Feminism in Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter*

A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract—**Literary works have been shaping how people see the world around them for hundreds of years; they have become a medium for portraying and/or criticizing a certain society in a certain period of time. One thing that has never ceased to appear in literary works is gender role and representation, which is still the subject of controversy. People believe that writers oftentimes portray men and women in their works in line with their views of men and women in real life, which is very interesting to investigate. This paper aims to investigate the representation of women in the short story "Lamb to the Slaughter" written in 1953 by a famous British writer, Roald Dahl. This descriptive qualitative research focuses on the structure of the story and is analyzed using Barthes' five systems of codes, which falls to the area of structural semiotics. The story is divided into 135 different lexias and afterward categorized into the five codes, each of which helps reveal how Dahl portrays women in his story. It is found that despite the woman is portrayed to fit the traditional gender role as a homemaker at the beginning of the story, Dahl reverses the role in the end, portraying women to be a more independent and resourceful in time of trouble. The findings also show that men are not portrayed as positively as women, and thus lead to the deduction that there is an issue of feminism imbued in the structure and the choice of words in the story.**

Keywords—*semiotics; structural semiotics; Barthes; five systems of codes; narrative structure*

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of how women are inadequately and sometimes unrealistically portrayed in literary works have been an issue which never ceases to appear in many scholarly works (e.g. Meyerowitz, 1994; Barry, 1995; Lippa, 2002; among others), especially (but not exclusively) after World War II in the 1940s (Holt, n.d.). During this period, a lot of short stories and novels are written portraying women in a domestic setting as a submissive wife who stays at home and rear children (Meyerowitz, 1994).

It is not until the 1960, when the 'women's movement' became a very popular topic resulting in what is now known as modern feminism, did a lot of feminist scholars begin to challenge the portrayal of female characters in literary works which promulgates gender inequality in society, putting women as second class citizens who should be satisfied living as a homemaker (Meyerowitz, 1994). In Britain, feminist criticism mainly deals with how women are represented in literature because it is a form of "socialization" (Barry, 1995);

in other words, literary works "provide the role model which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations" (Barry, 1995, p. 122).

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is one of the most prominent British writers in the twentieth century who is known for his unique style and satirical themes, which have the tendency to be rather sadistic in nature (Pearson, in Klugová, 2007; Jaber, 2016). This style is not only restricted to his works for adults, but they are also found in his stories for children, and thus inviting a lot of criticisms (West, 1985; Petzold, 1992). It is one of the reasons why Dahl's works are always interesting to be analyzed.

This paper attempts to identify the representation of women portrayed in one of Dahl's most well-known short stories, *Lamb to the Slaughter*. As it is written less than a decade from the peak of the Anglo-American feminist movement (Barry, 1995), it is intriguing to see whether Dahl, who is known to be a master of story construction (Hacht, 2009), inserts his view of this issue in his writing. The tool used to discover the representation is a branch of linguistics called Semiotics; to be more specific, this research utilizes Roland Barthes' five systems of codes, a structural semiotics theory proposed to find the 'hidden' meaning in narratives.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

A. Barthes' Five Codes

Barthes (Barthes, 1986) differentiates between "work" and "text" in seven different propositions: method, genre, signs, plurality, filiation, reading, and pleasure. In short, the former is defined as a commodity—a definite object which is very rigid in its classification and is only created for passive consumption—while the latter is said to be "that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in a position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder" (Roland Barthes: Understanding text, n.d.). In other words, one cannot have a different interpretation from what the author has intended when reading a "work", while reading the same "text" may result in the readers' having an understanding that is beyond what the author intended.

While every literary work can be considered as a "text", Barthes believes that not all of them can be categorized as a "writerly text"—a text in which the reader is perceived as "no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes, 1974).

In a "writerly text", or "hypertext", the information taken by the readers can be linear or non-linear and later this information is combined into determining what conceptual and/or ideological structure that the text has.

There are five semiotics elements that can be identified in a text: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes (Barthes, as cited in Barry, 1995). The hermeneutic code (HER), or also called the "enigma" code (Zaib & Mashori, 2014), refers to the elements that create puzzlement and/or questions in the story to keep reader's curiosity and provides suspense throughout the story. It will rise the question "what will happen next?" as well as "why is it happening?", and thus making the reader actively involved in the making of meanings. This code is considered as a structural code, which means that the reader has to read the text in order so that they are able to make sense of what happens in the text (Roland Barthes: Understanding text, n.d.). The proairetic code (ACT) serves to indicate the sequence of action, giving the reader clues to what happens before and after a certain event in the story. Together with hermeneutic code, this code is said to be "readerly" (Barthes, 1974).

The rest of the codes are considered "writerly" as they allow the reader to gather bits and pieces of information without having to read a text in sequence from the beginning to end. In other words, a reader can choose to only read the last two chapters of a certain book and decides that the book talks about something that may or may not be present in the rest of the chapters. The semantic code (SEM) allows reader to take a connotative meaning out of a certain description of a place, character, and object to understand the theme of the text (Eagleton, 1993; Barry, 1995; Zaib & Mashori, 2014). Similar to the semantic code, the symbolic code (SYM) is connected to theme, but it is more focused on the basic binary polarities (Barthes, 1974). There is no clear distinction between these two codes and therefore the reader is asked to find elements that are contrasted in the text (Barry, 1995; Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). The last code, the cultural code (REF) contains information that is not explained in the text itself (Barthes, 1974)—the reader understands a particular element in a text based on common knowledge and/or experience with other text (Felluga, n.d.).

B. Methodology

This qualitative study is an analysis of text which is conducted following Barthes' (1974) method in his book *S/Z*. The first step of the text analysis is to divide the short story *Lamb to the Slaughter* into different lexias, units of meaning (Barry, 1995). After having examined the text carefully to see the connection of particular parts to the elements in Barthes' theory, it is decided that the story is divided into three different major parts before it is divided again into smaller units of meaning and categorized into different codes in the theory according to their characteristics.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The story consists of 133 lexias in total: 43 lexias in the first part of the story, five lexias in the second part, and 85 in the third part of the story. However, due to space constraint

and the purpose of the research, this paper only presents the analysis of lexias which help determining the concept that underlies the story. The summary of the story is provided to give a better understanding of the story.

A. Summary of the Story

Lamb to the Slaughter mainly revolves around the sole female character in the story, Mary Maloney, a doting wife who is heavily pregnant with her first child, who suddenly gets caught in turmoil of emotion as her husband, Patrick—a policeman, suddenly tells her that he wants a divorce. Unable to process the news, she finds herself doing what she normally does every day—cooking dinner for her husband. She finds a leg of lamb in the cellar and decides to roast it; however, when her husband sees her as she returns upstairs, he decides to leave. Without thinking, Mary swings the frozen lamb and hits the back of her husband's head to prevent him from leaving, immediately killing him. Panicked and not wanting to be sentenced to death for murder, Mary begins to stage a plot. She puts the lamb into the oven, goes grocery shopping, and pretends to be shocked when she returns home and sees her husband's dead body on the floor. The police come quickly and begin their investigation, suspecting a burglar with a heavy object to be the culprit. At that time, the lamb in the oven is cooked. Mary persuades the officers to have dinner in the house by telling them that she cannot finish the lamb by herself and her late husband will want his colleagues to have it anyway. The story ends with the policemen eating the whole meat, still talking about a possible murder weapon, and Mary laughing in the other room.

B. Application of the Five Codes in the First Part of the Story

The first part of the story starts from the beginning of the story to the part where Mary decides to cook dinner after Patrick tells her about the divorce. The analysis of the first part reveals that Mary and Patrick are portrayed to fit the typical gender role in that period—a doting wife who wants to please her husband and a breadwinner husband who works for his family (Holt, n.d.; Meyerowitz, 1994).

> *Lexia 3*
>
> *She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.* (line 14)
>
> *Lexia 6*
>
> *She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks* (lines 17-18)
>
> *Lexia 30*
>
> *"Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down."*
> *It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.*
> *"Go on," he said. "Sit down."*
> *She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes.* (line 62-66)

The three lexias contain proairetic code (ACT), or commonly known as the code of action. Zaib and Mashori (2014) mentions that this code makes the reader focus on the actions and reactions of the character(s)—in this case, Mary

and Patrick. Mary's actions revolve around Patrick and his needs; in Lexias 3 and 6, Mary stops what she is doing when her husband comes home, she deals with his coat and afterward makes him some drinks. Then Lexia 30 shows that she immediately obeys her husband's commands, even showing nervousness even though she does not do anything wrong. The eagerness to serve and to oblige to her husband's whims is in line with how women are traditionally expected to behave (Brannon, 2017).

Mary's and Patrick's characteristic can also be seen implied in Lexia 8 below:

> *Lexia 8*
>
> *For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved intent, far look in his eyes when they rested in her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whiskey had taken some of it away.* (lines 21-29)

The above lexia contains a semantic code (SEM) which discloses Mary's characteristics at the beginning of the story: understanding and loving. However, in the phrase "intent, far look in his eyes", Dahl also seems to want to imply that Mary is too wrapped up in her love for her husband that she is oblivious of Patrick's feelings; in other words, in this part Mary is portrayed as either rather stupid or she is in denial.

In this part, Dahl clearly emphasizes how women act as a wife in a traditional household. Even when her husband finally tells her that he wants a divorce, her first reaction is to pretend that nothing happens and proceeds to prepare dinner. Datesman, Crandall, and Kearny (2014) suggest that women's instinct to be a good homemaker is stereotypical.

C. Application of the Five Codes in the Second Part of the Story

The second part of the story is quite short; nevertheless, it is crucial in showing the change in which Dahl portrays the characters. This part begins with Mary subconsciously swinging the leg of lamb onto the back of Patrick's head and ends when she realizes that she has accidentally murdered him. There are five lexias found in this part.

> *Lexia 44*
>
> *At that point, Mary Maloney 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.* (lines 101-103)

In this lexia, which shows ACT and SEM codes, there is a shift in how Mary is portrayed. The ACT code reveals that she does her action swiftly without any hesitation, especially in the phrase "without any pause". In relation to the SEM code, the lexia also suggests a change in Mary's characteristics; she is no longer portrayed as weak and submissive anymore. Another study conducted in 2016 by Maysaa Jaber also supports that this part of the story is the turning point of Mary's character. Since Dahl's themes tend to revolve around the 'turning of the table' (Makman, 1997) and his heroes are mostly the underdogs and the unfortunate (Hammill, 1989), suffice to say that the rest of the story will be a follow-through this turning point of Mary's characteristics.

> *Lexia 46*
>
> *She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.* (lines 105-107)

ACT code in this lexia explains a sequence of action following the hitting: Mary stepping back and waiting while her husband loses his balance for a moment before falling to the ground, unmoving. From this action, it is drawn that the stereotypical role of men as the powerful one in the household (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971) is reversed with women. Now, Mary, who is before portrayed as below her husband, is the one having more power over Patrick to the extreme that she, both literally and figuratively, puts him in the position below her.

D. Application of the Five Codes in the Third Part of the Story

The third part of the story is the aftermath of the murder. In this part, Mary's characteristics develop more, moving away from her portrayal in the first part of the story.

> *Lexia 49*
>
> *It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill then both-mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?* (lines 112-117)

Contrary to what a lot of researchers say about women's tendency to cope with stress by expressing their emotion (Emslie & Hunt, 2008), Dahl portrays Mary as very collected and logical in this part. This is usually a stereotype of how men deal with stressful situations. Brannon (2017) suggests that men are rational while women are more emotional; thus, by writing Mary starting to make a logical connection between her previous action and the consequences that she may have to face, it is clear that Dahl is breaking the traditional stereotypes. This lexia also piques the reader's curiosity into what is going to happen next, and as the reader has to find out

by reading the text until the end, this lexia is considered to contain the hermeneutic code (HER).

Lexia 107

"Jack," she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by. "Would you mind giving me a drink?"
"Sure I'll give you a drink. You mean this whiskey?"
"Yes please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better."
He handed her the glass.
"Why don't you have one yourself," she said. "You must be awfully tired. Please do. You've been very good to me."
"Well," he answered. "It's not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going." (lines 240-248)

The lexia above is a conversation that Mary has with Sergeant Jack Noonan, the leading detective in her husband's murder case as well as Patrick's colleague. This lexia, containing both symbolic (SYM) and ACT codes, shows that Mary is no longer conforming to the portrayal of submissive women who serve other people (Holt, n.d.). Despite her choice of words when asking for a drink, it is unmistakable that Mary is actually giving order to Jack. This suggests that there is a shift in Mary's position in the household compared to in the first part of the story. In this part, Mary is no longer the one who is busy trying to ensure the comfort of men; on the contrary, she is now in the position of power, ordering men about to ensure her own comfort. She also orders, subtly, in the form of a suggestion, that Jack gets some drinks for himself. Jack obliges to her although he says himself that drinking on the job is prohibited. The contrast between the two scenes is so palpable that it becomes obvious how men are no longer dominant and forceful in the last part of the story.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Lamb to the Slaughter as a whole is a SYM of its own. From the beginning of the story to the end, we can see that Dahl is giving emphasis on the contrast between men's and women's characteristics. He starts off by presenting a stereotypical household—the man of the house as the breadwinner and the lady of the house as the homemaker—but in the end he portrays men to be under the dominance (and manipulation) of the only woman in the story.

By structuring the story in this way, Dahl intentionally gives the reader a false sense of security: making them think they are going to read a typical story that will establish men as the dominant participant in a household while in the end he breaks through that paradigm and provides the reader with a surprise. I believe that Dahl wants the story to serve a bigger purpose than only as an entertainment.

In the surface, the story keeps on emphasizing how men treated women as their inferior—Patrick's treatment of Mary at the beginning shows such tendency. In addition, the police officers actually imply that women are weak by directly using the male pronoun "he" when referring to the murder suspect as they think Patrick may have been hit by a large heavy object. However, when dug deeper, it is obvious that the one that is

inferior is actually the men. It is Mary who decides how to welcome her husband in the manner that she does; she is the one who decides what to have for dinner. The fact that she murders Patrick is not the beginning of her dominance in the household—it only strengthens it.

Relating to Barthes' classification of work and text, I am of the conclusion that this particular story of Dahl is a text out of which every reader can make their own meaning actively to add to the plurality of the text. Regardless of what Dahl really intends the story to be and how he actually feels about gender stereotypes, the units of meaning in the story points toward one dominant trait: female empowerment.

This research only focuses on a certain aspect of the story, and therefore I cannot claim that it is only about female empowerment. Another theory and/or approach should be used to further analyze the story in order to arrive to a more general conclusion. Moreover, I do not take into account Dahl's own view about gender roles, which may or may not lead to a different deduction of the analysis. Therefore, it is highly recommended that future research takes the writer's own view into consideration when doing their analysis. It is also important to see Dahl's other stories to see the ideology behind his writing.

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