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# In Search of Lizzie Borden Between Fact and Fiction



*L. A. Borden*

(1860–1927)

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## Introduction

**L**IZZIE ANDREW Borden was an American woman accused of murdering her father, Andrew Borden, and her stepmother, Abby Borden, with an axe in Fall River, Massachusetts, on 4 August 1892. After being tried and acquitted in 1893, she gained legendary status and this double homicide gained a reputation as one of the most famous crimes in American history. What makes this case so attractive to numerous scholars is that it not only requires a more profound investigation in legal terms but also demands a broader observation of the case in many different areas of study, including literary studies.

Although stories about the Fall River incident follow the atrocious and highly transgressive act of a daughter who murdered her father and stepmother with an axe, they are a long way from being mythical tales. This event immensely shook popular culture in the halcyon days of the 1890s, and many trustworthy crime writers felt impelled to put forward their ver-

sions of the possible truth. But the mystery was never solved; on the contrary, it only deepened, causing cultural anxiety and resistance from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Literary works inspired by Lizzie Borden have been created and re-created throughout history, resulting in extensive coverage of the Borden case in North American literature.

Both prose non-fiction and fiction texts are analyzed in this paper using an interpretivist lens. Concurrently, the extracts are sorted according to genre and narrative technique to scrutinize any correspondence between the representation of Lizzie Borden in factual and non-factual accounts. This paper's primary focus is on the internal and the external factors that impacted Lizzie Borden's background. These elements are explored through the prism of the ideological and sociocultural situations that existed when the texts were written, especially regarding the degree of feminist ethics they exhibit.

The aim of the paper is not only to delve into the reflection of social norms and gender perspectives of the day but also the observation and appropriation of the Victorian time in both true-crime and crime-fiction literary works. The issues of social class, gender, and ethnicity are of greatest importance for this analysis. Consequently, the impact of Borden-related literary works on the current popular image of Lizzie Borden is also discussed. Furthermore, the focus is on the physical and mental characteristics attributed to Lizzie Borden in addition to the feminist overtones of her personality. Finally, the interdependence between the scrutinized prose texts, as well as the stage production, namely, the degree of intertextuality between these writings, is considered.

## True-Crime Books

**T**HE QUIDDITY of this arcane murderess has been an intriguing topic for two centuries. From the moment when information on the murder was disseminated, it began to generate immense publicity. The written lore of Lizzie Borden's story started with newspaper articles.<sup>1</sup> Various scripts written on this topic were predecessors of what is nowadays considered Borden literature. However, non-fiction prose texts constitute the most extensive body of work. They primarily represent Lizzie Borden, the Borden family, the homicide, the investigation, the trial, and her acquittal. Some authors, depending on the period when the texts were composed, even incorporate the post-acquittal life of the exonerated woman. Indeed, the homicide is continuously generating new true-crime writers to this day.

## Reissued Beginnings

**E**DWIN PORTER was one of the first authors to initiate the Borden literary tradition when he wrote the true-crime book, *The Fall River Tragedy: A History of the Borden Murders* (1893), also famous for providing extensive coverage of the case, which was further used as a primary reference by other authors.<sup>2</sup> Aside from the fact that Porter was a police reporter who worked for the *Fall River Daily Globe*, which is indicated on the title page, “Police Reporter of the Fall River Globe,” confirming thus the intentional suggestion that the book is a reportage and based on truth, it is also worth mentioning that Porter was a contemporary of Miss Borden’s. Due to this being highly damaging content for an acquitted individual, the book quickly found its way into her hands. Lizzie ventured to destroy each copy of the book she could find, attempting to wipe it off the face of the earth (Robertson 1996, 359). However, the book was again presented to the broader public when it was reprinted in 1985.

Porter describes how he was captivated by this case. At the same time, his writing objectively provides all the facts to the readers primarily through the compilation of numerous accounts of the murder, investigation, and trial. The high literary value of this book is seen right from page one, as the beginning is adorned with literary devices such as similes: “the cry of murder swept through the city of Fall River like a typhoon on the smooth surface of an eastern sea” (Porter 1985, 3). Additionally, there are relatively hyperbolic descriptions of the murder as being “the most atrocious” (*ibid.*) and references to the “unparalleled monstrosity of the crime” (*ibid.*, 4). Porter (*ibid.*, 5) even postulates a melodramatic description of the homicide: “Mystery somber and absolute hung in impenetrable folds over the Borden house, and not one ray of light existed to penetrate its blackness.” Regardless of the claims made in the preface, the main body of the book emulates his candid thoughts and objections about the Borden case. These ostensibly impartial comments are not deprived of rhetorical devices either. With a clear understanding of the seriousness of the murder, Porter (*ibid.*, 13) admits to wondering: “Could any but a maniac have inflicted those pitiless wounds; or could any but a madman have struck so ruthlessly and unerringly and watched the effect as the weapon sped on its mission of death, time and time again?” He does not particularly allude either to the repudiation of the case or the questionable mental health of the murderer.

Porter himself pointed out the inconsistency of Lizzie’s inquest testimony. Consequently, he almost axiomatically includes the final court settlement in the book’s preface, representing Lizzie’s acquittal as being immutable, but inaccurate. The main part of the book gives much attention to the prosecution, led

by District Attorney Hosea Knowlton. As noted by Mr. Knowlton, this murder “thrills the human heart to its depths” because “when the word passes from lip to lip and from mouth to mouth that a human life has been taken by an assassin, the stoutest hearts stop beating, lips pale and cheeks blanch, strong men grow pale with the terror of the unknown and mysterious” (Porter 1985, 290). The defense is, however, less quoted, which diminishes its importance in the trial.

Porter (1985) himself has a polarized stance toward Lizzie. In order to emphasize Lizzie’s apathetic character, that of “a cunning, cool woman” (139), Porter contrasts her with her sister Emma, who is “very quiet and unassuming,” while Lizzie “is haughty and domineering with the stubborn will of her father” (ibid., 26). Lizzie’s behavior in court was emotionless to the extent of being unnatural, and her demeanor during the trial was described as completely unfeminine (ibid., 38). The best illustration of “her peculiarly unemotional nature” is the moment she was arrested, when “she did not shed a tear” (ibid., 65). The lack of consanguineous affection is partially explained through the description of her family and their background. On the other hand, her church and charity engagement, which could not have been more emphasized by her defense during the preliminary legal proceeding, is no less prominent in the book. Porter restates the case and lays the foundation for the supplementary development of Lizzie’s image in America.

## Consecutive Reportage-Based Accounts and Trial Transcript

**A**SIDE FROM being identified as an enthusiast who dedicated his life to murder cases, Edmund Lester Pearson had been repeating the same pattern of writing books. Still, he always took the opportunity to include his reputedly favorite case. He was a journalist, a true-crime writer, and a criminologist who is well-known for his outstanding contribution to reaffirming the denouement of the case in the form of essays and more extended studies on the issue. Pearson’s first account, titled “The Borden Case,” is a classic among the stories on Lizzie’s guilt and belongs to an assemblage of four other murder cases published in *Studies in Murder* (1924). The Borden case occupies the most extensive part of the book and is the first murder case discussed.

In addition to the notion that this jaunty and amusing analysis of the Borden case casts a shadow on the other significant murder cases, one’s curiosity is piqued even more since Lizzie was still alive when it was published, as is also the case with Porter’s book. Pearson primarily consulted Porter’s written accounts in order to incorporate accurate data into his book. The background

information and the murder are followed by the inquest, the trial, and the murderer's life after the trial. Pearson presented the context within which the murder happened objectively, although the prosecution was represented in a slightly subjective manner. What differentiates it from Porter's account is that Pearson (1924, 68) discusses feminist issues, finding the

*result of the present status of women as voters [to be] a nearly complete abandonment on the part of their political leaders of the belief which was prevalent thirty or forty years ago [when] all women accused of grave crimes should either be cleared in advance of trial; if convicted, should not be liable for punishment.*

Mark Bauerlein (1997, 23), in his study *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy*, writes that what “embodies the prime impulse of many scholars today: to bring literary analysis to cultural critique” is cultural poetics. Hence, if analyzed through the lens of cultural poetics, feminist ideology forms a significant part of Pearson's writing. This is due to the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, with which first-wave feminism ended and which gave women in America the right to vote in 1920 (Castro 1990, 31).

The 1920s were dubbed the Age of Anxiety in America as social unrest and a clash of cultures emanated from the contradiction that was the non-symbiotic relationship between the past conventional understanding of cultural maintenance and the upcoming innovational practices of more modern society (Palmer 2006, 118). Similarly, Pearson (1924, 32) points out that a murder committed by someone from Lizzie's class was not usual practice, if not non-existent; indeed, “to suggest that a woman of good family, of blameless life and hitherto unimpeachable character, could posit two such murders, is to suggest something so rare as to be almost unknown to criminology.” Contrasted with male crimes, “when, in modern times, the attack has taken a more brutal form,” he continued, “the murderess has usually been a woman of base antecedents, one from the criminal class, and acting in concert with a man” (ibid., 32). The state of affairs of the then-modern time, as suggested by Pearson, is that Lizzie had ushered in a new era in criminology. She shone light on murder cases committed by the female upper class. Without a doubt, Porter focused more on the homicide than on the representation of Lizzie, and his discussion is summed up in one question: “Will the whole truth ever come out?” (Robertson 2019, 286). But does the truth matter?

During Lizzie's lifetime, in the compilation *Murder at Smutty Nose and Other Murders* (1927) Pearson also devoted a short chapter to this case, titled “The Borden: A Postscript.” In this chapter, Pearson (1927, 291) is even more insistent that “the Borden case is without parallel in the criminal history of Amer-

ica.” He briefly supports his claims with the fact that the mysterious murderess is the epitome of her sensational character and that it is the “most interesting” and “the most puzzling” criminal case on the North American continent (qtd. in Robertson 2019, 281). In this text on Lizzie, besides the commonly heard claims which were abundantly repeated, Pearson mentions a few pieces of information relevant to the case which had not been disclosed before, although these were not cogent enough to solve this conundrum.

Pearson dedicates here more passages to representing Lizzie’s character than in his first script. He wittily argues “that the unknown assassin of Mr. and Mrs. Borden could give the two bright youths from Chicago not only cards and spades, but a stroke a hole, half fifteen, ten yards start, and any other handicap known to sport, and still beat them” (Pearson 1927, 291). The motif of Lizzie’s strength as a woman is metaphorically depicted. After the use of a humorous style, the narrative becomes more sober as recognition is given to Lizzie’s act which was done “in courage, in coolness, in resolution, in audacity, in intellectual power, and in everything that goes to make up the ‘perfect murder,’ which they set out to commit so egregiously fozzled” (ibid., 291). This postscript, in contrast to the previous one, has a surprisingly favorable undertone regarding Lizzie’s personality.

The comparison of Lizzie’s demeanor before the murder with the way “she was described as being when she faced trial for her life twenty years ago” implies the same “stolid, immobile, unemotional appearing woman” whose “large strong features” were still “expressing the same determination that characterized her when she faced her accusers on the charge of parricide” (Pearson 1927, 301). Lizzie’s strength is juxtaposed with her apathy. Her indifference was nowhere near as unknown as what happened the night of 4 August. “If this woman has ever had an emotion, it can honestly be said that she has invariably succeeded in concealing it from any other human eye” (ibid., 301). Pearson (ibid., 302) wraps up his chapter with a determination that “neither detectives, lawyers, nor criminologists can solve the questions which they present,” and gives space for new writing about Lizzie, since the answers “lie deep in that mysterious region, the human heart.”

Towards the end of the 1920s, Lizzie Borden’s health declined. She died of pneumonia in 1927 (Hischak 2019, 124), and one year later Pearson published another postscript about the infamous case in his new collection *Five Murders: With a Final Note on the Borden Case* (1928). Its title, “The End of the Borden Case,” suggests that his dedication to the Borden case could have ceased at this point, although it did not. The postscript comprises anecdotes about Lizzie Borden; indeed, it gives the impression of a eulogy, while Pearson (1928, 290) reiterates a rather radical statement about Lizzie and her odd personality.



“Imagine a woman of sullen disposition, jealous and moody; the daughter of a stern, rather tyrannical old man. Add, if they are of importance, smoldering and repressed sexual emotions.” Porter again touches upon the feminist topic of female sexuality as repressed by the patriarchy. In regards to sexual repression in the Victorian period, Stephen Kern (2006, 327–328) argues that it “is an unconscious mental process that is pretty near impossible to document historically. But . . . levels of sexual oppression and suppression . . . were high.” The role of the patriarchy in the context of Lizzie’s sexuality might be divined in the theory of Michel Foucault (1978, 115–131) developed in the 1970s, which claimed that the dominant group modifies ideology through the use of power, and repression of sexuality follows as a result of this. Lizzie’s sexuality, therefore, had a predetermined path imposed by her father. Since the notorious murderess was already deceased when Pearson wrote the postscript, Pearson (1928, 266) disappointedly states: “In all human probability, the case is forever closed; the chance that the whole truth will be known is utterly gone.” This conclusion leaves it up to the reader’s imagination to invent a possible ending. Nevertheless, Pearson had no intention of ceasing his investigation.

As a sequel to the previous book, Pearson published the compendium *More Studies in Murder* (1936) including “Legends of Lizzie,” a new chapter about Lizzie Borden which had been initially published in the newspaper *The New Yorker* (1933). This sequel accentuates the public fascination with Lizzie, and although the author communicates his enchantment with the numerous Lizzie enthusiasts, they prove that the Borden case is much more than a regular criminological issue and that the increasing interest in Lizzie Borden is justified. In the meantime, fiction started to take control of the representation of Lizzie’s character. For instance, John Colton and Carlton Miles published the play *Nine Pine Street* (1934). The play’s plot is slightly different from what is known as being the real-life occurrence, and the names have been changed. Consequently, Pearson intends to make a difference between what is known about Lizzie from history, fiction, and popular culture. He wittily illustrates her popular-culture profile in an oxymoronic way:

*Yet a majority of her townsmen, as far as I can discover, believe that this gentle lady chopped her stepmother’s head to bits with a hatchet, hung around for an hour and a half, welcomed her father into the house, and then repeated the operation with him. And did all this, one summer’s morn, on an empty stomach—except for half a cup of coffee and a few nibbles out of one side of a cookie. (Pearson 1936, 20)*

Therefore, Pearson emphasizes that Lizzie Borden is a prominent figure in popular culture because of her reputation as a cold-blooded murderess.

The other relevant point is that this chapter was written in the 1930s, the decade known as the Great Depression, shortly after women had been granted the right to vote and had been accepted into many professions. The economic changes wrought by the Great Depression in the United States of America were devastating. While the female employment rates were rapidly decreasing during this time, women's fight for equal rights was going backwards (Hapke 1997, 3). Housewifery and motherhood were again the women's main occupations. That being the case, the cultural and historical background might be the reason for the apparent attention to Lizzie's character in this chapter. This text does not fall behind on legends and anecdotes as well.<sup>3</sup> Overall, Pearson left a strong mark in attributing the status of a code to the Borden case and acquiring Lizzie Borden as the leading protagonist.

After consecutive shorter texts, Pearson wrote a book about the Borden case, *Trial of Lizzie Borden* (1937), in which he emphasized the legal proceedings, having thoroughly edited the trial of Lizzie Borden and published it to imbue the proceeding with a more insightful and cohesive understanding of Lizzie's apparent guilt. In this trial-and-inquest transcript, his foci were the issues of social class and the acquittal, specifically the discordance between Lizzie's profile as a lady and her role as an axe-murderess. Pearson's transcripts served as a basis for further discussion on this issue. Some scholars of jurisprudence and gender studies argue as to whether her feminine traits or a lack of evidence affected the trial and the final verdict. Most of these scholars claim that the male jury did not recognize her murderous urge because of their preconceived idea of an upper-class lady (Robertson 1996, 351–416; Jones 1988, 222–252). In a study that comprehensively elaborates on the cultural observations of this matter, Cara W. Robertson (1996, 416) concludes that it was “far better to let one woman get away with murder than to suggest that a dutiful middle-class daughter Miss Lizzie might be capable of it.” This remark itself expresses Robertson's unbiased stance regarding the issue.

Some parts of Pearson's transcripts are thought to be abridged, and this is especially noticeable in Lizzie's inquest testimony. Pearson also seems biased towards the prosecution and defense, showing strong sympathy towards the former, and callousness towards the latter. Subject-wise, Robertson (1996, 410) claims that both the prosecution and the defense tackled gender and class issues: “Throughout the trial, Borden's attorneys play upon the incongruity between the image of a raving maniac who perpetrated the murders and the prim embodiment of femininity accused of the crime.” That being the case, Pearson took pains to quote Hosea Knowlton, the prosecutor who accentuated the essentiality of these notions in questioning the murders. The most prominent among the speeches is Knowlton's summarizing of Lizzie's trial while address-



ing the jury, whereby Lizzie is seen as “a Christian woman” who “is no ordinary criminal.” She is “a lady, the equal . . . of your friends,” whose role in a society is one “that all high-minded men revere, that all generous men love, that all wise men acknowledge their indebtedness to” (Pearson 1937, 327; qtd. in Porter 1985, 272). Some parts of Knowlton’s presentation even appear as a thorough explication of a crime of the fairer sex. Although “it is hard . . . to conceive that women can be guilty of a crime but . . . they are no worse than [men].” They kill “in dispatch, in celerity, in ferocity.” The conclusion is clear: “If [women’s] loves are stronger and more enduring than those of men, am I saying too much that, on the other hand, their hates are more undying, more unyielding, more persistent?” (Pearson 1937, 344–345). In the interplay between the prosecution and the defense, Knowlton eventually comes to the conclusion that the corollary of female deviance is stronger than that of the males.

The other issue discussed at the trial was that Lizzie was occasionally associated with women’s groups: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, a pro-suffrage organization, was the most prominent among them. Pearson on a few occasions touches upon Lizzie’s feminist defenders, calling them her “sob sisters” and attributing them the label “unintelligent” (Pearson 1937, 41). A few decades later, Ann Jones opposed him by taking a different stance. Given that women were not allowed to serve as jurors at the time, an all-male jury was deciding on Lizzie’s life, and her feminist supporters were anxious about the lack of females in the jury at the trial. However, they were unaware that having a jury of men might actually assuage the accusations. Indeed, they did not foresee that this purported “iniquity” would go in her favor, as it did (Jones 1988, 236).

Lizzie Borden’s life after acquittal slightly puts into the shade her mostly unfavorable representation in the trial transcript:

*In later life, in company with one of her few intimate friends, Miss Borden often referred to her father, quoting him and his phrases. She mentioned Mrs. Borden without hatred, but with general disapproval of stepparents of any kind—“steppies” was her word for them. She had a strong pair of arms, could row a boat well, and drive a spirited pair of horses. One of her great delights was the theater; another was an art gallery: the Corcoran Gallery at Washington gave her much pleasure. To be in Washington—“where nobody knows me”—was joy. She had feared Mr. Knowlton as if he were the Day of Judgement, and shuddered at the thought that he could ever question her again. (Pearson 1937, 83–84)*

This description also contrasts Pearson’s other narrative, which does not take a sober tone. Given that the transcript indicates that the motive for the murder is Lizzie’s greed, the narrative part includes clever jokes concerning the motive.

“On the morning of the fatal 4<sup>th</sup> of August, someone asked Miss Lizzie the time of day. ‘I don’t know,’ she replied, ‘but I’ll go ax Father’” (qtd. in Adler 1995, 40). Besides the examples from popular culture, the literary value is also recognized in the narrative of the trial. For instance, the literary allusion of Alice Russel as Cassandra and Lizzie Borden as Lady Macbeth is complemented by the jurors’ observation of the skulls “like Hamlet in the churchyard” (Pearson 1937, 93; qtd. in Adler 1995, 40).

Pearson did not find the evidence conclusive enough to result in acquittal. “Finally, and most importantly, the case was peculiar in that the verdict was never considered a satisfactory conclusion” (Pearson 1937, 59). Even though Pearson believes in Lizzie’s guilt, his feelings seem ambivalent, and her portrayal goes from tender damsel to heartless slaughterer and back to tender damsel. This binary representation is an inextricable part of Pearson’s texts. It is reasonable to question whether his biased stance prevented his works from setting a high biographical standard. Pearson’s retentive writing on this topic constantly enlightens his contemporaries, and this tradition was maintained among Borden scholars.

## Speculative Fact-Oriented Revelation of a Murderer

**T**HE 1960S were a time of great change in North America. The tenets of the counterculture movement led to greater freedom in writing. New literary works that emerged in the 1960s reflected the socio-political situations. A specific feature of these texts was that they had no distinct outline that differentiated fact from fiction (Monteith 2008, 105). At the beginning of the 1960s, another reporter, who gained the Edgar Award for Fact Crime twice, fueled new controversies around the Borden case (Robertson 2019, 283). Edward Radin’s true-crime book *Lizzie Borden: The Untold Story* (1961) was judged to have become a bestseller because it provided a new and peculiar view of this murder case. Radin’s reexamination of the possible truth caught the particular attention of self-appointed investigators of the Borden case. The book was deemed interesting by virtue of the fact that he reintroduced Lizzie’s character in a positive light and introduced a new culprit. Consequently, this book can boast many reviews and coverage by reputable newspapers. The book’s cover was adorned by a quote, which had captured Radin’s attention when he read *The New York Sun* issue of 5 June 1893, which described Lizzie as: “the most injured of innocents or the blackest of monsters” (Adler 1995, 49). Radin accuses Porter and Pearson of giving the misleading impression in their writings that Lizzie was guilty. The book includes the chapter—“The Case

Against Pearson”—in which he attacks Pearson for modifying the official trial transcript in order to further defame Lizzie. Radin even mentions the newspapers’ general malevolence towards Lizzie. From Radin’s (1961, 20) viewpoint, *The Globe* seems to be “one of the earliest practitioners of yellow journalism in this country,” which “left no doubt that it intended to increase its circulation and advertising by any means” (ibid., 13).

The author claims to have unearthed some new and surprising details about Lizzie Borden and the murder itself and, besides expressing the common opinion that Lizzie does not fit into the role of an axe-murderer, his inquiry results in the peculiar accusation of Bridget Sullivan, the Borden’s maid, who was nicknamed “Maggie” by the Borden sisters. Radin (1961, 198) reveals many instances when “Bridget did change her testimony from that which she had given under oath at the inquest.” For example, she “said at the trial that the daughters did not often eat with their elders, but she also testified that she never heard any quarrels or saw any signs of unpleasantness” (ibid.). Radin even attempts to justify this minutely corroborated statement by comparing the Borden case to another murder. The Borden case is compared with a case where a servant killed her mistress after the latter heavily criticized the former’s work. To make the book appear more credible, Radin presents forensic results. Additionally, an analysis of the role of John Morse, Lizzie’s uncle, and his suspicious return to the house after the murders is included (ibid., 68).

Unlike Porter and Pearson, Radin seems to be one of Lizzie’s defenders. His writings are slightly influenced by the beginnings of the second-wave feminist movement, which originated in North America. The second wave focused more on civil rights and tackled different forms of inequalities, especially that of male-dominated society (Nicholson 1997, 7–10). Therefore, Radin dedicates more pages to the female family members. For instance, the readers learn more about Lizzie’s biological mother: for example, that she died after suffering from a spinal condition and pelvic congestion when Emma was twelve and Lizzie was only two years old (Radin 1961, 21). The book also gives a portrayal of Emma (ibid., 22–23) and also a depiction of Abby and her family, who were the cause of the quarrel between Mr. Borden and his daughters (ibid., 29–32). When it comes to the representation of Lizzie, Radin painted a somewhat personal portrait. According to Radin (ibid., 14), “she was neither large nor muscular,” instead, she looked good and had “large expressive eyes.” She was a “gentle girl, well-liked, highly respectable,” and extremely charitable (ibid.). Radin (ibid., 27) defended her to such an extent that he explains her emotionless behavior in the courtroom as being a result of her upbringing. On one hand, Radin had transcripts, interviews, and letters that he had gathered from some collectors, Lizzie’s friends, some cousins, even the Fall River Historical Society, to prove

that he was right. On the other hand, it is questionable whether Radin's claims are sufficiently substantiated to prove that it was Bridget who killed the victims. At any rate, the general public has never accepted Bridget's guilt and Lizzie's innocence.

## Female Understanding of Actual Crime

**T**HE WOMEN'S Liberation Movement, part of second-wave feminism, empowered women authors to produce and publish more from the 1960s onwards (Forster 2018, 114). This revolution generated new poetics and extended the list of socially acceptable themes in the literary context. Such escalating changes were reflected in the Borden case literary assemblage as well. One of the first North American women authors to write a true-crime book on the Borden case was Victoria Lincoln with her *A Private Disgrace: Lizzie Borden by Daylight* (1967), an influential book that quickly gained popularity and was awarded the Edgar Award for the best non-fiction crime book of 1967. Combining an ironic tone with scintillating wit, this fascinating piece thoroughly depicted Lizzie, her appearance and her thoughts, as well as the motive for murder.

Its opening statement that "Lizzie Borden is an American legend; the lady with an axe" is further developed into a real-life persona analysis (Lincoln 1986, 19). With the help of a psychological approach, she described the character of the murderess more than any true-crime author had ever done before. Lincoln (*ibid.*, 24) argued that Lizzie had no control over her "peculiar spells." Naturally, these unusual occurrences were considered the cause of the homicide (*ibid.*). Besides committing homicide, she did other "odd things" under these "spells" throughout her life, such as shoplifting (*ibid.*, 305). Therefore, all of the pieces of information provided in this book "attach grave importance" to her mental state as a principal cause of her strange behavior (*ibid.*, 24). Regarding Lizzie's depiction, Lincoln, partially contradicting what was previously accepted as being accurate, finds Lizzie "like her own eyes, so hugely open, so transparently pale, and utterly uncommunicative" (*ibid.*, 301). Lincoln (*ibid.*, 230) postulated that she "had always been a woman of strong character," and "always kind" (*ibid.*, 38) but "also shy" (*ibid.*, 37), and had an immense love for animals (*ibid.*, 58).

After consulting a doctor, the author suggested that Lizzie had epilepsy, further suggesting that Lizzie was unaware of her actions when killing her family members. Lincoln (1986, 41–48) claims that Lizzie was having an ambulatory temporal lobe seizure when she committed the murder, and this proposition slightly diminishes her responsibility for the double parricide. Corroborated by medical data, it is argued that Lizzie was an epilepsy sufferer:

*The duration of an attack of temporal epilepsy, like its incidence, varies widely from patient to patient; though in any given patient both incidence and duration can be predicted. Hearsay evidence as to the frequency and length of Lizzie's "spells" is in accord with previously unnoted evidence in the court documents, and tidily parallels many medical case histories. Apparently her seizures came only during the menstrual period, and then only three or four times a year. They were of brief duration, an hour or so at most. (Lincoln 1986, 46)*

However, Lizzie could only have been having a temporal lobe seizure when she killed Abby if the difference in time between the two murders can be accounted for. The conclusion might be drawn that her somatic symptoms and the antecedent money dispute led to her unsuccessful attempts to obtain prussic acid and, in the course of time, to kill Abby with an axe.

Lincoln opens up an intriguing discussion regarding the father-daughter relationship, believing that Lizzie loved her father and did not plan to kill him but was forced to do so because she did not want him to discover that she had killed Abby. The book reflects on how *de trop* Lizzie's love was (Lincoln 1986, 94–97). Lincoln (*ibid.*, 95) clarifies that she “never thought that the defense overplayed Lizzie's devotion to Andrew, nor his to her; nobody who knew them ever doubted it.” The reason behind Lizzie's act of killing her purportedly beloved father could have been that “her need to be loved outstripped her ability to love” (*ibid.*, 57). Nonetheless, Lincoln does not shy away from discussing the real motive for murder; she argues that the prosecution emphasized the importance of the broken lock in order to suppress the fact that Andrew had already planned to complete the property transaction with Abby and was dealing with that issue on the day of the murder. The monetary motive does not come as a surprise since the Borden sisters had the same four-dollar weekly allowance, equal to their maid's salary (*ibid.*, 211). All in all, according to Lincoln (*ibid.*, 80–83), this was the most sensible underlying motive for the murder.

As a female writer, Lincoln naturally showed a better understanding of Lizzie's menstruation in the days of the murder. The menstrual cloth in the Victorian age was a “birdseye linen napkin,” which was “slightly longer than a baby's diaper, and thicker” (Lincoln 1986, 131). The menstrual period could have been both an asset and a liability for her: the former due to the discredited evidence of bloody rags, and the latter because of the common belief regarding a woman's hormonal changes during that period. Consequently, the issue of menopause is touched upon in the book. Lincoln (*ibid.*, 47) claims that Lizzie was released from her kleptomaniacal tendencies and her “peculiar spells” during menopause. Although it might fall into the scope of these “odd spells,” the author shows hesitancy towards speculations regarding Lizzie's lesbian relation-

ships. Lincoln (*ibid.*, 307–308) does not confirm anything besides the friendship with Nance O’Neil, the actress whom Lizzie befriended in her post-acquittal life. Despite her apparent sympathy for Lizzie, Lincoln shares the oversights made during the inquest and the trial. Following the inexplicable circumstances of an unseen and unheard thief and Andrew’s suspicion that the only way for an intruder to enter the house was to pass through Lizzie’s bedroom, the investigation was halted and the incident stayed out of the public eye (*ibid.*, 50–53). Moreover, the manufacturing pharmacist’s attestation to Lizzie’s attempts to obtain the poisonous prussic acid two weeks before the crime happened was excluded from the jury’s consideration of the evidence (*ibid.*, 60). These unnoticed instances helped Lizzie get away with the murder.

Although unprejudiced, Lincoln showed some benevolence towards Lizzie. This is where the social and cultural construct of the murderess got a new shape. Along with identifying with the murderess in terms of gender and class, they had much more in common than is apparent, notwithstanding the generation gap. Lincoln is a Fall River native as well and belongs to the high society. Unfortunately for her, Lincoln never got to know Lizzie personally. Lincoln’s childhood attempts to talk to her failed as the elderly lady ignored her (Adler 1995, 58). Even though Lincoln belongs to the same social class, she criticizes the upper-middle-class ideologies in Fall River. “The newly rich society, like the newly rich man, cares for status symbols; a hierarchic demarcation of neighborhoods is . . . strong” because “in Andrew’s heyday, the coming of steam . . . shifted the residential areas according to social rank” (Lincoln 1986, 33). This made Lizzie move home and change her name (*ibid.*, 302). However, during the trial, she was eventually socially ostracized by the same upper-class gentlemen—her protectors (*ibid.*, 22–23). Lincoln, therefore, confirms the deceitful nature of upper-class friendships. Lincoln admitted that there was so much more to be discovered and resolved in the world of Lizzie Borden.

## Jurisprudential Writing

**I**T WAS not only reporters and writers, but also persons with jurisprudential backgrounds who wrote books of great importance to the Borden case, Robert Sullivan being one of them. After becoming a lawyer, and later a judge, Robert Sullivan in his writing assuredly proclaims Lizzie guilty. He examines the case in legal terms in *Goodbye Lizzie Borden* (1974), and the book mainly includes an examination of the courtroom proceedings from the trial transcripts. With his purportedly impartial perspective centering on the trial, Sullivan argues that the jury expressed a definite hesitancy in finding Lizzie



guilty of a capital offense. Sullivan (1974, 191) asserts that the avoidance of a death warrant was the cause of her acquittal. The portrayal of Lizzie is objective and straightforward in this book. Lizzie is portrayed as “no great beauty” with “reddish hair . . . drawn into a high bun” (ibid., 20). With a clear understanding of the case, Sullivan (ibid., 210) wanted to put an end to this story, because he “felt that a complete analysis of the Borden matter might in some way help to lay it to rest.” But Sullivan (ibid., 205) is aware that Lizzie is a “heroine, even an idol, to a large segment of American people,” and, despite his wishes, the infamous murderess is nowhere near disappearing from public consciousness.

## Controversial New Truth in Non-Fiction

**T**HE TRUE-CRIME literature written about the Borden case usually either revolves around the investigation and trial, dedicating less attention to Lizzie’s character, or else it puts the Victorian murderess in the foreground without going into the criminal offenses and legal proceedings. However, some of the literature about the Borden case ends up being a mixture of both. Frank Spiering’s *Lizzie* (1984) is a purely conjectural book in which the author uses fact-based accounts to formulate his conclusions regarding the murder and Lizzie’s private life. He includes various materials, including trial transcripts, various newspapers, and interviews, but he also cites Porter and Pearson. This book provides a solution to the murder that is slightly different than in the previous Borden literature. It introduces a new alleged murderer. Like Radin, Spiering claimed to have solved the puzzle. He revealed that it was Emma, Lizzie’s sister, who committed the murders, having come home earlier from a trip and having entered the house secretly, and that Lizzie didn’t want to give her away. Spiering (1984, 71) dedicated one chapter titled “Murderess” to the discussion of Emma being the killer. As explained by the author, Emma’s motive was rooted in the property quarrel, as murder was the easiest way to prevent their father from giving away his property to their stepmother. Spiering also does not exclude the possibility that Lizzie may have attempted to kill the elderly couple with poison.

Spiering developed a theory regarding Lizzie’s sexuality, a theory that was initially suggested by Lincoln. Lizzie is depicted as attractive and solitary, but not partnerless. In the chapter titled “Nance,” Spiering argues that she embarked on a love affair with the actress Nance O’Neil and this argument is backed up by the significant shift in historical and cultural ideologies between the 1960s and 1980s (Adler 1995, 71). In that period, many transitions in lesbian and gay activism made lesbian identity more visible in the popular media. The gay libera-

tion movement, which reached its peak in the 1980s, highlighted that more and more people were coming out as gay/lesbian (Stein 2012, 79–114), and this new awareness influenced the representation of homosexual characters.

Spiering's claims regarding Lizzie's sexuality were not without foundation. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1985, 53) elaborates on the existence of same-sex relationships between women who "routinely formed emotional ties" in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Young men were "segregated into different schools, supported by their male network of friends and kin, socialized to different behavior." In contrast, "young women's relations with one another were strong, often frolicsome, and surprisingly long-lasting and devoted" (*ibid.*, 68). Speculation about Nance and Lizzie's lesbian relationship is far more credible than that of Emma being a murderess. However, doubt still remains: was it Lizzie, Bridget, or Emma who got away with the murder?

## An Unprecedented (Non-)Factual Character in a Factual Story

**T**HE DICHOTOMY of the guilt and innocence of Lizzie Borden became a significant issue again when the enthusiasm of the North American people for the story was renewed in the 1990s. In the wake of Radin's and Spiering's claims, Arnold R. Brown advocates for Lizzie's innocence and finds a new guilty individual. Brown provided one more controversial explanation of the Borden case in his actual-crime book (1991). The book's references include different materials from history books, newspapers, and Pearson's written accounts. Aiming to provide speculations that had not been disclosed before, Brown criticizes both the defense and the prosecution. Brown (1991, 270) claimed they "had taken up the jury's time without seeming to know who committed the crimes." He claims that the murderer was actually Andrew's illegitimate son, William Borden, even though there is not a single shred of evidence to prove such claims. Andrew's son is represented as a mentally ill person whose identity was covered up for more than a century. According to Brown, both Lizzie and the city official who had promised to acquit her knew that William had committed the homicide but kept quiet for the rest of their lives. Brown (*ibid.*, 275) quotes one of the judges, Justice Dewey, as saying: "I was satisfied when I made my charge to the jury that the verdict would be 'not guilty.'" It is made clear in the book that the main reason Lizzie stood trial without saying a word was inheritance rights. Although this new truth might have theatrical potential, most researchers on Lizzie take it with a grain of salt.

## Life After Acquittal

**T**HE PUBLIC opinion of Lizzie Borden was built on a myth and has not excessively oscillated over the decades. Few books written about her are considered to be unbiased. Depicting Lizzie more positively would usually mean a more subjective analysis. One contemporary author who is less harsh on Lizzie is David Kent. In an actual-crime book (1992) with many never-known-before facts after the trial, Kent opposes Porter's representation of Lizzie, portraying her in a rather different light. It is claimed that Lizzie was amiable and benevolent, and that her charitable work increased after the murder. Like Radin, Kent accuses *The Globe* of being biased. Kent also refutes many of Porter's statements which denigrated Lizzie's persona. In contrast to her father, who had "never been known to give anything to charity" (Kent 1992, 16), Lizzie apparently devoted herself to charity work right up until her death (ibid., 209). Kent does not try to solve the puzzle of this case but instead provides more evidence regarding Lizzie's life after her acquittal. He eventually concludes that the reason for the continuing interest in Lizzie is that the killer has never been found. Indeed, no one has ever managed to lift the veil shrouding the mystery of the homicide in the Borden family.

## Crime-Fiction Novels

**T**HE FALL River saga would not be complete without a fictional adaptation in literature. The Borden-themed fictional oeuvre consists of novels, short stories, plays, poems, plays, operas, ballets, films, and even songs. Although some are less known than others, they all convey a disturbed relationship between Lizzie Borden and the other characters. The general public is most familiar with the children's rhyme "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe," which alludes to Lizzie's guilt:

*Lizzie Borden took an axe  
and gave her mother forty whacks.  
When she saw what she had done,  
she gave her father forty-one.*  
(“Lizzie,” Robertson 2019, 278)

The novelists do not spare her from culpability either. However, this is not the main emphasis of the novels in question. Instead, they portray Lizzie Borden as

a promiscuous woman involved in hetero-, homo- or bi-sexual relationships and unhealthy family relationships. Either simultaneously or at different times, she is a lover, feminist, criminal, and anti-hero in true-crime novels.

## Female Beginning

**S**TEALING A march on her North American counterparts, Marie Belloc Lowndes, a prolific English writer, was one of the first novelists to write about Lizzie. Lowndes's novel was written during the Great Depression, or "The Slump," and its popularity extended beyond the United States to the United Kingdom. The 1930s were known as the "Red Decade" because of the upsurge of communism and hegemonic society as a consequence of unemployment and poverty in America (Joannou 2013, 11). However, the female literature of this decade was diverse and boasts some of the most outstanding female authors, such as Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys. Lowndes's novel *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture* (1939) proves that she was a mystery writer who had an imaginative approach to the murder case. Each element of this famous novel relies on biographical information and is situated in the social context of Victorian times. However, the book stands out due to the romanticization of the murder (Adler 1995, 110) in which the motives of love and "the warmth of passion" predominate in the narrative (Lowndes 1939, 113).

Based on a trip Lizzie undertook to Europe with other upper-class ladies, which took place some years before the murder, this mysterious trip gave free rein to Lowndes's imagination. In Lowndes's plot, Lizzie falls in love with Hiram Barrison, an American man, but they keep the affair secret. A direct association can be detected between the fictional Barrison, Lizzie's lover, and the similarly named Hiram Harrington, Lizzie's uncle (Adler 1995, 109). Although Barrison "was coloring and altering her view of life" (Lowndes 1939, 48), he was a "mean and calculating soul" (ibid., 141). During Lizzie and Barrison's rendezvous in the Bordens' barn in Fall River, Lizzie suggested that they should wait until something happened, hinting at the murder of her elderly father and stepmother. "Their lips met in a long kiss, and then her head dropped onto his breast. She murmured in low, ardent accents, 'Oh, dearest, must we wait till' her voice faltered, and Hiram Barrison knew that had she gone on, it would have been to say 'my father and stepmother are dead?'" (ibid., 105). The plot culminated when Abby saw Hiram coming out of the barn and confronted Lizzie afterward. Although thinking about "the part sex plays in the hidden lives of many women," Abby "had never thought anything of the kind as remotely possible about her husband's favorite daughter" (ibid., 136). However,

the confrontation takes a different direction, leading to the melodramatic moment when Lizzie confesses, “I want you to know that I’ve always hated you, Mrs. B.” (ibid., 153).

Eventually, desire-driven, Lizzie commits the homicides. The narrative did not have the familiar tone of horrifically committed murders, but “Hiram Barrison found himself trembling all over; try as he would, he could not control his limbs” (Lowndes 1939, 219). Towards the plot’s resolution, the novel covered many aspects of the trial, yet, expectedly, diverged from being a biographical account. However, the love story does not have a happy ending when the novel finishes; Hiram returns to Boston. Lizzie was expected to write to him, but that never happened. Their relationship was over, and Lizzie was left to live in the agony of her tragic love story. The readers are left questioning whether Lizzie’s affair with her suitor, which was not fated to be anything more, was worth the murders.

Lizzie is represented as a romanticized, solitary spinster who longs for a loving partner and whose features comply with the established biographical facts. Endowed with “her proud and independent character” (Lowndes 1939, 91), “courage . . . was her outstanding quality” (ibid., 161). “She was fond of children and possessed a masterful disposition . . . she was a born teacher” (ibid., 2). The feature of hers which is most relevant to the novel is that of a *femme fatale* due to her “romantic nature” which “scented a romance” (ibid., 71). Notwithstanding that she had never been fond of her stepmother, Lizzie knew that her father “preferred her to her sister” (ibid., 8) because she and he “were alike, both haughty, determined, and bent on always getting their way” (ibid., 132). Lowndes assigned to Lizzie Borden the character of an inappropriate lover and imagined that Mrs. Borden had discovered the illicit liaison; therefore, in this retelling of the story, Lizzie is a passionate criminal who put her desire for love and marriage even before her father’s life.

## Fictive Interdisciplinarity

**D**UE TO the dramatic nature of the homicide, the New England murderess was also the focal point of performing arts. For example, Agnes de Mille’s *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (1968) gained popularity due to the interdisciplinarity of the art forms. It is a ballet that follows the story of Lizzie Borden, which was later turned into a book. Premiered in 1948 under the name *Fall River Legend*, de Mille showed a strong passion for this criminal case. Through choreography, dance, and music, the ballet concentrates on memorable moments such as Lizzie dancing with her mother’s ghost following the murders:

*We would show her in her dead mother's arms. Again I heard high violins—calling "Lizzie, Lizzie"—a crying sound and a sound of running feet like wind. In black space Lizzie and her mother would rush to meet one another, Lizzie falling weeping on her mother's bosom. . . . We would see Lizzie rush to her dead mother's arms; but since Lizzie is covered with blood, she must have been a naughty girl. Her mother is accordingly shocked and slaps her. And with this slap Lizzie is cast out from grace—from grace and from love. Neither heaven nor hell will have her, neither the dead nor the living; she must wander forever alone in timeless space. . . . Since she has murdered, she becomes the adult and she picks up her mother in her arms to comfort her like a baby. She has become in fact the mother figure. I knew instinctively this must be so. With the crime Lizzie does find identity with her dead mother. She loses her love forever, but she replaces her. The murderess, Lizzie, cradles her mother with infinite unavailing love until they drift apart into mists of forgetfulness.* (de Mille 1968, 137)

This scene enhances the biographical relevance of her dead mother whose absence had been reiterated in factual accounts.

In Agnes de Mille's production, Lizzie is romantically involved with a minister of the church. However, her stepmother was an obstacle to her liaison because she forbade their romance. Money and wealth dominate the plot. Greed is displayed as a principal motive for the murder by a woman who had been found guilty of committing a crime. De Mille (1968, 138) wittily states that "murder for real estate is not possible to dance" because this story was "built toward guilt and therefore punishment," and, as a consequence, an "acquittal under these circumstances was an anticlimax." The origin of the murder case, according to de Mille's claims (*ibid.*, 14) is the American attitude towards wealth: "This feeling of money and the power of money as a manifestation of God's will, lies at the heart of our story. It is the common belief throughout the world that America is money-mad." Indeed, "in those days there was only one compensation for lack of a husband—money" (*ibid.*, 120). Lizzie was known among shop owners and their employees as a sophisticated shoplifter with a medical condition, which was a by-product of the lack of financial self-sustainability. The salespeople would list the items she stole after each visit and forward the bill to Andrew Borden. Lizzie's kleptomania was not publicly revealed because the bills were duly paid. Over the course of time, Andrew developed the habit of locking his bedroom door and leaving the keys in the corridor. Lizzie's shoplifting tendencies were still present years after her acquittal, as well. The same procedure of sending the bill to the home address would be followed, although this time the invoice would be sent directly to Lizzie and paid by her (*ibid.*, 105–106).



The experimentation with the creation of a ballet took place in the postwar period. American topics of popular culture in the 1940s and the art form in the 1960s counterculture in America are reflected in de Mille's work (Sickels 2004, 182; Le Grice 2001, 300). Various photographs accompanied theatrical depictions of the crime and de Mille's ballet creation. Yet literary images of violence, murder, and terror cause stronger emotions than these photographs did. Andrew, who had "ten great wounds . . . half lay, half sat, . . . gashed, mangled, chopped . . . One half of his face was all but sliced off, half an eye hung on the broken cheek" (de Mille 1968, 36) and Abby lay "face down, her head battered by nineteen blows, skull bones, hair, face, switches and flesh matted into what looked like badly dressed steak" (ibid., 40). The pictures of Lizzie's hysteria did not fall behind the other overemphasized emotions either. "Suddenly screams shatter the stillness, bloodcurdling, hair-raising, scream after scream . . . the pandemonium of utter horror" (ibid., 138). Indeed, de Mille inserted one art form into another work of art and hence kept Lizzie's character alive in popular fiction.

## Lesbian Novel

**E**VAN HUNTER's novel *Lizzie* (1984) is an original concoction of factual and fictional elements because it reconstructs the murder case and fills the historical gaps to complete the enigma. Using a puff-and-blow style and a titillating approach in narrating, the skillful storyteller permeates the humorous writing with historical data and biographical information (Adler 1995, 111). Hunter gave an in-depth depiction of Lizzie's character. He made a clear distinction between fact and fiction and elucidated the references of the novel in the afterword. The purely fictional side of the novel provides a more eccentric portrayal of Lizzie Borden than in previous novels, primarily because of its controversial plot and openly lesbian descriptions.

The novel compares the public and private Lizzies. The historical figure is rather severe, and she preserves the traditional picture of a dispassionate murderer and the features of the legend: "Her forehead is low but shapely, her eyes are large and clear. She has pretty ears, small and delicate and held closely to the head. Her nose is straight. . . ." (Hunter 1984, 147). Speaking "of Lizzie Borden's eyes. Gray, they had said. Steady, they had said, almost staring. Cold, they had said. Penetrating" (ibid., 24). She shows conflicting tendencies at both the inquest and the trial. The genuine parts include trial and inquest testimonies, newspaper articles, and notes taken from Victoria Lincoln's and Agnes de Mille's works.

The Lizzie constructed by her imagination is entertaining, passionate, and desirable, and she relives the memories from her visit to Europe. The imaginary plot takes place on both the Old Continent and New Continent. While on a trip through Europe, Lizzie made friends with Alison, a wealthy upper-class lady who took care of her when she was laid low with influenza. Lizzie recovered in Alison's mansion in Cannes and was seduced by her. Alison is a quintessential European lady with an adventurous temperament and consummate behavior. After becoming infatuated with the British woman, Lizzie is ashamed of her lesbian side. However, the strong influence of Alison made Lizzie become "lesbian to the core" (Hunter 1984, 358). Although Alison alerted Lizzie to the perils of their situation and advised her not to involve herself in unnecessary trouble, bit by bit, Lizzie regards Alison as her role model and begins imitating her rebellious behavior.

Lizzie's visit to the Old Continent and the end of her lesbian romance made her extremely discontented after her return, leaving significant traces in her day-to-day life. She felt abandoned, as well as betrayed in some way, and, as a consequence, she found a way of releasing her anguished emotions in unrestrained sexual behavior. Lizzie was carrying on a passionate affair with Borden's Irish maid Bridget before their seemingly innocuous tryst resulted in the murders, which ensued when Lizzie's stepmother discovered their secret. On the day of the murder, Lizzie was caught in bed with Bridget by Mrs. Borden, who could never have imagined that it would cost her her life. Following Abby's threats to expose their affair, Lizzie killed Mrs. Borden by striking her with a candlestick. Hunter invents a seemingly less dangerous weapon than an axe, contrasting a dramatic moment such as the killing of Abby. Afraid of the possible consequences, Lizzie also ended Andrew's life upon his return. Unlike Abby, he dies as a consequence of hatchet blows. Lizzie "was drenched in blood; she had not expected so much blood . . . Her hands where she held the bloodstained weapon dripped blood into her father's own blood flowing from his head onto the carpet" (Hunter 1984, 421). Hunter did not diverge from the real-life final verdict; hence, she was acquitted.

The 1980s were a prosperous time for women in America, as the feminists of the time had managed to gain equal treatment for men and women in the area of labor (Marks et al. 2018, 87). This liberal feminist tradition is reflected in Hunter's writing as Alison expresses her feminist convictions that resulted from being under the repression of a patriarchal society. "Is it your passion that shames you so? Then are we, as women, not entitled to the same passion men consider their God-given right?" (Hunter 1984, 419). Besides this, Lizzie's acquittal is also explainable in the light of Alison's words. She firmly states that women's "greatest secret" and "supreme strength" is found in the traditional

male belief doubting “that a proper lady . . . would ever commit a breach that seriously threatened his superior position” (ibid., 425). She denigrates their ability to discern that “the society he has constructed and which he will support with his very life” could be jeopardized by “his daughter, his sister, his wife” (ibid., 425). Alison’s revolt against the patriarchal world generated her rebellious fornications. Yet, to the public she is a married woman. She further asserts that a man “must perforce believe that we are all capable of bringing down his elaborate house of cards and thereby destroying his faith in the cherished myth of ideal womanhood” (ibid., 425–426). Indeed, Lizzie used the patriarchal system of the Victorian era to her advantage in the courtroom.

Gabriela Schalow Adler parallels the manner in which Hunter and Lowndes depicted the Borden story, alluding to the cultural shift and current ideology of the time when the novels were written. Hunter’s depiction is similar to Lowndes’s representation of the crime regarding its essence as a crime of passion. However, the lesbian relationship in the former differs from the love story in the latter in terms of sexual orientation, which reflects the cultural change and the process of feminist liberalizations over the decades (Adler 1995, 114–115). In brief, the intense criticism of patriarchy is expressed through lesbian relationships and getting away with murder. Hunter benefited from the feminist politics of the time by evincing the ambivalence of gender roles in society with the help of fiction.

## Fictional Anti-Hero

**N**OT ALL novels about Lizzie are founded on her unhappy romantic relationships. The real-life investigation had its literary adaptation in detective novels as well, one of which is Walter Satterthwait’s *Miss Lizzie* (1989). Although the novel is based on historical writings about the Borden case, it is adapted to a completely different context with imaginary characters, plot, and setting. The novel does not modify the real-life occurrences but produces a continuation of the mysterious Fall River murder case in the light of a new and intriguing homicide.

The plot covers the story of Amanda Burton, who, as an adult, reminisces about her childhood. In the summer of 1921, Amanda discovered that her neighbor was the infamous Lizzie Borden:

*Difficult it would have been, however, not to notice Miss Lizzie. She was, for one thing, our nearest neighbor. She rented the white clapboard cottage next to ours, and every morning from the parlor I would watch her bustle down the steps and*

*across the small sandy yard, tufted with weed, to the gate of the picket fence. She would unlatch the gate, slip through it, then turn and latch it once more, carefully, deliberately, like someone who took care against intruders. And then she would set off down the street, a short squarish figure, her hands folded into the sleeves of her black dress, her purse hanging from her forearm like a padlock. She moved with her shoulders hunched and bent slightly forward, leaning into a private wind, and she wore her black, I thought, almost proudly: as though it were a uniform, as though she were on march. (Satterthwait 1989, 4–5)*

The middle-aged lady is amiable in the company of the thirteen-year-old girl: “She was warmth and substance, softness and strength; she was real. She was alive” (Satterthwait 1989, 41); therefore, the latter befriends her. The similarities between them are hard to miss: Amanda lost her mother as a child, and her love for her father was in the shadow of her contempt for her annoying stepmother. Although it was rumored that Amanda and her brother William, who had the same name as Lizzie’s imaginary brother in Arnold’s true-crime book, hated their stepmother, she argues that “This was simply not true. Hate, like love, requires an acceptance of the other, a recognition of his or her reality. What we felt for our stepmother was something worse, something far more shameful. It was contempt” (ibid., 10). One morning, Amanda’s stepmother was found dead in her bedchamber killed by blows from an axe. Amanda had been sleeping in a nearby room that night. The first suspicions, naturally, pointed toward Lizzie, given her infamy. Notwithstanding her notoriety, Lizzie turns detective, even though the legal proceedings are taking place, and she kills the real murderess, thus saving Amanda’s life. There is also a romantic backstory about Amanda and a lawyer who took part in the murder case. Upon Lizzie’s death, Amanda is bequeathed a card as a remembrance, a mnemonic of a mother and a hatchet in the Nikola system (Adler 1995, 117).

Lizzie’s physical portrayal matches the real-life elderly Lizzie and her glazed blue eyes with a pince-nez: “She narrowed her eyes. Behind the pince-nez clipped to the bridge of her nose, they were a very pale blue, almost gray, and large, which made them seem expectant, waiting” (Satterthwait 1989, 252). Although Satterthwait (ibid., 8) depicts her as “stern” and “severe” but also passionate and fearless, unusually endowed with a special kind of “charm,” Amanda got to know her more privately. Lizzie was a thoughtful, strong, and solitary woman in her eyes, who either smoked cigarettes or played cards. Lizzie is a multi-faceted character in this novel: she is the hero of the story, but also a murderer, a villain, and a detective at the same time. She might be considered an anti-hero.

Satterthwait draws on the actual-crime authors of the Borden literature. He agrees with Lincoln’s argument that Lizzie was suffering a seizure of the

temporal lobe when she killed Abby (Adler 1995, 116). As in the other Borden literature, lesbian tendencies were touched upon in the novel. Speaking of her actress friend Nance, Lizzie expressed her admiration for her role as Lady Macbeth, which “is a difficult role” (Satterthwait 1989, 203). Satterthwait agrees with Pearson in this respect, since Pearson was the one who compared Lizzie to Lady Macbeth (Adler 1995, 117). The novel features many underlying elements, yet it lacks a definite conclusion. It resembles a *roman noir*. The protagonist is a troubled and victimized character, a self-made private detective, who is compelled to confront the legal system. However, it defies the traditional “masculine ideology of the canonical noir crime genre” in which the anti-hero is male (Aziz 2012, 36). Satterthwait had managed to represent Lizzie as an anti-hero in the late 1980s. His book sparked a new controversy because it illustrated the possibility of this muse of American popular culture having both a guilty and an innocent side.

## Dysfunctional Family

**W**HEN A historical event is placed into the contemporary context, it naturally reflects the social issues of its own time. That is why Elizabeth Engstrom’s *Lizzie Borden* (1991) is a novel of morbid and extremely complicated family relationships. Engstrom includes historical data and real-life personalities. The factual segment appears as an epilogue at the end of the novel which reveals the details of the homicide. However, the novel consists of a lot of invented data about the Borden family, permeated by the controversial issues of sexuality, eroticism, and filial affection. The dysfunctionality of their family and the perverse scenes appear to be too exuberant for a 19<sup>th</sup>-century story. The Borden family deviates from the classical Victorian family to a large extent. Engstrom’s imagination brings into the story contemporary family issues which were not so common in the Victorian era. Indeed, it gives the impression of a Victorian novel turned into a present-day melodrama.

In this work of fiction, Andrew is a greedy father, while Abby is a surprisingly kind but, at the same time, inert person and a despised stepmother. Besides Lizzie, her sister Emma is the other member of this dysfunctional family who indulges in lust. Emma is envious and an alcoholic, and she repeatedly vanishes from the familial chaos by going on week-long binges of drinking and sexual dissipation. Hence, in this novel, Lizzie did not have an idyllic childhood, as it was damaged by immorality, incest, and adulterous romance. However, the pendulum swings way too far for this family. The novel reveals that the beloved younger daughter was having sexual intercourse with her father in her child-

hood, and that this caused repressed sexuality as a consequence. The issue of repressed sexuality is brought forth again but immortalized. The novel embraces bizarre and absurd representations of Lizzie and flawed family relationships. Eventually, she bursts out of her comfort zone in a passionate fury and begins having female lady-loves. After getting involved in a lesbian affair with her old schoolmate during her adult life, she then dives into a lesbian romance with her father's lover, who is bisexual. She even does many peculiar things that she does not remember afterwards. This occurrence is directly comparable to the "spells" that Lincoln mentions in her book (Adler 1995, 123). Lizzie's personality in Engstrom's novel is somewhat complex, and her peculiarity extends to many spheres of her life.

Regarding the killing, Engstrom intertwined violence and passionate murder with sexuality. Lizzie is seen in two places at the same time during the attack: one of them is the barn, and the other is the house. The murder scene shows her masturbating in the barn while killing her stepmother in the guestroom: "Lizzie pounded herself as she imagined pounding Abby" (Engstrom 1991, 329). The image intensifies over time, as her "thrusts" are "more and more brutal" (ibid.). Her feelings were ambiguous, as she "loved it" but also "hated it," and she intended to "hurt, bite, squeeze, kill" (ibid.). In the barn, "she rolled, curled over, in the hay," her body "twitching and throbbing," while, in the guestroom, she was striking her stepmother with an axe, inflicting "blow after blow on her . . . stepmother's head" (ibid.). Finally, "the orgasm shuddered to a violent conclusion" (ibid.). The scene ended with Lizzie's scream.

The early 1990s were the years of third-wave feminism, which centered on the notion of female sexuality (Waters 2007, 250). The major themes of Engstrom's novel, such as female sexual freedom, seem highly influenced by sex-positive feminism. The cyclical anachronism of the novel extends from the upper-class female characters' unrestrained comportment to the lesbian relationship. Both of these matters appear to be criticizing the patriarchal system. Following the crime, Lizzie questions herself and expresses a doubt: "I think there's something wrong with me" (Engstrom 1991, 338), but, later on, she comes to a realization: "It was not my fault" (ibid.). Engstrom alludes to the patriarchal upbringing as the primary culprit for her homicidal behavior. It condemned her to a miserable childhood and adult life afterwards. Therefore, Engstrom evinces all of the secrets that a prominent family might have through the fictional representation of a Victorian murderess.



## Conclusion

**B**OTH FACTUAL and fictional literary works have represented Lizzie Borden differently over the decades. For some, Lizzie was a decadent wealthy heiress who heartlessly killed her family members with an axe; for others, she was an innocent spinster who unfairly got a stain on her reputation. The polarized stance is reflected in those texts that intended to bring an end to the stigmatization of this prismatic figure, compared with those that directly rebuked her. In addition, the non-fiction texts show that the Victorian spinster did display two irreconcilable personas while being observed by the public during the trial. In the additional circumstances of the widespread social consternation, the actual-crime Borden-case authors mostly agree that the verdict was socially conditioned; hence, Lizzie was not sent to the gallows. Considering that female axe-murderers were statistically a rarity, the defense managed to win over the jury with the biological, social, environmental, and hereditary circumstances that constituted Lizzie Borden's personality.

Broadly observed, Borden-related literature, regardless of its genre, features the conventional aspects of a melodramatic style. Some of the dramatic events in the true-crime novels come from the melodrama in the court, which is based on transcripts of the proceedings. In contrast, works of crime fiction depict the murder itself and give a frightening representation of the murder. On one hand, various testimonies, the prosecution/defense of criminal culpability, etc., were revealed and, on the other hand, the homicide depictions stir powerful emotions. Yet this is not necessarily the case in every narrative of each genre. Regarding crime fiction, not only do most authors make a big effort to recreate the character of Lizzie, but they also retell the story in an impressionistic manner. Accordingly, the motivation is the central issue of both the fictive and non-fictive works, since it predetermines the narrative. Literary works which were written on this topic have played out various scenarios. Still, most authors concur that Lizzie had a financial motive.

The ideologies of the time are incorporated into both the historical and the fictional writing. The change of social and cultural circumstances throughout history modifies the representation of Lizzie Borden, irrespective of whether it is factual or fictional. The Borden texts diverge in the following aspects: the exposition of the gender and class-conscious society is encouraged, and the portrayal of the case and of Lizzie Borden is suppressed in some narratives, and vice versa. What they have in common are the echoes of the feminist tradition in North American literature. Therefore, Lizzie Borden is not only an American murder icon but also a feminist one. Each true-crime story refers to the ambivalence of her status as a woman. The rejection of her guilt is based on feminin-

ity: the feminine model of an effete spinster generates considerable criticism from the gendered framework of the murder case. She is considered a gendered subject in a feminist agenda that, from one point of view, undermines the patriarchal ideology and from, another viewpoint, invigorates it. Most Borden authors point out the development of feminist doctrine through the description of Lizzie and her position in society.

Since much of the data obtained from various sources, which were the basis of the true-crime stories, is speculative, there is a tight bond between literary representations of the real and imaginary Lizzies. This is mostly the case because invented characters are present in both the true-crime and crime-fiction prose texts, as well as in the ballet. For instance, Andrew's alleged illegitimate son is a fictional character in one true-crime story, whereas Lizzie's numerous purported lovers are fictional characters in crime fiction and the performing arts. This parallel between the fictionality of the texts shows that intertextuality is substantially present in the Borden literature. On the one hand, non-fiction texts were written based on other non-fiction works, while, on the other hand, fiction texts were influenced by other fiction or non-fiction works. In conclusion, the lines between fiction and non-fiction in the literature on Lizzie Borden are not defined.

Ultimately, the question arises: what is, in fact, a fair verdict in Lizzie's case? Whatever the answer is, Lizzie Borden has already gained recognition as a cult figure in American history. The everlasting popular culture muse went from Victorian murderess to postmodern figure and feminist heroine, and we can only guess at what she might become in the years to come.



## Notes

1. *Police Gazette* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 220); *New York Times* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 12–16, 47, 99, 201–212, 324); *New Bedford Evening Journal* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 324–325); *New York Herald* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 27–48, 145, 337); *New York World* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 138–139, 111–112); *Fall River Herald* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 1, 22–38, 114, 202–204); *Boston Advertiser* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 4); *Boston Globe* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 202–292, 307–326); *Boston Herald* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 14–15, 287–288); *Boston Daily Globe* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 206); *Boston Sunday Herald* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 340–345); *Globe* (Kent and Flynn 1992, 315–319).
2. Pearson 1924, 1928, 1937; Radin 1961; Spiering 1984; Kent 1992.
3. There are legends that: Lizzie sent photos from the crime scene in a note to Mr. Moody, regarding them as souvenirs; Lizzie was naked when she attacked the el-

derly Bordens; she was disabled and asphyxiated; she had informed her friends that she had procured a new axe prior to the murders; in her preadolescent years, she had visited a friend who suddenly died; following her acquittal, she helped her friends pull down the old hut with an axe; and many others (Adler 1995, 40).

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**Abstract****In Search of Lizzie Borden: Between Fact and Fiction**

The paper discusses the representation of Lizzie Borden in true-crime and crime-fiction prose texts, as well as in a stage production. It centers on the hypothesis of sociocultural aspects which constitute the accounts written about her and feminist readings. Regardless of genre, these narratives portray Lizzie Borden in various ways—from a female tormenter to a guilt-free spinster. Both true-crime books and crime-fiction novels, together with the ballet, are modified by sociocultural factors and are also subject to intertextuality. In addition, the lines between fiction and non-fiction literary works of primary concern are blurred.

**Keywords**

Lizzie Borden, literary representation, true crime, crime fiction