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Lamb of the Slaughter by Roald Dahl

Lamb to the Slaughter is a short story written by Roald Dahl in which tells the tale of a young woman named Mary Maloney, who is informed by her husband, Patrick that he intends to divorce her. She does not take the news lightly and end up murdering her husband in a crime of passion with the frozen leg of a lamb. The writer uses a mix of predictable behavior and short dialogues to create a story that is filled with suspense and tension.

**Suspense through Setting**

At the start of the story, the writer uses the classic opening routine that automatically creates the air of suspension in the setting of the story. As Mary watches the wall clock, waiting for her husband, she organizes the daily routine in her mind. Also, why there is any need for colorfully exaggerating her love for her husband in the opening paragraphs of the story, with words like “sunbather in the sun” and “luxuriate in his presence”? Readers feel a great amount of anticipation, getting inevitably suspicious of the highest normal routine, waiting for that tragic turn that is about to occur. Adding more suspicion to the situation is the strange but brief spell of Patrick’s behavior that further adds another layer of suspense in the situation. Before Patrick creates the chill in the air after the breaking of the divorce news, he is uneasy and rather jumpy. He walks the length of the room “slowly, in long strides” and drains his drink of whiskey “in one swallow”, and later makes a new and much stronger drink than he ever had before as Mary is seen recalling in the text of the story.

**Suspense through use of Imagery**

The writer also creates suspicious imagery after the initial setting by describing the emotional reaction of Mary as she listens to her husband breaking the news of her separation through divorce. The images that follow the situation create further as to what she may do next to take revenge as her emotions make it certain that she will not just walk away calmly. The words in the text "All right then, they would have lamb for supper" also make the reader suspicious as it is repeatedly said in the story that they go out for supper on Thursday, which also happens to be the day of the murder incident. Another imagery is the submissive nature of Mary. The time she commits the act, the reader thinks that she will break down emotionally and commit a mistake that will make sure that the murder is traced back to her. But, contrary to the conventional thinking of the reader, Mary plays out the field and thinks of ways to walk free from jail. In the end, the placement of the meat after the commitment of the murder also makes the reader suspicious. Why would she place the meat in the oven knowing that she will not eat anything? It is, in the end, this suspicion is cleared as the leg of the lamb is used to feed off the police team that comes to investigate the crime, eliminating the murder weapons in the process. Lastly, the words like “As a wife of the detective” add another layer to the story already filled with layers of suspense imagery. No doubt she will use the skills that she might have learned from the many discussions she might have had with her husband during her duties, but in what ways, that is uncertain till the end of the story.

**Suspense through use of dialogues**

The writer also makes the masterful use of the dialogues in the entire course of the story, although it is very little in amount as compared to the use of excessive imagery in the course of the narration of the story. First the dialogue "This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid, but I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much" creates an air of suspension that makes sure that the eyes of the writer are glued to the pages. Next, come the repeated dialogues that convey Patrick’s message that he will not have the supper in the house as its Thursday and he will go out start the use of dialogue in the mash-up of suspense in the story.

**Analysis**

To conclude, the entire story is the masterpiece of English prose when it comes to the use of suspense to keep the reader interested until the end. How the story starts makes the reader want more, contrary to the average suspense story where the reader needs to plow through the pages to reach interesting parts of the story as the initial setting is very engaging for the average reader. The character of Mary as both protagonist and antagonist is also an interesting factor that makes the reader guessing that what she might do next. Also, the excessive use of imagery plays with the reader's minds and makes him think of the possibilities that might not have been expressively described in the course of the story. Lastly, the story cements the reputation of Roald Dahl as a master of suspense writing that may set the bar very high for the future English prose writers for many years to come.

# Works Cited

Dahl, Roald. *Lamb to the Slaughter*. New York: Harper's Magazine, 1953. Print. <https://www.classicshorts.com/stories/lamb.html>.