

## Teaching with Paratext: Rereading Roald Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter" in the Literature Classroom

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Whenever I teach my food and literature class, I include Roald Dahl's 1953 short story "Lamb to the Slaughter." Most of my students know Dahl from reading his wildly successful children's stories, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach* among them, but few have read his adult fiction and fewer still have thought critically about his relationship to food.<sup>1</sup> "Lamb to the Slaughter" is his most anthologized short story. Its popularity is often ascribed to its twist ending, in which the main character, Mary Maloney, having murdered her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, feeds the cooked lamb to the investigators who come looking to solve the crime. Yet my students rarely focus on the twist ending. Instead, they express deep empathy and compassion for Mary as an oppressed figure in 1950s America, linking their reading of the story to their basic historical knowledge of the time period. What has always shocked me as their instructor is how often they read Mary's act of violence not as bad or deserving of punishment but instead as a proto-feminist act, one that is precipitated by her stifled and restricted life as a housewife. Perhaps this reading developed out of the current discussion around consent and assault in the growing "#metoo" movement at the time of this writing—even though the movement was never referenced in class—but I was still surprised that my students were able to construe and articulate complicated feminist notions in a piece written by an author regularly

described as misogynist.<sup>2</sup> If my students were picking up on these notions, where or how were they getting there? I asked this question, in part, because we were reading the story devoid of context, as I had given them a free PDF version widely shared by instructors on the internet. By decontextualizing the story, I began to question if I was doing my students a disservice even as I tried to save them money. Would their readings of the story or the characters, especially Mary, change if it was placed within some context, be it an introductory literary anthology or even the original context of the story's publication? Would their feminist reading be strengthened, challenged, or complicated if they were examining more material circulating around the story? Not unlike the investigators who arrive at Mary's house, I decided to return to the "scene of the crime," the original publication of the story in *Harper's Magazine* in 1953. From there I discovered a trove of paratextual material that could enrich exactly what my students were discerning in the story in 2017.

Paratextual material—in this case, illustrations, letters to the editor, and other articles published in the same issue of *Harper's Magazine*—can offer a more complex and culturally textured understanding of a text. This essay proposes a pedagogical approach that embraces paratextual material in the literature classroom, both as a way to address how cultural and social concerns are always in flux, but also to demonstrate to students how their readings are always emplaced—i.e. situated in, reflective of, and partly determined by not just the particular cultural-historical moment of a story's publication, but also by their own emplacedness as readers in the twenty-first century. This approach addresses two pedagogical concerns: one, that we should consider writing's paratextual context in the classroom as an expression of its cultural-historical

moment; and two, that examining the paratextual material makes what may be implicit in a text explicit. In essence, I see the paratextual material bleeding through the story.

Literary scholars are the most likely group to engage in paratextual analysis, particularly in the fields of book history and reception studies.<sup>3</sup> In addition, interdisciplinary fields—such as fan fiction studies, adaptation studies, and media studies—examine the paratexts created by the readers and promoters of source material.<sup>4</sup> At present, though, the bulk of scholarship addressing paratextual study in the classroom focuses on young children<sup>5</sup> or, in the case of the 2018 *Literacy Engagement through Peritextual Analysis* published by the American Library Association in partnership with the NCTE, peritextual<sup>6</sup> material as it relates to the teaching of information literacy in a digital age. Little attention has been paid to teaching paratextual material surrounding short stories, perhaps in part due to the genre’s ties with commercial production and reception outside the literary canon.

Yet as Kathleen McCormick writes in *College Literature*, “one of the ways in which student readers of literature can be enabled to work on critical awareness in that balance between autonomy and determination is by being given access to discourses that can allow them to read and study literary texts from the standpoint of their *production* and *reception*” (5). McCormick proposes that for students to become “active makers of meaning” of literary texts, instructors must provide them the tools to “historicize their own reading position” while also emphasizing the students’ own “reading as a process of production in dialectical relation to other readings in the past” (5). McCormick advocates for this investigation into the paratextual for works already within the canon, but I want to extend this method beyond canonical literature, drawing

attentions to how paratextual material bleeds through *any* form of writing, and that the act of reading is always negotiating layers of socio-historical context.

Just as my students could articulate a feminist reading of Dahl's short story, the paratextual material could shape and connect to their reading of the story in profound and enriching ways, ways that were not determined by an anthology's limitations. To demonstrate this concept, I begin this essay with a short close reading of Dahl's story informed by discussions I have had with my students. I then examine the paratextual material in *Harper's* September 1953 issue in order to illustrate how I see the paratextual material bleeding through. This approach offers a pedagogical model that embraces the use of paratextual material in the literature classroom to enable and enrich discussion of the cultural and social implications of works taken out of their original context.

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The power of Dahl's stories lies in their ability to exaggerate, to take trifling details and push them beyond their limits to effectively satirize his target.<sup>7</sup> In "Roald Dahl's Subversive Storytelling," Margaret Talbot comments upon how Dahl's use of exaggeration functions particularly well in children's literature: "Children need the dark materials of fairy tales because they need to make sense—in a symbolic, displaced way—of their own feelings of anger, resentment, and powerlessness." I see Dahl's adult fiction using this same framework of exaggeration. In "Lamb to the Slaughter," the use of a frozen leg of lamb to commit a murder, while initially comical, can also signal to the reader something about the ways domesticity can literally be weaponized to counter feelings of anger, resentment, and powerlessness. Mary's

frustration is not borne out through a tale of slow poison—a feminized method of murder that removes the actor from the physical act of killing—but through a violent act that bears symbolic weight as a critique of domesticity.<sup>8</sup> Mary uses food as a weapon, turning food into the exaggerated object of violence—a leg of lamb into a billy club. While this could suggest Dahl’s intent to masculinize Mary through a physically intense act, I read this act as an exaggeration that captures the very real anger and frustration of the housewife.

Dahl’s exaggerated description of Mary focuses on her vulnerability at six months pregnant: “There was a slow smiling about her [. . .] Her skin [. . .] had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before” (23).<sup>9</sup> This description initially situates Mary as the “lamb” of the title, an innocent, non-threatening entity who only comes alive once her husband Patrick is home; she “luxuriates in [his] presence [. . .] almost as a sunbather feels the sun,” since she spends the majority of her day alone in the house (23). Her isolation seems complete; the narrator references no friends, no other family. Yet her eyes have become “darker” than before, a slight nod toward the horrors to come.

Mary’s anger reaches a boiling point when Patrick reveals he’s leaving her. His leaving not only destroys the fiction of their happy married life, but also throws into dark relief her utter dependence on him. This reliance is the underbelly of domestic ideology; without it, Mary’s sense of self is set adrift. Any housewife identity is typically moored in caregiving; without Patrick, Mary is both alone and uncertain of her future. One way to ensure her future is, ironically, to destroy the thing that defines her dependency. Mary’s killing of Patrick then

becomes a retaliation against this domestic self, ensuring that she establishes a new self on independent grounds.

The reader may first experience Mary's intense reliance on Patrick as acts of smothering, starting from the moment he walks in the door; she doesn't really come alive until that moment. She takes his coat and hangs it up, makes him a drink, and then sits nervously waiting for another task. Patrick seems unaffected by his wife's emotions, responding to her enthusiastic greeting with just "Hullo" followed by an immediate draining of his glass of whiskey (40). Immediately, the reader knows something is up, even if Mary stays oblivious to Patrick's mood as she prattles on about dinner plans. The shift in the story comes when Patrick finally snaps at Mary: "Listen," he said. 'I've got something to tell you.'" This short admonishment is followed by a description of Patrick that shades him in darkness, a clear symbolic gesture towards his role as the villain:

He had now become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near his left eye. 'This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid,' he said. 'But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much.'

And he told her. (40)

The reader is never told exactly what he says. It's implied he wants to leave her, but the ambiguity here is important because the reason doesn't really matter. Patrick has been unkind and unfeeling since he walked in, and now, with his chin and mouth in shadow, he's solidified as

the villain of the story. While Mary may seem overly involved at first, it is Patrick's cold delivery of this news that shocks the readers, and Mary, into seeing the imbalance of power clearly.

From here, readers are intended to sympathize with Mary, which is further evidenced by the lack of spoken dialogue on the following pages. Following Patrick's revelation, Mary continues to stay silent, as in the story's opening. But now the reader is privileged to hear Mary's inner questioning: "Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing" (40). The use of the word "imagined" implies a direct connection with the reader: just as readers are imagining this story, Mary is imagining a story as well. This positions the reader alongside Mary, as an accomplice in the story-making process. Readers follow alongside Mary as the narrator pays close attention to her actions: "When she walked across the room, she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all—except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now—down the steps to the cellar, the light switch, the freezer, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met" (41). She unwraps a leg of lamb and brings it upstairs, ostensibly for Patrick's dinner. However, his admonishment—"For God's sake, [. . .] don't make supper for me. I'm going out"—sparks Mary's revenge as she "simply walked up behind him, and without any pause, she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head" (41). Readers stand alongside her (and perhaps cheer?) as she, without hesitation, murders Patrick.

In a fit of anger at her own oppression, Mary lashes out violently. This violence isn't intended to comment ironically on her docility. Because the readers follow the story through Mary, we receive the same sort of release as Mary does when she kills him. The murder forces the reader to contextualize Mary's act in the limited choices of freedom open to her. We see the absurdity of the act, but we also see the absurdity of the very system in which Mary operates in the first place.

Yet the reader's identification with Mary throughout her violent act suggests a redemptive possibility lurking behind a potentially sexist narrative. Once Patrick is dead, Mary becomes pragmatic, practical-minded in her thinking. She quickly pulls herself together, devising an alibi that also incorporates destruction of the murder weapon. She acts with precision—practicing a smile, fixing her hair, touching up her makeup—before going to the grocery store where she refers to herself as “Mrs. Patrick Maloney,” subsuming her identity under that of her husband's name (42). Essentially, Mary uses sexism to her advantage, performing a feminine masquerade that will keep her from later suspicion by anyone investigating her alibi.

The masquerade works, perhaps because all the other characters in the story are men. We encounter no women besides Mary. It seems Mary, consciously or not, performs to their assumptions. After she returns home and calls the police, the investigators, friends of Patrick's, examine the home for evidence of an intruder. At no point does it cross their minds that the woman who found the body could be guilty.

While the investigator's lack of a critical eye could just be bad police work, Dahl pushes the point to its exaggerated conclusion. Mary, sensing the men must be hungry, offers them the now-cooked leg of lamb. The men hesitate for a moment, then acquiesce:

The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat. 'Have some more, Charlie? [...] She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour.' 'Okay then. Give me some more.' 'That's a hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick,' one of them was saying. [...] It ought to be easy to find. [...] One of them belched. 'Personally, I think it's right here on the premises.' 'Probably right under our very noses. What do you think, Jack?' And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle. (44)

The final line of the story is chilling as the reader imagines the giggle of Mary. The giggle becomes another sort of pressure release, and the reader giggles along with Mary because she's succeeded in getting away with it, because it's a good twist ending, and perhaps even because we, too, are in on the joke with Mary. We are supposed to giggle at the inept investigators, seeing in their failure the problem with assuming women aren't as capable as men. The investigators are deliberately painted as inept: "their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat." They are animalistic in their incompetence, a group of barbarians standing around a kitchen table consuming the murder weapon out of greed, hunger, and ignorance.

Dahl took himself seriously as a writer, going so far as to research the viability of a murder with a frozen leg of lamb: “Dahl had confirmed the details with the help of the Marshes’ cook, Mary. ‘He spent all one morning talking to her about techniques of freezing,’ Marsh’s daughter recalls. ‘Everyone thought he had gone mad’” (Treglown 105). Dahl’s insistence on getting it right adds realism to the story: he isn’t using the leg of lamb just for a fun twist, but he’s suggesting an exaggerated solution to unhappiness that, in fact, acts as a release for the reader and for Mary. As Jonathan Culley has written, Dahl’s use of humor becomes a way to reach an audience that may not be aware of its own need for a release, regardless of whether that audience is made up of children or adult readers: “I can’t help wondering whether his books also succeed on a subtle, unconscious level as well, as modern myths resolving contradictions that are socially felt, albeit subconsciously” (71). By returning to the paratextual materials, we can situate this reading, and the subconscious desire for a release from the modern myths of domesticity, within a historical context that even contemporary student-readers are able to feel.

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Picking up the September 1953 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, the reader is immediately greeted with one form of paratext: [the cover image](#). The cover illustration is both funny and disturbing: a woman wearing a dress patterned with the faces of other women stands on a Roman-style pedestal, while a small Dr. Alfred Kinsey gestures at her with a long pointer as though giving a lecture. A crowd of men and women with expressionless faces stare up at her, as the woman herself gazes off the cover to the edge of the page. The woman’s unreadable face dares readers to open the magazine and find out what’s so important about her for themselves.

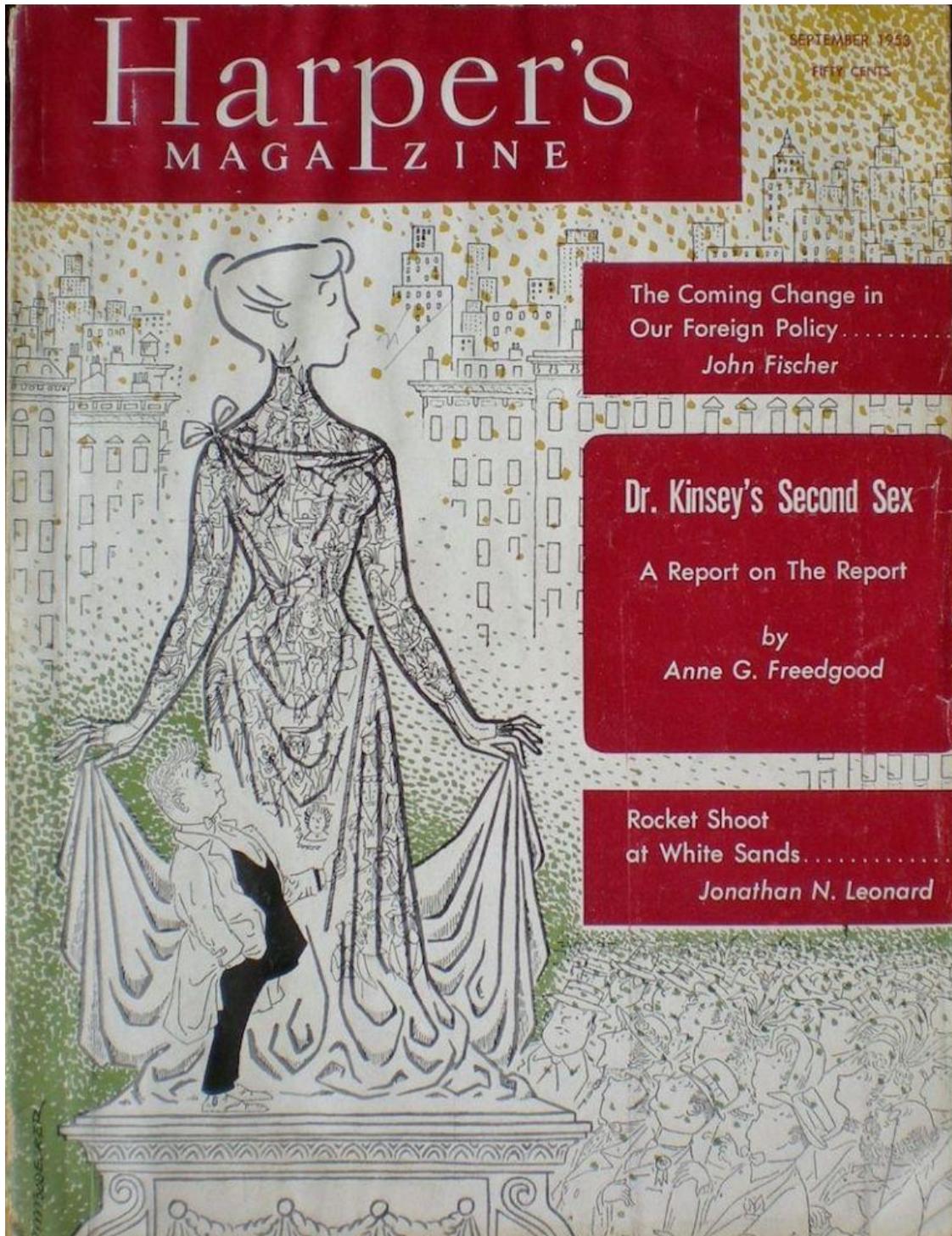


Figure 1: Cover Image.

The illustrator of the cover, N. M. Bodecker, was known for magazine work that was often “gently mocking and political in tone,” and this cover seems no different (R. Michelson Galleries).

Theorist Gerard Genette defines paratext as a threshold “which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility either of entering or of turning back” (261). The cover of *Harper’s* is the first such invitation to enter. Paratext, be it illustration or advertising or essays that surround a story in a magazine, offers an important context to any reading, in part because it makes every act of reading emplaced. Broadly conceived, paratext is defined as any of the elements that surround and prolong one’s reading of a text. Whether chosen specifically by the author (in the case of an authorial preface) or implicitly supported by her (other works published alongside her work), paratext enriches the complexity and nuance of one’s reading experience (Genette 261-2).

By returning to the paratextual material in the original publication of “Lamb to the Slaughter,” readers add depth and complexity to Dahl’s work by situating it within the cultural context of a developing second wave feminism. Too often students see historical waves as firm, decided, already entrenched, in part because feminist waves are often taught without consideration for how they ebb and flow in real time. Yet the “historical awareness of the period which saw the birth of a work is rarely a matter of indifference when reading it [ . . . ] I do not say that one must know it; I only say that those who know it do not read in the same way as those who do not, and that anyone who denies this difference is making fun of us” (Genette 265-6). When contemporary student-readers couple their historical knowledge (or even lack thereof) with the text of Dahl’s story, they complicate notions of history through their emplaced reading

practice. By teaching with the paratext, we begin the process of acknowledging tension, untangling notions of concrete history, and solidifying (or challenging, depending on the text) students' own perceptions in close reading of texts. Bringing paratext into the classroom enriches our conversations about the value of literary study in part because it makes texts dynamic, enriching words on a page with lively sites of life. To illustrate how I see paratext enriching Dahl's story, I will situate *Harper's Magazine* within the cultural context of its publication with a brief turn towards magazine culture in 1953.

Following a decade of war, US economic analysts predicted a sharp growth in the middle-class, and with that growth, a desire for more magazines that cater to individual tastes. While magazine content of the time typically focused on "play and leisure" articles, *Harper's Magazine* was intended for a more cosmopolitan audience familiar with burgeoning social and political movements that would find a stronger foothold in the following decade. This may have led to their continued success even as television began dominating the entertainment market. *Harper's* readership was considered part of the "special interest" groups of magazines that continued to grow after World War II (Sumner). The advertising in the September issue reflects this: at my count, ten ads are travel-related, fifteen advertise books and other entertainment related paraphernalia, and just two are directed towards general shopping (e.g., an ad proclaiming the benefits of pork chops).

*Harper's Magazine* had just celebrated its 100th year of publication in 1950, and its circulation continued to grow alongside *The New Yorker*, *Reader's Digest*, and various women's magazines (Sumner 125). From April to September 1953, the magazine's paid mail subscriptions

alone increased by 4,619 customers, which does not take into account the number of readers who weren't subscribers but picked the magazine up from newsstands and grocery stores. In particular, the September issue saw the biggest increase in readership that year, with a total circulation 5.02% greater than the average total circulation for the period (July-December 1953)<sup>10</sup>. These numbers are important, in part, because they show a growing market for the content *Harper's* was publishing.

*Harper's Magazine* published poems, book reviews, as well as nonfiction essays and short stories. The September issue contains its usual variety of creative work, as well as essays grappling with the aftereffects of war, the explosion of suburban culture, and a shifting American identity in the postwar era. Titles include "The Coming Change in American Foreign Policy" and "Quiet Day at Panmunjom"; Bernard DeVoto's regular column "The Easy Chair" discusses motel towns, a phenomenon that sprang up with the growing population of car owners.

Of particular interest to my discussion of Dahl's short story is the main feature of the September issue: editor Anne Freegood's article on Dr. Alfred Kinsey's research into female sexuality. Its title, "Dr. Kinsey's Second Sex," plays upon Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 work *The Second Sex*. Aiming for a frank discussion about female sexuality, Freegood's article suggests that women have too long been oppressed through their domestic life, and that perhaps a sincere, frank discussion about sexuality can open up larger discussions about equality in general. Freegood writes that it is not her intention "to evaluate these [Kinsey's] conclusions," but instead she wants to simply catalogue Kinsey's conclusions about female sexuality and homosexuality while also capturing the larger cultural significance of Kinsey's work (24). Freegood in

particular focuses on the uproar raised by Kinsey's first book, citing that this second volume is likely to raise even more discussion: "Only a handful of articles about the first volume appeared before publication. Close to one hundred national magazines, newspapers, and news services wrote Dr. Kinsey asking to see advance proofs of the second" (22). Freegood predicts her work will be "only one of a flood of prepublication reports on the second Kinsey report" (22). The significance of this report in conjunction with Dahl's story illustrates exactly what we lose when we remove the paratext. By offering Freegood's essay in conjunction with a reading of Dahl's story, we begin a conversation about the tensions inherent in the work that can also be supported through the very material surrounding its publication. Freegood's voice also captures in real time the conversations happening before and after Kinsey's publications, an insight that would be lost through an presentist historical account.

The editors of *Harper's* spend a considerable amount of time praising and framing Freegood's report in their opening editorial section headed "Personal & Otherwise," which suggests that they too recognized the significance of Kinsey's study and wanted to draw their readers' attention to its publication: "In fact, she [Freegood] raises questions about the future status of women in American which P & O profoundly hopes Dr. Kinsey and his associates will someday leave their adding machines and their 'objectivity' long enough to try to answer" (6). These questions extend to Dahl's story as well, in part because the P&O editors suggest they expect a backlash from anti-feminists.

Members of the anti-feminist movement mentioned by the editors would surely be dismayed not only by Freegood's essay but also by Dahl's story, as its violence finds expression

through the very elements deemed important to womanhood. The editors write: “It is difficult to deny the central insistence [. . .] that the many-thousand-year subjugation of one sex by another is about to be drastically modified. Their vigorous and defiant appearance has been heartening, particularly on the scene of some confusion in which the anti-feminist revival (back to the three Ks—Kinder, Küche, Kirche) had been enjoying a momentary vogue” (6). Those three Ks (in English, children, kitchen, church) find oblique expression through Dahl’s setting and symbolism—the kitchen, the pregnancy, the marriage. Indeed Dahl’s story, when coupled with Freegood’s report, suggests a possible outcome if women are sent back to the “three Ks”; instead of silence, they will resort to violence to achieve their aims of freedom.

The editors have little to say about Dahl’s story in particular, perhaps hoping to entice readers with an amuse-bouche of its contents: “‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ (p. 39) is a tasty dish of domestic drama which will go down all the better, we feel, without introduction” (12). It’s important to note the term “domestic drama”; are the editors hinting at the drama of the murder or the drama embedded in cultural discourses around domesticity? While it is unclear, being open to multiple possibilities of reading this introduction mimics the sort of reader response I see my students engage in. Adding in the paratextual simply deepens the myriad possible analysis.

One other paratextual element to consider when reading Dahl’s story are the illustrations included in *Harper’s Magazine*, images I have not found reprinted with the story elsewhere. Adolf Hallman’s illustrations, which the editors call “moody” (12) are of special note as no other work of fiction in the issue includes illustrations. The simple pen-and-ink drawings depict the three major acts of the story: Patrick’s confession that he’s leaving Mary; Mary’s visit to the

grocery store; and Mary's giggle in the living room, with the outlines of the detectives in the background. The [first and third illustrations](#) are especially striking in their contrast.



**Figure 2: Patrick's Confession.**



**Figure 3: Mary's Giggle.**

Whereas in the first Mary appears in the background, drawn smaller with a decidedly dejected air about her face, in the third she appears in the foreground, smiling broadly with only the light outlines of the detectives in the background. The [middle image](#), of Mary carrying a bag of groceries, depicts a straight mouth, emotionless in its determination. These images exist as another element of paratext that is often lost when we anthologize stories in large collected volumes or share them on the internet. By returning an element that could support or challenge a student-reader's interpretation of a story we offer yet another material avenue for close reading.



**Figure 4: Mary at the grocery store.**

Readers had a lot to say about *Harper's Magazine's* September issue; seven letters alone were published in November that address Freegood's report. Five express outrage at her article, including one from Mrs. R.A. Wood that reads in part: "Having established over a period of years a magazine purporting to appeal to the thinking mind of man, you now shell out the

ballyhoo on the Kinsey report” (20). Another letter from Dr. Marvin B. Rodney ends with a dismissive yet sensual turn: “I was somewhat surprised at the naivete of *Harper’s* for taking quite so full and willing a bite at this juicy morsel” (20). Finally, a letter from Erna Bentz suggests a tongue-in-cheek response, wherein she both applauds free speech and a free press. She concludes, “Of course now I have seven children and so the subject of sex doesn’t interest me. . . .” (20). Reading these letters alongside the magazine helps illustrate how readers of the time might have responded to the story and gives students a sense of what people of the time actually thought of the material in their everyday lives.

*Harper’s Magazine* only published one letter that addresses Dahl’s story. Headed “Perfect Lamb,” the letter from Paul Flowers reads in full: “Praise Allah (and Roald Dahl and *Harper’s*) for reviving the short story. ‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ [September] is a welcome and delightful tale, in sharp contrast to all the social problem and psychological case histories which seem to dominate short fiction. More power to Roald Dahl and *Harper’s*” (21). Whether Flowers is being intentional in his dismissal of the story’s psychological depth is unclear; regardless, his letter to the editor asks us to consider whether as a reader Flowers finds himself more aligned with the detectives or with Mary. If he isn’t in the living room giggling alongside Mary, has he missed the very depth of the social problem being lampooned by the story? The ambiguity is telling: regardless of the story’s ultimate point, it isn’t difficult to find a number of inroads to a reading that creates contrast. The story is delightful not just for its plot or form, but also because it is a piece of fiction addressing social and psychological issues in subtle ways. It reveals a dark side underpinning the very issues of gender that Kinsey’s work in female sexuality was

exploring. Modern day student-readers are much like Flowers. By reading *Lamb to the Slaughter* with its paratextual material intact, we might offer yet another interesting response to the mix.

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Even after its publication in *Harper's Magazine* and in Dahl's short story collection *Someone Like You* (1953), "Lamb to the Slaughter" was reprinted in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1955 and adapted for television in episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1958) and *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979). It has also been reprinted in numerous short story anthologies for classroom use. Of the classroom anthologies I have been able to locate, all negate a possible feminist reading. Two, in particular, ascribe Mary's choice of leg of lamb as a clever trick of a morally bankrupt character.<sup>11</sup> Each of these reprints and adaptations offer yet another set of possible readings for discussion, an outcome that Gerard Genette anticipated with his remark that "every context creates a paratext" (266).

While my food and literature students who inspired this essay did not have the paratextual materials alongside their reading of Dahl's work, I can now confidently assert the value of bringing that material back in to the literature classroom. Students might have articulated new relationships between illustrations and text, between covers and text, between all the materials like advertising and comments from readers that situate a reading in a particular time and place. In doing so, they might also be able to articulate how their own emplaced reading practices are influenced by the paratextual materials that take shape, not only in the physical texts they read, but also in the digital spaces that intertwine with their reading lives.

Teaching with the paratext offers another avenue into the cultural study of literature, and it does so with materials nearly already at hand. For the teacher-scholar interested in this kind of work, most of my research into paratext began at the campus library. Once I ascertained where “Lamb to the Slaughter” was originally published, I accessed Periodicals Archive Online (which required a university library subscription, although often public libraries have access to similar databases) to find a digital copy of *Harper’s Magazine*. For a future project, I am tinkering with ways to turn the tables on my students, asking them to go out and discover paratextual material for themselves. That way, they get the joy of being their own paratextual detectives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on Dahl's adult fiction is also scarce, although readers can refer to J.C. Bernthal's "'And For a Knife We Shall Use the Great Sword': Uncanny Cutlery and its Absence in the Fiction of Roald Dahl" in *FEAST Journal* and Peter Burger's "Contemporary Legends in the Short Stories of Roald Dahl" in *Contemporary Legends*.

<sup>2</sup> By the time Dahl's popularity as a children's author was exploding in the 1980s, critics like Catherine Itzel were labeling Dahl a woman-hater. The scope of my essay is not to settle whether Dahl is a misogynist or not, even as I engage in a feminist reading of Dahl's adult fiction; I simply suggest that students have and can read a feminist response into "Lamb to the Slaughter."

<sup>3</sup> See Fredrik Åström, who examined articles using paratextual analysis and found, "The great majority of the articles citing Genette or using the paratext concept are published in literature studies journals; and the co-citation maps reveal a structure that is, to a large extent, typical for the humanities in general and literature studies in particular. Together with literature studies, there is also a relatively strong connection to a more general humanities-oriented theoretical field in the post-structuralist tradition and, to a lesser and more peripheral extent, to library and information science and science studies research" (16).

<sup>4</sup> See Finn, Barker, Cartmell and Whelehan, or Stanitzek for writing on paratext in these fields.

<sup>5</sup> See Sipe and Maguire.

<sup>6</sup> Gross and Latham develop their peritextual literacy framework by building on Gerard Genette's seminal work in paratextual analysis. In Genette's theory, paratext includes both the epitext (the material outside the bound book, such as reviews) and peritext (materials within the

bound book, like a table of contents). Because this study focuses on a printed magazine, I only use the term paratextual throughout this essay because I believe it best encompasses the variety of material found within a collection/magazine.

<sup>7</sup> As Margaret Talbot suggests in “Roald Dahl’s Subversive Storytelling,” Dahl’s use of exaggeration functions particularly well in children’s literature: “Children need the dark materials of fairy tales because they need to make sense—in a symbolic, displaced way—of their own feelings of anger, resentment, and powerlessness.” I see Dahl’s adult fiction using this same framework of exaggeration.

<sup>8</sup> The 1953 public would not be unfamiliar with tales of female murderers. Both in the public imagination and in the newspaper, stories about women who murder people aren’t new; in fact, the pulp fiction of the 1940s routinely featured women criminals. Stretching farther back we can find a society captivated by the trials of people like Lizzie Borden and Nannie Doss. However, the common belief that women tend to stick to less overt methods of killing, like poison, pervades. This may be in part because one of the only spaces women were given complete control over was the kitchen; fear about tainted food and drink becomes expressed as an anxiety about female control. Part of what makes “Lamb to the Slaughter” unique is the overt violence depicted by Mary’s act. Even other short stories by Dahl don’t embrace violence in the same way; his story “The Landlady,” published around the same time, has the titular character poisoning her boarders in a plot similar to *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from the story are drawn from the September 1953 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

<sup>10</sup> These numbers come from a third-party service known as the Audit Bureau of Circulations, which was the only group that collected data on magazine circulation at the time (other than the magazines themselves).

<sup>11</sup> Tracking down anthologies designed for classroom use is surprisingly difficult, given both the nature of the textbook publishing industry and the lack of libraries that purchase such material. Of the four I did locate, all suggested a reading in conflict with my students' readings, often moralizing over the murder even if they did hint at Mary's abusive situation. One even suggested we read Mary as the abuser, arguing that Patrick's refusal of the whiskey was simply the snapping point for her to finally kill him (*Short Stories for Students*, Detroit, MI, Gale, 2002).

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