

# Lamb to the Slaughter Study Guide

## Lamb to the Slaughter by Roald Dahl

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# Contents

<a href="#">Lamb to the Slaughter Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Author Biography.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Detailed Summary &amp; Analysis.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Historical Context.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Critical Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Criticism.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #1.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #2.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #3.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Critical Essay #4.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Compare and Contrast.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">What Do I Read Next?.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Further Study.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Bibliography.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>



## Introduction

Initially rejected, along with four other stories, by *The New Yorker*, "Lamb to the Slaughter" eventually appeared in *Collier's* in 1953, after Knopf published its first collection of Dahl's short stories and established his American reputation. Dahl had been making headway as a professional writer with a spate of tales which, like "Lamb to the Slaughter," reflect aspects of human perversity, cruelty, and violence. "Lamb to the Slaughter" opens with Mary Maloney, the pregnant, doting wife of a policeman waiting for her husband to come home from work. When he does so, he makes an abrupt but unspecified statement to Mary, the upshot of which is that he intends to leave her. Her connubial complacency shattered by this revelation, Mary crushes her husband's skull with a frozen leg of lamb and then arranges an alibi. The laconic suddenness of the events, as Dahl tells them, creates an experience of shock for the reader, an effect which no doubt accounts for the popularity of this frequently anthologized and reprinted story. Dahl, who is also the author of popular childrens' fiction, appears here as an adult student of adult evil, as a cynically detached narrator, and as an advocate of a grisly form of black comedy. Yet "Lamb to the Slaughter" prefigures the grotesqueness in even his work for children: in both *James and the Giant Peach* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* "bad" children meet with bizarre and horrific but appropriate fates.

## Author Biography

Roald Dahl was born in Wales to Norwegian parents. His father died the year he was born, and his mother remained in Great Britain. He attended the prestigious Repton public preparatory school, where he was a quiet, bookish student, but never went on to college. After graduation, Dahl went to work for the Dutch Shell Oil company, and was posted overseas in Africa. At the outbreak of World War I in 1939, he joined the Royal Air Force and became a fighter pilot. Shot down during a sortie over Greece, Dahl was injured and spent the rest of the war in Washington DC, as a spy. Among his colleagues in the United States at the time was another future writer, the creator of James Bond, Ian Fleming.

Dahl published a highly embellished account of his war escapades in *Colliers* magazine in 1942, and started writing regularly after that, gradually gaining success. By the end of the 1950s, he was a successful and well-known author. With *James and the Giant Peach* (1961) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) he also established himself as a writer for young people. In 1954 he married the film actress Patricia Neal. In part through Neal, he made acquaintances in the film industry and worked in Hollywood as a screen writer. His most famous screenplay may have been his adaptation of Fleming's James Bond novel *You Only Live Twice* (1967). He also adapted his own work for motion pictures, writing the screenplay for *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971). Dahl died in 1990.



## Plot Summary

Dahl commences with a picture of static coziness in a middle-class, domestic setting. Mary Maloney, six months pregnant, waits for her policeman husband Patrick Maloney to come home from work. The scene emphasizes domesticity: "The room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn." Matching chairs, lamps, glasses, and whisky, soda, and ice cubes await. Mary watches the clock, smiling quietly to herself as each minute brings her husband closer to home. When he arrives, she takes his coat and hangs it in the closet. The couple sits and drinks in silence - Mary is comfortable with the knowledge that Patrick does not like to talk much until after the first drink. So by deliberate design, everything seems normal until Mary notices that Patrick drains most of his drink in a single swallow, and then pours himself another, very strong drink. Mary offers to fix dinner and serve it to him so that he does not have to leave his chair, although they usually dine out on Thursdays. She also offers to prepare a snack. Patrick declines all her offers of food. The reader becomes aware of a tension which escapes Mary's full notice.

Patrick confronts Mary and makes a speech, only the upshot of which is given explicitly: "So there it is. . . . And I know it's a kind of 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." For reasons which Dahl does not make explicit, Patrick has decided to leave his pregnant wife.

Mary goes into shock. At first she wonders if she imagined the whole thing. She moves automatically to retrieve something from the basement freezer and prepare supper. She returns with a frozen leg of lamb to find Patrick standing by a window with his back to her. Hearing her come in, he tells her not to make supper for him, that he is going out. With no narrative notice of any emotional transformation, Mary walks up to him and brings the frozen joint of meat down "as hard as she could" on his head. Patrick falls dead.

She emerges from her shock to feel panic. Do the courts sentence pregnant women to death? Do they execute both mother and child? Do they wait until the tenth month? Not wanting to take a chance on her child's life, she immediately begins setting up an alibi. She puts the lamb in the oven to cook, washes her hands, and tidies her hair and makeup. She hurries to her usual grocery store, telling the grocer, Sam, that she needed potatoes and peas because Patrick did not want to eat out and she was "caught . . . without any vegetables in the house." In a moment of truly black comedy, the grocer asks about dessert: "How about afterwards? What are you going to give him for afterwards?" and she agrees to a slice of cheesecake. On her way home, she mentally prepares herself to be shocked by anything tragic or terrible she might find.

When she sees her husband's corpse again, she remembers how much she once loved him, and her tears of loss are genuine. She is sincerely distraught when she calls the local police station - the one where Patrick has worked - to report what she has found. Mary knows the policemen who report to the crime scene, and she casts Sergeant Jack



Noonan in the role of her comforter. A doctor, police photographer, fingerprint expert, and two detectives join the investigation, while Noonan periodically checks on Mary. She tells her story again, from the beginning: Patrick came home, was too tired to go out for supper, so she left him relaxing at home while she started the lamb cooking and then ran out for vegetables. One detective checks with the grocer, who confirms Mary's account. No one seems to seriously consider her a suspect. The focus of the investigation is on finding the murder weapon - which must be a large, heavy, blunt instrument. The detectives ask Mary about tools, and she professes ignorance but says that there may be some out in the garage. She remains in a chair while the house is searched.

Noonan tries to persuade Mary to stay somewhere else for the night, but she refuses. She asks him to bring her a drink and suggests that he have one too. Eventually all of the police investigators are standing around, sipping drinks, tired from their fruitless search. Noonan notices that the oven is still on and the lamb has finished cooking. Mary thanks him for turning the oven off and then asks her dead husband's gathered colleagues - knowing that they have worked long past their own mealtimes - to eat the dinner she had fixed for Patrick. She could not eat a thing, she tells them, but Patrick would want her to offer them "decent hospitality," especially as they are the men who will catch her husband's killer.

The final scene of the story concerns the policemen eating in the kitchen and discussing the case while Mary listens from the living room. The men agree that the killer probably discarded the massive murder weapon almost immediately, and predict that they will find it on the premises. Another theorizes that the weapon is probably "right under our very noses."



# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

Mary Maloney loves her husband, and each day she eagerly awaits his arrival from work. At a few minutes to five in the afternoon, with his usual afternoon drink ready to be mixed, lighting subdued enough to be restful but cheerful at the same time, she awaits his arrival. This day is no exception. As the minute hand creeps closer to five, she begins to listen for the sounds of his car, ready for her day of solitude to be over. As usual, Patrick Maloney arrives at a few minutes to five, and she takes his coat, makes his drink, and then sits down again to bask in her beloved husband's presence, as would a sunbather on a warm summer day. She is six months pregnant, and she has a happy glow about her. She does not pressure her husband for conversation, she understands that he is tired from a hard day's work, and is content to merely sit and enjoy his silent company.

Finally, she asks if he is tired. He replies in the affirmative, and promptly finishes his whiskey and soda in one swig. After a moment, he rises to refill his glass, despite his wife's offers to do it for him. He tells her to sit down, and she obeys, merely observing the amber color of the drink the high whiskey to soda ratio. She offers to get his slippers, and he declines in an uninterested tone of voice. She tries to make conversation, commenting on the lamentable state of affairs when a police officer of his high rank should have to work so hard. He offers no response, and the silence is filled only by the ice clinking against the side of Patrick Maloney's empty glass.

She offers him some cheese as a final attempt to break the silence, but he declines once again. Thursday is their night to eat out, so she has not prepared anything for supper, but seeing how tired he is she offers to cook so that they do not have to go out. When she receives no response, affirmative or negative, she decides aloud that she will bring some cheese and crackers anyway. "I don't want any," he says firmly, his voice flat and hard. She decides to bring it anyway, and he can eat it or not, she says. He asks her once again to sit down, and she is suddenly frightened, and obeys him.

"Listen," he begins ominously, "I've got something to tell you." She asks, "What is it, darling? What's the matter?" She notices a muscle twitching near the corner of his left eye. He preempts his announcement with a warning that what he had to say would be a shock, but assures her that he has thought long and hard about the matter before coming to a decision to tell her about it. He finishes his prelude with a hope that she will not blame him too much.

His announcement takes only four or five minutes, and through it, Mary Maloney sits quietly in a dazed horror. When he has finished telling her, he acknowledges the poor timing of his announcement, but assures her that he will give her money and see that she is looked after. However, he adds, "There needn't really be any fuss I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job."



Mary's first reaction is one of disbelief and rejection of the reality of what has just taken place. She thinks that perhaps she has imagined his brutal words, and decides that the most sensible course of action is to assume that she had indeed imagined them. This time he does not stop her as she heads for the kitchen, managing to croak out quietly, "I'll get the supper."

Once she has left the room a wave of nausea hits her, and her actions become automatic. She goes down to the cellar, opens the deep freeze, and pulls out the first thing she lays her hands on. It is a frozen leg of lamb. Lamb for supper, she decides numbly, and carries it back upstairs, holding it by the thin bone that jutted out of the meat. As she leaves the cellar and walks through the living room towards the kitchen, she sees her husband standing by the window, and stops. He hears her, but does not turn around. "For God's sake," he says to the drawn curtains. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out."

Assured now that she had not imagined his words, Mary Maloney walks up quietly behind him, and without hesitation she musters up all her strength and swings the large, frozen piece of meat high in the air, bringing it down as hard as she can on the back of his head. As if in a cartoon, Patrick Maloney stands for four or five long seconds, swaying, before falling dead on the carpet.

The noise of the crash brings the stunned woman out of her reverie. "All right," she says, "so I've killed him." She suddenly is able to see everything very clearly, and her mind begins to think very fast. She wonders briefly if an unborn child is spared when its mother is given a death sentence, but immediately dismisses the thought from her head. She is not prepared to find out.

She carries the meat into the kitchen, and puts it in a pan in the oven. She turns the oven on and washes her hands. Upstairs in her bedroom she practices a smile in front of the mirror. She practices speaking aloud, repeating her words until they sound natural to her ears. "I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas."

Once she is satisfied, she gets her coat and walks to the corner grocery shop. "Hullo Sam," she says cheerfully. She repeats the lines she has rehearsed, improvising some easy banter with the grocer Sam, commenting in passing that her husband had come home tired that night and wanted to stay in for dinner, so she was going to cook some lamb and vegetables for him. Sam suggests some cheesecake for dessert, and within minutes, Mary Maloney is marching gaily out of the store with her vegetables and cheesecake.

As she hurries home, she coaches herself mentally that she is returning home to cook dinner for her husband. She must hurry, because he is tired and hungry, and thinks that if she were to come home and find something tragic had happened, naturally she would be overcome with grief. Not that she was expecting to find anything. "Do everything right and natural," she reminds herself. "Keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for any acting at all."





She is smiling and humming to herself as she enters the house, and calls out gaily to her husband. When there is no response as she goes into the living room, it really is quite a shock to see her husband lying there on the floor, and she finds that she actually does not need to act at all. She begins to sob, kneeling by his side, not acting, but at the same time marveling at how easy and natural it all seems.

A few moments later she goes to the phone and calls the police station, a number she knows off by heart. When a voice answers, she is ready with a hysterical "Quick! Come quick! Patrick's dead!"

After a few brief questions, the patrol car arrives in no time, and she knows the policemen who are in it. She tells them the story of Patrick coming home tired, and them deciding to stay in for dinner as a result. She tells them that she went to the grocer, bought a few things, and when she came home, she had found him lying on the floor. The two men inspect the corpse, and find congealed blood at the base of his skull. Soon the house is full of men. A doctor, two detectives, a photographer, and a man looking for fingerprints, all ask her to repeat her story, and question her in detail. They check her story with Sam the grocer, and her alibi is confirmed.

Jack Noonan, one of the officers she knows, is particularly concerned for her well-being. He offers to take her to her sister's house, and when she refuses, he asks if she would like to lie down. She tells him that she is too weak to move and prefers to stay where she is, so they continue about their work as she looks on. Jack Noonan keeps her updated as they look for clues and examine the body. They determine that Mary's husband has been killed by a blow to the back of the head with a weapon that is almost certainly large and made of metal, he tells her. Although they are still looking for it in the house, it is also possible that the murderer has taken the weapon with him. In a situation like this, he tells her, "Get the weapon, and you've got the man."

The detectives ask her in the course of the investigation to think about the contents of her home, to try to think of what could have been used as the murder weapon. They suggest a heavy metal vase, or a big spanner, neither of which she has in the house. The night wears on and the investigation continues. At around nine o'clock, she asks Jack Noonan if he would fix her a drink, and have one himself while he is at it. One by one, the men are all persuaded to have a drink in the living room with Mary Maloney.

After a while, Sergeant Noonan remembers that the meat is still cooking in Mrs. Maloney's kitchen. He offers to turn it off for her, and she thanks him gratefully for remembering. When he comes back in from the kitchen, she asks a favor of him and the other officers. Knowing how important hospitality was to her late husband, Mary Maloney tells Sergeant Noonan that she cannot in good conscience let the men leave without feeding them supper. Jack Noonan resists at first, but as he and the other men are hungry, they are finally persuaded to tuck into the large leg of lamb in the oven.

She overhears the men talking in the kitchen as they eat, enjoying the feast that they were talked into eating. They are talking about the size of the murder weapon used to hit poor Patrick. The report from the doctor showed that his skull was smashed to



pieces, as if it had been hit with a sledgehammer. Which is why, they reason, it ought to be easy to find. A weapon of that size would be hard to hide, and the murderer certainly would not want to carry it around with him for long. One of them belches loudly and voices the opinion that it must be on the premises, for that very reason. "Probably right under our very noses," another agrees, through a mouthful of succulent lamb. "And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle."

## Analysis

The beginning of Roald Dahl's short story, "Lamb to the Slaughter," is somewhat at odds with the story's somber title. It would seem, at first appearance, to be a description of marital bliss, followed by a sudden, startling act of passion. However, upon reflection of the text, Dahl does provide the reader with foreshadowing before the act is committed.

In the first paragraph, the home environment that Mary Maloney creates each day for her husband is described as follows: "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, whiskey. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket." This paragraph is filled with evocative language that foreshadows the chilling act to come. For example, the curtains are drawn despite the fact that it is still daylight out. Were the curtains not drawn, someone may have seen Mrs. Maloney commit her murderous act. However, they are drawn, and the dark room is sinisterly lit with two dim table lamps, further adding to the eerie mood. The warm mood is contrasted by the fragment, "Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket."

The cadence, or rhythm, of the story further builds the suspense before the act is committed. The methodical description of the environment, and the rhythmical, placid lull of the silence between the couple, broken only by the clinking of the ice in an empty whiskey glass and the clicking of Mary Maloney's knitting needles, serves to unnerve the reader and build the expectation that something monumental is about to happen.

Following this description we find the motive for the murder. Love. Mary Maloney is crazy about her husband. Each day she waits eagerly for his arrival, after ensuring that everything is perfect for his arrival. She does not need conversation, but is content merely to exist in his presence.

What we do not know is Patrick Maloney's reason for leaving her. Omitting these details, Dahl leaves the interpretation up to the reader. Is he leaving his pregnant wife for another woman? His casual and even cruel way of breaking the news to her makes us suspect that he has found someone else, although we have no way to be certain. He could be balking at the thought of raising a child, tired of his life of boring domesticity, or any number of other reasons.

Whatever the reason, his announcement is enough to trigger a violent reaction in his wife. She is at first numbed by the news, but this numbness is followed by one of the most startling and stark feminist transformations in modern literature. Stunned by her



beloved husband's announcement, she goes down to the cellar, ever the placid wife, trying in the midst of her confusion to make dinner for her husband. As she reaches into the freezer, something snaps within her and she comes back up the stairs a changed woman, a woman who is unwilling to play the victim any longer and will seek her revenge. Even as she hits her husband over the head, watching in the lamp-lit room as he topples to the floor, she is calm, lucid, and in fact, her mind becomes sharper than it ever has been. She knows immediately what she must do, and executes her plan flawlessly.

She has a minor lapse in her seemingly endless reserve of steel nerves when she comes back from the grocer's, and she kneels down by her husband's lifeless body and weeps. This too is part of her plan however, and Dahl is once again ambiguous as to whether she is weeping out of remorse for her dead husband, or if it is simply the next step in the carefully calculated plan.

The irony of the story is obvious, and Roald Dahl's well-known dark humor is evident throughout. The reason why she is able to cover her tracks so flawlessly is because her husband is a policeman, and she is well acquainted with the routine investigations following an event of this type. She is also well acquainted with the police force, and knows well the idiosyncrasies and habits of the other members of the police force who are investigating their chief's murder. Finally, in her ironic coup de grace, Mary Maloney gets the last laugh as she convinces the very men who are combing the house for the murder weapon to eat the leg of lamb that she used to smash her husband's skull "all to pieces just like from a sledgehammer."



# Characters

## Mary Maloney

Mary Maloney, the story's protagonist, is six months pregnant and satisfied with her (from an external perspective) rather banal life with her policeman-husband Patrick, whom she adores. She had "a slow smiling air about her" and was "curiously tranquil." Mary keeps a neat home, and busies herself with preparations for the baby. When Patrick unexpectedly announces that he is ending their marriage, Mary enters a state of shock. She automatically goes to the basement to remove something from the freezer for supper. She takes the first thing she finds — a leg of lamb— carries it back up the stairs, approaches her husband from behind, and strikes him on the head with the frozen leg of lamb. He falls to the floor dead. "The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock." Concern for the well-being of her coming child leads her to act quickly and efficiently to establish an alibi. She starts cooking the leg of lamb, rehearses a normal conversation with the grocer, and then goes to the store to buy vegetables. She hurries home, thinking that if "she happened to find anything unusual, or tragic, or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she'd become frantic with grief and horror." In fact, when she sees her husband's lifeless body again, she remembers her "love and longing for him" and cries over him quite sincerely. She then telephones her husband's police colleagues and collapses in a chair while they search the house for the "heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal," that is believed to be the missing murder weapon. When a sergeant points out that the oven is still on and the leg of lamb is done, Mary urges the policemen— "good friends of dear Patrick's . . . helping to catch the man who killed him" — to eat it because she knows they have missed their own suppers. The policemen consume the murder weapon while speculating about the case. "And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle."

## Patrick Maloney

Patrick Maloney is a policeman still walking a beat. The reader learns that it is unusual for him to drain most of his evening cocktail in one swallow, as he does when he first comes home. He replies in short sentences or monosyllables as Mary watches him intently, trying to anticipate and fulfil his desires by offering to fix him another drink, bring his slippers, fix him a snack. He does not answer at all when Mary expresses her displeasure that "a policeman as senior as you" is still walking a beat— a suggestion that Patrick may not be especially successful at his job. On the evening of the story, Patrick abruptly announces that he is leaving Mary, although he will continue to provide for her financially. His only acknowledgement of her pregnancy is that he says he knows "it's kind of a bad time to be telling you." He hopes that there will be no fuss about it. Although the reader is told little outright about Patrick's character, the narrative implicitly indicates that he dislikes her worshipful adoration of him, her constant catering, and her tactless reminder about his lack of advancement in his profession.



## Sergeant Jack Noonan

Noonan is one of the policemen at Patrick Maloney's precinct who responds to her frantic telephone call that she found her husband lying on the floor, apparently dead. He and Mary know one another, and he helps the weeping woman gently into a chair before joining another policeman in examining the body and scene and calling for other investigators. He is solicitous of Mary's well-being, asking if she would like to go and stay with a relative or with his own wife, or be helped up to bed. At one point she asks him to bring her a drink. He, and the remaining officers and detectives, also help themselves to whisky at her urging. It is the sergeant who notices that the oven is still on and the leg of lamb done cooking. Mary begs him and the others to eat the meal that she cannot bring herself to touch, and after some demurrals, all the policemen sit down in the kitchen and completely devour the murder weapon.

## O'Malley

O'Malley is Sergeant Noonan's partner. Dahl is having fun with stereotypes, for O'Malley, like Maloney and Noonan, is an Irish name, and "the Irish cop" was a sociological phenomenon in American big cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. O'Malley's words and actions are not specified in the story: he is just one of the policemen on the scene, discussing the case and, eventually, unwittingly consuming a portion of the tasty murder weapon.

## Sam

Sam, the grocer, appears in the middle of the story. After Mary has killed Patrick, she constructs an alibi by making a hasty visit to the grocery store to buy vegetables to go with the meal she tells Sam she is cooking because Patrick does not want to eat out, as they usually do on Thursday nights. Mary later overhears a policeman reporting that Sam found her behavior at the store "quite normal."



# Themes

## Betrayal

"Lamb to the Slaughter" tells of at least one betrayal: Patrick Maloney's unexplained decision to leave his pregnant wife. This violation of the marriage-vow is obviously not the only betrayal in the story, however. Mary's killing of her husband is perhaps the ultimate betrayal. Her elaborately planned alibi and convincing lies to the detectives also constitute betrayal.

## Identity

Dahl plays with the notion of identity both at the level of popular psychology and at a somewhat more philosophical, or perhaps anthropological, level. At the level of popular psychology, Dahl makes it clear through his description of the Maloney household that Mary has internalized the bourgeois, or middle class, ideal of a young mid-twentieth-century housewife, maintaining a tidy home and catering to her husband; pouring drinks when the man finishes his day is a gesture that comes from movies and magazines of the day. Mary's sudden murderous action shatters the image that we have of her and that she seems to have of herself. Dahl demonstrates, in the deadly fall of the frozen joint, that "identity" can be fragile. (Once she shatters her own identity, Mary must carefully reconstruct it for protective purposes, as when she sets up an alibi by feigning a normal conversation with the grocer.) In the anthropological sense, Dahl appears to suggest that, in essence, human beings are fundamentally nasty and brutish creatures capable of precipitate and bloody acts. Then there are the police detectives, who pride themselves on their ability to solve a crime, but whom Mary sweetly tricks into consuming the main exhibit. Their identity, or at least their competency, is thrown into doubt.

## Love and Passion

At the beginning of "Lamb to the Slaughter," Mary Maloney feels love and physical passion for her husband Patrick. She luxuriates in his presence, in the "warm male glow that came out of him to her," and adores the way he sits, walks, and behaves. Even far along into her pregnancy, she hurries to greet him, and waits on him hand and foot—much more attentively, it appears from his reactions, than he would like. Patrick is presumably motivated to leave his wife by an overriding passion for something or someone else. Mary's mention of his failure to advance at work, and his own wish that she not make a "fuss" about their separation because "It wouldn't be very good for my job" indicate that it may be professional success that he desires. His treatment of his wife does not suggest that he loves her.

## **Passivity**

The concept of passivity figures in the story. The first pages of the story portray Mary's existence as almost mindlessly passive: she sits and watches the clock, thinking that each minute brings her husband closer to her. She is content to watch him closely and try to anticipate his moods and needs. Patrick's predictability up to this point is part of this passivity. The two are living a clockwork life against which, in some way, each ultimately rebels. Passivity appears as the repression of passion, and passion finds a way to reassert itself.

## **Justice and Injustice**

The question of justice and injustice is directly related to the question of revenge. "Lamb to the Slaughter" narrates a train of injustices, beginning with Patrick's betrayal of Mary and their marriage, peaking with Mary's killing of Patrick, and finding its denouement in Mary's deception of the investigating officers. Patrick acts unjustly (or so it must be assumed on the basis of the evidence) in announcing his abandonment of Mary, for this breaks the wedding oath; Mary acts unjustly, in a way far exceeding her husband's injustice, in killing Patrick, and she compounds the injustice by concealing it from the authorities.



# Style

## Black Humor

Black humor is the use of the grotesque, morbid, or absurd for darkly comic purposes. Black humor became widespread in popular culture, especially in literature and film, beginning in the 1950s; it remains popular toward the end of the twentieth century. Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) is one of the best-known examples in American fiction. The short stories of James Thurber and the stories and novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. also offer examples. The image of the cheerful housewife suddenly smashing her husband's skull with the frozen joint of meat intended for his dinner is itself blackly humorous for its unexpectedness and the grotesque incongruity of the murder weapon. There is a morbid but funny double meaning, too, in Mary's response to her grocer's question about meat: "I've got meat, thanks. I got a nice leg of lamb from the freezer." She did indeed get a leg of lamb from the freezer, and after she used it as a club, she found herself with a rather large portion of dead meat on her living-room floor. Also darkly funny is the grocer's question about what she plans to give her husband "afterwards," that is, for dessert. From Mary's point of view, Patrick has already gotten his "just desserts," and there will be no more "afterwards" for him! The ultimate example of black humor in "Lamb to the Slaughter" is, of course, the spectacle of the policemen and detectives sitting around the Maloney kitchen table, speculating about the murder weapon while they unwittingly devour it.

## Point of View

Dahl grants the point of view to Mary, the protagonist. Right away, readers see the scene through Mary's eyes. The warmth and cleanliness, the punctilious ordiliness, of the living room where Mary awaits Patrick reflect Mary's conviction, soon to be shattered, that she has built a comfortable and even beautiful life. In Patrick's case, Dahl communicates indirectly by gesture. Mary greets Patrick with a "Hullo, Darling," while Patrick responds with a "hullo" only, omitting the endearment. He drinks his evening scotch and soda more quickly than usual and resists Mary's efforts to wait on him; he fails to respond to Mary's conversation. Readers see these things more or less as Mary sees them, although they likely interpret them more quickly than she does as signs of his dissatisfaction with his marriage. After the killing, Mary changes. No longer the ornament of a contented setting, she becomes the calculator of her own survival, and that of her unborn child. As Dahl writes, Mary's mind suddenly clears; she begins to dispose of evidence, and she sits in front of her dresser-mirror rehearsing a normal conversation with her grocer. When she returns home, having founded her alibi, she views the body of her husband as if for the first time, and readers, too, get a newish view of it, described much more grotesquely, with greater and more poignant detail, than previously. In these two contrasting scenes of the death, Dahl completes the transformation of his central character.



## Symbols

The setting is symbolic: Its domestic primness implies Mary's having bought into a rather banal version of middle class happiness. The frozen leg of lamb is also symbolic and indeed constitutes the central symbol of the story. The piece of meat is already a token of violence: an animal traditionally viewed as meek and gentle slaughtered for carnivorous consumption. The notion of a lamb, moreover, resonates with biblical symbols, such as the scapegoat mentioned in Leviticus, the ram that substitutes for Isaac in the tale of Abraham and Isaac, or Jesus himself, "the Lamb of God." But Dahl's story reverses the connotation of these biblical images.



# Historical Context

## The Post-War Decade

Dahl began his writing career in 1942 with a story about being shot down while fighting in North Africa. Violence, whether associated with warfare or with crime, continued to fascinate Dahl and figures prominently even in his childrens' stories. "Lamb to the Slaughter" belongs to the first full decade of Dahl's writing career and to the first decade of what historians call the Post-War period. This period witnessed the sociological and cultural transformation of the Western world and took hold as strongly in the United States, where Dahl had come to live, as in Europe. Among the features of the Post-War period may be tallied the growth of cities and the attendant rise in urban tension, the incipient liberation of women, young people, and minorities, the sense that the normative, agriculturally based America that had existed up until the nation's involvement in World War II was in radical dissolution. It is significant with respect to Dahl's story that divorce, formerly rare in the statistics of American life, began to rise in the aftermath of the war.

## Popular Fiction

The same decade was also the heyday of popular fiction in the United States, with dozens of weekly and monthly journals featuring short fiction and serialized novels, and with paperback publishing getting under way. Dahl began his career in the "weeklies" before breaking into print in commercial book form. The wave of popular fiction, emphasizing the short story, saw the differentiation of genres. Police and detective fiction, war fiction, science fiction, romance, even the business story, all represent distinct genres which appealed to well-defined groups of readers.

## Television Culture

The year of "Lamb to the Slaughter," 1953, puts the story in the glory days of American television, on which at the time gimmicky dramas of a slightly grotesque character frequently appeared. (Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*, which would come along in 1957, represented the zenith of the trend.) With its two-setting structure (the Maloney household and the counter of a grocery store) and its limited dramatis personae, "Lamb to the Slaughter" has the feel of a teleplay scenario. The black comedy and the opportunity for potential viewers to be in the know while certain characters (the detectives) remain ignorant of the facts, also conform to the nature of the one-act, half-hour TV drama interrupted by commercial messages.

## Critical Overview

The critical reception of Dahl's story "Lamb to the Slaughter" needs to be put in the context of his critical reception generally. First of all, Dahl achieved commercial success, and after a period of struggle, became wealthy on the basis of his writing. For this to happen, a writer must have talent and he must have a sense of how to make that talent appeal to large numbers of ordinary readers. There is, moreover, often a difference between what a large segment of the literate public wants and what academically trained editors, who stand between authors and the public, think that the public wants or what the public ought to want. Once his writing reached its audience, Dahl never experienced any difficulty; before reaching his audience, at the editorial level, however, Dahl often confronted obstacles. "Lamb to the Slaughter" was originally rejected by *The New Yorker* in 1951. In the meantime, Dahl had established contact with the publishing firm of Knopf, which brought out a collection of his previously published stories called *Someone Like You* in 1953. This collection was successful with the American reading public. Unpublished Dahl stories were now sought by magazines, and *Colliers* ran the stories that *The New Yorker* had rejected, including "Lamb to the Slaughter."

Critical reaction to Dahl's first published collection, summarized by Jeremy Treglown in a biography of the author, makes the case. *Someone Like You* received a good number of reviews, the majority favorable, a few condescending; but even the favorable ones tended to categorize Dahl as a strictly popular writer. Treglown quotes *New York Times* critic James Kelly praising Dahl as "the *complete* short-story writer." Yet Kelly went on to differentiate classes of short-story specialists. On the one hand there are writers like Chekhov, the Russian, an indubitable artist and explorer of human psychological depth; on the other hand, there are "solid plotters like Saki, O. Henry, Maupassant and Maugham" to which latter category he assigns Dahl. "The reader looking for sweetness, light, and subtle characterization will have to try another address," Kelly wrote. Among the negative reviews, one from the *Buffalo News* opined that even though he was a beginning author, Dahl was unlikely to achieve much in the way of a higher level of artistic expression; the same reviewer disliked Dahl's stories for their unrelievedly sardonic attitude and for their lack of social significance. Nevertheless, as Treglown notes, "by Christmas [1953], 7500 hundred copies had been sold."

"Lamb to the Slaughter" benefited from the success of *Someone Like You*, and Dahl quickly marketed it to *Colliers*. The story has been widely reprinted ever since. As Treglown writes, the story of Mary Maloney's murder of her husband constitutes "a comic crime thriller in miniature which was

to become one of [Dahl's] best-known stories and whose plot must be among the first to depend on a domestic freezer." Notice that Treglown refers to the story as "comic," stressing its black humor. Treglown makes a virtue of what other critics of Dahl have seen as a vice, namely a penchant for the grotesque and a nasty vision of human existence. This divergence of opinion sums up the critical reaction to Dahl rather neatly.



As he gradually deemphasized "adult" fiction in favor of "children's stories" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Dahl found that, despite the popularity of such items as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, some academic students of "children's stories" did not approve of him. It was thought that an amoral viciousness undermined the moral order in Dahl's children's fiction. In its elements of savagery and rejection of the rules of behavior, "Lamb to the Slaughter" might be described as a "children's story for adults."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4



# Critical Essay #1

*Bertonneau holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature from UCLA and has published over thirty scholarly articles on aspects of modern literature. He is particularly interested in the anthropological implications of narrative, an interest which he explores in the following essay on "Lamb to the Slaughter".*

In his short story "Lamb to the Slaughter" Roald Dahl offers his readers a tale so grotesque, so darkly comic, so hilarious in some of its incidental details (the fourth line from the end features a belch), that one can easily fail to take it seriously. "Lamb to the Slaughter" seems a kind of literary joke, a morbid toss-off, which the author luckily convinced some editor to buy. Yet part of Dahl's cleverness in this slick tale of domestic comfort disrupted, of marriage betrayed, and of a life taken, is that he tricks his readers into complicity with a murder, just as the murderer tricks the investigators into complicity by getting them to consume the evidence.

If readers feel sympathetic to Mary Maloney (as well they might) because her husband Patrick has abrogated their marriage and rejected her love without prelude, they must nevertheless not forget that Mary's act, her escalated turnabout against Patrick, violates a much deeper tabu than that against the unilateral dissolution of marriage; it violates the tabu against murder. Rather like an authorial devil, Dahl tempts readers to join with Mary's "giggle" at the end of the tale, when her self-exculpating plan has prevailed. Attentive students of Dahl's text will understand, however, that the comedy conceals an eruption of ugly vengefulness and that such vengefulness potentially entangles all people, actual and fictional. The law, represented in the story by the unfaithful Patrick and the bumbling detectives, serves in real life, under coercive threat, to defer just this type of personal score-settling. "Lamb to the Slaughter," perhaps surprisingly, turns out to be a story about the fundamental— and fragile— devices of civilization, and about the ease with which the seemingly law-abiding citizen lapses back into the murderous brute.

Consider the murder itself and its immediate effects. Approaching Patrick from behind, with the frozen leg of lamb hefted as a club, Mary swings high and directs the full weight of it on Patrick's head "as hard as she could." As Dahl affirms, a frozen joint smashes as well as cold steel. (The detectives will suspect something like "a heavy metal vase.") Grotesquely, Patrick "remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying." The adverbial qualification constitutes a neat, and telling, bit of narrative irony on Dahl's part, for the act is anything but gentle. Patrick crashes to the carpet. When Sergeant Jack Noonan arrives, he finds "a small patch of congealed blood on the dead man's head." Over the sinister repast, one investigating detective remarks that the police doctor had found Patrick's head to be "smashed all to pieces just like from a sledgehammer." In the story, these details lie dispersed at different stages of the telling. Putting them together serves as a reminder that Patrick's death is quite brutal, and that Mary, seemingly out of character, has summoned the grim strength of a Neanderthal. To Patrick, it seems, falls the role of sacrificial lamb to which the story's title refers, the one who goes unwittingly to his own pathetic slaughter. Yet whatever his offense, no matter



how much he corresponds to stereotype of the male betrayer of women, Patrick does not deserve to die.

One might imagine a feminist reading of "Lamb to the Slaughter" in which the interpreter focuses on Patrick's betrayal of Mary, his casual sacrifice of the marriage to his career, to his ambition, to his very own withdrawn intentness. Perhaps one does not even have to be a feminist to succumb to the urge to defend Mary on just such suppositional grounds. Patrick's piggishness— if that is what it is— after all seems to confirm the worst things that contemporary (especially academic) convention ascribes to the naturally reprobate male character. The plight of abandoned, and at least emotionally abused, women circulates widely and is well known to many. Why should readers therefore not side with Mary and even delight in her revenge against patriarchal oppression? All the more so because the events take place in a story, not in real life. Are not stories, after all, precisely the locus in which our impractical wishes may be carried imaginatively to fruition, thereby sublimating dangerous thoughts and urges? A close reading of the details ought to dampen this urge. The scene in which Patrick announces his intention to leave Mary looms as particularly interesting.

Patrick begins his tense speech to Mary with the assertion that "this is going to be a bit of a shock to you." Mary, whom Dahl has previously characterized as being "without anxiety," exhibiting "a slow smiling air," and being "curiously tranquil," has already "begun to get frightened," now infuses her eye with a "bewildered look." Patrick says that he has thought about what he is planning to say "a good deal" and that he hopes that Mary will not lay too much "blame" on him. So far, Dahl has employed direct discourse. Now, however, he switches to indirect discourse and to a purposefully vague vocabulary: "And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at the most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word." Switching back to direct discourse, Dahl makes Patrick conclude his speech with remarks about how "there needn't be any fuss" and how a fuss "wouldn't be very good for my job." It sounds selfish. What else can it be? But the important thing to note is what Dahl premeditatedly declines to divulge, what he quite deliberately conceals through elision. Readers never learn from Dahl's carefully elided narrative precisely what Patrick's line of reasoning, his case, is. (Or even what his line of unreasonable self-justification, his non-case, is, for it could be one as easily as the other.) While a strong tendency to put the worst light on such matters no doubt afflicts every reader, the fact remains that Patrick's motive hovers outside any reader's ken. To fill in the blank, no matter how certain one is about an assignable motive, would be to collaborate unbidden in the storytelling, a violation of critical principles.

What happens to the instinctive reading of the story (namely that Mary is primitively justified) immediately the reader's lack of knowledge about Patrick's motive makes itself known? In the first place, what Dahl casually calls Mary's "instinct," her "instinct . . . not to believe any of it, to reject it all," becomes suspicious, the more so since, having dispatched Patrick with the convenient and fatal mutton-joint, she herself experiences clarity: "It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden." In the light of this clarity, Mary carefully rehearses her alibi. She sits in front of her vanity mirror



and practices saying normal things to Sam the grocer. Her talent for lying rises, here, to the superb. It shows itself superb again when, returning from Sam's, she convinces herself to act naturally, as though she did not know the fact of her own criminal deed. It expands into the superlative when she skillfully lies to Sergeant Noonan and O'Malley, on their arrival, feigning the distressed survivor, mocking herself up as the discoverer of a grisly crime perpetrated by an unknown assailant. Now if, in the unrecorded blank of his speech, Patrick said to Mary, I've taken up with someone else more helpful to me in my career, younger and more beautiful, so I'm abandoning you, one might say that Mary was, indeed, primitively justified. But of course Patrick might just as well have said, I've discovered that the child is not mine and that you are not what you seem, in which case the reader's sympathy with Mary would be considerably undermined. A purely speculative interpretation which insisted on this could point to Mary's adeptness at manipulation and deception, her acquaintance with "nearly all the men at the precinct," as clues that she might be capable of such duplicity. The point is that Dahl leaves us entirely without knowledge. And it is therefore without knowledge of Patrick's motive that readers must assess Mary's act.

Of course, "Lamb to the Slaughter" belongs to the genre of comedy, as well as to the genre of crime fiction. Dahl exaggerates everything, selects morbid details, transforms mere domestic facts, like the existence of a meat-freezer in the basement, into the occasion for criminal enormity. Mary hefting the lamb-joint is a moment of dark comedy as well as a nasty little scene. Even the title, with its multiple if rather simple ironies, contributes to the comedy. For who exactly is the lamb on the way to the slaughter? At first it is Mary, about to be rejected by her husband, then her husband, fatally stunned with a leg of lamb, and then the police investigators, tricked fiendishly by Mary into consuming the very murder weapon which would enable them to solve the case. In this last detail, one might even sense a hint of ritual cannibalism, since in eating the lamb the men are participating, unwittingly of course, in the immolation of Patrick. At one point, one of the men belches. Seen this way, the placid little postmortem meal takes on a higher degree of morbidity. But it also points to the "moral," so to speak, of Dahl's amoral tale.

Civilization calls on its members to renounce primitive justification in favor of rational justice; it requires them to renounce personal vengeance, that is, in favor of established institutions which depersonalize the assignment of guilt and the administration of punishment. Even though it feels slightly absurd to invoke ideas like due process and the assumption of innocence in the case of a story which probably does not take itself altogether seriously, emphasizing these philosophical points is nevertheless imperative.

Modern middle class domesticity, represented by the living room where Dahl first reveals Mary in the story's opening paragraphs, is an instance of civilization. Taken for granted and even reviled, such homely banality nevertheless amounts to the culmination of an age-old battle by human beings against their base nature, their tendency to act out of selfish motives without regard for others. For one thing, domesticity has a wider context beyond itself, the public order of which the policeman are the putative caretakers. Dahl shows us that the caretakers of order are always less than perfect, but that is merely to underline the fragility of the achievement. Not a





material, but a spiritual achievement, the triumph of trust and cooperation over selfishness, as in marriage, requires continuous maintenance. The parties must cherish one another and hold vigil each over himself. When one party breaks the trust, or breaks the law, or otherwise disrupts the peace, the almost inevitable natural reaction of others is to reply in kind, or to escalate their response above kind. The whole fabric of trust now verges on unraveling. Dahl shows us, in sardonic fashion, just this unraveling, and in transforming the sweetly pregnant wife into the calculating killer, he reminds his audience that angelhood is a rare achievement and that revenge, especially, is an appetite which only faith and morality enable us to suppress.

In Mary's concluding "giggle," then, the comedy ends and the serious discussion must begin. Readers caught up in the fantasy of vengeance, made palatable by the comedic elements in Dahl's story, will be sorely tempted to chuckle quietly along with the clever killer, but this temptation reveals something about the primitive being in every reader. To be sure, that primitive lurks in every individual, and seeks any justification, any chink in the moral framework, to manifest itself. The lamb of our best nature must always keep a wary eye on the slaughtering beast.

**Source:** Thomas Bertonneau, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998.



## Critical Essay #2

*Piedmont-Marton is the coordinator of the undergraduate writing center at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, she analyzes the irony behind the title of Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter."*

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is representative of Dahl's economical style and dry, dark sense of humor. Like all of his short fiction, the narrative in this story is driven by plot, not by character or mood. Readers find themselves dropped into the middle of the action with no knowledge of the background or history of the characters to establish tone or motive. Starting with the double meaning of its title, however, "Lamb to the Slaughter" offers readers a number of opportunities to explore the complexities and possibilities beneath the taut and matter-of-fact surface of the story. Alert and curious readers will find themselves opening narrative trap doors and rummaging through Mary's psyche in search of reasons why an ordinary evening ended in murder.

The expression "lamb to the slaughter" is used to describe an innocent or naive person being led into danger or failure. Unprepared political candidates, or woefully outmatched sports teams are often described as lambs being led to the slaughter. Dahl's use of the expression is surprising and effective for two reasons. First, it reminds us that the slaughter that the lamb is led to is a real, not a metaphorical, killing. Second, in this story, readers discover later, the lamb is not the victim of the slaughter, but the instrument. When we first encounter meek Mary Maloney, bent over her sewing and awaiting her husband's arrival, we think she will be the lamb. As it turns out, her husband Patrick is literally the lamb led to slaughter, Mary brings her little leg of lamb to the slaughter as weapon, and in the metaphorical sense of the expression, the investigating officers are lambs, that is, naive followers, led to the slaughter, first to the scene of the crime, and second to the dinner table to consume the evidence. When readers last see Mary Maloney she is giggling to herself at the unwitting joke one of the officers makes when he claims that the weapon is "probably right under our very noses."

Mary Maloney is hardly the lamb she seems to be. As critic Mark West has noted, seemingly ordinary and respectable characters who "are confronted with peculiar problems or opportunities and respond by committing, or at least contemplating, cruel or self-destructive acts," are a feature of Dahl's stories of this period. Unlike the characters in the war stories, however, characters like Mary "do not behave nobly under pressure." When they find themselves in extreme circumstances they "lose their moral bearings." In "Lamb to the Slaughter" Mary, in West's words, "so easily makes the transition from housewife to murderer that one wonders about her mental state prior to the day she killed her husband." A close reading of the story suggests that she may have possessed the traits of a killer all along, and by extension, so do we all.

Upon re-reading, "Lamb to the Slaughter" offers some provocative insights into Mary's character and her relationship to her husband. Because on the first reading we are predisposed to think of her as the "lamb," the innocent who is about to get hurt, we do not notice how her composure that evening seems put on, or at least strained. Dahl



describes her as having a "slow smiling air about her." She is "curiously tranquil" as she waits for the clock to tick off the minutes until her husband comes home. When he finally does come home, he becomes the center of her universe, the "sun" around which her world revolves. Her desire to please him seems edgy and frantic, more an act of control than affection.

Patrick's news that he is leaving her threatens the control she has over him, and thus over her own impulses. She seems to make a last-ditch effort to remain in his orbit by insisting that he let her make him supper. Patrick does not respond when she whispers "I'll get the supper," after hearing his devastating announcement, and she takes that as acceptance of her offer. As it turns out, though, he simply is not listening to her and lashes out when she enters the room with the frozen leg of lamb: "For God's sake . . . Don't make supper for me. I'm going out." When her offer of service is rebuffed, Mary perceives it as a loss of control and literally hits her husband over the head with the meal he rejected. Readers are left with several questions. At what point does Mary decide that she'll use the meal first figuratively and then literally as a weapon? If she has no intention of attacking him why does she unwrap and inspect the meat in the cellar? If she were really planning to make supper then surely she would have selected something smaller, like the lamb chops she has suggested earlier. A whole frozen leg of lamb will—and does—take hours to cook. And why does she grasp it like a weapon rather than a piece of food, "holding the thin bone-end of it with both hands"? What seems most calculated about her behavior is the fact that after he rebuffs her final offer she comes up behind him "without any pause," as if to get a running start.

After she brings lamb to the slaughter of her husband, Mary sets about gathering the rest of the lambs into her circle of influence. Mary's behavior after she kills Patrick asks readers to consider some difficult questions about her true nature. This is unnerving because, as West points out, Dahl asks that readers see something of themselves in the apparently ordinary Mary who finds herself in extraordinary circumstances: pregnant and facing the death penalty for killing her husband. Her deliberate behavior to cover her guilt is explainable as the natural instincts for a woman trying to protect her unborn child. But the explanation is less than convincing, however, since the welfare of the child occurs to her almost as an afterthought, "on the other hand, what about the child," never to be mentioned again. Furthermore, Mary seems much more calculating than instinctive in the hours that follow her husband's murder.

Mary's actions immediately after the murder are a chilling mirror image of her behavior in the first scene of the story. Earlier that evening she had carefully set the ideal domestic scene while she waited for Patrick to come home, arranging their two chairs and the "two tall glasses, soda water, whiskey." After the murder Mary puts the lamb in the oven and then "sat down before the mirror, tidied her hair, touched up her lips and face." Then she begins to rehearse the appropriate emotional reactions to the situation. First, she feigns nonchalance for her visit to the store that will establish her alibi. Later on her way back from the store she practices how she will be overcome with shock and grief at discovering her murdered husband's body. Mary's performance is so convincing that she quickly diverts attention from herself as a suspect. While she sits quietly



playing the distraught widow the officers scour the house and grounds looking for the weapon.

Mary ultimately uses the same means of control over the investigating officers that she had used with Patrick: food, drink, and the illusion of uncomprehending innocence. It is because Patrick finally rejected her offers that he ended up dead. Because the officers can only perceive her as a helpless victim, they cannot see how they are being led astray. First she tempts them with a little whiskey. Then finally, using Patrick's sense of duty and their loyalty to him as reasons, she convinces them to abandon the trail of the murderer and sit down to eat the weapon that she used to kill her husband and their colleague.

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is unusual for a Dahl story in that the murderer seems to face no consequences for her actions. But by drawing readers into Mary Maloney's psyche, Dahl demands that readers ask themselves some difficult moral questions. Seen as a crime of passion, an emotionally distraught woman's single impulsive act that ends in tragedy, Mary's crime does not seem to require punishment other than her own lifelong remorse and knowledge that she has caused her child to be fatherless. But a woman in the throes of passion and jealous rage could not have behaved with the forethought and self-control that Mary displays in the hours following the murder. Her orchestration of the investigation goes far beyond the knowledge she would have gained as "the detective's wife." She appears to be a master manipulator who killed her husband because he was no longer willing to submit to her control. Dahl's chilling conclusion seems to be that as long as there are lambs, people willing to be manipulated, there will be slaughters.

**Source:** Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 1998.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Warren gives some background on Dahl's life and analyzes Dahl's position as a writer of horror stories. He likens Dahl's style to that of James Thurber and Saki, other notable twentieth-century humorists who possessed a satiric and sometimes morbid bent.*

Roald Dahl is a short story writer of highly unusual gifts whose specialty is what the French term *contes cruel*, but minus the bloodshed. He is one horror writer who rarely spills blood. His short stories have earned him great distinction not only in the field of horror, but among the great short story writers of the twentieth century, an assemblage that includes James Joyce, Frank O'Connor, John Collier, Saki, Katherine Mansfield, John Cheever, and Ernest Hemingway (who was a personal friend of Dahl's and whose advice on storytelling and the value of economy Dahl took to heart).

Dahl was born in Llandaff, South Wales, in 1916. His parents were Norwegian. After education at Repton School he went to work for Shell Oil Company and was sent to Dares-Salaam in Tanzania, East Africa. The next year, with the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the R.A.F. at Nairobi. He was severely wounded in the Libyan desert, but later served as a fighter pilot in Syria and Greece and became wing commander, but recurrent headaches made him unable to fly. He was invalided back to England, then sent to Washington, D.C. as assistant air attache in January 1942. At this point he still had no thought of becoming a writer.

While stationed in Washington he made the acquaintance of a small man with steel-rimmed spectacles who was looking for an account of flying with the R.A.F. This man turned out to be C. S. Forester, author of the Horatio Hornblower adventures. Dahl wrote up his experiences and sent them on to Forester, who, bowled over by Dahl's natural writing ability, sold it to the *Saturday Evening Post* without Dahl's knowledge. The *Post* paid Dahl nine hundred dollars, which he promptly lost playing poker with Harry S. Truman. They also asked for more pieces by the same writer. Dahl wrote a second, fictional, piece. That too was accepted for publication. Dahl continued writing, and in 1945 these pieces were issued together in a slim volume entitled *Over To You*. All on flying themes, these are unlike Dahl's later work though they are just as vivid and economical. (One amusing incident occurred when Hemingway borrowed the volume: he returned it after two days, and when Dahl asked how he'd liked the stories, Hemingway, striding off along the corridor, replied: "I didn't understand them.")

The short stories for which Dahl is best known and most highly regarded began to appear in *The New Yorker* and other publications in 1948. They were collected in three volumes, *Someone Like You*, published in 1953, *Kiss Kiss*, in 1959, and *Switch Bitch*, in 1974.

Dahl married actress Patricia Neal in 1953, and in between writing short stories became a bestselling children's author. Among his more popular children's books are *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *The Enormous Crocodile*.



He has also written *The Gremlins*, a children's book, *Sometime Never*, a novel, and several screenplays, including *You Only Live Twice*, a James Bond film, and *The Night Digger*, a suspense thriller. He also found time to host two television series featuring adaptations of his works, *Way Out* in 1961, and *Tales of the Unexpected* in the late seventies. His more recent books include *The Wonderful World of Henry Sugar and Six More*, his first collection of stories designed for both juvenile and adult readers, and *My Uncle Oswald*, a novel featuring more overtly sexual themes than he'd previously dealt with.

It is, however, as a short story writer that Dahl is most renowned. His stories are not horrific in the usual sense. They have been likened to those of Saki, John Collier and James Thurber, and to the whimsically macabre cartoons of Charles Addams. The comparison is judicious. Praised for the "grinning skull" quality of the narration, and the technical excellence of their construction, his short stories have been well received by critics, though they disagree on whether Dahl is, at heart, a moralist. Although his evildoers are usually punished, the form that retribution takes is usually so outlandishly unexpected that opinions differ. Naomi Lewis of *New Statesman* believes "these really are moral tales. Go wrong and you get some very peculiar desserts." Whether there is an unsuspected vein of profundity in Dahl's work, or whether Dahl is simply an entertainer "a master of horror — an intellectual Hitchcock of the writing world," says a reviewer for *Books and Bookmen* who writes supremely well, one can hardly fault the originality of his plots, the economy of his storytelling, or his craftsmanship.

Dahl himself, in interviews, has stressed the importance of plot above all else, not only in his own work but in that of his contemporaries. "After having done my twenty-five years of short stories," he told Lisa Tuttle in a *Twilight Zone* interview,

I think I probably ran out of plots, and that's the hardest thing in the world. If you write the sort of short stories I write, which are real short stories, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, instead of the modern trend, which is mood pieces . . . found about thirty-five plots, and then I probably ran out of them. I don't know many now. I don't know *any*, I don't think. I couldn't sit down and write a short story now— it's very hard. And these people who are writing them now, they don't have any plots, they don't bloody well have them. Maupassant had them. Salinger had them. That's why they were so sparing. Salinger found eleven. . . .

"Lamb to the Slaughter" is one of Dahl's most memorable tales, frequently anthologized and dramatized on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, as were several of Dahl's stories. As directed by Hitchcock himself, it remains probably the most famous of the half-hour segments. The plot concerns a policeman's wife who, upon learning her husband is leaving her, hits him over the head with an enormous leg of lamb, killing him, then serves the lamb up to the investigating policemen who sit around eating it while complaining they cannot lay their hands on the murder weapon. This is typical of Dahl in its mixing of humor and horror. The plot is just outrageous enough to be plausible, and his deadpan style sustains it to the last line. As always with Dahl, one is conscious of a master stylist at work, polishing every line, every phrase. This impression is not



mistaken: Dahl estimates it took him six hundred hours over five months to complete his story, "Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat." . . .

Some of Dahl's other stories are less horrific and more like well-told jokes, elaborate leg-pulls by an amused, self-assured, sardonic and somewhat sadistic storyteller. "Vengeance Is Mine, Inc." concerns two entrepreneurs who set up a service that offers punching the nose, or blacking the eye, of a prominent vitriolic newspaper columnist. Their charges: five hundred dollars for the first, six hundred for the second, or one thousand dollars for both. . . .

Roald Dahl's position in the field of horror is difficult to judge, for he has always stood apart from other practitioners of the genre. One reason for this is the slimness of the volume of his published work. A contemporary of Dahl's, Robert Bloch, has for example published some five hundred stories over fifty years. Dahl, although he got a later start as a writer, has published perhaps one tenth as many. While it is arguably easier to produce first-rate work if you publish only two stories a year, as Dahl was doing in the late forties and early fifties, the consistent excellence of his work would not be possible otherwise. It is hardly fair to fault Dahl for remaining true to his ideal and never sacrificing quality for quantity. More horror writers, as well as "mainstream" short story writers, should follow his example. . . .

**Source:** Alan Warren, "Roald Dahl: Nasty, Nasty," in *Discovering Modern Horror Fiction*, edited by Darrell Schweitzer, Starmont House, 1985, pp. 120-28.



## Critical Essay #4

*In the following review, Kelly examines the use of suspense in the short story collection Someone Like You, in which "Lamb to the Slaughter" appeared.*

At disconcertingly long intervals, the *complete* short-story writer comes along who knows exactly how to blend and season four notable talents: an antic imagination, an eye for the anecdotal predicament with a twist at the end, a savage sense of humor suitable for stabbing or cutting, and an economical, precise writing style. No worshiper of Chekhov, he. You'll find him marching with solid plotters like Saki and O. Henry, Maupassant and Maugham. He doesn't really like people, but he is interested in them (to paraphrase the author of "Cakes and Ale"); the reader looking for sweetness, light and subtle characterization will have to try another address. Tension is his business; give him a surprise denouement and he'll give you a story leading up to it. His name in this instance is Roald Dahl, here represented by *Someone Like You* (a collection of eighteen short stories, quite a few of which have appeared in *The New Yorker* and other magazines); and a more imperturbable young Englishman would be hard to find.

Mr. Dahl must bring off a tour de force every time out, since credibility seldom plays much part in the situations that interest him. His stories are like a fast game of badminton in which there's never a positive answer to the big question: Where's the bird? Honed dialogue, a masterful hand with nuance and an ability to keep the reader off balance through sheer astonishment are usually enough to see him through. Not always, though. For some observers (including this one) the spell will not extend to four or five of the stories where the humor is too ghoulish and the originality too intrusive. But it is safe to predict that anybody who responds to one entry will respond to all; Mr. Dahl is never, never dull.

For satirical burlesque, not many recent stories coming from either side of the Atlantic can compete with the outrageous "Nunc Dimittis," an intricate tale of a man of culture and his resourceful revenge upon a young woman who had indiscreetly allowed her full-length portrait to be painted from the skin out. In a similar vein, "The Great Automatic Grammatissator" gravely explains what happens when an electronic genius named Adolph Knipe (who wants to be a man of letters) converts an electronic computing machine into a device for writing short stories and novels. The idea, of course, is to buy up all practicing writers and produce the world's creative output by Knipe's Grammatissator, which, Mr. Dahl estimates, must already be responsible for at least half the novels and stories published in the English language during the past year.

A short one— maybe the best one— called "Taste" captures the high drama and gourmet flavor of a dinner party where an expert winebibber backs his judgment of breed and vintage with a fraudulent bet and almost gets away with it. There's a story about a dubious host and hostess who put a microphone in the guest room and open up new horizons on cheating at bridge; another concerns a man who invents a sound machine which picks up cries of anguish from flowers and trees.





There's a wonderfully underplayed murder story in which the murderess gets off scotfree, thanks to a truly perfect crime. There's a pure horror story with muted sadism at its heart— and a last line guaranteed to raise most readers' hackles. There's one about a genteel commuter who mistakes his companion for a boyhood bully and falls into a "Stalky and Co." reverie. For many readers the final scarifying story about greyhound racing and the cheating men and willing dogs who share it will live as long as any in the book.

*Someone Like You* was made to be read— but tough-minded people who don't care which way the cat jumps will probably get the most fun out of it. Mr. Dahl could be a cult without half trying, and he deserves the warm welcome he'll get. No electronic machine will ever turn out *his* stuff.

**Source:** James Kelly, "With Waves of Tension," in *The New York Times Book Review*, November 8, 1953, p. 5.



## Topics for Further Study

Examine the elements of the story that make it a black comedy. How does Dahl use irony to bring humor to the plot?

"Lamb to the Slaughter" can be considered a revenge fantasy. Think of some other revenge fantasies you have read or seen in movies and on television shows. Write about how such stories can function as a catharsis. Think of a revenge fantasy you have had yourself and write it as a fictional story.

What percentage of murders are instances of domestic abuse? Does the unpremeditated nature of Mary's crime make it seem less horrible than if it had been planned? Do you think a person like Mary could really kill someone so suddenly?

An old saying holds that "Revenge is a dish best served cold," meaning that if you want to take vengeance, you should wait and plan carefully and not act impulsively against the person who has wronged you. If Mary had consciously decided to avenge herself on her husband for deserting her, and waited and planned, do you think she would have killed him? What else might she have done to pay him back for his treatment of her?

## Compare and Contrast

1950s: Precisely because the traditional social norms had begun to come under the pressures that would lead to change, American society in the 1950s tended to reaffirm the norms of religion, family, self-reliance, law and order, and strongly defined gender roles.

1990s: Certain social trends only barely visible in 1950 now present themselves glaringly: the statistical likelihood that many marriages will fail, for example, and the ubiquitousness of violent crime. Restrictive gender roles are one of the most frequently attacked social mores in the late twentieth century. Murder is commonplace and horrific domestic violence abounds. For example, in the mid-1980s, a suburban Detroit, Michigan man killed his wife and kept her body in a locked freezer for several years, until one of the couple's daughters discovered it.

1953: Simone de Beauvoir's nonfiction study of 1949 denouncing the unequal position of women in most public and private arenas is published in translation in the United States as *The Second Sex*.

1990s: Women still earn, on average, only 75 of what similarly educated men earn in comparable positions.

1950s: The English and American populations, recovering from two wars (World War II and the Korean War), responded enthusiastically to economic trends, embracing the new standard of cheap housing and abundant material goods within the price-range of middle-class "consumers."

1990s: The "baby boom" generation (those born in the post-World War II years) is the first in English and American history to be measurably worse off financially than their parents generation.



## What Do I Read Next?

Dahl's first published story, "Shot Down over Libya," appeared in *Saturday Evening Post* in August 1942. As Dahl's earliest work, it merits the attention of anyone interested in the remainder of his stories. The story stems from Dahl's experience in the Royal Air Force, heavily fictionalized, and introduces the element of violence which threads through his oeuvre. A pilot, a British flying his Hurricane in support of ground troops, meets up with an aerial ambush by Italian aircraft, which shoot him into the ground. He survives the crash, but is injured. Despite its slightness, "Shot Down" prefigures much of the later writing.

The short stories of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., collected in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, have been cited in comparison with those of Dahl for their darkly comic nature and often bleak assessments of human nature.

In Dahl's story "The Way Up To Heaven," a woman is infuriated by her husband's chronic lateness. She begins to suspect that he is late deliberately to torment her. She seizes a chance opportunity to leave him stranded in a disabled elevator where he will almost certainly die.

For many years, Dahl was married to the actress Patricia Neal, whose autobiography *As I Am* (1988) contains a frank depiction of their life together and of the factors that drove them apart.

In James Thurber's short story "Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife," a typically mild-mannered, married Thurber protagonist had an ongoing joke with a female colleague about running away together. One day she varies her standard response by saying that first he will have to "get rid of" his wife. That night Mr. Preble lures his wife into the cellar of their home, planning to kill her and bury the body under the earthen floor. She is reluctant to enter the cellar, but once she does, she realizes what he plans to do. She belittles his plan, criticizes his choice of a murder weapon, and mocks his general ineptitude as a prospective murderer. The story ends with Mrs. Preble sending him away to find a more suitable weapon and screaming after him to "close the door . . . were you born in a barn?"

*A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift is an early and famous example of literary irony and grotesque humor. Under its full title: *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of the Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents, or the Country, and for Making them Beneficial to the Publick*, the essay shocked some members of the public when it appeared in 1729, advocating that problems of famine, poverty, and overpopulation be addressed by eating the children of the poor.



## Further Study

Raphael, Frederic. "Stories from the Source of Heartlessness."

*The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4618, October 4, 1991, p. 28.

An assessment of Dahl's career, noting that he was a mass-market writer but comparing him to some of the finest prose stylists of the twentieth century. Raphael theorizes that Dahl's war experiences as a fighter pilot, which he wrote about in the stories collected in *Over to You*, are responsible for the bitterness and cruelty of much of his later fiction.

Warren, Alan. *Roald Dahl*. Mercer Island, Wash.: Starmont, 1988, 105 p.

Critical study of Dahl's fiction, including a chapter on filmed adaptations of his stories.

West, Mark I. *Roald Dahl*. N.Y.: Twayne, 1992, 148 p.

Biographical and critical study, covering Dahl's life and literary career.

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Treglown, Jeremy. *Roald Dahl: A Biography*. New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1994, p. 105.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels





frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

SSfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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