Wales to Norwegian immigrants in 1916. At an early age, Dahl's father and older sister died of illness, leaving his mother to raise him and his two other sisters. During his formative years in Wales and later England, he experienced the violent cruelty of other students and adults at school, a theme that emerges in works such as *Matilda* and *Witches*. While at school in Derbyshire, England, he and his fellow students were occasionally enlisted as taste testers for Cadbury chocolates, inspiring Dahl's best-known work, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Once finished with his schooling, Dahl travelled to Newfoundland and later through east Africa as an employee of the Shell Company. Though now renowned as a children's writer, Dahl was also a fighter pilot for Britain in World War II and served the Royal Air Force from 1939 until he was invalided in 1941. The next year, Dahl became an assistant air attaché in Washington, D. C., where he met C. S. Forrester and began to publish short stories. Dahl's experience in the RAF and Forrester's encouragement eventually led to the publication of Dahl's first novel, *The Gremlins*, in 1943. After the war, Dahl married a well-known American actress, Patricia Neal, with whom he had five children. Tragically, his oldest child, Olivia, died of measles in 1962, and his wife Patricia suffered from multiple ruptured brain aneurysms in 1965. Neal and Dahl divorced nearly two decades later, and in 1983 Dahl remarried Felicity Crosland. After writing 19 novels, 13 short story collections, and several autobiographies and scripts, Roald Dahl died on November 23, 1990, at the age of 74.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story likely takes place in the 1950s, based on its reference to a "deep freeze," a once-popular term for a refrigeration unit. Mary's chat with Sam about whether freezing meat makes a difference suggests that the technology was relatively new then. As in the present day, life in the 1950s was deeply influenced by patriarchy, a system in which men hold more political, social, and economic power than women. Though (white) women in both the U. S. and Britain gained the right to vote in the early 20th century, women in the 1950s did not have as many opportunities as their male counterparts and were expected to remain in the private sphere of domestic life, taking care of their houses, children, and breadwinning husbands.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like "Lamb to the Slaughter," many of Dahl's other short stories for adults contain elements of black humor or comedy. Nathaneal West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (published in 1933), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) are examples of other novels that utilize black humor. The plot of "Lamb to the Slaughter" is also similar in several ways to Susan Glaspell's works *Trifles* and *A Jury of Her Peers*, both of which involve a repressed housewife murdering her insensitive husband and her motive never being understood because of male detectives' arrogance.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Lamb to the Slaughter
- **When Published:** 1953
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story; black comedy
- **Setting:** Late 1940s or 1950s, in the Maloney house and a nearby grocery store
- **Climax:** Mary kills her husband
- **Antagonist:** Patrick Maloney
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration. "Lamb to the Slaughter" was supposedly written by Dahl after his friend Ian Fleming (spy novelist and former intelligence officer) suggested he write a story about a woman who murders her husband with frozen mutton that she serves to the detectives investigating her husband's case.

Small screen version. The story was adapted into a television script written by Dahl and presented by Alfred Hitchcock. It aired in 1958, five years after the story was originally published.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Mary Maloney faithfully waiting for her husband Patrick to come home from his job as a detective. Six months pregnant and happy in her marriage, she eagerly watches the clock while she sews. When Patrick arrives, she is ready to hang up his coat, prepare a drink for him, and sit in silence with him as he rests. For Mary, who is alone in the house during the day, this after-work ritual is one she looks forward to. However, as Mary attempts to care for her husband, Patrick brushes off her efforts, drinks more than usual, and declares that he has something to tell her. While a nervous Mary

scrutinizes him, Patrick tells her that he is leaving her. Though the narrator leaves out the details, it becomes clear that Patrick still plans to take care of her financially but that their marriage is over. Mary, who is in disbelief, decides to act as if nothing has happened and fetches a frozen **leg of lamb** from the cellar to prepare their supper. When Patrick tells her not to bother and begins to leave, Mary suddenly swings the frozen meat at the back of Patrick's head and kills him.

Once Mary realizes that her husband is dead, she thinks rapidly of how to protect herself and thus her unborn child from the penalty of murder. She puts the meat into the oven, and while it begins to cook, she practices her expression and voice, and then goes out to a nearby grocery store and chats amiably with Sam, the grocer, about what she needs to buy for her husband's dinner. On her way home, she purposefully acts as if everything is normal, and then is shocked to "discover" Patrick's body on the floor and begins to cry. Distraught, she calls the police, and two policemen, Jack Noonan and O'Malley, friends and colleagues of Patrick, arrive. Mary, maintaining her façade, claims that she went out to the store and came back to find Patrick dead. As other detectives arrive and ask her questions, her premeditated chat with Sam is revealed to be her alibi and she is able to elude suspicion.

The policemen sympathize with Mary and attempt to comfort her. Despite Sergeant Noonan's offer to bring her elsewhere, Mary decides to stay in the house while the police search for the murder weapon. Jack Noonan reveals to Mary that the culprit probably used a blunt metal object and that finding the weapon will lead to the murderer. After nearly three fruitless hours of searching in and around the house for the weapon, the policemen are no closer to finding the murder weapon and never suspect that it could be the frozen meat cooking in the oven. Mary is able to persuade the tired, hungry, and frustrated policemen to drink some whiskey and eat the leg of lamb that by now has finished cooking. As the men eat the evidence in the kitchen, Mary eavesdrops from another room, giggling when one of the men theorizes that the murder weapon is "right under our very noses."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mary Maloney – The story's protagonist, Mary Maloney is the wife of Patrick Maloney, a detective. A happy and devoted housewife who is six months pregnant with her first child, Mary spends much of her time caring for and thinking about her husband while attending to domestic tasks such as cooking and sewing. After Patrick reveals that he is leaving her, however, Mary suddenly kills him with a frozen **leg of lamb**. She then cunningly covers up the murder, using her role as an "innocent," supposedly-foolish housewife to trick the investigators.

Patrick Maloney (the husband) – The husband of Mary Maloney, Patrick Maloney is a police detective who cares more about his work than his marriage. Despite Mary's best attempts to make him comfortable and care for him, he does not reciprocate her efforts or feeling. He callously tells Mary that he has decided to abandon his marriage, and is then killed by Mary herself with a frozen **leg of lamb**. Though the narrator explicitly discusses Mary's idolization of Patrick and his masculinity, Patrick's name is not revealed until halfway through the story, after he has already died.

Jack Noonan – Jack Noonan is a sergeant and friend of the Maloneys. Jack is one of the first officers to arrive at the scene of the murder. Like the other officers on the case, he is sympathetic and condescending towards Mary and does not suspect her of Patrick's murder at all. Instead, he tries to comfort her and, along with his colleagues, is persuaded by Mary to eat the **leg of lamb**, unaware that it is actually the murder weapon.

Sam – Sam is the grocer who unwittingly becomes Mary's alibi. After the murder, Mary chats casually and briefly with Sam, giving the impression that she is buying vegetables for her husband's dinner at Sam's store. Later, the police confirm her story with the grocer, who, like the detectives, has been deceived by Mary.

MINOR CHARACTERS

O'Malley – O'Malley is a policeman who arrives with Sergeant Noonan at the scene of Patrick's murder.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENDER AND MARRIAGE

Throughout the short story, Mary Maloney is firmly situated in a patriarchal society—that is, a system in which men hold more power than women politically, socially, and economically. Historically, women have been often consigned to the private sphere of domestic life, as they were deemed by men to be intellectually and emotionally unfit for the public sphere outside of family and home life. Men, on the other hand, were able to move through both spheres, enjoying the comforts of domestic life provided by wives and mothers while interacting with the political and economic institutions of the public arena.

Mary's marriage is a perfect example of gendered hierarchy, as

her entire life revolves around that of her husband. While Patrick works in the public sphere as a detective, Mary stays at home in the private domestic sphere, working on her sewing and eagerly awaiting his return "after the long hours alone in the house." Once her husband arrives, all of her energy is devoted to anticipating his needs. Fulfilling the duties of a stereotypical housewife, Mary, demonstrates her affectionate submission by performing various domestic tasks for her husband — for example, hanging up his coat, making him drinks, offering to fetch his slippers and make supper — despite the fact that she is six months pregnant and Patrick barely acknowledges her efforts.

Like the society in which the story is set, Mary's marriage is heavily influenced by male or masculine dominance. The narrator explicitly describes Mary's love for her husband as an idolization of or subservience to masculinity. Patrick's return home is "blissful" for Mary not only because she has been isolated in the house all day but also because she "loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel—almost as a sunbather feels the sun—that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together." Mary's comparison of masculinity to the sun, to a powerful celestial force indifferent to yet shining upon mere humans, reinforces a gender hierarchy in which men are associated with strength and perfection, and women with weakness and inferiority.

This male dominance also manifests in the lack of reciprocity in the Maloneys' marriage. Despite Mary's repeated endearments of "Darling" and attempts to make her husband more comfortable, Patrick responds brusquely, without reciprocating her affection or acknowledging the effort it must take her, as a heavily pregnant woman, to care for him and the house. Furthermore, when Mary attempts to engage him in conversation or requests that he eat something, Patrick ignores her, but when he wishes to speak to her, he orders her to "Sit down," expecting her to submit as a dog would to its master. Whereas Mary attends to both his physical and emotional needs (preparing him drinks, offering him food, sympathizing with him about his job), Patrick assumes that his wife is little more than a creature to be "looked after" financially when he leaves her. After breaking the news of his imminent departure, he dismisses his wife's potential reactions and emotions as "fuss," coldly asserting that it would be bad for his job. Patrick's privileging of his work over Mary stands in stark contrast to the life she has built around him.

After Mary murders her husband, then, she is able to escape suspicion partly because of her cleverness and partly because the policemen hold traditional, patriarchal views of women as caregivers incapable of violence or deceit. When Jack Noonan, a detective and friend of Patrick, asks Mary is she would prefer the company of her sister or of his own wife, he reinforces the stereotype of women, and thus of Mary, as caregivers. When he explains to Mary what happened to Patrick, he implicitly assumes the culprit is male, using masculine pronouns such as "him" and "he" to describe the murderer. The detectives consider "impossible" the idea that Mary has deceived them all as well as Sam, the grocer who unwittingly becomes her alibi.

ROLE REVERSALS

Dahl subjects his characters to various reversals in their traditional roles. Most prominent of these role reversals is that of Mary Maloney, whose act of murder defies the policemen's assumptions about her and about the culprit. By physically attacking her husband, with a club-like weapon no less, Mary subverts gender stereotypes and takes on the traditionally male role of violent attacker and murderer. Her quick thinking and ability to deceive others causes the policemen to sympathize with (and to some extent infantilize) her as if she were a victim, despite the fact that she is actually the murderer.

Mary's weapon of choice, a **leg of lamb**, is also subject to role reversal in the story and symbolizes her transformation. The lamb, often portrayed as a gentle, sacrificial creature, is literally sacrificed as food, with its leg frozen in the Maloneys' cellar, waiting to be eaten. However, once Patrick Maloney decides to leave his marriage, the lamb then becomes a *tool* for violence, rather than a recipient of violence. This is can also be seen in the ironic wordplay of the story's title, "Lamb to the Slaughter": Mary's sudden violence renders Patrick the figurative "lamb" to be slaughtered, while the frozen leg of lamb is literally the instrument of slaughter.

Patrick Maloney's role reversals are two-fold. First, in contrast to the story's early account of Mary's infatuation with his masculinity and power, Patrick is now "feminized" as the power in his marriage shifts to his wife when she attacks and kills him. Second, his death then undermines his role as a detective. Whereas previously his duties as a detective would have entailed preventing the crime in the first place or bringing the culprit to justice, now he unable to do so as he must fulfill the role of murder victim.

Like Patrick, the other detectives in the story also switch roles, not by becoming Mary's victims but by serving as her unwitting accomplices. After hours of unsuccessfully searching for the murder weapon, the policemen are persuaded by Mary to eat the leg of lamb, unaware that they are assisting a murderer by destroying the evidence.

FOOD/CONSUMPTION

Much of "Lamb to the Slaughter" is occupied with eating and food. At the beginning of the story, food is closely linked to domesticity and marriage. Mary's repeated attempts to feed Patrick demonstrate not only her affection for her husband but also the role she plays as homemaker and housewife. Similarly, Patrick's refusal to eat

Mary's food is a rejection of that affection and foreshadows his rejection of the domestic life Mary has built around him. Even after Patrick's death, food still is (or appears to be) associated with marriage, as Mary attempts to maintain the façade of domestic bliss by establishing her alibi of buying Patrick's food from Sam, the local grocer.

After Patrick tells Mary he is leaving her, food becomes a literal and figurative weapon. In the literal sense, food is weaponized when Mary kills her husband with a frozen **leg of lamb**, which is said by the narrator to be as effective as a "steel club." Metaphorically, food also works against the other policemen, as they never suspect that Mary's frozen meat could be used as a weapon, and they begin to eat the evidence for which they have been searching all night.

Just as the weaponization of food is both literal and metaphorical, so too is the motif of consumption. Mary, a happy housewife, is consumed with her marriage and her husband's masculinity, and thus her role within a male-dominated culture. Obsessed with domestic bliss, her entire life revolves around her husband. Patrick, on the other hand, is consumed with his work. Though he is always tired because of his work as a detective, he values his job more than he does his wife. After Patrick's death, this consumption becomes literal and possibly cannibalistic for the detectives, who eat the murder weapon. As the detectives' "thick and sloppy" mouths wolf down the leg of lamb, the men fail to realize that it had been bashed into Patrick's skull and may even contain his blood. Whereas Patrick Maloney was once consumed with *his* work, now he is consumed *by* his work, or rather by his former friends and colleagues on the police force. Like the men's suspicion that the weapon is "right under our very noses," this is another example of the story's ironic black humor.

BETRAYAL

Patrick's betrayal of his marriage drives the rest of the story's plot, leading to both his wife's betrayal and that of his colleagues. When he leaves his wife, Patrick betrays not only the love Mary has for him but also the unborn child she is carrying and their private domestic life together. At the sudden breakdown of her marriage and the world she built around Patrick, Mary commits her own betrayal by killing her husband. Covering up the murder primarily for the sake of her child, Mary calls the police, maintaining a façade of innocence and manipulating the policemen to inadvertently commit a betrayal of their own. As they investigate the murder, the policemen unknowingly betray both their former colleague and their profession by drinking whiskey on the job and by eating the evidence, ironically speculating in another example of Dahl's black humor that the murder weapon is "right under our very noses." Through this succession of betrayals, Dahl seems to be suggesting that betrayal begets betrayal, that disloyalty and deception will only lead to more treachery.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LAMB/LEG OF LAMB

Traditionally the lamb is portrayed as a gentle submissive creature, associated with ritual or religious sacrifice (especially in Judeo-Christian tradition). In this story, the figure of the lamb takes on two roles: as both a victim and a source of violence or sacrifice. Both Mary and her husband Patrick take on the roles of figurative lambs as they sacrifice each other. However, while Patrick sacrifices Mary's role as his wife by leaving the marriage, Mary sacrifices Patrick's life, killing him with a frozen leg of lamb. The transformation of the lamb from an object of sacrifice to a tool of violence signals Mary's transformation from submissive housewife to violent killer, and resonates in the double meaning and black humor of the story's title: whereas the Maloneys are both lambs to be slaughtered figuratively or literally, the lamb, or rather the frozen leg of lamb, is also used as an instrument of slaughter. Once the policemen are called to investigate Patrick's murder, then, the lamb comes to represent both a sacrifice *for* the detectives (as food) and a weapon against them (as that sacrifice as food entails the destruction of evidence).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Tales of the Unexpected* published in 1990.

Lamb to the Slaughter Quotes

❝ The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight—hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket. Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Related Characters: Patrick Maloney (the husband), Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene of the short story, the reader is presented with images of duality and domesticity: in the

comfortable living room of the Maloney household, there are two lamps, two chairs, and two glasses. However, the duality and sense of comfort reflected in the story's setting is betrayed by the loneliness of Mary Maloney, who waits across from an empty chair for her husband to return home. The contrast between the setting and its inhabitants represents the Maloneys' marriage, in which the only spouse actually "present" is Mary.

The fact that Mary waits home alone while her husband is away at work is typical of gender expectations of the 1950s, in which the story was set and written. Women were expected to remain in the private sphere of domesticity and home life, giving birth, caring for their children, performing domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, and attending to their husbands. Men, on the other hand, were free to pass between the public sphere (through their occupations and interactions with social, political, and economic institutions) and the private sphere, in which they could enjoy the comforts of home provided by their wives.

> There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her skin—for this was her sixth month with child—had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

Related Characters: Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, Mary is in domestic bliss. Deeply in love with her husband and heavily pregnant, she fully embraces her role as a traditional, subordinate wife; her objectification is reflected not only in her husband's treatment of her but also in the narrator's first description of her.

Using a poetic convention called "blason," the narrator portrays Mary by describing various body parts one by one. Similar to a slow pan over a woman's body in film, the blason was often used by Renaissance poets to metaphorically dissect the female body while supposedly praising it. As the narrator switches from a possessive personal pronoun ("*her* skin") to definite articles ("*the* head," "*the* mouth," "*the* eyes, with their new placid look"), he figuratively distances her from personhood.

> She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel—almost as a sunbather feels the sun—that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together.

Related Characters: Patrick Maloney (the husband), Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After Patrick returns home from work and during his post-work ritual, Mary is eager to submit to her husband's desire for quiet, despite the fact that she has been home alone and has likely had no one to talk to all day. Patrick's presence is a delight for Mary, both because of her loneliness and because she idolizes her husband's masculinity. She "luxuriates" in his masculinity, perceiving Patrick's "warm male glow" to be as powerful as the sun. Mary implicitly perceives herself and her femininity to be as weak and as subordinate as a mere human compared to a sun, emphasizing the one-sidedness of the Maloneys' marriage.

> And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job.

Related Characters: Patrick Maloney (the husband) (speaker), Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Breaking his post-work routine, Patrick tells Mary that he is abandoning her and their unborn child, and he does so in a very condescending, patriarchal manner. He claims that Mary will be "looked after," assuming that she is little more than a financially dependent creature, and he minimizes her emotions as "fuss." Though Patrick does not altogether

renounce his responsibility as breadwinner, he betrays Mary by rejecting her role as his wife, further skewing the power imbalance of their relationship. Patrick's hope that Mary will not make a "fuss" for the sake of his job as a detective shows that he privileges the public sphere and work over the private domestic life and relationship Mary has built around him.

> At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.
> She might just as well have hit him with a steel club.
> She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

Related Characters: Patrick Maloney (the husband), Mary Maloney

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Patrick informs Mary that he is leaving her, she strikes him on the head with a frozen leg of lamb. An example of Dahl's black humor, the frozen meat is compared to a steel club, anticipating the policemen's later search for the murder weapon. The narrator, breaking into subjectivity and indulging in black humor, then observes the comic effect of the husband's corpse swaying in the air before falling down.

Mary responds to Patrick's betrayal by performing a betrayal of her own—by killing him. Her murder weapon, the leg of lamb, further represents her transformation. Whereas the lamb is often portrayed as a docile, sacrificial creature, now it is used for violence. Similarly, Patrick's betrayal transforms Mary from a submissive and subordinate housewife to a violent murderer.

> It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both—mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?
> Mary Maloney didn't know. And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance.

Related Characters: Mary Maloney

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After the murder, Mary realizes what she has done and resolves to cover up the crime. However, she does so not for herself but for her child. If Mary were to be discovered, the death sentence would make "no difference to her," because the life she built around her husband was destroyed even before she killed him. Mary's decision to survive is significant because it is the first instance in the story where her energy is not entirely focused on her husband, and where she establishes for herself some measure of independence after her husband's death. Though Mary is still fulfilling the traditionally feminine role of caregiver for her child, she is also stepping into a more traditionally masculine role of protector.

> The two detectives remained, and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her, and Jack Noonan asked if she wouldn't rather go somewhere else, to her sister's house perhaps, or to his own wife who would take care of her and put her up for the night.

Related Characters: O'Malley, Jack Noonan, Mary Maloney

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Called to investigate the murder, the policemen examine the scene and attend to Mary. Most apparent after their arrival is the stark contrast between Patrick's treatment of Mary and that of his colleagues. Unlike Patrick, who ignores and

rejects Mary, the policemen are "exceptionally nice to her," emphasizing a shift in Mary's position within the story.

Jack Noonan's offer to bring Mary to her sister's house or to his wife's demonstrates both his concern for her emotional wellbeing and his assumption that the women will fulfill the expectations of them as caregivers. But it is exactly this assumption that allows Mary to escape suspicion.

> Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may've thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.
>
> "It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man."

Related Characters: Jack Noonan (speaker), Patrick Maloney (the husband), Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

While the policemen search for evidence, Jack Noonan explains to Mary that her husband probably died of a blow from a blunt metal instrument. Never considering the possibility that a frozen piece of meat, a symbol of domesticity and innocence (particularly because of the symbolic associations of the lamb), could be the murder weapon, Noonan makes another false assumption when he describes the murderer as a man. Using masculine pronouns such as "him" and "he," Noonan relies on "the old story" — one in which only men are capable of violence or physical strength. The irony of his claim, "Get the weapon, and you've got the man," is the central irony of the story: the police indeed "get the weapon" — by eating it — but fail to catch the woman.

> "Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terribly hungry by now because it's long past your supper time, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don't you eat up that lamb that's in the oven? It'll be cooked just right by now."

Related Characters: Mary Maloney (speaker), O'Malley, Jack Noonan, Patrick Maloney (the husband)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After hours of searching for the murder weapon, the policemen are persuaded by Mary to rest and eat the leg of lamb, which by now has finished cooking. Mary again plays the role of homemaker and caregiver by offering the men food—but unbeknownst to them, it is not for their sakes that she does so, as it once was for Patrick's, but rather for the sake of herself and her child. Mary's deceit invites the men to betray both Patrick and their profession, turning the policemen into her unwitting accomplices. Invoking her husband's name, she is able to persuade them to eat the lamb, destroying the weapon she used to kill their former friend and colleague.

> The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.
>
> ...
>
> "That's the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick," one of them was saying. "The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer."
>
> ...
>
> "Personally, I think it's right here on the premises.
> "Probably right under our very noses. What you think, Jack?"
> And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.

Related Characters: Patrick Maloney (the husband), Jack Noonan, Mary Maloney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator becomes more distant from the protagonist, Mary is eavesdropping on the men's conversation while they finish off the lamb. The men's speculation that the murder weapon is "under [their] very noses" is another example of Dahl's black humor and irony. As the men eat their supper, the lamb functions as a weapon against themselves and their job, and as a betrayal of Patrick. Not only do the men fail to detect the murderer and even destroy evidence, but they also engage in (possible) cannibalism, wolfing down the material transferred from Patrick's body to the leg of lamb. In doing so, they become Mary's accomplices and allow the emergence of another irony in the story; whereas before Patrick had been consumed *with* his work, now he is consumed *by* his work.

Once Patrick leaves Mary, the narrator associates her womanhood with coldness by having Mary feed the murder weapon to her victim's friends and laugh as they wonder where it might be. Dahl's portrayal of "the woman" (no longer named as Mary) as either warm and submissive in marriage or murderous and deceitful without marriage, is arguably a stereotypical representation of women as dependent on men for moral and social stability.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER

The scene is warm and cozy. There are two lamps, two chairs, and two glasses on the table, and drinks and fresh ice ready to be mixed. Mary Maloney is at home alone, sitting across from an empty chair and waiting for her husband to return from work.

The opening scene emphasizes both the "duality" (everything is doubled) of the setting and its emptiness. Like the Maloneys' marriage, Mary is the only one present, despite the fact that everything around her is meant for two.

Six months pregnant and happy with her life, Mary works on her sewing and eagerly awaits her husband's arrival. She is described in bodily terms — in terms of her body: the position of her head is "curiously tranquil," her skin translucent, her mouth soft, her eyes placid, large, and dark.

Mary's pregnancy and sewing are examples of her domesticity, epitomizing the traditional roles of women as child-bearers and domestic servants. The narrator emphasizes her objectification by emulating a poetic convention called "blason," in which a poet describes a woman by targeting various body parts.

When her husband arrives home, Mary greets him with a kiss and an endearment, hangs his coat up for him, and prepares drinks for them both, a strong one for him and a weaker one for herself, before returning to her sewing as he sits down with his whiskey.

Mary fulfills the roles of caregiver and domestic servant through these loving gestures. The fact that Patrick does not reciprocate them highlights the power imbalance of their relationship, which also manifests in the way she prepares their drinks.

For Mary, this post-work ritual is "blissful," despite her husband's silence, which she accommodates and mirrors. She has been home alone all day and she "loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel—almost as a sunbather feels the sun—that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together."

As a housewife, Mary is expected to stay in the private sphere of domesticity while her husband goes to work; she has been home alone all day, with no one to talk to. Yet when her husband comes home, Mary is quick to accommodate her husband's desire for silence. The power imbalance between Mary and her husband is further skewed by her view of him as almost godlike. While her husband's masculinity is compared to the sun, Mary is a mere "sunbather," sustained only by her relationship to her husband.

Contrary to their usual ritual, the husband downs half his glass in one swallow and goes to get more, ordering Mary to sit down when she tries to help him. When he returns, his glass has even more whiskey than before. Mary tries to sympathize with the difficulty of his job as a detective, but he ignores her.

The husband's breaking of their usual routine and decision to drink more than usual suggests that something is wrong. The husband reinforces his patriarchal power by giving Mary orders and refusing to acknowledge her efforts as his emotional caregiver.

Mary repeatedly asks her husband if he would like something to eat, offering suggestions and insisting that he eat. He refuses every time, telling her again to sit down when she gets up to fetch the food. While he stares down at his now empty glass, Mary waits nervously and scrutinizes him as he prepares to tell her something.

Mary's attempt to get her husband to eat something is yet another example of her wifely duties as caregiver. Her husband's rejection of her food is also a rejection of her role within the marriage. As he mentally prepares himself, he looks down as if ashamed, while Mary's focus is entirely on him, as it has been for their entire marriage.

The narrator leaves out the details of the conversation, but allows the reader to discern that Mary's husband is leaving her. The husband acknowledges that "it's kind of a bad time," promising to provide for her financially, but asks her not to make any "fuss," as it would be bad for his job.

Mary's husband's mention that "it's kind of a bad time" refers to the fact that he is abandoning not only Mary but also their unborn child. In his promise to send her money and in his dismissal of her potential emotions and reactions as "fuss," he implicitly dismisses the idea that his wife is a thinking and feeling human being.

Mary, shocked and unwilling to believe what her husband has told her, decides to act as if nothing has happened. Absently, she goes down to the cellar and grabs a frozen **leg of lamb** for dinner. When she returns, her husband tells her not to bother, as he is leaving.

Unwilling to believe her husband's rejection, Mary clings to her marriage by performing her usual duty of preparing dinner. Her husband, however, rejects both her meal and her.

Without warning, Mary walks up to her husband and bashes the back of his head with the frozen **leg of lamb**, which the narrator notes is as effective as a steel club. The husband's body sways in the air for a few seconds before crashing to the floor.

Mary carries out her own sudden betrayal by killing her husband here. The murder weapon (a frozen leg of lamb) and the narrator's description of the body comically swaying in the air are examples of Dahl's black humor. The narrator's comparison of the lamb to a steel club anticipates the policemen's search for the murder weapon later in the story.

The noise brings Mary out of shock as she recognizes that her husband is dead. She quickly realizes that she would get the death penalty if discovered, and thinks that this would be a "relief" if not for her unborn child. Unsure of the consequences for her baby, she resolves to cover up the crime.

After the murder, Mary finds the death penalty to be a "relief," because the life she had with her husband is already over. However, her resolution to survive suggests that her concern for her child exceeds her concern for herself and her marriage.

To do so, Mary puts the murder weapon, the **leg of lamb**, into the oven and lets it cook. She then washes her hands, fixes her appearance, and practices speaking to and smiling at an imaginary Sam (the local grocer), trying to appear as normal as possible.

By cooking the leg of lamb for supper, Mary destroys the evidence of her crime. Unlike the murder, which she commits without fully realizing her actions, the cover-up is clearly premeditated.

After she has rehearsed enough, Mary goes outside to a grocery shop and chats briefly and casually with Sam, the grocer, pretending that she is gathering food for her husband's dinner and speaking about Patrick (her husband) as if he is still alive. On her way back home, Mary decides to act as if everything is normal, rehearsing her actions and reactions in her mind, telling herself to "keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for any acting at all." When she gets back, she does exactly that, calling for her husband, becoming shocked at his dead body, crying, and calling for the police.

Mary establishes her alibi by deceiving Sam, claiming that she is cooking dinner in order to maintain a façade of domestic happiness. She also refers to her husband by name for the first time in the story. Whereas prior to his death, Patrick Maloney was unnamed and idolized for his masculinity and power, the narrator's and Mary's naming of him after the murder suggests the dispossession of his masculine power. In order to maintain her façade, Mary engages in a sort of "doublethink," deceiving herself into behaving a certain way while simultaneously remaining aware of that deception.

Two policemen, Jack Noonan and O'Malley, both former colleagues and friends of Patrick, arrive. Still crying, Mary tells them that she went out to the grocer and came back to find him dead. More policemen, a doctor, a photographer, and a fingerprint expert arrive, asking Mary questions but also treating her kindly. Mary recounts her story but mentions more detail, such as Patrick's tiredness, her sewing, how the meat is in the oven, and which grocer she talked to. One of the detectives goes out and confirms her story with Sam.

Cleverly incorporating kernels of truth into her story, Mary is able to deceive the police, who fail to suspect her as the real culprit. Unlike Patrick, who ignores and does not reciprocate his wife's love, the various men who investigate Patrick's murder treat Mary with kindness (if also condescension, at times), signaling a change in her traditionally subordinate gender role.

After Patrick's body is removed and the doctor, photographer, and fingerprint expert leave, the policemen, still "exceptionally nice to her," try to make Mary more comfortable by offering her the company of her sister or Noonan's wife. Mary refuses, and the policemen allow her to stay while they search for more evidence.

Whereas Mary had put so much energy into pleasing her husband, only to be rejected, now it is Mary who is refusing the efforts of the policemen who attempt to comfort her. The policemen's offer to send her to her sister or Noonan's wife carries with it the assumption that women (and thus Mary) are caregivers by nature and incapable of violence, again allowing Mary to escape suspicion.

Jack Noonan occasionally speaks to Mary, explaining how Patrick was killed. He says that the murder weapon was probably a heavy piece of metal, and they are still searching for the weapon, which is crucial to catching the murderer: "Get the weapon, and you've got the man." Later, another detective asks Mary about potential weapons, and she suggests they look in the garage.

Noonan reinforces this gender stereotype by assuming that the murderer is a man. Describing the weapon as a blunt metal object, Noonan confirms the narrator's previous comparison of the leg of lamb to a steel club, and unwittingly gives Mary enough information for her to point the police in the wrong direction.

After nearly three hours of searching, the four remaining policemen have had no success finding the weapon. It is late, and they are now tired, frustrated, and hungry. Mary asks Sergeant Jack Noonan for a drink, and he complies, pouring her a glass of whiskey. Mary insists that he also have some whiskey, and he agrees, but acknowledges that it's against the rules. The rest of the men are also persuaded to have a drink, and though they are uncomfortable, they try to console Mary.

Mary's interactions with the policemen highlight her sudden (and perhaps unrealistic) transformation from a submissive housewife to an intelligent and subtly dominant killer. Whereas during her marriage, Mary had to fetch drinks for her husband, now the policemen fetch drinks for her. Whereas Mary had attempted to provide emotional support for Patrick, with no success or reciprocation, now it is the policemen who attempt the same for her. Mary utilizes this new power by persuading the men to drink on the job, subtly undermining their credibility and objectivity.

Sergeant Noonan notices that the **lamb** is still in the oven and offers to turn it off for her. Mary then asks him and the others for a "small favour" — that they eat the lamb as a reward for being friends of Patrick and for helping to catch his killer. After some hesitation, the men agree and go into the kitchen to eat the lamb.

Mary exercises her power by asking a favor of the men. However, contrary to her claims, the lamb is not a reward for their friendship with Patrick, but rather a betrayal of both Patrick and their profession, leading to the ironic twist of the story. By eating the lamb, the men destroy the evidence of the murder.

"The woman," as the narrator calls her, stays in the other room, listening to the men eat the **lamb** and talk about the murder weapon. When the men speculate that it is "right here on the premises," "right under our very noses," Mary giggles to herself.

The description of Mary as "the woman" signals a greater narratorial distance from the story's main character, indicating the extent of her transformation. The irony of the men's speculation of the murder weapon's location as "under [their] very noses" is another example of Dahl's black humor.

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