

The speckled band and and lamb to the slaughter essay

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Most murder mysteries share familiar story line characteristics. There is usually a body or victim, a murderer, suspects, an investigation, clues laced throughout the story and a motive for the crime. Similarly, such stories normally will employ a range of techniques and writing styles designed to convey an atmosphere and to build suspense within the story. Both Lamb to the Slaughter and The Speckled Band exhibit many of the stock story line characteristics described earlier.

However, when reading the stories, it is quickly apparent that the authors employ differing styles and techniques to help build their atmospheres and to maintain suspense and interest. It is these differing styles and techniques that this essay sets out to examine and compare. In The Speckled Band, its very name attempts to promote both intrigue and interest. As the reader becomes more involved with the story, the title leads the reader towards a range of possible story lines. When a "band" of gypsies is mentioned, the reader may well assume that the gypsies are integral to the plot and (probably) involved in the ensuing crime.

This approach helps maintain interest and suspense in the early part of the story. A number of other techniques are employed to help confuse and, hopefully, enthuse the reader. Techniques such as the withholding of information, building of pace and the skilful use of language all help to enthuse the reader. The story was written in the late Victorian era. As was fairly typical in this period, it tries to build suspense methodically and gradually. In terms of building a sympathetic, intimate atmosphere, the piece is written from the point of view of Sherlock Holmes' dearest companion, Dr Watson.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-speckled-band-and-lamb-to-the-slaughter-essay/>

He is skilfully established as a trusted and likeable character. It is written in the first person as if Watson is telling a story and not merely taking notes, as is his appointed role as Holmes' assistant. This promotes a sense of intimacy. The reader is encouraged to develop a strange trust for Watson thus developing a warm feeling about the story and its main characters. It purposefully sets out to involve its readership and keep them interested in the leading characters. An example of how Doyle promotes intimacy and sympathy for his characters is how he frequently uses Watson to refer to Holmes as " my dear fellow" or " my friend".

This helps give the story an endearing quality enhanced further when Holmes reciprocates these 'warm' feelings by calling Watson my " intimate friend". This and Watson's childlike adoration for Holmes, encourages the readership, so that they too, are receptive to the idea of Holmes being an altogether impressive figure: " I had no keener pleasure than following Holmes and in admiring his rapid deductions like intuition ". Clearly Watson greatly admires Holmes and because Watson has been made likeable and respected by the reader, they too, are encouraged to view Holmes in this way.

The setting of murder mysteries is often crucially important in adding to the atmosphere surrounding the plot. In The Speckled Band, it is made to be an integral part of the story. This is perhaps atypical of much of the late 19th Century writing style and certainly true of most of Doyle's works. In The Speckled Band, the setting and environment is exhaustively described and this attempts to add to the story. The detail that is given tries to draw the

reader towards various mistaken thoughts. The sentences attempt to suggest something sinister or to imply hidden meanings.

For example, the history of the Estate is meticulously provided as if this is of real importance to the circumstances of the mystery. The author frequently uses elaborate, descriptive language to help build his atmosphere. For example he employs the following simile to help the reader visualise Stoke Moran (the Estate): ".. two curving wings, like claws of a crab. The family was at that time among the richest in England and the estate extended over the border into Berkshire in the north and Hampshire in the west. " This technique is effective, as it conveys aggression and menace.

The reader is encouraged to regard the house as forbidding and dangerous. The presence of animals and gypsies in the story line add to this image. As the story unfolds, Helen Stoner tells Holmes of a whistle and a metallic sound. This kind of detail helps build up the mystery as to how the crime occurred. It encourages the readers to engage their own minds to try and find the solution to this apparently unfathomable mystery. Withholding information in this way helps add to the suspense. For example, the readers are never told why Helen is trying to solve the case two years after it happened.

Conan Doyle uses many literary devices to convey an impression of suspense and mystery. These devices occur throughout the story to ensure the reader is always guessing what happens next. His main technique is to use a combination of melodrama and somewhat highbrow language. He uses the latter frequently and the former to ensure the reader does not become

disinterested by it. For example, when Helen Stoner begins her story by saying: " Oh sir, do you not think you could help me too and at least throw a little light through the dense darkness which surrounds me? " it is promoting intrigue yet at the same time, is tinged with some humour.

By contrast, in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, which is a 20th century work, the methodical/analytical style of writing is less apparent and the setting for the story becomes of less importance. More attention is placed on building the characters' emotional involvement in the plot and using this character development to build the atmosphere. Dahl's setting is generally homely and cosy. His story is written in the third person and in a chronological order that charts Mary's reactions and actions. Any atmosphere that is built is that that is created by what is revealed inside Mary Maloney's head. The house is not used atmospherically.

Dahl's writing style is generally bland with little elaborate language. He uses a plain and clear structure. This style allows the reader to concentrate on the story and the emotions of Mary, and its blandness helps give a sense that extraordinary things can happen to ordinary people. For example, the line after the deed had been committed. " Alright she told herself, so I've killed him. " She then immediately begins practicing what she is going to say to the shopkeeper, and how to act normally. Dahl's atmosphere is not created by the traditional " whodunit" story line but by a different method.

The question promoted is not who did the crime (as this is revealed early), but whether or not the perpetrator will get away with it. We do not necessarily want Mary to get caught as she is with child and killed the victim

in a crime of passion. The main reason she covers the crime up is that she doesn't want her child to be born in prison. This approach attempts to make the reader sympathetic towards Mary. The idea is planted that perhaps she deserves to get away with it on the basis of ' he was unfaithful - therefore he deserves what he got' - perhaps a comment by Dahl on contemporary values.

Dahl's language style is very simplistic and purposefully easy to understand. This makes the story accessible to a wide readership. Events are explained without going into great detail: When quizzed by the detective about which grocer Mary had visited, an explanation of: " She told him, and he turned and whispered something to the other detective who immediately went out into the street", is given. No emotion, opinion or supporting atmosphere is offered. The statement is simple, sharp and concise. This approach is fairly typical of much latter stage 20th Century writing.

We can speculate that this change in language style by authors, was influenced by the fact that 20th century readership had increased to those in the 19th century. Most 20th century writers were keen to ensure that their works were accessible to this much larger audience and thus tended to keep the language straightforward, even simplistic. This can be seen in Lamb to the Slaughter all through the novel, even to a point where perhaps more illustrious language would be better suited. For example, when the police arrive perhaps we would expect very emotive language and a noticeable quickening of pace.

However, when the police arrive there no sense of shock given in the language used but rather a bland, sedate atmosphere - " Two policeman walked in. She knew them both... and she fell right in to Jack Noonan's arms". Simple and to the point. It is understandable and acceptable to a wide readership unlike battle of words that ensues in such situations in The Speckled Band. No foul play is even suspected on her part, so no complicated reasoning or deductions are made because the alibi and story presented by Mary are instantly believed, making no complicated reasoning necessary.

Despite their inherent differences, we can see that both stories also carry with them a number of similarities, particularly those that generate suspense and tension. Both use the technique of using sudden shocks. Examples of this can be found in Lamb to the Slaughter, in the scene when Mary suddenly hits Patrick with the leg of lamb or, indeed, when the police surprisingly eat the leg of lamb. Similarly, in The Speckled Band, when Dr Roylott is not only caught by Holmes, but is also then killed. This is intended to shock the reader.

Both authors also employ a technique of slowing and building up the pace of their stories. A good example of when the pace starts building in Lamb to the Slaughter is when Patrick begins to tell Mary that mysterious 'something'. The pace is slowed down when she recounts how she killed her husband and builds up again when she goes to the greengrocers. Similarly, in The Speckled Band the pace is slow when Helen Stoner tells her long and

detailed story, but once she leaves, the pace suddenly quickens by the appearance of Roylott, a scene conveying a strong sense of threat.

In *Lamb to the Slaughter* the technique of gradually increasing the tension can be observed when Mary is waiting for her husband. The tension builds up to the point where she hits him with the leg of lamb. This approach is mirrored in *The Speckled Band* in the piece where Holmes is gradually and miraculously collecting all the clues in the case right up to the death of Mr Roylott. Both authors use their language and dialogue very carefully. In *Lamb to the Slaughter* when Mary asks politely if Patrick wants his slippers and he shouts back rudely and impatiently " No", this suggests that something important is amiss.

A similar technique is employed in *The Speckled Band* when Holmes purposefully speaks very calmly and methodically, thus trying to add to the sense of melodrama and tension. For example, when Dr Roylott appears in the doorway and aggressively demands to know what his daughter is doing there, Holmes responds very calmly and blandly with " Indeed Doctor, pray take a seat". Additionally, after another tirade by Roylott demanding information, he simply answers " It's a little cold for the time of the year", slowing down the pace and relieving tension.

The Speckled Band and *Lamb to the Slaughter* broadly reflect the 19th and 20th century periods from which they come. They may be viewed as being fairly typical of the writing style of their periods. In *'The Speckled Band'* the crime is solved (as with all Holmes' murder mysteries). This perhaps reflects the late 19th century belief in the power of science to answer difficult

<https://assignbuster.com/the-speckled-band-and-lamb-to-the-slaughter-essay/>

questions and solve mysteries. 19th century morality values and ideas of justice would not have been receptive to the idea of criminals/wrongdoers, 'getting away with it' and this may have influenced Doyle.

Conversely, in Lamb to the Slaughter, the crime is left unresolved and a certain contempt is perhaps being shown for authority (the police) and its ability to solve problems - perhaps an example of 20th century cynicism and a mistrust of the 'system' (or at least Dahl's). Altogether, both stories are good examples of how suspense and atmosphere may be created using different methods and techniques. Both approaches employed have merit, and modern day writers continue to utilise aspects of each style.