Unit 5

Title: Lamb to the Slaughter

Suggested Time: 2-4 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.10; W.9-10.1, W.9-10.4, W.9-10.7, W.9-10.8; SL.9-10.1; L.9-10.1, L.9-10.2, L.9-10.4

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

Perception sometimes doesn’t reflect reality.

Synopsis

This darkly humorous story is a modern, yet classic tale of irony and suspense. Mary Maloney eagerly awaits her husband Patrick’s arrival home from work. When he finally arrives, it is obvious that something is wrong. He tells his wife that that he is leaving her. Shocked beyond reply, Mary begins cooking dinner. She grabs a large leg of lamb from the freezer. She walks up behind her husband and hits him on the head with the frozen meat, killing him. Then she places the leg of lamb into the hot oven. To establish an alibi, she goes out to the market and calmly asks the shopkeeper for potatoes and peas for her husband’s dinner. When she returns home, she calls the police, pretending to have just discovered her husband’s body. Hours later, as the police search for the murder weapon, Mary begs them all to eat the leg of lamb she has cooked so that it won’t go to waste. The story ends with a final ironic twist as the police officers consume the leg of lamb, all while discussing the mysterious disappearance of the murder weapon.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Students read the entire selection independently, they “read in their heads.”
2. Teacher reads the text aloud while students “read in their heads” or students take turns reading aloud to each other. Depending on the text length and student need, the teacher may choose to read the full text or a passage aloud. For a particularly complex text, the teacher may choose to reverse the order of steps 1 and 2.
3. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| At the beginning of the text, how does Dahl describe Mary’s characteristics? What textual evidence does the author use to describe Mary and her house in order to achieve this effect? | Mary is described as a neat and seemingly content housewife. She has a calm-demeanor and is almost saint-like. Dahl writes, “There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of a head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. 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.” She is the one taking care of her husband making him drinks and taking care of his every need. Mary’s seeming contentment is shown in the following passage: “*She, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel-almost as a sunbather feels the sun-that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested in her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness.”* |
| Describe Patrick’s characteristics. What textual evidence does the author use to describe him in order to achieve this effect? | When the reader first see Patrick, he might be described as in control, emotionally detached and self-centered. Although he enters the house “punctually” as always, his behavior shows that he is a bit nervous and something is different this evening. He plays with his glass filled with ice, “holding the tall glass with both hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.” Dahl’s continued use of the verb “said” to describe Patrick’s dialogue rather than using adjectives which convey emotion can add to the sense of detachment and also provide a sense of ambiguity about his motives. As he prepares to give Mary the news, Dahl writes, “He had now become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She [Mary] noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye*.”* The image from the light begins to paint him as negative, in the dark. The little muscle movement could show a little loss of control but still overwhelmingly emotionless. He asked not to be blamed, but as he gives her the news, Mary watches him  *“*with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word*.”* During this time, the author gives no indication of the motivation for leaving, adding to the sense of ambiguity of the situation. Finally, although he admits it is a “bad time” for the news (she is pregnant), he hopes that there will be no “fuss” because it would not be “very good” for his job. After he tells her this, he does not turn around to face or address her even when she approaches him from behind with the leg of lamb. |
| Dahl describes the husband’s glass of whisky and ice several times. How is it described? Why do you think he focuses on this object? Cite textual evidence to support your analysis. | The ice in the glass is described at various times as tinkling “against the side” and “falling against the bottom of the empty glass.” In addition, “She [Mary] hears the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.” Dahl focuses on the sound of the ice cubes to give readers an understanding of the atmosphere, tension, and the almost deadly silence in the room. |
| Describe the ways that Patrick’s demeanor and comments change Mary. Why does Mary undergo these changes? Use textual evidence to prove the effect Patrick’s comments have on Mary’s actions. | Patrick treats her very brusquely telling her to sit down. After he has a second drink and refuses dinner for a second time, he tells her to “sit down…just for a minute, sit down.” This is the first direct order he has given her, a break from the placid personality she has come to expect. He then tells matter-of-factly that he is leaving her. Her actions show her changing from adoring to horrified to robotic (see examples above). |
| How does Mary’s behavior at the grocery shop contradict what has happened earlier in the story? | Before going out, she rehearses her smile and greeting, so that she will be able to smile “brightly” at the man behind the counter and have a conversation about needing potatoes and vegetables for the dinner she wants the clerk to think she is making since her husband has said he was “tired and doesn’t want to eat out tonight.” She is able to provide a believable alibi for her time. Although before she was “horrified” regarding the events of the night, now she is in control planning her alibi. |
| “And now, she told herself as she hurried back…” This paragraph starts off with a long sentence. How does the structure of the sentence reflect her thinking at that moment? | This is where either she becomes a very calculating murderer, planning the steps to her alibi and the way she will be able to get away with the murder, or the point where she breaks totally with reality. The semicolons link like ideas so that all of the sections of this passage are equal in value. Using the conjunction “and” seven times in the passage adds to the layering of pieces of her story. She is trying to explain the events as logically as she could. The length of the sentence also indicates a sense of rambling which may be caused by Mary’s nervousness. Her mind seems to be racing and she is frantic while trying to keep her body as calm as can be. |
| The police officers do not suspect Mary for the murder. How does her behavior play a role in assuring this didn’t happen? | She played the role of a distraught wife. For example, she wept hysterically when the officers first came and later continued to sob as she told her story of discovery. The officers did not suspect she was the murderer, they treated her kindly but they only quickly (back in fifteen minutes) checked out her alibi. After it was verified, they seem to have lost interest in her as a suspect. She continued to act innocent as she felt she couldn’t move and didn’t feel too good while the investigation was happening. Finally, she could not “touch a thing” of the meal she had prepared once it was cooked. |
| What happens to the murder weapon? How does Dahl assure his readers understand the irony of this event? Cite the evidence from the story that foreshadows this event. | The police eat the lamb in the end when Mary offers to feed them. It is literally “under their nose” when that statement is made. Dahl foreshadows this event from the point when Mary takes the leg of lamb, “placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high and shoved it inside.” The cooking meat is again referred to during her trip to the store as she admits to “cooking it frozen” and “taking a chance on it this time.” The grocer becomes an accomplice when he lets her know he doesn’t “believe it makes any difference” when, in fact, cooking it does make a difference to her getting away with the crime. Just as the detectives’ voices were “think and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat,” their investigation was sloppy as well. Finally, they admit that she wanted them to finish it as they would be doing her a favor. While they believe that favor was born from hospitality, when, in fact, they did her the favor by destroying the evidence. |
| Notice how the lighting changes during the course of the text. Cite evidence to show how the lighting has changed. How does this change in imagery reflect the changing character of Mary? Cite textual evidence to support your opinion. | At the beginning of the short text both lamps are “alight” in the room. At the grocery store, the lights are still on. When the officers appear to investigate, it is dark outside, and Mary notices “ the flash of a torch through a chink in the curtain.”  Mary’s character mirrors the light. She seems content and happy at the beginning symbolized by the lamps being alight. Her soul begins to get dark after she kills her husband and the final darkening of her soul is when she has the officers eat the murder weapon. |
| Regarding the allusion to the phrase “going like a lamb to the slaughter.” Why does Dahl title this story “Lamb to the Slaughter?” Who is the “lamb” in the story? Who, or what, is being “slaughtered”? | “Like lamb to slaughter” is a biblical allusion, usually referring to the sacrifice of an innocent, but here it could have many interpretations:   * Mary the innocent lamb being slaughtered by her husband’s words and actions. * The irony of Mary (the lamb), killing her husband. * The weapon, a leg of lamb, being cooked and eaten (slaughtered) by the officers. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | placid  tranquil  tinkled  bewildered  precinct  premises  corpse  “put her up for the night”  “slipped out”  chink  consoling  hospitality  hesitating | content  administered  instrument |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | transclucent  peculiar  spanner  trifle | luxuriate  welled  hysterically  exceptionally  exasperated |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt
  + At pivotal moments of the text, the author carefully uses language to portray the emotions and the changing emotions of the characters. Trace the emotions of Mary and Patrick throughout the text and the language that the author uses to convey these emotions. Look at not only actions but dialogue as well. Write an essay in which you trace the changes in one or both characters and explain the motivation for those changes.
* Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should remind students to use any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions.

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| ***Evidence***  ***Quote or paraphrase*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument*** |
| By using the word “said” to describe Patrick’s dialogue | All emotion is removed from the husband’s conversations. Any characterization is found only in the actions and somewhat generic words he says, not in understanding how he thinks. Characterization of the husband is very ambiguous throughout the first section which enables the irony to develop. |
| “She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.” | This shows the emotions of how much she cared about him and that she would stop everything to give him attention. |
| “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.” | Mary worships the idea of love and a husband, but she doesn’t seem to be in love with the man himself. |
| “…was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house.” | Mary uses the word “content” rather than a more intense feeling, which again distances herself from the man. |
| “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” | This statement again shows that she loved the actions of their relationship rather than the man. |
| “She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested in her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.”  ” She loved the silence rather than the conversation, the picture rather than any insight.” | All of the descriptions show a detached wife, rather than the loving wife she outwardly appears to be. |
| “..holding the tall glass with both hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side” | Patrick seemed to be a bit uneasy, not able to relax. Foreshadows that he has something to say to her. |
| “’Yes,’ he said. ‘I'm tired,’ And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it left.” | Patrick is no longer patient, but impatient to share his news. This is one of several times the author uses the phrase “he said,” using the ambiguous term of “said” rather than give emotion to what he says. |
| “Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.” | Patrick emotions are very controlled which keeps Mary wondering. |
| "I don't want it," he said.  “Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down." | Patrick is now starting to lose control a little bit, but his actions exemplify that he wants to take back control of the situation. |
| "This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid," he said. "But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much." | Patrick is aware that his wife may have not seen the signs of a separation; this is evident when he uses the word “shock.” He has thought about the separation for a long time and he wants to end the marriage. He seems to care more about himself than anyone else, manifested when he says, “I hope you won’t blame me too much.” |
| “And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she stayed 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.” | Even though the dialogue takes four or five minutes, there are no details provided. The author gives no indication of the motivation for leaving. Not knowing the details of the separation increases the ambiguity of the situation.  Mary’s reaction is more than Patrick suspected. She is horrified and in disbelief and with every word he says, he detaches himself from her. |
| "So there it is," he added. "And I know it's 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." | Although he is leaving a pregnant wife, the main idea of this statement is that it “wouldn’t be good for his job”. This statement shows that he cares more about the job than for his life with his wife, |
| She couldn’t feel anything at all--except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now… (As she approaches Patrick, Mary) simply walked up behind him without any pause” and hit him over the head. | Mary, on the other hand, changes from appearing perfectly content to being overcome with “dazed horror.” She is almost robotic as she goes to get the leg of lamb. |
| "For God's sake," he said, hearing her, but not turning round. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out." | There is no focus given to his wife. He hears her but doesn’t even look at her. Again, he disregards what she considers her job of fixing dinner, and is planning on avoiding any more of the situation. |
| “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.” | Patrick is so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he doesn’t sense his wife in the room or bother to see what she is about to do. |
| “She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.” | He doesn’t try to respond, even though it takes a few minutes for his body to collapse. The slow response is similar to the slow responses he has given all along. The most active thing he has done since coming into the room is to collapse. |
| “Both the smile and the voice were coming out better now. She rehearsed it several times more.” | Mary is in control and is practicing her alibi to make sure she can get away with the crime. This indicates a change from her behavior earlier in the story. |
| “…she fell right into Jack Noonan’s arms, weeping hysterically.” | She is playing the part of a grieving wife. This also demonstrates that now she is taking control of the situation. |
| “…I know Patrick would never forgive me…if I allowed you to remain in the house without offering you decent hospitality.” | The irony here is clear. She is asking the detectives to do her a favor by eating the leg of lamb. Little do they realize, they are eating the murder weapon. Mary is in control. |
| “And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.” | Does this show insanity or satisfaction? |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In Roald Dahl’s short story, *Lamb to the Slaughter*, a man (Patrick) returns home to his loving, pregnant wife (Mary) and announces he is leaving her, a revelation which turns the once docile and content woman into a cold-blooded murderer. Dahl reveals this unexpected transformation of Mary Maloney, the spurned wife, through her actions and thoughts.

As the story opens, Dahl introduces the characters of Mary and Patrick as a seemingly normal loving couple. Mary, a housewife, waits eagerly as the hour approaches for Patrick to come home from work. She is described as “placid” and “tranquil” as she caters to his every whim, preparing his drink and hanging up his coat. Mary thinks quietly about this “blissful time of day,” where she is “content to sit quietly enjoying his company after the long hours in the house”. Dahl writes of Mary’s love and almost complete adulation of her husband, “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”. As a sunbather worships the sun, Dahl portrays Mary as basking in the presence of her husband, as if her life is only complete when he is present.

Although at the beginning of the story, Mary seemingly loves and adores her husband, one wonders if she is more entranced by her position of dutiful wife rather than in love with the man, himself. Mary seems to pride herself on keeping a neat and tidy home, but Dahl’s use of the word “content” to describe Mary’s feelings intimates a sort of tepid passion for her husband. Dahl writes that Mary loves the way Patrick sits “loosely in his chair” and moves “slowly across the room”. She loves the “funny shape of his mouth,” but nowhere does Dahl state that Mary loves the man, himself. Perhaps it is telling that Dahl focuses on Mary’s attraction to her husband’s outward characteristics because before the night is over, their loving marriage will be revealed as a possible façade.

Mary may seem to love everything about her husband; however, her perspective of the situation soon changes with dramatic news from Patrick. Dahl’s portrayal of Mary’s husband and his feelings for Mary are somewhat ambiguous. Patrick’s dialogue is introduced with the generic verb “said,” deliberately robbing the reader of any sense of emotion. Patrick answers Mary in short, crisp phrases, which reveal a sense of detachment and a slight tinge of agitation or possible guilt. Dahl describes the ice in Patrick’s whisky glass to further reinforce the quiet tension of the room and the iciness of Patrick’s responses to Mary. The reason Patrick is leaving Mary is also ambiguous; however, as he tells her the news and says that “there needn’t really be any fuss. It wouldn’t be very good for [his] job,” she watches him “with a kind of dazed horror,” as he seems to move “further and further away from her with each word”. While Patrick may have “thought about it a good deal,” the revelation shocks Mary and sends her reeling, out of touch with reality.

From this point, Mary’s actions are no longer those of a loving wife, but are described as robotic or almost out-of-body. As Patrick is described moving “further and further away from her,” she senses that what she is experiencing is not reality but something she may have imagined, a dream, and that when she wakes up, she might discover that “none of it had ever happened”. Dahl writes that Mary, nauseated, walks to the cellar as if she “couldn’t feel her feet across the floor” and that, in fact, she “couldn’t feel anything at all”. Instead of serving the lamb to her once-loving husband, Dahl portrays her as “simply” walking up and walloping him with the leg of lamb as his back is turned. As her ideal life, or what she perceives to be her life, is shattered, so is her grip on reality. Dahl writes, “Everything was automatic now” and her break with reality is complete.

It is with Patrick’s violent death, that Mary makes her final transformation, to that of a self-preserving, scheming criminal. No longer in shock, she contemplates the consequences of her actions and decides that “she certainly wasn’t able to take that chance”. Dahl writes that with careful rehearsal, Mary’s at first “peculiar” smile and voice began to appear normal. Mary’s actions at this point are portrayed as quick and calculated as mirrored by Dahl’s use of long, complex sentences in this portion of the text. Her alibi is set. Her words practiced and rehearsed. She is an actress waiting for her finale, a sobbing exchange with the police who come to investigate the death. Mary’s performance pays off in the end, after begging the officers to accept her “decent hospitality,” she tricks them into eating the very murder weapon they are searching for.

Mary Maloney’s transformation from seemingly adoring wife to murderer to cunning criminal occurs in a short span from evening to night, a transformation mirrored by the light imagery within and outside of the house. Although Mary may seem like a somewhat flat character, her motivation, as depicted by Dahl, is not always clear. Mary seems to be in perfect control at the end of the text, with her cold and calculated plan; however, it is important to note that the reader’s last image of her, giggling as the detectives ironically eat the murder weapon literally under their “very noses” could be that of a cold blooded killer or that of a psychotic victim. Is this the satisfied giggle of someone who knows she has gotten away with murder or the manic giggle of someone whose grip on reality has been shattered along with her perceived ideal life? The slight difference between the two may be the question Dahl wants his readers to ponder.

Additional Tasks

**Option 1:** Mary is on trial for the murder of her husband. The question is not whether she killed him, but why? What is your perception of Mary’s guilt? Was the murder premeditated? Was she caught up in the moment? Or was she temporarily insane, therefore not responsible for her actions? You are a Junior District Attorney and are responsible for advising your supervisor in this case. Research the laws which define murder in your state (first degree, second degree, manslaughter, etc.). Based on the evidence in this story, of what type of homicide is Mary guilty of? Write a report to your supervisor analyzing the evidence and determining what the charge should be. Make sure to support your assertions with evidence from the text making sure to use your state’s legal code.

* The following websites may help in your research:
  + Cornell University Law School: Legal Information Institute <http://www.law.cornell.edu/>
  + Homicide: Murder and Manslaughter (NOLO Law for All) <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/homicide-murder-manslaughter-32637.html>
  + Murder (The Free Dictionary) <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/murder>

Answer-Answers will vary. Students will use evidence from research and text to support their view of Mary’s culpability at the time of the crime.

**Option 2:** Write Mary’s death bed confession or the letter she writes to her unborn child explaining what happened that night. What do you think her perception of events is? Support any opinions with textual evidence.

* Possible responses: Answers will vary depending on how students view Mary’s character. If they believe she was sane, evidence will include the plan to cover up the murder and how she carried it out. If they believe, she is insane, the evidence and tone will support that interpretation.

**Option 3:** Watch the Alfred Hitchcock version of *Lamb to Slaughter* on SchoolTube at the following link: <http://www.schooltube.com/video/b4ffb2ed2146057eda1d/> Write a short essay or movie review focusing on how Hitchcock portrays the characters of Mary and her husband. Was this portrayal similar to the way you perceived the characters as you read the story? How was the portrayal similar or different to your view? Did viewing the visual text change your interpretation of the story? Explain why or why not.

Answer: (Interpretations may vary. Possible answer may include mention of Hitchcock’s interpretation playing up the premeditation of the murder as well as Mary’s break with reality by the end. His directorial choices lead to much less sympathy being paid to Mary, and more calculation by her in every step of her story. The ambiguity Dahl created with his language is lessened by Hitchcock’s interpretation)

Note to Teacher

* To prepare the students for the reading and question which deals with the biblical allusion in the title, students should read the directions for the *Make the Connection: Quickwrite* section.