

# Analysis of the Mariticide Plot in “Lamb to the Slaughter” and “Why Women Kill”

## -- From the Perspective of Feminism

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### Abstract

**Mariticide, from Latin maritus "married" + -cide, from caedere "to cut, to kill", literally means the murder of one's spouse, but has become most associated with the murder of a husband. (Collins Dictionary). The term is currently used to refer to the murder of a husband killed by his wife. Nowadays, mariticide plots can be seen in some films, television and literary works quite often. From Trifles, a one-act play written by Susan Glaspell and first performed in 1916, to Why Women Kill, an American dark comedy-drama anthology television series by Marc Cheery and premiering in 2019, these works with mariticide plots have witnessed the development of the awakening of female consciousness and feminism movements. In this paper, the mariticide plots will be analyzed from the perspective of feminism by making comparisons between the two famous, classic and somehow similar works Lamb to The Slaughter and Why Women Kill (story in 1963) in terms of plot, characters, themes as well as social impacts.**

### Keywords

**Mariticide; Lamb to the Slaughter; Why Women Kill; Feminism.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Lamb to the Slaughter

The story mainly resolves around the sole female character, Mary Maloney, a traditional housewife who is pregnant for six months. Dahl is giving emphasis on the contrast between men's and women's characteristics. [1] Mary kills her husband, Patrick, who is a policeman, by using lamb because she loses her mind and gets extremely disappointed and angry when she is told by Patrick that he will leave her. She finally gets away from police's suspicion and sentence by means of pretending to be shocked when she returns home and destroys the murder weapon—the lamb by cooking it and making the police eat the murder evidence.

### 1.2. Why Women Kill (Story in 1963)

Beth and Rob were a couple and used to live a happy life until one day Beth accidentally hears that Rob has an affair with a waitress. Then Beth wants to make Rob turn back by making friends with Rob's lover, April. Gradually, Beth discovers that it isn't the first time of Rob's cheating behavior and her daughter's death was directly due to the negligence of Rob and his former lover when they were having sex. Then Beth makes the plan together with her neighbor Mary, who is suffering from domestic violence of her husband, Ralph. Eventually Rob is shot to death by Ralph since Ralph wrongly suspects that Mary cheated him and had an affair with Rob. Beth took the revenge successfully in the end.

## 2. Character Comparison

Husbands and wives are definitely the key roles in both works. All the stories and conflicts are centered on them. During the time around 1960s, all main characters in *Why Women Kill* and *Lamb* and the *Slaughter* share some similarities in family status, routine lives, personalities as well as final destiny.

### 2.1. Beth Ann Stanton & Mary Maloney

Both of them are housewives. They are kind, hard-working and always make the house in order. At first, they love their husbands sincerely. However, they both have serious crises in family affection. Beth's husband has an affair and Mary's husband is going to leave her even though she is pregnant for six months. Besides, they both kill their husbands eventually and escape from the legal sanction.

When they deal with the murder, they tend to be extremely wise and smart. Beth's murder plan is excellent and Mary can stay calm and come up with the ideas of getting away from sentence after her husband is killed by a lamb. It actually breaks the stereotype that men are rational while women are more emotional.

### 2.2. Rob Stanton & Patrick Maloney

They are the ones whose salaries take up most financial income of a family, and who are away from home all day until they get off work and come back home at dusk or evening, and also, who both betray their wives and pay the price in the end.

They are the breadwinners and irresponsible husbands. They tend to ignore their wives' feelings and always order their wives to serve them, like helping them take off the clothes when they get home, prepare the dinner, pour the drinks and so on. When they are off work at home, they become the masters of the house. However, they don't realize what's wrong with them and continue to make mistakes without reflecting themselves even for a single second. Finally, serious family conflicts burst out and they are ironically killed by their own wives.

## 3. Comparison and Analysis of Plot and Theme

### 3.1. The "Husband-Killed" Ending

Even though both Rob Stanton and Patrick Maloney are killed eventually, and both Beth and Mary get away with the punishment successfully, the endings of these two works are still somehow different.

#### 3.1.1. The Means of Killing

Firstly, as to the way of killing, Beth doesn't kill Rob using her own hands but by the hand of Ralph Vlasin, who is Rob and Beth Ann's neighbor and used to be an abusive, violent and crusty husband. Finally, Rob is shot to death by Ralph since Ralph wrongly covers that his wife, who is also named Mary as the protagonist in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, has an affair with Rob due to Beth's careful and solid murder plan. Besides, Ralph is sentenced to death for the crime of intentional homicide, making his wife free from frequent domestic violence. On the contrary, Mary kills Patrick directly using the "big frozen leg of lamb" without any hesitation. But unlike Beth's orchestrated and well-planned murder, Mary's killing behavior tended to be compulsive and uncontrollable just like an accident.

*"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."*

---*Lamb to the Slaughter*

### 3.1.2. The Reasons for Killing

The reasons for their killings are also somehow different.

For Beth, even though she felt disappointed towards Rob's cheating behavior in marriage, the real reason that drove Beth to draw up a murder plan is the death of her daughter, which was directly caused by Rob's cheating behaviour but made Beth blame herself, thinking that it was her responsibility. Rob's continual cheating behaviors and direct responsibility for the loss of their daughter made Beth take the revenge.

However, for Mary, she cannot accept the truth that Patrick was going to leave her, even she had been pregnant already. She felt astonished and extremely angry. Maybe such anger made her eventually kill Patrick. Besides, the fact that he immediately offers to pay Mary to see she's "looked after" conveys a sense of guilt in the situation, which is likely an affair.

*"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."*

----*Lamb to the Slaughter*

Concerning the reaction towards the cheating behavior of husbands, Bernard Le Bovier Fontenelle, a French author once said humorously, "Women react differently: a French woman who sees herself betrayed by her husband will kill his mistress; an Italian will kill her husband; a Spaniard will kill both; and a German will kill herself." which indicates women's intolerant attitudes towards the infidelity in marriage.

### 3.2. Identity Tag and Gender Inequality

*Lamb to the Slaughter* is written in 1953 and shares a similar history background with the *Why Women Kill (story in 1963)*. During that period, the second-wave feminism and Anglo-American Feminist movement (Barry, 1995) was popular. As Betty Friedan once said in her works *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), "something wrong lodged in the minds of countless American housewives", which aimed to challenge patriarchal values, promulgates gender equality and critique the long-lasting stereotype in contemporary literature and popular culture. [2] In this period of time, to audience, women often appeared in screen as housewives. Independent female consciousness is often suppressed by voices from different sides in a patriarchal society. [3] Besides, it also aimed to represent the figure of the woman as an autonomous subject, focusing on the gendered body of woman to better understand gender issues such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment and violence. Consciousness-raising was seen as a key tool for furthering feminism; Women during that time were gradually aware of their "identified identifications" as housewives which were attached to their families rather than independent individuals, and trying to break the stereotype that their missions are staying at home and managing everything of their families.

In both works, previously Beth and Mary don't mind their identities as housewives and are proud of their identity tag as a "common sense", which is supported and promoted by the majorities in the society. They seem to enjoy or even "consider it an honor" to do the housework and take care of their husbands willingly.

*Rob: Honey, does my tapping offend you?*

*Beth: Rob is such a wonderful provider. I consider it an honor to take care of him.*

----*Why Women Kill (story in 1963)*

*"She took his coat and hung it in the closer. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself. For her, this was always a blissful time of day."*

----*Lamb to the Slaughter*

However, in their husbands' own eyes, both Beth and Mary are more like their housewives, attachments or even "servants" rather than complete individuals who are independent and have their own self-consciousness. Since husbands is not only the economic pillar of the family, but also the absolute dominant position in the relationship between husband and wife, [4] they take everything for granted. In *Why Women Kill (story in 1963)*, Rob considers that Beth should be his widow in case he dies, as if Beth is an object belonging to him. And in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, Patrick decides to leave Mary, as if she is an abandoned toy even though she has already pregnant for six months.

*Beth: I don't have a job, or a hobby. All I do is take care of you.*

*Rob: That's what makes you a good wife.*

*Beth: But when you're not here anymore, who will I be?*

*Rob: My widow?*

----*Why Women Kill (story in 1963)*

When Beth tries to attract Rob's heart back by making great changes in her appearance, Rob even doesn't notice them and preforms to be distracted all the time. And in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, Mary tends to be enthusiasm and caring for her husband. Similarly, Patrick is indifferent towards his wife and unwillingly to give responses to Mary's words of care, which indicates that probably Patrick has been offish and indifferent. In these two scenes, we can draw the conclusion that men are likely to focus on their own things like reading newspaper, drinking wine, managing their job business at the dinner rather than listening to their wives' words attentively, then give a positive and timely response.

*Beth: Why would you spend that much on a dress? I wanted to look pretty. For you.*

*Rob: Thanks.*

*Beth: I don't understand. It has been years since I bought a new dress. And I got my nails done, a-and I got a new hairdo. How could you not notice?*

*Rob: Well, to be honest, I never notice stuff like that.*

*Beth: Why not?*

*Rob: Cause when I look at you, I don't see clothes or hair. I just see you...the girl I married. I don't expect you to be chic or stylish. You're my wife I just need you to be the...same old Beth.*

----*Why Women Kill (story in 1963)*

*"Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign."*

----*Lamb to the Slaughter*

### 3.3. Sacrifices of Females to be Wives

Suraj Mishra once illustrates the sacrifices and struggles female will takes. According to his poem, "A women sacrifices her tears, blood, self-respect, wishes and dreams when she is loved least, denied to be educated, gonna marry and leave her house, gonna give birth to a new life, given household responsibilities, tortured hard and imprisoned in a cage of nightmares of struggles." In these two works, we can see that both Beth and Mary have sacrificed a lot for being a wife and for the whole family.

#### 3.3.1. Loneliness and Boring Life

These two female characters are portrayed to be lonely and live a boring life. All their work is some repetitive and basic housework like doing cleaning and laundry, preparing for dinner and

taking after children. They spent most of their time staying at home with few entertainments and waiting for their husbands to come back home. With limited socializing, (their social hub is comparably small, which can be the neighborhood in most cases. In that case, they will feel lonely from time to time. For Beth, she tells Rob that she doesn't have a job, or a hobby (actually she has a hobby) after marriage. All she does is taking after her husband. And for Mary, she keeps sewing when Patrick is absent from home. When Patrick comes back home, she is still busy with the sewing work. From these details we can conclude that maybe sewing is an important way for Mary to kill time and struggle through the boring life. Besides, we can feel her tiredness and the negative feelings when she is alone at home by means of noticing the surrounding environment (the curtains drawn, the empty chair opposite. French ice cubes in the Thermos bucket) and appearance (the larger and darker eyes).

*"The drop of a head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil."*

*"He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing"*

---Lamb to the Slaughter

### 3.3.2. Hobbies and Dreams

Females might sacrifice their hobbies even their dreams for their family. Previously, Beth was fond of playing piano and roller skating, after she gets married with Rob, Beth has no time to do such things, which are also not supported by Rob. She also had the dream of giving a recital, but Rob even laughed at Beth by saying she weren't as good as she thought she was. What Rob wants Beth to do is managing the whole family rather than paying attention to the dreams she pursue for. Just like April, Rob's lover has told Beth that the reasons why she will not get married is that she "wants to have a career" and "want to be a singer". However, having a marriage will stop her from "being somebody someday". On the contrary, in *Lamb to the Slaughter*, it's unknown to us what hobbies and dreams Mary has, but judging from her boring routine life, we could tell, similar to Beth, Mary could have some hobbies previously. She probably just stops them due to the burden of taking care of the family or Patrick's discouragement. One thing is confirmed that, being a housewife and doing the family daily business is definitely not their ideal lives.

## 4. Conclusion

*Why Women Kill* and *The Lamb to the Slaughter* are the classic works which reflect the development of female characters' self-awareness and break the tradition stereotypes towards women. The ultimate goal of feminism is not to "kill" men, but to achieve gender equality. By using the black humor, we readers gradually understand the tough condition of wives in 1960s and the hidden reasons of Mariticide. There is still a long way to go to achieve the gender equality both in a family and in a society. But with the emerging and popularity of these works, positive attitudes shall be held since more people have noticed the conflicts and tried to solve such problems.

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