
Breaking Free From Misogynistic Views in Lamb to the Slaughter by Roald Dahl

Introduction

For decades, women have strived to achieve equal equality with man. In today's modern age, many women are protesting about their fundamental human rights. Caitlin Moran, an English journalist and author, has defined feminism as '[s]imply the belief that women should be as free as men, however nuts, dim, deluded, badly dressed, fat receding, lazy and smug they might be' (Caitlin Moran). In the short story *Lamb to the Slaughter*, written by British novelist Roald Dahl, the author addresses the dangers of living in a misogynistic community; a place where men deem women as incapable of being rational. The story depicts the heavily pregnant protagonist, Mary Maloney, as the perfect housewife. However, the reader soon realizes that her image of 'perfection' is an illusion when she murders her husband, Patrick Maloney, when he decides to leave her for unknown reasons.

In literature, the conventional role of women is to serve and protect her family. However, this short story depicts a woman murdering her husband and then getting away with murder. Ultimately, *Lamb to the Slaughter*, written by Roald Dahl, suffices as an attempt to eliminate the stereotypical representation of women through the use of the enigmatic character, Mary Maloney.

An Innocent Devoted Wife

The first scene of the narrative primarily focuses on Mary's physical description as the classic housewife. Dahl's portrayal of the pregnant Mary focuses on her eyes and mouth, providing her with the appearance of innocence or harmlessness. The narrator describes her mouth as 'soft' and her eyes, 'with their new placid look, seemed darker than before' (1). Literature often depicts lips as an instrument of femininity or beauty. Often, readers do not expect that this type of mouth to ever utter a vengeful or disgusting word. Likewise, large eyes tend to open up a person's face, causing others to open up to them easily. Big eyes often provide others with a feeling of warmth or passion while still presenting a sense of innocence. The features of innocence or warmth can create the perfect mould for a stereotypical housewife. This is precisely what Mary Maloney first portrays; a harmless pregnant housewife who is patiently waiting for her husband to return from work.

During the opening scenes of the short story, Mary Maloney portrays the typical gender role of women during that time; a devoted wife who desires to please her working husband. From the beginning of the reading, readers can quickly comprehend that Mary revolves her world around her husband and his needs. As soon as Patrick comes back from work, Mary 'went forward to kiss him' and 'took his coat and hung it in the closet' (1). The protagonist admits that 'she [loves] to luxuriate in the presence of this man' and she admires the 'warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together' (1). Mary's thoughts and actions orient around Patrick's desires. Mary often stops her activities so that she can cater to him once he reaches home; she obeys his every command.

The sense of eagerness to serve, to oblige, to take care of and nurture Mary's husband showcases how women are traditionally expected to behave. Nevertheless, when Mary describes 'the intent, far look in his eyes' (1), Dahl attempts to imply that Mary is so overcome with her love for her husband that she fails to recognize Patrick's feelings. In other words, this exhibits Mary's denial and attachment to her husband. Here, Dahl emphasises how 'traditional' woman act in a household and their natural response to be a wonderful homemaker. Due to her attachment with Patrick, Mary constantly needs him near her. This belief of how women need men in their life is the main gender role that Dahl provides in this short story.

A Cunning and an Intelligent Woman

Due to the constant constraints of living in a male-dominated society, Mary decides to kill her husband. In the reading, Mary is so frustrated in Patrick's sudden decision to depart from her, that she decides to murder him. Mary 'walked up behind [Patrick] 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' (2). The above quote displays a change in Mary. Readers can see that she kills Patrick swiftly without any hesitation or 'without any pause' (2); Mary's 'ideal' image has finally been disclosed, thus, breaking the common stereotype of women appearing loyal to their husbands. Mary is no longer weak and submissive; however, now she is a strong and cunning women. Due to Patrick's decision to abandon for the betterment of her life.

Thus far, Mary's character signifies innocence, purity, and naiveness however, this portrayal of innocence is an illusion. The moment Mary murders her husband, she is viewed as a cunning and an intelligent woman who is capable of being responsible for herself. When 'she swung the big frozen leg of lamb' on her husband's head, she watched him '[remain] standing there for at least four of five seconds' until 'he crashed to the carpet' (2). From Mary's impulsive response to murder her husband, caused by Patrick's decision to abandon her, the cliché role of men playing the dominant one in the family is under reverse by women. Mary, the pregnant woman who is beneath her husband, is now shown as an independent lady that has more control over Patrick. Patrick Maloney is now, both literally and figuratively, in a position underneath Mary Maloney.

A Strong-Willed, Poised and Reasonable Woman

After committing murder, Mary's characteristics develop further, causing her to stray away from her previous image in the first half of the narrative. By analyzing the short story, the reader begins to understand that Mary Maloney is not a weak-minded woman but, and an incredibly strong-willed person who is prepared to do anything to save herself and her baby. The protagonist admits, 'she knew quite well what the penalty would be [for killing her husband]' and thought 'that was fine' (3).

However, Mary instantly began to think about her child and wondered 'what were the laws about murderers with unborn children' (3) and started to devise a plan to keep her and her baby safe. History views women as inadequate to think or act by themselves and argues that females need males at times of hardship or stress. For instance, the collected and logical way of dealing with stress is a role which men usually play while many others believe a women's way to cope with stress is to deal with it emotionally. Contradictory to what people's beliefs are of women's tendency to cope with stress, Dahl portrays Mary as poised and reasonable. The depiction of

logic and collectiveness signifies Mary as an intelligent woman who is capable to critically think during times of stress, thus, causing the stereotypical belief that men are more rational than women destroyed.

A Symbol of Power

In the final portion of the short story, readers can view how men are no longer dominant over women. In the narrative, Mary Maloney exchanges a conversation with Jack Noonan, the leading detective in Patrick's murder case, where she tells him to retrieve her a drink. During the exchange, Mary orders for a glass of whisky and even asks '[w]hy don't [he] have one [himself]' even though, she fully acknowledges that drinking while working '[is] not strictly allowed' (5). At first glance, it may seem that Mary is asking for alcohol to compensate for the grief over her husband's death. Nonetheless, this selection portrays how Mary no longer plays the conventional role of mother Mary who lives to serve others. Here, Mary is addressing and giving Jack Noonan the order, thus causing a shift of the traditional role of women as caregivers to men. In other words, Mary's goal to ensure the comfort of others no longer exists. However, she is now the symbolism of power in the household; an individual who orders men around to guarantee her safety. The differentiation of the first scene and the final scene indicates that men are no longer playing the powerful or forceful character in the narrative, but, the weaker and supporting character.

Conclusion

Rather than falling under society's demands of how women should think or behave, Mary Maloney takes her future in her hands, ultimately causing her to break free from the misogynist view of the male-oriented world. Through *Lamb to the Slaughter*, Roald Dahl offers support to women, so they no longer are victims of marginalism by interweaving the rehashed topic of breaking traditional stereotypical views placed upon women. Regardless of Dahl's personal views of gender stereotyping, an overall theme in the narrative is displayed; female empowerment. By empowering the next generation of females, there will be a possible change in the expectations of women in society and the world can be 'perfect'. In a perfect world, women will be equal to men, they will no longer be 'the weaker gender' and they will no longer be 'objects'. At first, the idea of a 'perfect world' is unimaginable, however, shortly, feminism will no longer be mere theory, but it will be the basis of equality and the cause of the betterment of all people.