

A comparison of  
modern murder  
mysteries against  
those written in the  
past essay s...



**ASSIGN  
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Lamb to the slaughter was written by Roald Dahl in 1954. Roald Dahl is most famous for writing children's stories but when he did write stories for adults they tended to be about ordinary people in extraordinary situations with surprising outcomes or twists and 'Lamb to the slaughter' is no exception. From what we know of Dahl's style, when writing for adult, we can guess that the story is going to be untraditional to say the least, with an unexpected murder and victim and a surprising or shocking outcome or twist.

The speckled band' was written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and was published in 1892. Doyle's books are famous for their lead character the fantastically analytical Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is a brilliant detective who takes on cases as a hobby to satisfy his inquisitive mind rather than as a profession. Holmes and his sidekick Watson, go around solving seemingly impossible mysteries using the powers of observation and analytical thought. One of Holmes's most famous lines is, "when all other possibilities have been discounted, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the solution".

This prior knowledge of the author and the lead to characters suggests that the story is going to be a traditional murder mystery with the method so convoluted and unfathomable that only the great Sherlock Holmes's can unravel. The victim in 'Lamb to the slaughter' flies in the face of tradition, Instead of the expected old fashioned view that females were the weaker sex therefore they traditionally become the victims of the violent crimes that occur in murder mysteries but in this story the roles are reversed.

The victim in this story is a male police officer; he is also the murderer husband. Right from his entrance into the story we can tell that something is

wrong. Dahl uses the first two paragraphs to establish a routine of the house and to show the reader that this routine was so strictly adhered to that it had become close to an obsession for the wife. Their routine has become like a little play acted out everyday. Everything from the drinks on the side board to the exact time that car pulls up outside is the same.

It is only when the husband comes home that her routine gets broken that we begin to realise this is not the idyllic home life that we were lead to believe. It starts when the husband does an “unusual thing” which is to down his whiskey, this break of routine is a turning point in the play a transition between what appears to be a happy and “tranquil” marriage to the reality that the murderer refuses to see at the beginning the truth is this very placid woman’s life is falling apart.

The victim’s behaviour is nervous we can see this from his rapid consumption of alcohol and the fact that he makes no effort towards the phatic conversation initiated by the wife. These actions suggest to the reader the reader that he is preparing himself for sometime, trying to work up enough courage to tell his wife bad news perhaps? These omens are foreshadows of the events to come. They carry on with his blunt or even harsh refusal of her polite offers of supper. From the evidence supplied by his behaviour towards her we can guess that he has bad news for her.

We can also conjecture that a woman so caught up in routine is going to react badly to this news. Helen Stoner the victim in ‘The Speckled band’ is a far cry from the very unconventional victim in ‘Lambs to the slaughter’. The victim is instead the epitome of the tradition murder mystery. Firstly she is

female and, at the time the story was written, she would have been perceived as a member weaker sex and therefore unable to defend her and in need of male protection against the threat of another male.

Secondly the women is obviously petrified; “ It is not cold that makes me shiver”. In traditional murder mysteries we are generally made to feel sorry for the victims and none more so than Helen. She has just lost her sister under suspicious and extraordinary circumstances and has a violent step father who appears to be unhinged. The murderer in ‘ Lamb... ’ is, as I’ve already mentioned, Mary Malone a pregnant house wife. At the beginning of the novel she appears very placid and content with her life; she even has a “ quiet, smiling manner” in everything she does.

She also fixated on her routine; her husband arrives home at exactly the same time every day; she has the same drink wait for him; she gets his slippers; they eat out on Thursday. When her husband breaks that routine she no longer knows how to cope, in fact she tries to make him dinner when he just asked her for a divorce, this reaction shows how important this lady’s routine is to her that she needs to believe that everything is normal when a bombshell has been dropped.

Also Mary seems to be totally dependant on men. She’s dependent on him not only for financial support but also for emotional support, she needs to “ luxuriate” in the “ warm male glow” of her husband to reassure herself of her husbands love and there reconfirm the constant factors in her life. Basically she’s a feminist’s nightmare. When her husband threatens to destroy not

only her routine in which she found security but also destroy her belief that he loved her she snaps.

The murder of her husband was not pre-meditated and was in hot blood but yet there is something in human about her calm self possession after the event. This feeling is encouraged by Dahl writing that she'd just killed her husband quite so matter-of-factly was chilling. I feel he did this to deliberately shock the audience; he not only wanted to get a reaction out of the readers but also to make them reassess some of their stereotypes. Mary is seemingly unfazed about being charged with murder and it is in the end her unborn child that prompts her to hide her guilt.

Her clear thinking is also very worrying after all she has just killed her husband with a part of there dinner with out even thinking, surely she should be hysterical but instead she is already planning her alibi. All this evidence suggest that Mary Malone has past beyond the reaches of sanity, whether her madness is temporary or permanent we do not know, what we do know is that Mary Malone is not a well women whose heavily pregnant and madly in love with her husband whose just ask her for a divorce, asking if they can keep the arrangements quiet so it wont effect his job.

The reader is made to feel sorry for the woman whose life just shattered before her eyes and lashed out in a moment of pure rage and fear. Also we sympathises with a mother unwilling to admit to her crime for fear it will threaten her child. (Although I'm not sure living with a murderous psychopathic mother is a great start for it any way) But murder under any circumstance is not acceptable even if the circumstances were extreme to

say the least. The author is trying his best to evoke feelings of sympathy for her by showing us how her husband's bad news totally destroys her world.

The murderer in 'The speckled band' follows the traditional stereotype; he is male, he's violent, he has a terrible temper, he intimidates young women, he has a clear motive. The murderer is described as having a "large face, seared with a thousand wrinkles burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion." This description of him is hardly intended to arouse sympathy but instead to do the exact opposite, unlike Dahl Doyle is not trying to evoke sympathy for the murderer but instead to stir up fear and repulsion of him in the readers.

He is also different to Mary Malone as his motive is material rather than emotional, this is not a crime of passion committed in hot blood but instead a premeditated well thought out murder committed in cold blood to get his hands on money by killing his step daughters. This story, as I've already said, follows along the traditional lines of a murder mystery. Another piece of evidence to prove that it does is the way in which we see the murderer. In pre nineteenth century literature the murderer is always evil and a stereotypically bad person who needs to be brought to justice.

The idea's of justice in Victorian time, which was when this story was written, were very specific. If you committed a murder you were a monster and therefore deserved the full retribution of the law. It would have gone against the public morals to try and evoke feelings of pity towards a man who has committed such crimes. The setting in 'Lamb...' seems to reflect Mary's

obsessive tendencies, the drink is already laid out, the curtains are already drawn and the room was warm and spotless.

This sounds like pleasant enough environment but then if this environment was never messy and a strict routine was adhered to every day the environment becomes claustrophobic. Mary's husband probably felt trapped in his house and ensnared by a wife who has lost contact with the real world. The setting is interesting as it is not stereotypically creepy but it uses over cleanliness to create an odd scary feeling from the reader. It reminds me a lot of the setting of 'The landlady' another one of Roald Dahl's other stories. The setting of the speckled is a more traditionally spooky house.

It's a run down mansion with half of the roof has caved in. This creates the atmosphere of fear which was an essential characteristic in a good old fashioned murder mystery. Other characteristics that add to the atmosphere of evil and fear for example Sherlock Holmes the man of iron is scared and that is never a good sign also the amount of planning such an elaborate murder would take is fairly chilling in itself. The two stories also have different views on the detectives involved; one is inhumanly acute and sharp with the ego to go with it and the other set of detectives are painted as bubbling fools who manage to eat the murder weapon.

The detectives in 'Lamb...' seem to be very unprofessional and incompetent, firstly they drink on the job, next they leave Mary unattended in the murder scene with the corpse and thirdly in the twist of the book they manage to eat the murder weapon. The incompetence in the police force is unusual in a murder mystery normally they would be revered as the solver of

a great crime but then again 'Lamb...' as we've already discovered is not a typical murder mystery. This untraditional view of the detectives is the antonym of the image we get of Holmes.

Holmes behaves in a thoroughly professional manner through out the book, making lightning quick deductions from what would seem insignificant pieces of evidence. As well as this Holmes possesses those characteristics that no good hero should be without namely; a superior intelligence; lots of curiosity; a good deal of strength and finally bravery. Holmes displays all these characteristics. Doyle is very clever to place all the clues before us before having Sherlock explain their relevance that way he not only builds suspense but also manages to make us respect Holmes's intelligence even more.

The outcomes of these two murder mysteries are very different indeed. In 'Speckled band' the murderer meets justice as the method he used to kill his stepdaughter recoils and bites him instead. This would have been a very satisfactory ending in Victorian history as the murder is resolved quite nicely the murderer falls foul of his own scheming and there are no loose ends. This is different than 'Lamb...' where the murderer gets away with her crime. 'Lamb...' being the more modern story is less bound by the morality of the time. The ending feels unfinished there is no cut and dried justice nor is there a sense of completion.

It evokes a feeling of uncertainty in the reader; after all do we really want this woman and child to be locked up? 'Lamb...' main good point is the point it is so thought provoking. I enjoyed both of the stories for different



reasons. 'Lamb...' 'untraditional storyline and ironic twist make it very interesting. Also it is very compelling to watch how an ordinary women can become so out of touch with reality that she will commit murder to keep her imagined reality from shattering. Despite this however my favourite out of the two books must be 'The Speckled Band'.

All of the Sherlock Holmes series are amazing as you try to deduct from the evidence the truth. Also the hero himself manages to fulfil in us a need to find something, or someone, superior. People will always read murder mysteries as the public love to be confounded but there is another reason as well. People will always be interested in the darker side of human nature. What could drive someone to kill? By reading murder mysteries we can get a glimpse into the minds of the people that could take another persons life. These stories help us assess ourselves, to find out what could push us far enough that we could destroy another human being?