

**6 , 2007**

**Bouquets pour Hélène Forme e rappresentazioni dell'ironia e dell'umorismo/Formes et représentations de l'ironie et de l'humour**

---

**John Douthwaite**

**Patriarchy to the Slaughter - Comically**

---

**Per citare l'articolo:**

<https://www.publifarum.farum.it/index.php/publifarum/article/view/108>

---

Rivista Publifarum

[publifarum.farum.it](http://publifarum.farum.it)

---

Documento accessibile online:

<https://www.publifarum.farum.it/index.php/publifarum/article/view/108/204>

Documento generato automaticamente 27-08-2020

---

# Patriarchy to the Slaughter - Comically

John Douthwaite

---

## Indice

[1. INTRODUCTION. Background, aims and method.](#)

[2. THE TEXT](#)

[3. THE ANALYSIS](#)

[3.2 Coming to the crunch](#)

[3.3 The crunch](#)

[4. Liberation](#)

[5. Relishing liberation - comicity](#)

[6. Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION. Background, aims and method.

Roald Dahl's *Lamb to the Slaughter* talks about peoples motives and behaviour. People are motivated by values and emotions. The relationship between affective states and ideological systems, (which are based on values, analytically speaking), is very close indeed. At a more prosaic level, money and love (whatever that may mean) are perhaps the two main driving forces (or values) in life. Finally, we are heavily conditioned to ensure our behaviour patterns correspond to the values inculcated in us in our tender years, and affect, as stated previously, is perhaps the

main force supporting values, a point that the story to be analysed bears out to the full.

Naturally, while growing up some people come to the conclusion that the ideology they have “received” does not suit them, and they rebel, trying to change matters. One mode of rebellion, or protest if one prefers, is to make fun of the object one criticises, and one of the major strands of Roald Dahl’s work is precisely that of criticising society through comedy which is often deepest black. And one of the blackest of his stories is entitled *Lamb to the Slaughter*.

The aptly chosen title comes from Isaiah, Chapter 53:

5: But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

6: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7: He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a **lamb to the slaughter**, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

The idiomatic expression which Dahl has taken for his title is used in Modern English to signify “innocently and without resistance”. As we shall, see, irony characterises the story from its outset.

The tale is a simple one, and quickly told. A housewife so traditional that she seems almost a caricature is waiting for her husband to come home after work, as is her wont every working day. Her husband is a senior police officer and Mrs Maloney has devoted her life to looking after him, sacrificing any individual interest she might have had to further his career and hence their family life.

One evening, when Mrs Maloney is six months pregnant with their first child, her husband comes home after work and tells her quite simply, abruptly and bluntly that he is leaving her for another woman. Never ever having envisaged for even one instant in her life that such a possibility even existed in the remotest of circumstances, given her own and what she believed was also her husband’s credo, she is dumbfounded. He gives her no option, but states straightforwardly that he understands her predicament, so she will receive sufficient money to live her life out in comfort.

Mrs Maloney, unbelieving, goes to the cellar to get something to cook for dinner. There she “stumbles across” a frozen leg of lamb. Picking it up she goes to the kitchen. On her way she passes by the living room where her husband is still standing looking out of the window. She walks up to him and delivers such a violent blow to her husband’s skull that he dies almost instantly.

At that point she realises she does not wish her child and herself to die. So she pretends her husband has not yet arrived home, starts cooking supper, placing the “murder weapon” in the oven at a high temperature, goes out to the local shop to buy more food for the evening meal, and returns home pretending not to find her husband. Later she “discovers” her dead husband’s body and calls the police – her husband’s colleagues and friends. They immediately arrive, ascertain that their chief is indeed dead and proceed with the investigation. Since the wife is a natural possible suspect, the investigation necessarily includes checking the wife’s alibi by going to the shop where Mrs Maloney bought the food for the evening meal. Her story tallies perfectly with that of the shopkeeper. Furthermore, she has no immediately apparent motive for killing her husband, theirs having always been a “happy” family, hence the police form the hypothesis that the chief arrived home, that someone entered the house or was with him, and that that someone killed him. The medical evidence establishes that the murder weapon as being something extremely heavy and large, such as a club, but the police search fails to unearth the weapon. Meanwhile it is getting late, the policemen are tired and hungry, so Mrs Maloney invites her husband’s “friends” to dine with her, otherwise, as she says, the dinner will only go wasted. Though at first embarrassed, the policemen finally succumb to tiredness and hunger and partake of the meal, thereby unwittingly (and stupidly) destroying the evidence of the murder weapon. They will leave the house that night convinced the weapon is somewhere nearby, for it must have been too heavy and too large to carry very far, yet unable to find it. Mrs Maloney will go scot-free.

The present paper will try to account for the following “facts” about the story. First, I have recounted the essence of the tale in 533 words. The original totals 3575, approximately seven times that length. I will try to show that Dahl manipulates mainly the Gricean maxims of relevance and quantity (or the economy principle, to use an alternative wording for the latter) to gain his ends. Second, that his principal

goal is to position the reader so that he/she sympathises with Mrs Maloney to the point of condoning the murder she commits, just as, when reading or watching the film of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* one feels one's body go taugth, one's arms and hands tense, as McMurphy tries to strangle wretched Nurse Ratched, and one hears oneself almost screaming "Kill the b...", despite the fact that the vast majority of us are "normal" law-abiding citizens who would utter the utmost condemnation of murder. The analysis will focus on the stylistic devices deployed to align the reader's sympathy through a close reading of the first part of the story.

## 2. THE TEXT

(1) The room was warm and clear, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight - hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. (2) On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. (3) Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket.

(4) Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

(5) Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come. (6) There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. (7) The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. (8) Her skin - for this was her sixth month with child - had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

(9) When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, punctually as always, she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. (10) She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

(11) 'Hullo, darling,' she said.

(12) 'Hullo,' he answered.

(13) She took his coat and hung it in the closet. (14) Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, rocking it so the ice

cubes tinkled against the side.

(15) For her, this was always a blissful time of day. (16) 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. (17) 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. (18) 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. (19) She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

(20) 'Tired, darling?'

(21) 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm tired.' (22) And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. (23) He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it, left. (24) She wasn't really watching him but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arms. (25) He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

(26) 'I'll get it!' she cried, jumping up.

(27) 'Sit down,' he said.

(28) When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

(29) 'Darling, shall I get your slippers?'

(30) 'No.'

(31) She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

(32) 'I think it's a shame,' she said, 'that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.'

(33) He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing; but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

(34) 'Darling,' she said. (35) 'Would you like me to get you some cheese?'

(36) 'I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.'

(37) 'No,' he said.

(38) 'If you're too tired to eat out,' she went on, 'it's still not too late. (39) There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right

here and not even move out of the chair.'

(40) Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

(41) 'Anyway,' she went on, 'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first.'

(42) 'I don't want it,' he said.

(43) She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face.

(44) 'But you *must* have supper. (45) I can easily do it here. (46) I'd like to

do it. (47) We can have lamb chops. (48) Or pork. (49) Anything you want.

(50) Everything's in the freezer.'

(51) 'Forget it,' he said.

(52) 'But, darling, you *must* eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like.'

(53) She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

(54) 'Sit down,' he said. (55) 'Just for a minute, sit down.'

(56) It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

(57) 'Go on,' he said. (58) 'Sit down.'

(59) She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. (60) He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass, frowning.

(61) 'Listen,' he said, 'I've got something to tell you.'

(62) 'What is it, darling? (63) What's the matter?'

(64) He had 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. (65) She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

(66) 'This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid,' he said. (67)

'But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. (68) I hope you won't blame me too much.'

(69) And he told her. (70) It didn't take long, four or five minutes at 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.

(71) 'So there it is,' he added. (72) 'And I know it's a kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. (73) Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. (74) But there needn't really be any fuss. (75) I hope not anyway. (76) It wouldn't be very good for my job.'

(77) Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. (78) It occurred to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had

imagined the whole thing. (79) Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn't been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

(80) 'I'll get the supper,' she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her.

(81) When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. (82) She couldn't feel anything at all - except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. (83) Everything was automatic now - down the stairs to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. (84) She lifted it out, and looked at it. (85) It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again.

(86) A leg of lamb.

(87) All right then, they would have lamb for supper. (88) She carried it upstairs, holding the thin bone-end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living-room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

(89) 'For God's sake,' he said, hearing her, but not turning round. (90) 'Don't make supper for me. (91) I'm going out.'

(92) 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 she could on the back of his head.

(93) She might just as well have hit him with a steel club.

(94) 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.

(95) Then he crashed to the carpet.

(96) The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock. (97) She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while blinking at the body, still holding the ridiculous piece of meat tight with both hands.

(98) All right, she told herself. (99) So I've killed him.

(100) It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. (101) She began thinking very fast. (102) As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. (103) That was fine. (104) It made no difference to her. (105) In fact, it would be a relief. (106) On the other hand, what about the child? (107) What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? (108) Did they kill them both - mother and child? (109) Or did they wait until the tenth month? (110) What



did they do?

(111) Mary Maloney didn't know. (112) And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance.

(113) She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the over on high, and shoved it inside. (114) Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. (115) She sat down before the mirror, tidied her face, touched up her lips and face. (116) She tried a smile. (117) It came out rather peculiar. (118) She tried again.

(119) 'Hullo Sam,' she said brightly, aloud.

### **3. THE ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 The Opening - setting the scene (paragraphs 1-4)**

The story opens with a symbolic description of the setting in the first paragraph. In Gricean terms, all the details selected for inclusion are relevant to establishing this mid-level implicature. At a general level, these details establish the context of situation as that of a traditional bourgeois family and at the specific level the (supposed) nature of the relationship between the husband and wife as a harmonious one. Indeed, the first content word is “warm”, (for “room” may be taken as given information in the Hallidayan sense, the physical setting in which the action takes place, and so this information is of minor importance, as is further shown by the fact that “room” acts as theme and “warm” is the first element of the new information in the rheme). Warmth, (in S1), here does not simply describe the temperature, (its literal meaning), but evokes the connotations of the lexeme. Hence it acts as a modaliser (Douthwaite: 2000) symbolising emotional warmth, love, while “clear”, the second element of the new information, as well as a most unusual collocate, (hence foregrounded), in this linguistic and physical context, conveys moral purity. Indeed, in this context the literal or denotational meaning of “clear” has no sense whatsoever. The drawn curtains increase the feeling of affective “warmth”, closing out (what we infer to be) the “dark” night, the threatening external world, as do the two lamps through their being “alight”. Warmth and light also symbolise life - the room is alive, that is the people inhabiting the house are alive and their relationship is “well”.

After a most positive beginning, there then comes in S1 the second unusual linguistic phenomenon – the hyphen. The hyphen is strange because its codified function is divisive – in this particular case, together with a series of linguistic devices about to be explicated, it indicates the separation of Mary Maloney from the other person, a strange phenomenon when referring to a happy marriage. True, Mary is simply describing the scene around her; true, the emptiness of the chair also enables the description to be economic; and, true again, it might also imply she is savouring the return of her husband. However, that what is being alluded to at a deeper level is also separation and that Mary is not simply identifying the referent of “the one” is borne out by several linguistic facts. First, the passage began *in medias res*, with the definite article “the” presuming foreknowledge of the referent. Second, in contrast to “hers”, which is concrete and human, as well as precisely identified, the expression “the one” is distant, cold and vague or anonymous, a strange coupling. Third, this distance and lack of warmth (in contrast to the preceding description of warmth) is reinforced by the presence of a negativey coloured adjective, “empty”, a lexical item which, fourthly, could have been omitted without any loss of ideational content. Why not simply say “her husband’s” instead of “the one by the empty chair opposite”? The alternative I have suggested would offer the advantage of parallelism, setting up a relationship of equality, as well as reducing the number of words deployed; Secondly, why include “empty” at all? Surely “the chair opposite” would have sufficed to a person who presumably knows the layout her own living room reasonably well? Not to mention the fact that since she is alone in the room and since she specifies the “chair opposite her”, then she cannot be sitting in that chair, hence the chair is “empty”. Thus, if the inclusion of the adjective “empty” is not to flout the Gricean quantity and relevance maxims, then some implicature must be intended. Given the linguistic features listed above, I hypothesise that the author is conveying Mrs Maloney’s mental state and indirectly her worldview as a faithful, traditional wife while concurrently ironically foreshadowing the reality of a marriage which is about to break, for her beloved husband is about to arrive home and tell his wife he is leaving her for another woman. Clearly, such irony only emerges at a second reading.

Dahl “hides” his Gricean flouting by an adroit employment in S2 of a second

reference to the layout of the living room: "On the sideboard behind her". The reader untrained in stylistics will fail to note that the play on "opposite" in S1 and "behind" in S2 seem to make the information provided by "the one by the empty chair opposite" perfectly "natural", when in actual fact the real reason for including the information selected is to foreshadow the clash of opposites in the story.

S2 seems to continue the positive portrait begun in S1. Preparations for the coming communal act are described. Alliteration ("two-tall" and "water-whiskey") calls attention both to the communal aspect ("two-tall") and to the social aspect ("water-whiskey"), invoking the schema of well-deserved rest and relaxation after a hard day's work earning the family bread and butter. Further alliterative play enhances the effect: "d" in "sideboard-behind", "s" in sideboard, glasses, soda, whiskey", "l" in "tall-glasses"), linking these words in interrelationships mirroring the closeness of the "harmonious" couple referred to. S3 performs the same function, alliteration being deployed yet again to the same end (note the graphological as well as phonological play on the letters "s" and "c").

A further stylistic feature of the first paragraph is its absence of verbs, the only verb present being the copula "be" in the first clause, which may be taken as being informatively null, since its only semantic function is to link subject to subject attribute. Indeed, to enhance the effect, the copula has been deleted from all the other clauses, since the semantic function of all clauses is identical - linking the subject to its attribute. Thus, nothing happens. The situation is static. The same situation plays itself over and over again, day in day out. And this too is symbolic, for it mimics a static society where values are perennial and unchanging - the husband goes out to work to fend for the family while the mother stays at home to look after the children.

Indeed, to underscore the point that the central issue is the ideology of the society portrayed, the specific details of the this frame (Minsky: 1974) are totally irrelevant to such ideological content. Hence, names are not forthcoming, date, place, size of family and so forth are not communicated, because they are not pertinent to the goal of calling up the traditional bourgeois family. This is also shown by the fact that discovering a specific detail, in this case the exact nature of the husband's job, triggers another instance of irony, for we expect a policeman normatively to respect and uphold the institutions which he is protecting professionally in his own

personal sphere.

One final point concerning the first paragraph is that it is focalised through Mary Maloney. Thus, ellipsis, the absence of verbs, the lists of objects creating the large number of commas, together yield a text which is “fragmented”, “disjointed”, thereby creating the impression that what the reader is seeing is what Mrs Maloney progressively sees through her own eyes as these wander over the room. Point of view – the positivity – is hers. The Bakhtinian second voice – the undercurrent – is that of the author who is cleverly playing to create the counter-voice of negativity, announcing to the reader the storm before it breaks. It also creates the possibility that Mrs Maloney is the subject of the story, a hypothesis that the rest of the story will bear out.

The second paragraph is foregrounded by its brevity – one single sentence. Finally, we are given a name, but only of one of the two protagonists – the female, who is also theme and grammatical subject of the sentence. The male remains anonymous, identified only through his social role – that of husband, another piece of irony, since we will soon learn that that role is the very role he has betrayed. The lexical verb is again significant, for it takes a predicator complement and not a direct object, thereby suggesting that the agent does not act upon the world, a point which is reinforced both by the semantics of the verb (“to wait”) and by the complement of that verb (“for her husband to come home”) which again suggests “passivity” and “service”, for in the previous paragraph she has “waited upon” her husband through making the room ready to cater to *his* needs, in line with the traditional role of the housewife. Furthermore, the woman’s Christian name is that of the mother of God, while her surname a) suggests Irishness, with its association with Catholicism, hence with a traditional view of life, and b) is very near to the informal lexical item “baloney”, meaning “stupid talk”. Hence the associations of the woman’s name again evoke the two sides of the picture – traditional purity versus rule-breaking, with almost a hint of criticism of the woman who is silly enough to believe all the “baloney” her husband tells her.

The third paragraph continues the portrait of the traditional wife. S5, with which the paragraph opens, is another brilliant stylistic brushstroke. The first clause (“Now and again she would glance up at the clock”) offers information that would be stereotypically taken as conveying anxiousness. The second clause (“but without

anxiety”) immediately belies this interpretation, while the third clause (“merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come”) provides the explanation which justifies that interpretation. Thus, the creation of an expectation and its contradiction serve to emphasise her contentment with the extant state of affairs, thereby underscoring the irony. Thus, the dialogic exchange continues. Even more important than the illocutionary forces of the single clauses is the actual conceptual content, for it highlights the fact that Mary Maloney lives for (and through) her husband. Her lack of anxiety underlines her feeling secure in her ideology because of her faith in her husband. She has not the slightest suspicion of what or who he really is and of the violent storm about to break.

Further confirmation of this hypothesis comes from the deployment of the adjective “slow” in the following sentence as characterising her actions. Indeed, the next sentence clarifies that unhurriedness connotes “tranquillity. The two lexemes thus reiterate Mrs Maloney’s sense of security and fulfilment. Note how another unusual collocation lends weight to the argument: “curiously tranquil”. This foregrounding operation has a dual and opposite function. On the one hand it functions as a quantifier to indicate just how deep Mrs Maloney’s feeling of security is, and on the other hand it concurrently constitutes authorial comment on the woman’s ingenuousness, which is about to be revealed by the forthcoming events. The physical description of her features also point to security and the happiness that comes from fulfilment – a happy marriage and a baby on its way – a result of having realised her role in life as laid down by the canons of society: “smiling air”, “a wonderful translucent quality” (an almost religious description, reminiscent of paintings of the Virgin Mary and the Saints), “the skin was soft”, “the eyes, with their new placid look”. Indeed, lexemes such as “slow” and “placid” when used as modalisers, namely to express a value judgement over and above their identifying a quality, often convey negativity, while here they express great positivity. Note how the effect is enhanced through alliteration, so that the association with other lexemes with a more positive value creates a general atmosphere of positivity: “slow”, “smiling”, “sewing”, “curiously”, “skin”, “this”, “sixth”, “translucent”, “soft”, “eyes”, “placid”, “seemed”. Note also how the lexical selection will have been influenced by the wish to play on alliteration: “sewing” and “sixth” both play

on the letter “s” when alternatives to convey the same ideational/ideological concepts could have been selected, such as “cooking” and “eighth” without changing the communicative value of what is expressed. . Note also how “sewing” again recalls the traditional housewife and mother, and her dutiful devotion to her role: “the drop of the head as she bent over her sewing”. Here too, “drop” and “bent” would in different circumstances convey the negativity of the constraint of having to do something unpleasant, or of tiredness and fatigue.

The pattern of verb usage in paragraph three confirms the foregoing analysis. Of the thirteen lexical verbs, a) six are copulas (“was”, realised four times, “had acquired”, [in the sense of “become”], “seemed”) b) five are intransitive (“glance”, “gone”, “made” “come”, “bent”); c) two are transitive.

By definition, copulas involve no action, even less so agency. In the case of intransitive verbs, an agent might exist, but when present, he/she does not act upon the world. Only two verbs are transitive, but even here, the prototypical codified pattern of an agent acting on the world is lacking. In the case of “to please” the verb is reflexive and refers to an emotional state, and the “real action is “would glance”. Mary is thus acting upon herself and not upon the outside world, which remains unaffected. In the case of “did” (S6), two points are of relevance: first the actions referred to involve behaviour pertinent to Mary’s social role, so they simply reflect her “passive” female status, for she lives for her husband; secondly, the verb appears as the complement of a prepositional phrase, (hence it is of relatively minor informational value), and it refers not to the actions themselves, but to the “smiling air” the actions have as carried out by Mrs Maloney, hence here too, agency is played down. The picture that emerges is one of a static world of inaction, of a state of bliss (reminding us of the eponymous short story by Katherine Mansfield) – a world where nothing happens, nothing changes which is not relevant to the daily business of carrying on family life. Indeed, in such a state of affairs, the external world has no significant role. And it is this “fact”, which is attributable to the ideology which created it, that represents Mrs Maloney’s undoing, for the real world outside does count, for it brings about her downfall.

The fourth paragraph constitutes the final part of the introduction and presents similar features to the preceding paragraphs. First of all, it describes what Mrs

Maloney perceives. It does so in a step by step fashion, paralleling the first paragraph where Mrs' Maloney's eyes wandered over the "scenery" of the living room. Here, the Gricean pertinence of the selection of the details included emerges even more forcefully than in paragraph one.

Second, verb patterning is again significant. The paragraph opens with a foregrounded time expression "When the clock said ten minutes to five". Two points should be noticed about the deployment of this verb. First the clock acquires animacy through "speaking" and through the deployment of a conventional metaphor. The important point is that the selection does fall upon this option instead of the more "normal" expression "When it was ten to five", which would have conveyed exactly the same ideational content through a literal expression, thereby removing all the implicatures created by the foregrounding mechanisms deployed. Second, the inanimate Sayer, to use the Hallidayan term referring to the agent of a verbal process, does not speak to anyone, but simply speaks, in a void, so to speak.

Taken together, these two points create the impression of agency, of animate action upon the world, affecting it in some way. In its turn, this effect performs at least two textual functions. First, it constitute an ironic comment on the fact that Mr. and Mrs Maloney "speak" when their partner is present, but do not "speak to each other", as the end product of their relationship - infidelity - shows. Second, it hides the fact that is actually being described is Mrs Maloney's inner mental processes: she has intentionally been concentrating on the time so that when she knows her husband's arrival is imminent she begins to turn her conscious attention to capturing those sense signals that will inform her that he is arriving home - "listen", "heard".

And what she perceives are noises made by her husband arriving: "the tyres on the gravel outside ... the car door slamming ... the footsteps passing the window ... the key turning in the lock". Yet such information patently flouts the Gricean maxim of quantity, for they convey no new, no real information either to Mrs Maloney or to the reader, for a) such information is given, part of both our general world knowledge and part of Mrs Maloney's idiosyncratic knowledge (that her husband comes home by car and parks it on the garden outside their house, that there is gravel in the garden, etc.), b) she hears it everyday, so habituation and economy

would make the brain decide what was happening on the basis of simply one piece of information and would then ignore the rest. Instead, the process is described step by step, as stated above, despite the fact that each and every day it is the same. The implicature created by the flouting of quantity is thus the extent to which Mrs Maloney “loves” her husband, the extent to which her life revolves around and is dependent upon his.

The same interpretation applies to the step by step perception of objects in the living room in the first paragraph. We can now clearly understand that Mrs Maloney is going over the objects which will be pertinent to her “reunion” with her husband after his return from work. Indeed, the “reunion” has all the hallmarks of a ceremony, ritual being a marker of identity, a way of stating who one is both as an individual and as a member of society, and concurrently a way of bolstering as well as affirming that identity. Likewise, Mrs Maloney perceiving all the sounds her husband makes is ceremonial, inasmuch the noises she hears, and above all their regularity - they always happen - enhance in her the feeling of the security of a returning husband, thereby reinforcing their identity as members of the same group, in this case the family - the ceremony of “hearing” is the ceremony of “confirmation”.

This aspect also helps explain another subtle touch - the verbless clause “punctually as usual”. Again, from a Gricean standpoint, one will ask oneself what difference it makes whether the husband arrives on time or not. Instead, from a psychological standpoint, regularity means predictability, and predictability means nothing unusual, unforeseeable, can and will happen. And viewed within the framework of a security-bestowing ritual, the flouting of the relevance maxim again confirms the fact that Mrs Maloney lives for her husband.

The “fragmented” nature of the sentence (with the interruption caused by the verbless clause in question together with the list of noises Mrs Maloney perceives, hence the mass of commas giving the sentence an “uneven” graphological aspect), the fact that the clause may be interpreted as being presented as Free Direct Thought (Short and Semino: 2004), and the grammatically unnecessary inclusion of the coordinating conjunction “and” (“and the car door slamming”) in the list of noises heard, render the style of the sentence spoken more than written, confirming that the focaliser is Mrs Maloney and that the apparently mundane,



banal perceptual events reported are instead important to her, for they are the key to unveiling her mental workings and her mindset.

The interpretation offered two paragraphs above is bolstered by the implicatures created by the deployment of the other verbs in the fourth paragraph. The use of the verb “began” constitutes another mental, patientless process, while “listen” and “heard” are two verbs of perception. Again, the world is not acted upon. Indeed, Mrs Maloney does not act, but “react”: “She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in”. What the verbs help do then is focus on her role-related behaviour, both through their syntax and through the reference to her behavioural acts. Indeed, “sewing” is a classic symbol of the traditional female condition. And when Mrs Maloney lays aside her sewing, it is only to perform another of her duties as wife and mother – to greet her spouse.

The intense alliteration, involving the letters “s” and “d” – six out of the eight content words are involved in this phenomenon draws attention to the fact that the details conveyed have a deeper, non-literal significance. Interestingly, one of the words whose initial letter is an “s” is “slamming”; a harsh noise referring to the husband’s behaviour, and in stark contrast with the slow, quiet calm of Mrs Maloney’s actions. The counter-voice is always present.

S10 underscores this point by deploying yet again the mechanism of flouting quantity. The sentence describes Mrs Maloney’s actions step by step once again, and once again information that could have been taken for granted is included. For instance, if Mrs Maloney is sewing and then goes forward, then she clearly must have got up. And even if this were not so, what possible interest (viz. Gricean relevance) could it have to inform the reader that Mrs Maloney got up in order to go and kiss her husband? Absolutely none, unless Mrs Maloney is normally a contortionist who can crane her neck so far as to kiss the incoming husband without getting up from her chair.

The final point to note about paragraph four is the syntactic construction of the fourth and final sentence. Mrs Maloney is theme and subject, as elsewhere. She does the kissing. Significantly, no reciprocation occurs. The relationship is thus asymmetrical. In addition, her husband’s name has still not been mentioned. He is still referred to by “anonymous”, “distant” pro-forms. This underscores asymmetry. In this sentence, Mr Maloney is theme and subject of the second, and subordinate,

clause, a temporal clause. All these features mean that Maloney is presented as “minor” information. Since such phenomena are a constant of the entire first part of the story, the impression might arise that Mrs Maloney is self-centred, as well as stupid.

Sentences 11 and 12 constitute the first words spoken in the story. Aptly, they constitute a greeting. Like the kissing, however, the greeting is asymmetrical, for Mrs’ Maloney’s warm “Hullo, darling” is met with a simple “hullo” from her husband. Had both people had the same sentiments, reciprocation should have characterised the scene. Furthermore, the initiator of the conversation is Mrs Maloney, the female, and not the husband. Traditional sociolinguistic studies on male-female interaction generally show the male as the initiator of conversation, this being taken as one of a set of conversational signals denoting the greater power the male generally has in society. Here the deviation from the norm together with the minimal, unromantic response produced by the male is another instance of foreshadowing what is about to happen. Indeed, the number of “inconsistencies”, reflecting the author’s omniscient voice, might be hypothesised as being directed at Mrs Maloney’s ingenuousness, her not realising that anything is amiss – a strange situation when she is so deeply in love with her husband that she pays attention to the smallest detail. Yet perfectly human, for socialisation has taken its toll, in addition to the fact that blindness is also self-induced when one is in love.

This “long, drawn-out” conversation is instantly replaced by another paragraph describing the actions that take place. These actions immediately return us to the dutiful wife schema with Mrs Maloney who “took his coat and hung it in the closet”. Again we are provided with a list of sequential actions, as underscored by the adverbs “Then” and “soon” and by the coordinating conjunction “and” clearly marking the sequence. Once her duty of serving the drinks has been successfully accomplished, Mrs Maloney returns to her prototypical wifely task of sewing. That “proper” gender roles are adhered to is further and delicately hinted at by the difference in drinks: “a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself”. The conversational style of these two verbless clauses, as well as the rest of the paragraph, also shows that the paragraph continues to focalise through Mrs Maloney.

That such silence is strange in a happy marriage is underscored by the fact that the

following paragraph offers an “explanation” of this phenomenon: “She knew he didn’t want to speak much until the first drink was finished”. Again, the Bakhtinian dialogue seems to be in place. Everything fits into place to perfection. And perfect is Mrs Maloney’s love for her husband, as the syntactic and lexical choices indicate. Paragraph eight is realised by five sentences, which begin as follows:

- S15 For her, this was always a blissful time of day
- S16 She knew he didn’t want to speak  
and she was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company
- S17 She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man
- S18 She loved him for the way he sat
- S19 She loved the intent far look in his eyes

Set out in this way (to include also the second “sentence” in S16), the parallelism is crystal clear. Every sentence opens with Mrs Maloney as theme and subject, either formally or pragmatically. For instance, although S15 opens with a prepositional phrase, this is simply an alternative for an expression such as “she believed” or “she felt”. All five expressions thus conceived, (that is, including the verbal concept conveyed by the prepositional “for her”), are verbs of perception. The first two are verbs expressing belief and the next three a verb expressing an emotion. Two points stand out. First, the entire paragraph is thus focussed on Mrs Maloney’s internal, viz. intimate, self. Second, that her thoughts are coloured positively, sexually. Indeed, after the first two clause constituents (subject and predicator) the lexical choices are lavish in selections manifesting Mrs Maloney’s love and happiness.

“Blissful” (S15) brings back to mind Katharine Mansfield’s story “Bliss” mentioned earlier. Other lexical selections, however, seemingly lead us to a less ethereal, less psychological plane, than the (human) setting of Mansfield’s story. The items “content”, “enjoying”, (S16) and “luxuriate” (S17) in such close proximity, and the latter term following the verb “love”, suggest a more earthy aspect. Indeed, “luxuriate” is yet another unusual selection, and akin to “luxury”, which in Elizabethan times indicated “lust”. The sensual, (if not repressed sexual), dimension is underscored by a return to the positive concepts of heat and light through the repetition of the adjective “warm”, in a decidedly “amorous” concoction which is conveyed by another unusual expression, “that warm male

glow”, but also by the less striking continuation of that phrase “that came out of him to her when they were alone”. While “that warm male glow” is relatively explicit, “that came out of him” seems to be relatively “innocuous”, conveying very little. Instead, I venture to suggest that in deploying a blend of two conceptual metaphors - the conduit metaphor (Reddy: 1979) and the container metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson: 1980) - Mrs Maloney is primly confessing that her husband is physically highly attractive. What she fails to grasp, however, is that if his “warm male glow” (viz. his sexual attractiveness) is real, then she might not be the only woman to “detect” it. Here, the parallelism with “Bliss” is indeed valid, because both protagonists refuse to see or are incapable of seeing reality.

More importantly, the way very ordinary language is used by Dahl to describe humdrum, unimportant everyday states and events actually conceals deep mental processing which, if “detected”, reveals what the character is really like. Language and content seem to “hide” what is going on <sup>1</sup>.

A third unusual point is that these positive emotional terms cease to appear in the predicate with S17. Indeed, were it not for the predicator in sentences 18 and 19, these two sentences might almost appear to express a negative attitude, or at least a neutral attitude, one that is not openly and decidedly positive. Such “negativity” is foreshadowed in S16 by the expression “after the long hours alone”. At a surface level, this might appear as Mrs Maloney externalising the suffering she endures in order to savour the joys of marriage. Furthermore, and not by chance, the same lexeme “alone” is deployed in the following sentence, as if to countermand the negativity it expresses in S17: “when they were alone together”. However, I would posit that this expression, as others before it, is ambivalent, concurrently expressing Mrs Maloney’s positive outlook and the author’s negative or monitory tone.

The sensuality identified in SS16-17 also helps account both for the apparent cessation of emotive terms in SS18-19 and for the actual content of the latter two sentences. What is immediately striking is the almost ridiculous nature of the features Mrs Maloney “praises” in her husband: sitting “loosely” in a chair, “the way he came in a door”, “moved slowly across the room with long strides”, “the ... far look in his eyes when they rested on her”, “the funny shape of the mouth”. If it was not obvious that she is madly in love with her husband, listing such features

would appear as taking the reader for a ride. Indeed, it could be stated that Mrs Maloney was deliberately trying to select those features which have the very opposite effect to making a person attractive, as is the case with “the funny shape of the mouth”, for one’s first reaction on reading this phrase is to interpret the polysemic adjective “funny” as “strange”, hence “ugly”, and not as “amusing”, hence “attractive”. In other words, we have yet another instantiation of an unusual collocation. This feeling is reinforced by the expression “moved slowly with long strides”, for it is either a contradiction, since long strides generally denote quick movement, or else appears to be making fun of Maloney. As far as sitting “loosely” is concerned, I am afraid I have no inkling as to what is intended by such an expression.

What is being described, then, in SS18-19 is an absurdly extreme situation of love, where Mrs Maloney worships every single thing about her husband, to the point of turning him into a god-like creature, where a “normal” human being would simply see a mortal creature with his good points and bad points like any other mortal creature. Hence, the cessation of the deployment of explicit modal forms conveying positive values does not mean a cessation of positivity, but takes positivity one step further by making us understand that Mrs Maloney worships what no other human would worship. Ironically, the termination of the use of explicit modalisers heightens the praise being proffered.

Thus the opening sets the scene as a seemingly happy bourgeois family, with a traditional wife who adheres to traditional patriarchal values, and who dotes on her husband, who lives for him. Given the context Dahl is referring to, post Second World War Britain, such a portrait is credible, especially since, as we will see shortly, Mrs Maloney is not without intelligence.

However, the idyllic portrait painted of the family is continually being counterpointed by a contrastive voice which lies below the immediate surface, sending out signals that all is not well, all is not as it seems to be to Mrs Maloney.

## 3.2 Coming to the crunch

### 3.2.1 Introduction

The “real” conversation starts with S20. The extract below shows the turns in the dialogue without the descriptive passages in order to highlight the nature of the dialogue. I have signalled certain descriptive parts as forming part of the dialogue inasmuch as they indicate the turn-taking sequence. Thus T8, T12 and T18 indicate silences conveying the failure to take one’s turn, while the inclusion of the first sentence in T15 indicates Mrs Maloney making a pause, hence thinking, before deciding to take her turn. While purists might object to one or two of my decisions, such as including T18 despite there being no verbal text at that point in the extract, I would claim that the evidence is heavily weighted in favour of the interpretative points I am about to make.

T1 (20) 'Tired, darling?'

T2 (21) 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm tired.'

T3 (26) 'I'll get it!' she cried, jumping up.

T4 (27) 'Sit down,' he said.

T5 (29) 'Darling, shall I get your slippers?'

T6 (30) 'No.'

T7 (32) 'I think it's a shame,' she said, 'that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long.'

T8 (33) He didn't answer, so she bent her head again ...

T9 (34) 'Darling,' she said. (35) 'Would you like me to get you some cheese? (36) I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.'

T10 (37) 'No,' he said.

T11 (38) 'If you're too tired to eat out,' she went on, 'it's still not too late. (39) There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair.'

T12 (40) Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

T13 (41) 'Anyway,' she went on, 'I'll get you some cheese and crackers first.'

T14 (42) 'I don't want it,' he said.

T15 (43) She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. (44) 'But you *must* have supper. (45) I can easily do it here. (46) I'd like to do it. (47) We can have lamb chops. (48) Or pork. (49) Anything you want. (50) Everything's in the freezer.'

T16 (51) 'Forget it,' he said.

T17 (52) 'But, darling, you *must* eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like.'

T18 -----

T19 (53) She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

T20 (54) 'Sit down,' he said. (55) 'Just for a minute, sit down.'

T21 (56) It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

T22 (57) 'Go on,' he said. (58) 'Sit down.'

T23 (59) She lowered herself back slowly into the chair

T24 (61) 'Listen,' he said, 'I've got something to tell you.'

T25 (62) 'What is it, darling? (63) What's the matter?'

T26 (66) 'This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid,' he said.

(67) 'But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. (68) I hope you won't blame me too much.'

Table 1. The turns in the main conversation.

### 3.2.2 Part 1. Mrs Maloney dominant

Having included the silences, that is, the signals that a turn has not been taken, then the total number of 26 turns exhibit an even distribution. If we examine the silences, then Mrs Maloney fails to take her turn once, while Mr Maloney fails to do so three times. This means that at the explicit, verbal level, Mrs Maloney actually realises two more turns than her husband. Furthermore, she initiates all the turns, until T19, where Mr Maloney makes a preparatory move to introduce a new topic, his wanting a divorce. In other words, in conversational analysis terms, she appears to be the one with the power.

T20 (S54) is a watershed, then, dividing the conversation into two parts. In the first part, Mrs Maloney "dominates", in formal terms. In the second part Mr Maloney dominates. This hypothesis is supported by several linguistic features. First, it is significant that Mrs Maloney's only failure to take her turn is right at the beginning of the second part of the conversation, at T21, for it records her shock, and the transition from a "standard" family conversation scene to the "novel" event of her

husband declaring his intention to leave his wife. However, it may be argued that in one sense Mrs Maloney actually does take her turn here, only that it is mental, non-communicative, for it externalises her emotional state for the reader's benefit – the onset of fear, fear for what her husband is about to say. This, of course, goes totally against the picture that has been built up of so far of Mrs Maloney living contentedly in her secure world.

Second, a word count strengthens this very same argument. In the first part of the conversation, Mrs Maloney utters 187 words, while Mr Maloney a bare 14. The conversation has a question-answer-format in which Mrs Maloney asks the questions and Mr Maloney furnishes answers, generally minimal responses (Fellego: 1995) as the word count and the silences bear out, making the conversation more like an interrogation or a school lesson than a conversation between two intimate equals. Instead, in part two of the conversation Mrs Maloney has only one turn and utters a mere seven words while Mr Maloney has 4 turns and utters 62 words.

Third, the ideational content of Mrs Maloney's questions are restricted to states and events which refer exclusively to the realm of family life, hence to her social role as female care-giver. One can easily imagine that Mr Maloney who is presumably irritated by his wife since he wishes to leave her, will be even more exasperated by such a conversation. This accounts for his minimal responses which show a decided lack of interest in his wife's words as well as the tenseness that comes from knowing he has to broach an extremely delicate subject which can lead to extreme conflict.

The results obtained through applying the tools of conversation analysis are confirmed by other theoretical strands of pragmatic analysis. Let us take a few examples. First, the asymmetrical deployment of terms of endearment continues. While Mrs Maloney calls her husband "darling" he fails to reciprocate. Second, out of the ten turns which Mr Maloney does take and realise verbally, four perform the speech act of issuing an order, using the most direct grammatical means available – the imperative – and two are even more abrupt, consisting as they do of one word refusals – "no". Indeed, the number of refusals totals four. This is atypical of an exchange between spouses in normal ("happy") speech events. Third, and moving on to a consideration of the entire conversation (complete with description, that is),



the first part of the conversation has all the elements of female subalternity: a) service to her lord and master – “Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod” (S40). Here the verb “wait on” is improperly used, hence highly symbolic. However, what is even more incredible is that Mrs Maloney’s “waiting on” is not merely physical and social, in the way that a servant waits on his master, but is eminently mental and emotional – it denotes total psychological slavery. Note how the premodifier “little” collocated with “nod”, an act that costs absolutely nothing to the actor, drives the point home. Mrs Maloney is happy with little. Getting the master’s “slippers” is another classic in the traditional wife frame; b) the pleasure obtained is thus psychological and emotional: “I’d like to do it” (S46) does not merely transmit the conventional implicature associated with this linguistic form – “I want to do x” – but it concurrently conveys the literal meaning of the verb “like” – Mrs Maloney obtains joy and pleasure in serving; c) the alacrity of service when offering to get him another drink (“jumping up”), manifesting instant obedience to the code she adheres to, to the point of carrying out unissued orders inferred from context; d) defence of her male bread winner. S32 performs the speech act of criticism of her husband’s superiors who wear him out through work, and S44 insists that despite his tiredness he must have food in order to safeguard his health. With regard to S32, it never comes to mind that the fault of her husband’s weariness is not his work but the stress of the marital situation. Her husband is always right so she attributes his psycho-physical condition to the “misbehaviour” of his colleagues at work.

Of course, Mrs Maloney gradually moves out of her cocoon and starts to make her brain work, thus picking up the premonitory signs. Hence, in SS23-24 she realises from the sound of the ice cubes in the glass that he has downed his whiskey in one go. Note that these utterances imply firstly that Maloney’s behaviour is abnormal (Gricean relevance and quantity) and secondly that Mrs Maloney has fully realised the implication of her husband’s abnormal behaviour – “fully” in the sense that she attributes it to factors coming within the realm of her normality. In S28 she notices her husband has put little ice in his refreshed drink. S31 reiterates the concept that she notices that he is drinking far more than usual. At S43 “she moved uneasily in her chair, the eyes still watching his face”. She is gaining awareness that

something is seriously wrong.

### **3.2.3 Mr Maloney dominant**

When her husband takes command at T20/S54, which I have classified as the watershed, employing a starkly-issued command “Sit down”, which he immediately realises is too abrupt, as shown by the mitigator immediately following it in S55, “Just for a minute, sit down” , Mrs Maloney fully realises that something is not seriously but dreadfully wrong, as the omniscient author tells us (S56): “It wasn’t till then that she began to get frightened”. The emotion of fright is the indicator that the defences of her secure world have been attacked and breached.

The husband now comes on stage and we begin to build up a picture of him.

T24 and T 26 (respectively S61 and S66) constitute the preparatory moves in which Mr Maloney pre-announces the news to his wife, thus preparing her for the shock she is now expecting. Now it is standard human practice to prepare our fellow humans for the shocks we are about to give them in an attempt to lessen the negative effects which we predict the said shocks are likely to produce in the receiver of the bad tidings.

However, close scrutiny of the verbal and non-verbal strategies deployed by the husband together with his non-verbal behaviour in general begin to cast a negative light on him, for they do not seem calculated to produce the effect one is socially obliged to try to produce. S61 is his first utterance in the preparatory move. While one might not expect him to use terms of endearment, since he is about to ask his wife for a divorce, nevertheless, seeing that so far there has been not even the tiniest bit of evidence of acrimony in their relationship, one would have expected a slightly less distant linguistic form than the cold and curt “Listen ... I’ve got something to tell you”. Even the simply inclusion of his wife’s name - “Listen, Mary” -would have been a shade less impersonal, or the preparatory phrase “I’m afraid ...” slightly less brusque. Furthermore the inclusion of a premonitory adjective would also have been standard, as in “I’ve got something serious to tell you”.

While these preliminary observations might not fully convince, given the situation, the description of the man’s behaviour (S64) following these words is more serious a linguistic and moral affair. He avoids the light (a symbol of truth and righteousness), his head is bent (shame), and his mouth (the emitter of negativity)

is also out of Mrs Maloney's vision. Guilt and shame are written all over these signals. But worse is to come.

When unexpectedly announcing to one's spouse that one wants a divorce, immediately, when the woman is six months pregnant, to say, as does Maloney, that such news is going to be "a bit of a shock" is understatement to put it mildly. Maloney has absolutely no feeling for others, or perhaps more simply absolutely no feeling for his wife. S67 represents Maloney's justification for his desire to divorce. His argument about having thought seriously about the matter is fallacious, for it is based on the presupposition that his thought processes were logical, his analysis was correct, and the criteria employed to come to his decision were exhaustive and proper to the matter in hand. However, since the reader is never provided with what Maloney's thoughts had been, there is no way of knowing whether Maloney was right or not. From a critical standpoint (namely, from the standpoint of emitting a judgement about Maloney), the fact that he, the traditional male breadwinner of the house, has unilaterally come to a sane and logical decision immediately casts doubt on his mental powers and on his moral stance. From an analytic standpoint, we are dealing here with the Gricean maxim of quantity - zero information is provided on a crucial aspect of the story. I will take this point up more fully in 3.3.

Note also the intensifier "right" in the expression "right away". Two points are crucial here. The expression "right away" means "immediately". It thus appears that Maloney is taking a moral stance, for it is part of folk belief that doing things immediately, even unpleasant things, when they need to be done, is better than putting them off. This supposedly causes less damage in the long run. In addition to claiming righteousness, my previous point, one might add that as an argument, it can hardly justify the request for divorce. The argument thus flouts the Gricean maxim of relevance, and again makes us raise an eyebrow, if not more, at Maloney. Secondly, the fact that Maloney opted not for the more standard expression "immediately" but for the phrase "right away" plays on associations - "right" harking back to righteousness, and "away" betraying in Freudian fashion what Maloney's real goal is before he announces it officially - going "away" from his wife. We may thus hypothesise that the dual voice - that of character and that of author - is also present when Maloney is being referred to, creating the same ironic stance it did when Mrs Maloney was being referred to.

S69 constitutes a climax to Maloney's inanities: "I hope you won't blame me too much". He has a loving, nay doting, wife who is carrying his child, he comes home and tells her the thing she would least have expected and wanted, thus destroying her life in one fell swoop, and he asks her not to blame him "too much"! My claim is that the author has in just these few lines already positioned us against Maloney.

### **3.3 The crunch**

Dahl has been building up to the moment of revelation, when the husband will tell His wife he wants a divorce. Here is how he does it:

And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at 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.

'So there it is,' he added. 'And I know it's a kind of a 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. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job.'

This account defeats all possible standard expectations, estranging the scene to the point that it is almost unrecognisable as a frame, script or schema portraying one spouse declaring to the other that he/she no longer wishes to continue living with his/her partner. Estrangement is achieved through a variety of foregrounding devices. First, it is presented as narration (Short and Semino: 2004) where one expects the presentation to be carried out in some form of speech, direct speech or free direct speech being the more "normal" methods of presentation. Second, and incredibly, nothing is recounted. There is simply the narrator's representation of voice (NRV) (Short and Semino: 2004). NRV simply informs the reader that someone is engaged in verbal activity but does not provide any explicit or implicit account as to what speech acts were engaged in. In other words, it is a minimal representation of speech, furnishing a very distant and cold picture in this case. Third, there has been a build up to what is standardly a climax, when the truth comes out and all is revealed. Instead, the preceding two mechanisms create an anti-climax. Where one would have expected a declaration, an explanation, a justification, the expression of regret and so forth, there is silence – Maloney's voice

is not heard, what he has done and why he has done so is not given. Indeed, we are obliged to infer that he has told his wife he is leaving her from the ideational content of the following paragraph which contains prototypical information concerning alimony! Even worse, the whole affair is belittled: "It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most". Maloney makes short shrift of his wife after she has devoted her life to him. In conclusion, the account violates the Gricean maxims of quantity and relevance in relation to the prototypical speech event that would take place when divorce is the topic of that speech event.

Now the extension of the principle of zero quantity being a violation of the expected behaviour in this situation is to strengthen the argument that the reader is being aligned with Mrs Maloney and against her husband. No one wishes to appear as an inhuman, totally egoistic, selfish brute. One normally defends oneself. Life is never black and white, so even if the husband were more sinning than the wife, he would still have recriminations to make against her, defences to offer for his behaviour, even if he only appealed to (his own) human weakness.

Furthermore, at the theoretical level, if the writer is a good writer and if he is abiding by the Gricean Cooperative Principle, in other words, if he is being as communicative as possible and giving us as "honest" a picture as possible, then he would be duty bound to respect all the maxims, including the maximum of quantity, and give us all the information necessary to judge the case. In addition that information would have to be true. Hence, the conclusion is that if the author fails to give us any information that would "absolve" the husband, even if only in part, then there was no such information to give. Thus, the husband must be inferred as being presented as the guilty party. No defence is offered of his behaviour because there is no defence to offer. By the same token, if Mrs Maloney had defects, or even simply character traits which made the two people incompatible, then it was the writer's duty make the reader understand this and so condone Maloney's behaviour at least in part.

It is precisely this fact that a) positions the reader against Maloney and b) makes the story symbolic, a portrait of a standard social setting at a certain epoch.

The conclusion deriving from the Gricean argument advanced two paragraphs above tallies perfectly, of course, with the interpretation offered in the preceding sub-section (3.2) that Dahl was positioning his readers against Maloney. And the

paragraph following the denouement lends further weight to the argument.

S71 begins a new paragraph with the tritest of expressions in one of the most appalling interpersonal situations a human being can find himself/herself in - "So there it is" - thereby belittling the wife even further. By flouting the quantity maxim, the first clause of S72 verges on lunacy, for although "I know" has the conventional function of filler in speech, here it acts as an identity marker, for Maloney's speech (what little there is of it - non-communicativeness being another of his character traits which again makes us wonder whose fault it really is) is replete with "little" words which are meaningless (or even ironic, as here) and which betray a lack of intelligence and or at the very least sensitivity and respect for others. Indeed, the effect of this mechanism is redoubled immediately after in the same clause by the inclusion of "kind of", an intensifier which again diminishes the power of what he is saying. The trusim "A bad time to be telling you" is ludicrous in itself, but further downgraded first by "kind of" and then by "I know", thus making Maloney unbearable. It also calls into question, as happened earlier, the subsequent judgement he expresses in the second clause in S72: "but there simply wasn't any other way". We only have Maloney's word for it that there was no alternative - no evidence is offered to support his judgement. Furthermore, we have been aligned against him. And finally, our world knowledge tells us that when a wife is six months pregnant it is rather late in the day to break such news. Why could he not, for instance, have told his wife much earlier, when, for instance, the procreation of a child destined quite probably to unhappiness could have been avoided?

S73 worsens the situation. While we might in theory judge the fact that he will provide for his ex-wife's maintenance positively, for not all husbands honour their post-divorce obligations, several arguments again turn us against thinking Maloney is being honourable in a situation of stress and conflict. First of all, it is the first real ideational point of importance that he makes, (viz that the author presents to us as relevant), the other speech acts that have been verbalised all being offensive inanities. Furthermore, in his position, money is probably not a problem, so it can hardly be said he is making a sacrifice. One might say he is simply paying for his liberty and or salving his conscience. Finally SS75-77 give the game away by revealing the real motive behind his "generosity". If his wife fails to concede a

divorce without making fuss, then this might endanger his career. Maloney's values are quite clear: first the individualistic goal of achieving the economic and social status accruing from his work, then comes his communal, family life. This is another unambiguous indication of his egoism. The linguistic fact that the concept is couched in three sentences where one would have sufficed, betrays tension, a lack of calm control over a delicate situation: since the point is central to him, he is emotionally highly involved in it. Emotion, as revealed through his verbal utterances, is another indicator confirming his value system.

In sum, what is not stated is as important as what *is* stated. In Gricean terms, zero quantity is as significant as a positive value regarding quantity. That fact that Maloney is silent as regards his motives for leaving his wife is as important as his promising his wife will be cared for financially. Both sides of the coin help us build up his character, or rather, his value system, and enable us to pass judgment on him – negative judgement.

In conclusion, the story so far has built up a portrait of a happy bourgeois family and has smashed that image of contentedness to smithereens in the space of six lines. It has also positioned the reader to emit a totally negative value judgment with regard to the husband, thereby absolving the wife of any blame in the affair, despite the fact that we know the blame is never totally of one party and that we might well not agree with the wife's worldview. Indeed, the story is a criticism of that worldview.

## **4. Liberation**

The wife's world is shattered by her husband's request. "Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all" (S77). The use of the word "instinct" is highly symbolic, for "instinct" as used by Mary Maloney is, of course, a folk concept. What Mary is referring to is her emotional and psychological reaction to the devastating news which has torn her worldview asunder. This is unbearable for any human being, and a refusal to believe, viz. accept, the state of affairs is the natural reaction, for acceptance would entail the total rejection of one's identity and worldview, of what one has always been up to that moment.

SS78-78 thus refer to a state of hallucination, a possible explanation to "explain

away” the undesirable truth. Her disbelief, or rather her will not to believe, is so strong that she gets up and goes to the kitchen as if nothing had happened (S80) and continues with her wifely duties. This is, of course, her defence mechanism against the grim brutality of reality. Continuing with the daily humdrum routine when physical or spiritual death is at the door is a means of reasserting identity and trying to recover security. So Mrs Maloney goes to make supper as if her husband had just told her the most normal thing in the world. As S83 confirms us, “Everything was automatic now”. However, physicality confirms the depth of the emotion: “She couldn’t feel anything at all – except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit (S82).

Thus Mrs Maloney “automatically” goes “down the stairs to the cellar”, (symbolically a descent into hell, for note that not that many English houses have cellars, and even less have cellars where the food is kept) to collect food for the supper that she intends to cook. The step by step description of this set of events in SS83-85 is akin to the routine described in paragraphs one and three in the first part of the story, simulating a return to normality – Mrs Maloney does not wish to accept reality.

Thus, the events are again focalised through Mrs Maloney. This enables S86 to be delivered in FDT. The fact that a) S86 is extremely short – four words – does not constitute a grammatical sentence since it is realised by a verbless clause consisting of a single noun phrase (with a prepositional phrase embedded in it), b) the two function words are linked by alliteration (“leg”, “lamb”), and c) this concise sentence constitutes an entire paragraph, surrounded by much longer paragraphs, means that the sentence is heavily foregrounded. The implicature is not simply that Mrs Maloney sees something that will be suitable for dinner, but that in her subconscious her plan for revenge is taking shape.

S87 confirms that we are in Mrs Maloney’s mind through the use of FIT and a conversational style. The first verbless clause, “All right then” not only helps classify the style as conversational, but also has the added conventional overtones of revenge and/or anger – “All right then, if that is what you want then that is what you are going to get!” In other terms, the expression is ambivalent or multifunctional.

Textual confirmation of the subconscious intent to kill comes from the next



sentence, (S88), for if the estranging expression “holding the thin bone-end of it with both hands” did not implicate a well-formed intention to kill, then the detail would flout both the maxims of quantity and of relevance. Instead, the way she holds the leg of lamb is akin to that of the tennis player holding the tennis racket in both hands ready to deliver a powerful back-hander. The implicature is well made.

However, the rest of this sentence together with S92, are presented as narration – the omniscient author describing the visible, external events: “she went .. she saw .. she stopped”. Deploying three sentences, (SS89-91), her husband then tells her he does not want any dinner because he is going out. He does so with his back turned to her, without looking at her. These sentences are presented as Direct Speech, almost a contradiction in terms. S92 provides Mary’s reaction to her husband’s words and is again presented as narration of external events: “Mary Maloney simply walked up ... swung the club ... brought it down ...”.

Nevertheless, as in previous parts of the story, the external events are simply indicators of mental processing. The external events are clues as to what is going on in Mary Maloney’s mind. Thus “she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her , and she stopped”, (S88), convey that seeing him there in his attitude of concealment, guilt and shame bring back her anger to the fore. Note that the following clause is introduced by the coordinating conjunction “and”. This conjunction should therefore make the comma that precedes it redundant. This piece of deviant graphology thus constitutes foregrounding indicating a pause in which Mary Maloney is thinking. She is associating her husband’s guilt with her anger and with the leg of lamb she is holding in such a strange way. In other words, she is now considering the new situation and *consciously* and *explicitly* formulating the intention to kill her husband as punishment for his heinous crime. Thus, the syntagmatic order in which the information is presented - the Gricean maxim of manner, and to be precise, the sub-maxim, “be orderly” - reflects not so much the external action as Mary’s emotional reactions and mental reasoning. Her husband’s words, SS 89-91- confirm his guilt and inflame her anger, so she kills him – S92.

Numerous linguistic expressions in S92 confirm that her violent deed is the result of emotion and mental reflection based on her worldview. “At that point” is not merely an indicator of time, but implicates that she has taken her decision as a result of what has just preceded, namely SS89-91. The Gricean sub-maxim “be orderly” thus

operates from S83 to S92. “Simply” violates the maxims of manner and quality, for it cannot be taken literally. Killing is not generally a “simple” matter. The adverb refers to the implicit decision she has come to on the basis of her moral values. Crime is followed by punishment – a “simple” social rule. “Without any pause” is again a time marker at a literal level, but once again it conveys a non-literal message as did the previous time marker “At that point” (parallelism), namely the fact that Mary Maloney is firm in her decision. In other words, a change has come about in Mary. She has decided to throw off the yoke of patriarchy and become the agent of her own life.

A final point to be noted about the language is that the external description of events produces a matter-of-fact tone, one which stands in stark contrast to the passionate deed Mary Maloney is perpetrating, and which confirms that Mary has indeed decided to become the protagonist of her own life. Having been betrayed, she has no qualms. Hence her absolute calm. It is as if she had “rationally” argued out her situation: “I have a problem – I have illegitimately been deprived of my rights. How can I obtain justice? Through capital punishment”.

Now such a calm, cold-blooded attitude should enhance the condemnation we automatically emit when such a serious crime is committed. But, as I have been arguing from the outset, Dahl has so positioned us deploying the strategies analysed above that the killing evokes no such reaction. Quite the contrary - we condone it.

Such a stance is confirmed by S93: “She might just as well have hit him with a steel club”. The sentence is obviously produced by the narrator. It simply describes the efficacy of the murder instrument. It has no overtones of condemnation of the act just perpetrated with that instrument. It is simply a statement which reinforces the concept that Mary has dealt her husband a heavy, fatal blow. That such an implicature is intended is borne out by the fact that were it not so, the sentence would flout the quantity maxim, for the information it contains is redundant. The sentence could have been safely eliminated without any loss of conceptual meaning, for we all know what powers a frozen leg of lamb possesses. (This is not, of course, an invitation to carry out an experiment on one’s spouse or lover if he/she is not behaving properly!).

SS98-99, again foregrounded by the brevity of the paragraph they constitute, and

again presented in respectively FIT and FDT (parallelism again) confirm the ice-cold attitude that has possessed Mary. This continues in the following paragraph, which is again almost exclusively presented in FIT (S100, S103-110). In other words, the realisation of having being exploited and the consequent liberation through the act of murder – hence the changed consciousness and desire to become an agent – are marked by the passage from a predominantly external mode of presentation – narration – to a predominantly internal mode of presentation – FIT.

The object of her thoughts is the consequences that will ensure. At that time, the death penalty was in force in England. Hence Mary decides she does not want to die and she does not want her child to die.

With SS111-112 mode of presentation returns to external narration. The moment of consciousness-raising has passed, Mary has changed worldview and become a “feminist”, and now returns to humdrum business, to routine, in this case finding a solution to the immediate, concrete problem of how she can avoid the death penalty!

Since I have already anticipated the end of the story, our analysis may now come to an end, bar one final point.

## **5. Relishing liberation - comicity**

Mrs Maloney now thinks out her plan of defence and puts it into action. What emerges is her intelligence and her single-mindedness, as a result of which she turns the tables on her “male opponents”, the police, her husband’s friends who are investigating the murder. The central point about the final, long, section, is its comicality. The police are made to look extremely stupid in contrast to Mary’s own intelligence.

... Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may've thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

'It's the old story,' he said. 'Get the weapon, and you've got the man.'

Later, one of the detectives came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could've been used as the weapon? Would she mind having a look around to see if anything was missing - a very big spanner, for example, or a heavy metal vase.

They didn't have any heavy metal vases, she said.

'Or a big spanner?'

She didn't think they had a big spanner. But there might be some things like that in the garage.

The first point to note in the above extract is the extreme irony of “get the weapon and you’ve got the man”. The first level of irony is at the literal level, for the criminal is not a man but a woman. Instead, at a second and deeper level of irony, the real culprit is the man who betrayed, and more in general, man, or the patriarchal system which has deprived Mary of the existence she was trained and educated for. The other side of the coin is that the police do not really know what they are investigating. Looking for a man means looking in the wrong direction, at the literal level, and at the deeper level it means looking for a mistake (a male criminal) within the system and not at the system itself (patriarchy is wrong).

The second point about this passage is the feigned help Mary offers, thereby deviating the enquiries from their real direction, though there is actually little need to do so, as the final extract I will quote shows.

Next Mary uses an ingenious ploy as a preparatory move in getting the police to “remove” the evidence of her crime. She tells one of the men she needs a drink, a highly plausible request given the situation. But she uses this as a way of offering the men a drink (of whiskey). Given the fact that it is 9 p.m. and the men are tired and hungry, and that they are a “friend’s” home, they accept. Naturally, alcohol on an empty stomach makes their condition worse. So when Mary entices them to eat the food they offer only token resistance, thereby unwittingly destroying the evidence of the murder weapon. They even highlight their own stupidity themselves, as the extract which closes the story shows. In addition to their stupidity, the policemen also make a poor show on manners (“One of them belched”). And so Mrs Maloney wins the day, to her heart’s delight.

'Have some more, Charlie?'

'No. Better not finish it.'

'She *wants* us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour.'

'Okay then. Give me some more.'

'That's the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick,' one of them was saying. 'The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like a sledge-hammer.'

'That's why it ought to be easy to find.'

'Exactly what I say.'

'Whoever done it, they're not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.'

One of them belched.

'Personally, I think it's right here on the premises.'

'Probably right under our noses. What you think, Jack?'

And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.

## 6. Conclusion

Dahl has produced a story which is characterised by his usual black humour, with regard to style, but which is feminist, with regard to content and attitude. He tells the tale of a traditional woman who is happily subjugated to her husband. However, when the husband announces that he wants a divorce, the woman rightly feels betrayed for she has sacrificed her entire life for hi. She thus realises that her worldview was one which enabled her to be exploited and so decides to avenge her betrayal. She thus kills her husband.

The central point about the story, however, is that through his writing technique, Dahl positions the reader so as to make him/her side with the woman and against the man. Thus when the wife kills her husband, the reader emits no condemnation. In so doing, he becomes an accessory after the fact. In symbolic terms, he, too, becomes liberated by conceding that in the end murder was right, for it was not murder but justice, symbolically speaking. Patriarchy has to be done away with.

## Bibliography

- Dahl R. ( 1961/1979) "Lamb to the Slaughter", in *Tales of the Unexpected*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Douthwaite J. (2000) *Towards a Linguistic Theory of Foregrounding*, Alessandria,

Edizioni Dell'Orso.

Fellegy, A.M. (1995) Patterns and functions of minimal response, "American Speech", vol. 70, n.2, pp.186-199.

Minsky L. (1974) A Framework for Representing Knowledge, MIT-AI Laboratory Memo 306.

Short M., Semino E. (2004) *Corpus Stylistics: Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation in a Corpus of English Writing*. London: Routledge.

---

## Note

[↑ 1](#) And in this sense, even though Mansfield's story at first reading appears to be more "refined", at a deeper level of analysis the parallel between "Bliss" and "Lamb to the Slaughter" is a fitting one, aesthetic considerations aside.

Dipartimento di Lingue e Culture Moderne - Università di Genova  
Open Access Journal - ISSN 1824-7482