Summary

Summary (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

On a late summer morning, the villagers of a small New England town gather to conduct their annual lottery. There is an air of festivity among them, especially the children. Only a few in the crowd reveal slight hints of tension or unease.

The lottery has a long history in this and surrounding towns. The people who run it—in this town, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves—work hard to preserve the rituals that have been passed down from year to year. Changes have crept in, and some old-timers such as Old Man Warner regret what they perceive as a loss of a heritage that has preserved the happiness and prosperity of the town over time.

All the villagers finally arrive, Tessie Hutchinson being one of the last. Mr. Summers conducts the preliminaries, ensuring that each family is represented and that those who are absent have someone on hand to draw for them. Finally the lottery begins: Heads of families step forward and draw small paper slips from the black box that Mr. Summers keeps for the occasion. As this goes on, townspeople engage in small talk, and the air of festivity gives way to a pervasive aura of nervousness.

When all the slips are drawn, Bill Hutchinson discovers that he has picked the one marked with a black spot. Immediately Tessie begins complaining that the drawing was not conducted properly. Others encourage her to be a good sport, however, and her protests fall on deaf ears. She and the other members of her immediate family now come forward and draw slips, as various townspeople whisper apprehensively. Tessie draws the slip with the black spot. Mr. Summers commands, “Let’s finish quickly.”

The townspeople now move off to a cleared spot outside the town. Tessie in the center of the group. A desperate woman now, Tessie entreats the crowd to go through the ritual again, doing things fairly. Ignoring her protests, the men, women, and children of the town begin stoning her.
Summary (Critical Survey of Literature for Students)

Just before 10 a.m. on June 27, the three hundred inhabitants of a small village in New England start gathering at the town square. The children arrive first, and some of the boys begin to put rocks and stones into a pile. As the morning progresses, the men of the village begin to arrive, coming from their farms and fields. They are soon joined by their wives, who have come from their household chores. The scene is convivial: The children laugh and play, and the adults joke and gossip.

Eventually, Mr. Summers, a local businessperson who seems to be in charge of the assembly, arrives, carrying a large black box. He is followed by the village postmaster, Mr. Graves, who carries a stool. Two men help Mr. Summers place the heavy box on the stool, and Mr. Summers begins to stir and shuffle the hundreds of slips of paper that are inside the box. Then, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves begin drawing up lists of families, including the head of each household and the names of all members of each family. The old and decrepit box makes it clear that some sort of ancient tradition is being followed. The villagers recall that in the past the procedure had been longer and more elaborate. The oldest denizen of the town, Old Man Warner, points out that this is his seventy-seventh year participating in the ritual, called simply the lottery.

As the men are working on the lists of families, Tessie Hutchinson arrives, the last villager to join the crowd at the square. Tessie had realized at the last minute, while she was washing dishes, that today is June 27. Her friends and neighbors tease her about her tardiness.

The lottery begins. Mr. Summers calls up each head of household in alphabetical order, from Adams to Zanini. As people draw their slips, the villagers show a certain degree of nervousness. However, homespun humor reasserts itself when Bill Hutchinson is called and his wife urges him forward in a raucous and bossy way, causing those around her to snicker. While the drawings by the heads of households continues, Old Man Warner gets into a discussion with the people sitting near him about the background of the lottery. It appears that the lotteries used to be common in the region, but some villages have given up the practice. These breaks in tradition elicit Old Man Warner’s scorn: “There’s always been a lottery,” he insists, and he attributes the abandonment of the ritual to the current generation, whom he denounces as a “[p]ack of young fools.” He also reveals that the lottery is in essence a fertility ritual, and he quotes a half-forgotten adage: “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.”

All of the heads of families have finished drawing their slips of paper. Bill finds that he has drawn a slip with a dark splotch. It soon becomes apparent that something sinister is going on, as Tessie shouts out, “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair.” Dickie Delacroix’s mother urges Tessie to “Be a good sport,” and Bill’s advice to his wife is grim and terse: “Shut up, Tessie.” Tessie, however, continues to argue about the fairness of the procedure.

The slips of paper are retrieved, including the one with the ominous black splotch. Next, each of the five members of the Hutchinson family is made to draw from five slips. As this second drawing proceeds, one of Nancy Hutchinson’s school friends murmurs, “I hope it’s not Nancy,” a wish that draws fresh scorn from Old Man Warner. The Hutchisons each display their slips of paper—Tessie’s slip is dotted. Mr. Summers announces “Let’s finish quickly,” an exhortation in keeping with an earlier indication that the time of the lottery has been set at 10 a.m. so that the villagers can return home in time for their noon meals.

As Tessie stands alone, her neighbors and family and friends pick up stones and rocks from the piles the boys had amassed earlier. Dickie’s mother selects a rock so huge, she can barely lift it, and little Dave Hutchinson, too, is given a few small rocks to throw. As Tessie shrieks about the unfairness of the ritual, the villagers begin to stone her to death.
Summary (Masterpieces of American Literature)

Jackson once indicated that if she had never published any other work, she would be remembered for “The Lottery.” After the story came out in The New Yorker in 1948, Jackson received hundreds of letters, most of which were overwhelmingly negative. The letter writers were shocked, bemused, and, in some cases, frankly abusive. Many people wanted to know where and when the lottery was held so that they could witness it. Set in modern times in what some readers assumed was Jackson’s home of Bennington, Vermont, “The Lottery” caused a nationwide stir and made the author famous in her own time.

Jackson begins the story with typical understatement. The sun is shining on a summer’s day. Children are not in school, and they are the first to gather in the village square. Their parents join them as the hour for the lottery approaches. Soon everyone in the village is present (with the exception of Clyde Dunbar, who has a broken leg). Mr. Summers, who runs a coal business, is the master of ceremonies. He and the postmaster, Mr. Graves, set a black box on a stool in the middle of the square. There is an air of anticipation as Mr. Summers stirs the slips of paper in the black box and begins the drawing.

The villagers have done this many times before. For Old Man Warner, this is his seventy-seventh lottery. The event does not take long. It starts at ten o’clock in the morning and is over in a couple of hours. Everyone will be back home in time for the midday meal. There is even an air of frivolity that Old Man Warner deplores (“Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody.”).

Finally, all the names are called, all the slips are drawn, and the women begin to ask anxiously, “Who is it? Who’s got it?” It turns out that the Hutchinson family has the fateful slip. Tessie Hutchinson begins to complain that the drawing was not fair, that her husband Bill did not have enough time. Another, briefer drawing is held with only the Hutchinson family involved. The suspense is merciless, but at last the holder of the slip with the black dot is revealed: Tessie herself. Without pause, and in a business-like way, all the villagers, including Tessie’s own family, pick up the stones and descend upon the victim.

Jackson has Old Man Warner explain that the lottery is an ancient rite to ensure a good harvest each year. In times past, the rite was conducted with more ceremony, more seriousness. Now, however, the villagers have forgotten the liturgy. They even seem to have forgotten why they stone one individual to death every June 27. Like automatons, they follow tradition unthinkingly, simply doing what has always been done.

The scapegoating and mob frenzy that takes place in “The Lottery” seem to clash violently with the contemporary New England village setting. This graphic juxtaposition makes a strong statement about senseless violence and mindless social evil in modern times. As literature, “The Lottery” is a fine example of “sunlit horror,” a nightmare story that takes place in broad daylight. “The Lottery” begins with sunlight and child’s play, and ends in ritualized murder.
Summary

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson opens on a warm June day in a town of about three hundred people and describes an annual event in the town, a tradition that is apparently widespread among surrounding villages as well. Children arrive in the town square first and engage in "boisterous play." Some of the boys create a "great pile of stones in one corner of the square."

When the men of the village arrive they stand away from the stones, joke quietly, and smile instead of laugh. The women arrive next. As they join their husbands, they call to their children. One mother's voice carries no weight, and it is her husband that commands Bobby Martin's attention.

The event for which they gather is a lottery conducted by Mr. Summers, a neatly dressed, jovial business man with a wife but no children. Although many traditional customs associated with the lottery seemed to have been lost over time, Mr. Summers still has "a great deal of fussing to be done" before he declares the lottery open. He has created lists of households, their heads, and their members. He and Mr. Graves, the postmaster, have spent the previous night making up slips of paper to be placed in a shabby black box that has been used for the lottery for as long as Mr. Summers can remember.

As Mr. Summers is about to begin the drawing, Tessie Hutchinson hurries to join the crowd. She had forgotten that today was the lottery and remembered while she was washing dishes. She speaks briefly with Mrs. Delacroix about her forgetfulness and makes her way to stand beside her husband. Mr. Summers then begins to call off the names of each family in the village. As the household name is called, the male head of the family steps up to Mr. Summers and draws a slip of paper from the box. All are told not to look at the slip until after the last name has been called. During the time it takes to complete the drawing, Mr. Adams notes that some towns have started to talk about doing away with the lottery. Old Man Warner, participating in his seventy-seventh lottery, snorts at the idea and says that would only cause trouble.

After the last name has been drawn, there is a long pause before Mr. Summers tells the men to look at their slips of paper. When Tessie Hutchinson realizes that her husband holds the marked slip, she cries out that the process was not fair. The reader learns at this moment that the lottery does not offer a reward or prize in the traditional sense. Tessie claims her husband had to rush to choose the slip of paper and that her daughter and son-in-law should be included in the next round. Her husband tells her to be quiet as Mr. Graves puts only five slips of paper into the box, one for each family member who lives in the Hutchinson household.

The Hutchinson children pick first, followed by Bill and then Tessie. The two older children look at their slips and rejoice. Mr. Hutchinson looks at his and shows the blank paper to Mr. Summers. It is then clear that Tessie has drawn the unfortunate slip and Mr. Summers asks the townspeople to complete the lottery quickly. They begin to gather up stones and throw them at Tessie.
Themes

Themes and Meanings (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

The events of “The Lottery” border on the absurd. Nevertheless, the story cries out for interpretation on several levels. Shirley Jackson has skillfully used the elements of several ancient rituals to create a tale that touches on the character of ritual itself and the devastating effects of mob psychology.

At the heart of the story is one of the oldest concepts of humankind: the notion of the scapegoat. Ancient civilizations often conducted a ceremony in which the evils of an entire society were symbolically transferred to one member of the group, either human or animal, and that member was killed or banished. This death or banishment suggested that the evils of the past had been expurgated, allowing for a better future for the group. The Jewish people in Old Testament times conducted the ritual by designating a goat as the recipient of all sins and evil, then turning the goat out into the desert; hence, in Western literature, the term “scapegoat” has been widely adopted to designate this sacrificial victim.

Tessie Hutchinson is the scapegoat in her town in the year in which “The Lottery” takes place; the implication in the story is that the lottery is an annual event. In this town, the scapegoat is used to banish the evils of the society so that the crops will flourish. Thus, two ancient rituals are combined: the notion of banishing evils via a sacrificial victim, and the idea of appeasing higher powers in some way to ensure fertility for the land. Fertility rituals, too, usually involved some kind of sacrifice.

The people of the town are caught up in the ritual to such an extent that they have given up any sense of logic. Mob psychology rules their actions. Though they appear to be sane, sensible individuals, when the time of the lottery comes, they abandon their rational nature and revert to the instincts of the herd. This psychological phenomenon is characteristic of humans throughout history. Although Jackson portrays it in its extreme form in this story, the idea that men and women in groups are willing to forgo personal responsibility and act with great cruelty toward others is evidenced in actions such as lynch mobs, racial confrontations, and similar incidents. The willingness of people to act irrationally as members of the herd displays aspects that, while unpleasant, are still integral parts of their nature that they must recognize if they are to keep them in check.
Themes

"The Lottery" focuses on Tessie Hutchinson, a woman who is stoned to death by members of her village.

Violence and Cruelty
Violence is a major theme in "The Lottery." While the stoning is a cruel and brutal act, Jackson enhances its emotional impact by setting the story in a seemingly civilized and peaceful society. This suggests that horrifying acts of violence can take place anywhere at anytime, and they can be committed by the most ordinary people. Jackson also addresses the psychology behind mass cruelty by presenting a community whose citizens refuse to stand as individuals and oppose the lottery and who instead unquestioningly take part in the killing of an innocent and accepted member of their village with no apparent grief or remorse.

Custom and Tradition
Another theme of "The Lottery" concerns the blind following of tradition and the negative consequences of such an action. The people of the village continue to take part in the lottery even though they cannot remember certain aspects of the ritual, such as the "tuneless chant" and the "ritual salute," simply because the event has been held for so long that these aspects have been lost to time. Jackson highlights the theme of tradition through symbolism. For example, the black box from which the slips of paper are drawn represents the villagers' inability to change. The box is very old and in bad shape, but when it is suggested that the people make a new box, the subject is "allowed to fade off without anything's being done." Further emphasizing the long history of both the box and the ritual, the narrator notes: "There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here." Old Man Warner, the oldest man in the village, also represents the theme of tradition. When Mr. and Mrs. Adams suggest to Warner that some other villages have already given up the lottery or are thinking about doing so, he replies with, "Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves. There's always been a lottery."

Victim and Victimization
Victimization, or the act of oppressing, harming, or killing an individual or group, is also addressed in "The Lottery." The villagers believe, based on ancient custom, that someone has to be sacrificed for the good of the village even if that person has not done anything wrong. Jackson highlights humankind's capacity to victimize others by having friends and family participate in Tessie's killing. For example, even though Mrs. Delacroix is kind and friendly to Tessie at the beginning of the story, she rushes to stone her "with a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands" after Tessie's name is drawn. It is also considered significant that a woman is chosen as the story's victim. Some critics maintain that Jackson's depiction of a "normal" town that victimizes a woman fits logically with the traditional patriarchal type of society in which men have power and authority over women that has been accepted as "normal" in much of the world.

Sex Roles
Some recent reviewers of "The Lottery" tend to classify the story as feminist literature. They maintain that Jackson highlights the negative aspects of patriarchal societies through her telling of the lottery ritual. In the story, men draw for their family, and women are treated as possessions or subordinates. For example, when Tessie dares to question the method of drawing, her husband tells her to shut up. Some critics have also noted that the method of the ritual itself helps guarantee the traditional role of women as mothers in the village. Fritz Oehlschlaeger states in Essays in Literature that "the nature of the process by which the victim is selected gives each woman a very clear incentive to produce the largest possible family."
Characters

Mr. Adams
Mr. Adams is one of the men of the village. While he seems to be one of the few who questions the lottery when he mentions that another village is thinking about giving up the ritual, he stands at the front of the crowd when the stoning of Tessie begins.

Mrs. Adams
Along with Tessie Hutchinson, Mrs. Adams seems to be one of the few women of the village who questions the lottery. She tells Old Man Warner that "some places have already quit lotteries."

Mrs. Delacroix
An acquaintance of Tessie Hutchinson's, Mrs. Delacroix is the first person Tessie speaks to when she arrives late at the lottery. When Tessie protests the method of drawing, it is Mrs. Delacroix who says, "Be a good sport, Tessie." Mrs. Delacroix, however, is among the most active participants when the stoning begins, grabbing a stone so heavy she cannot lift it. Some critics suggest that Mrs. Delacroix represents the duality of human nature: she is pleasant and friendly on the outside, but underneath she possesses a degree of savagery.

Mrs. Janey Dunbar
Janey Dunbar is the one woman at the lottery who has to draw for her family because her husband is at home with a broken leg. When Mr. Summers asks her if she has an older son who can do it for her, she says no and then, regretfully, "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year." She seems to accept the patriarchal system with complacency, but when the stoning begins she picks up only small stones and then says she cannot run and will "catch up." This is one of the few hopeful and seemingly compassionate actions in the story.

Mr. Graves
Mr. Graves is the village's postmaster, the second most powerful official in the community. He helps Joe Summers administer the lottery and, like Summers, represents tradition and the status quo.

Mrs. Graves
Mrs. Graves is one of the female villagers, and she seems to accept the lottery without question. When Tessie complains about the method of the drawing, she snaps, "All of us took the same chance." She is also at the front of the crowd when the stoning begins.

Bill Hutchinson
Bill Hutchinson is Tessie Hutchinson's husband. When Tessie questions the method of drawing, he says, "Shut up, Tessie"; he also forces the slip of paper with the black spot on it out of her hand and holds it up in front of the crowd. Bill's control over Tessie highlights the patriarchal system of the village. His unquestioning acceptance of the results of the lottery, despite the victim being his wife, emphasizes the brutality the villagers are willing to carry out in the name of tradition.
**Tessie Hutchinson**
A middle-aged housewife and mother of four children, Tessie Hutchinson "wins" the lottery and is stoned to death by her fellow villagers. Tessie arrives late at the event, stating that she forgot what day it was. She questions Joe Summers, the administrator of the lottery, about the fairness of the drawing after her family draws the unlucky slip. She also questions the tradition of married daughters drawing with their husband's family. When she draws the paper with the black mark on it, Tessie does not show it to the crowd; instead her husband Bill forces it from her hand and holds it up. Tessie's last words as she is being stoned are, "It isn't fair, it isn't right." By challenging the results of the lottery, Tessie represents one of the few voices of rebellion in a village controlled by tradition and complacency. Her low status as a woman has also led many critics to state that Tessie's fate illustrates the authority of men over women.

**Mr. Martin**
Mr. Martin is a grocer who holds the lottery box while the slips of paper are drawn by the villagers.

**Joe Summers**
Joe Summers is a revered member of the community, the village's most powerful and wealthy man, and the administrator of the lottery. He has no children and his wife is described as "a scold." In addition to representing tradition—he continually stresses the importance of ritual to the survival of the village—his character is said to symbolize the evils of capitalism and social stratification.

**Old Man Warner**
The oldest man in the village, Old Man Warner has participated in the lottery seventy-seven times. When Mr. Adams remarks to him that another village is thinking about giving up the lottery, Old Man Warner replies, "Pack of crazy fools." Resistant to change and representing the old social order, he goes on to insist how important the event is to the survival of the village. When Tessie draws the paper with the black mark on it, Old Man Warner is in the front of the crowd spurring on the others to stone her.
Donna Burrell has labeled Jackson’s method of analysis the “folklore of the modern suburb,” noting that Jackson is “concerned with representing particular societies or community systems, not simply a few of the members. To some degree the system is the protagonist; many of the events seem included merely to illustrate the interactions of the elements, and even the rules of the interactions.” As a result, Jackson’s characters are usually flat rather than round, developed only as much as is necessary to establish their position in the social system of the story.

“The Lottery,” Jackson’s most famous story, has been anthologized to a degree that makes it one of the few stories that one can assume nearly every American student has read. Jackson’s calm description of the lottery procedure—the reader is given more commonplace details about the workings of the lottery than about any of the characters—helps counterpoint the horror of the final ritual that the story leaves to the reader’s imagination. As Barbara Allen puts it, “The point of ‘The Lottery’ is that blind adherence to traditional forms of behavior that have lost their original meanings and acquired no new, positive ones, can be destructive.” A number of specific targets have been suggested for Jackson’s story, including American society’s obsession with finding scapegoats during the years of the Cold War and the House Un-American Activities Committee witch-hunts. The remarkable openness of the story, however, seems to make it an attack on all forms of destructive social behavior, and Jackson was particularly proud when the then-apartheid-based South African government banned the story. Almost all Jackson’s tales make the same point in one way or another, describing traditional forms of behavior that either lose their meaning for the protagonist or come into conflict with and, almost invariably, succeed in suppressing the protagonist’s personal impulses.

“Flower Garden,” one of Jackson’s finest and most fully developed stories, narrates the arrival of a new family, the MacLanes—a young widow and her small son—into a neighborhood from the point of view of Mrs. Winning (note again the ironically emblematic name), who has married into the oldest and richest family in the neighborhood and lives with her husband and children in the family house, under the rule of her husband’s parents, especially her mother-in-law, who is an inflexible and repressive domestic tyrant. The MacLanes move into the small cottage down the street that Mrs. Winning had always wished that she and her husband could have lived in, and her increasingly frequent visits to the cottage suggest that she is vicariously living out many of her own dreams of independence through Mrs. MacLane—perhaps the absence of a husband is one of those fantasies. The growing friendship between the two women is abruptly ended when Mrs. MacLane hires a black man to work in her flower garden and invites his son over to play with hers. Mrs. Winning, who has been set up as a sympathetic character by Jackson’s shrewd decision to tell the story from her point of view, represses her own personal affection for the family and takes her place in the neighborhood system as a true heir to the elder Mrs. Winning, treating the MacLanes as social outcasts.

A final permutation on the conflict between social systems and individual impulses is represented by “The Tooth.” Clara Spencer’s toothache forces her to take a bus to New York City to see a dentist, leaving her husband and children for a day or two. As in other stories, the small town and family she leaves represent a familiar and ordered world, but also repression and self-denial, while the city offers the possibility of personal
freedom at the risk of becoming uprooted (like the symbolic tooth) and losing touch with reality. A similar character in “Pillar of Salt” observes with terror, and eventually succumbs to, the phenomenon of “People starting to come apart” in the city; by the end of her story, Clara Spencer abandons her social role and slips into a fantasy world with a mysterious stranger named Jim (Harris, one assumes). As Richard Pascal explains in his insightful reading of “The Tooth,” “the sin of feeling solipsistically happy and free, it might seem, is punished by the damnation of madness.”
Critical Evaluation

The publication of “The Lottery” in The New Yorker in June of 1948 created a scandal. Many readers canceled their subscriptions to the venerable magazine, and others wrote threatening letters to its author, Shirley Jackson. Later generations were puzzled by this controversy. The sources for the furor and scandal can be found in the structure of the story and its themes, in the mood of Americans in the late 1940’s, in the prejudices held by the reading public against certain literary genres, in the venue in which the story appeared, and in Jackson’s persona.

“The Lottery” presents a prototypal example of the surprise ending. Many writers, including Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry, Saki, and H. H. Munro, made this sort of plot twist a hallmark of their craft. A decade later, two long-running television series, The Twilight Zone and Alfred Hitchcock Presents, regularly employed this device as well. Surprise endings often lead to reader delight, but not so with Jackson’s macabre story of human sacrifice. Jackson provides subtle hints in the story that something grim is in the offing—for example, the gathering of stones and rocks, the crowd’s sense of nervousness as the lottery proceeds, and Tessie’s alarm when her family “wins” the initial phase of the contest. Also, the lottery is held at the end of June, near the summer solstice, a time of year that features prominently in agricultural festivals throughout the Northern Hemisphere.

Nevertheless, the characters seem so wholesome, so stereotypically small-town American, that it is easy for the reader to overlook the clues that Jackson provides. Such subtlety is a hallmark of Jackson’s craft, one to which horror novelist Stephen King made reference in the dedication to his 1980 novel Firestarter: “In memory of Shirley Jackson, who never needed to raise her voice.” In this dedication, King lists four of Jackson’s most celebrated works, one of which is “The Lottery” and the other is Jackson’s best-known work of long fiction, The Haunting of Hill House. This novel, too, begins in June and ends with a similar, though symbolic, sacrifice.

The surprise ending to “The Lottery” also reveals Jackson’s dark themes, including the warping effect on society of mindless tradition. Old Man Warner, the embodiment of rigid tradition, seems to believe that the sacrifice is necessary to ensure sufficient food for the village, but the other villagers are maintaining the practice out of habit and sheer inertia. They have forgotten why they are doing the ritual and have let it become a corrupt, atrophied shade of its earlier form; still, they insist on keeping the lottery because it has always been done. Simply out of tradition, they unquestioningly stone to death a neighbor whom they were laughing and joking with minutes earlier.

An even more pessimistic theme of the story is its interrogation of altruism and humanitarianism. No one in the village shows any concern for justice and kindness except Tessie—and she, too, starts to complain about the lottery only when she realizes that it is going to directly affect her own family. In short, Jackson suggests that people are not concerned about injustice and kindness unless these problems touch them personally.

The story’s surprise ending and its unflattering depiction of human nature must have been especially unsettling to readers in the late 1940’s, when Americans were especially proud of the role they had played in defeating the Nazis in World War II. Having recently vanquished a cruel and inhumane enemy, perhaps Americans were not ready for a story that implied that they themselves could be cruel and inhumane. Jackson hints that these characteristics are woven into the fabric of the United States by giving her characters names that were prominent in the nation’s early years (for example, Adams and Hutchinson). The names Summers, Graves, and Delacroix—literally “of the cross”—reflect other themes and motifs implicit in the story, such as, respectively, agrarian tradition, death, and sacrifice.
Furthermore, a surprise ending involving human sacrifice placed “The Lottery” in the genre of horror fiction, a type of writing dismissed as unsophisticated and sensationalistic and, therefore, fodder for cheap pulp magazines. The New Yorker had been the most prestigious venue for short fiction in the mid-twentieth century, and its subscribers must have felt duped into reading what they thought was “trashy” writing.

Adding to the reading public’s angry response to “The Lottery” was Jackson’s public persona. In 1948, she was known as a writer of humorous articles and short stories detailing her experiences as a housewife and mother of four children. Few if any readers would have expected from her a harrowing depiction of blind tradition and merciless selfishness, like that revealed in “The Lottery.”
Critical Overview

When "The Lottery" was first published in The New Yorker on June 26, 1948, it generated more mail than any other story published in the magazine up until that time. According to Jackson, three main themes dominated the letters: "bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse." Since then, critical opinion has been both ambivalent and diverse, with critics agreeing only that the story's meaning cannot be determined with exactitude. Early reviewers such as Heilman praised the emotional impact of the story's ending but suggested that Jackson took liberties with plot by suddenly interjecting into a seemingly ordinary environment the horrifying reality of the lottery. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren also suggested unease with the story's structure when they wrote in Understanding Fiction that Jackson "has preferred to give no key to her parable but to leave its meaning to our inference." Despite such comments, however, these critics applauded Jackson's focus on scapegoatism, victimization, and other themes relevant to contemporary society. Helen E. Nebeker summed up the ambivalence evident in early criticism when she wrote in American Literature in 1974 that "beneath the praise of these critics frequently runs a current of uneasiness, a sense of having been defrauded in some way by the development of the story as a whole."

While critics continued to concede that it was Jackson's intention to avoid specific meaning in "The Lottery," some nonetheless faulted what they considered the story's flatly drawn characters, unrevealing dialogue, and detached narrative style. They contended that because Jackson did not provide many details about the villagers, readers are unable to identify with or feel emotionally attached to the characters. Others, however, argued that "The Lottery" is a modern-day parable, a story intended to teach a lesson, and that the qualities disparaged by some critics are consistent with that type of literature.

More recent critics have commented on the relationships between men and women in the story. Fritz Oehlschlaeger, for example, stated in Essays in Literature that the story is a "depiction of a patriarchal society's way of controlling female sexuality." Others have read it from a Marxist perspective in which the consequences of class stratification are a primary focus. These critics have suggested that such village officials as Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves represent the upper class because of their power and money, while such characters as Bill Hutchinson and Mr. Adams represent the working class. Writing in The New Orleans Review, Peter Kosenko stated that "the lottery's rules of participation reflect and codify a rigid social hierarchy based upon an inequitable division of labor." "The Lottery" has also been read as a psychological horror story because of its focus on the willingness of people to engage collectively in abhorrent behavior. Although critical opinion continues to be mixed, "The Lottery" remains one of the most widely anthologized short stories of the modern era. The majority of commentators argue that because of its parable-like structure, Jackson is able to address a variety of timeless issues with contemporary meaning, thereby stirring her readers to reflective thought and debate.
Introduction to "The Lottery"
Although Shirley Jackson wrote many books, children's stories and humorous pieces, she is most remembered for her story "The Lottery." In "The Lottery" Jackson portrays the average citizens of an average village taking part in an annual sacrifice of one of their own residents. When the story was published in the New Yorker magazine in 1948, reader response was tremendous. People were horrified by the story and wrote to express their disgust that a tale containing a pointless, arbitrary, violent sacrifice had been allowed to be published. Some also called to see where the town was so that they could go and watch the lottery. It is this last behavior, the need to feel a part of the gruesomeness that exists in American society, that Jackson so skillfully depicts in "The Lottery."

Take for instance the recent fascination with television talk shows. On these programs we learn more than we want to about dysfunctional families, dysfunctional individuals, murder and mayhem. Even our print media proclaims our atrocities toward one another each day on their front pages. Yet Jackson wrote "The Lottery" in 1948—before gang violence, teen suicides, the threat of nuclear war, and handgun crimes reached epidemic proportions. Was Jackson looking into the future of the American society?

It has been noted that Jackson saw herself as a psychic even as a young girl. She had read more than her fair share of books dealing with witchcraft and the occult and wrote about the Salem witch trials. But, perhaps more than having clairvoyant powers, Jackson had an ability to see our present in our past. She understood that barbaric rituals once used to sustain the community in a harsh environment were often continued to enact a sense of unity and history within the community, even if they were no longer necessary.

Geoffrey Wolff, in an article in The New Leader, sees the communal bond as coming from a sort of democratic misconduct. He writes, "The story seems perfectly true. A sense of community is won at a price, and communal guilt and fear are seen as more binding than communal love." Certainly Jackson's story could be true. From the exactness of the June 27th date in the first line to the myriad details of the environment and its inhabitants, one can picture herself or himself in similar surroundings. Most of us have "stood together ... [and] greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip" before joining the rest of our family at a social gathering. Jackson even lets us know the habits of Mr. Summers and how he "was very good at all this, in his clean white shirt and blue jeans." We know the conversations of "planting and rain, tractors and taxes" of the men and the mundane housekeeping details of the women. Through these details Jackson allows us to identify with the town's lottery day, and to feel as if we are a part of their community.

We also see the fear of the townspeople. We see it in the way the summer vacation's "liberty sat uneasily on most" of the schoolchildren, and again in the uneasy hesitation before Mr. Martin and his son Baxter volunteer to help Mr. Summers stir the papers. The fear becomes more noticeable during the drawing when people were "wet ting their lips, not looking around" and holding "the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously." The fear is blatantly apparent once the Hutchinson family had been chosen and Nancy's friends 'breathed heavily as she went forward.' But, what we do not see is a sense of guilt in the townspeople to which Wolfe refers. Instead, we see Mr. Summers teaching Davy, the youngest of the Hutchinsons, how to participate in the ritual. We see the exuberantly grateful behavior of Nancy and Bill Jr., the other Hutchinson children, as they "both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads." They are certainly old enough to know that one from their family will be chosen as the sacrificial lamb, yet they show no remorse or guilt that it is not them. We even see that someone gives "little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" with which he can stone his mother. Perhaps then, the sense of guilt may be felt more by the reader of the story. The narrative technique used by Jackson helps the reader identify early on with the townspeople. When the story ends, the reader is then angered and feels that she or he has participated in the stoning through his or her identification with the characters.
It is the scapegoating of Tess Hutchinson that appalls us in the same way we are appalled by the atrocities we witness on the nightly news. Lenemaja Friedman writes in her book entitled Shirley Jackson that "the lottery may be symbolic of any of a number of social ills that mankind blindly perpetuates." Perhaps it is because Jackson has managed to identify with those who do the scapegoating that so much has been written about the story. Each critic tries to see something new and tie the story to his or her views of the world.

Peter Kosenko, for instance, writes an extensive analysis in New Orleans Review in which he suggests that "The Lottery" serves as an analogy of an "essentially capitalist" social order and ideology. This theory can be seen as viable if one studies the economic and political structures of Marxism and capitalism. On the other hand, critics with more of a sociological bent, such as Carol Cleveland, view the story as a fable. In her essay in And Then There Were Nine ... More Women of Mystery, Cleveland says Jackson depicts American society as "acting collectively and purposefully, like a slightly preoccupied lynch mob." With this interpretation, greed and corruption become collective characteristics of a society. Still others, wielding a historical perspective, tie the theme of "The Lottery" to the Bible or the Salem witch trials. In particular these critics often mention Jesus' proclamation "let those of you without sin cast the first stone," or the fact that Jackson jokingly claimed that she was the only practicing witch in New England. Others examine the story from a feminist perspective. They criticize the patriarchal nature of the village and point out that the goal of the sacrifice was "to contain the potentially disruptive force of an awakened female sexuality," as Fritz Oehlschlaeger states in Essays in Literature.

How then is one to really understand this powerful story? Perhaps on the most basic level, it can be viewed as a story of man's inhumanity toward man which permeates even the most outwardly looking pleasant places. Jackson, who lived for a time in Bennington, Vermont, said after the publication of "The Lottery" that she used the town and its inhabitants as models for the story. Yet Bennington was and still is a well-to-do town in southwestern Vermont. It boasts affluent families and convenient access to New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. Scores of tourists travel its roads in the fall, gazing at autumn leaves against a backdrop of beautiful Green Mountains. Bennington was not evil. From where then does the pervasive evil come?

Jackson takes pains in her story to let the reader understand that the yearly stoning was a longstanding ritual. She mentions that the "original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago," and "so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded." Although a ritual is any activity that is followed on a regular basis, we most often think of them as ceremonial, religious activities. In fact, Jackson points us in this direction when Old Man Warner states, "There used to be a saying about Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." This statement reminds readers of what they have learned about ancient sacrifices made in the name of various gods. It has been almost two thousand years since the Christians were sacrificed to the lions in Rome; but some cultures still believe that sacrifices made to the gods will provide them with healthy crops. Although several critics have noted the lack of religion in any of Jackson's work, one is left to wonder whether Jackson is condemning the hypocrisy of present day religions which espouse the "Golden Rule." Certainly, after reading the story, one wonders where current day religious principles are in this small pastoral community. How is it that an entire village can so complacently stone to death one of its own each year? More importantly, how can so many towns participate in the same ritual? Although Mrs. Adams offers some hope when she says that "some places have already quit lotteries," Old Man Warner makes it clear that to do so would be the same as "wanting to go back to living in caves."

The fact that only men inhabit positions of responsibility in the town and the fact that only men are allowed to draw during the household choosing phase of the lottery overshadows Mrs. Adams's statement. The way the men of the village say "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it," further emphasizes the patriarchal nature of the village, and the hopeful optimism of Mrs. Adams's remark is buried within the town's demand for tradition and ritual.
The Stoning of Mistress Hutchinson: Meaning and Context in "The Lottery"
In a 1979 article Richard H. Williams notes what he takes to be a "flaw" in the two-stage process by which the victim is selected in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Readers of the story will recall that the first round of the drawing determines a household from which the victim is to be drawn; the second round, the single victim from within that household. Williams points out that under such a system "individuals who are members of smaller families are more likely to be chosen as the sacrificial victim," and he then proposes a new plan that would keep the two-stage process but have the same effect as simply "selecting one individual at random from the village" ["A Critique of the Sampling Plan Used in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" Journal of Modern Literature]. But perhaps instead of correcting the story's "flaws," we should look at the lottery as Jackson designs it for a key to its meaning. The nature of the process by which the victim is selected gives each woman a very clear incentive to produce the largest possible family. Each child she has gives her a better chance of surviving if the marked paper falls to her household in the first round. What I am suggesting, then, is that one way the story can be seen is as the depiction of a patriarchal society's way of controlling female sexuality. Helen Nebeker has argued that the story presents a ritual that has outlived the fertility function it once had in an earlier myth-oriented time. Such an argument overlooks the real and continuing function of the lottery as it is organized. That function remains the encouraging of fertility within marriage, along with the patriarchal domination that accompanies it.

A conflict between male authority and female resistance is subtly evident throughout "The Lottery." Early in the story, the boys make a "great pile of stones in one corner of the square," while the girls stand aside "talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys." Later, as the Hutchinsons file up to draw their papers from the box, it is a girl who whispers, "I hope it's not Nancy." This girl's expression of a purely personal feeling is perceived by Old Man Warner as a threat to the social order, as is indicated by his bitterly exclaiming, "It's not the way it used to be," when presumably everyone subordinated personal feelings to the social demands of the ritual. It is also a woman, Mrs. Adams, who presents the story's most significant challenge to the lottery. When at one point her husband Mr. Adams remarks that "over in the North village they're talking of giving up the lottery," Old Man Warner gives vent to a tirade on the folly of departing from what has always served its purpose. Mr. Adams makes no response, but his wife does, pointing out to the Old Man that "some places have already quit lotteries," an oblique but nevertheless real gesture of resistance. That Jackson wants us to read Mrs. Adams's statement as a gesture of resistance is reinforced by what she does with the Adamses at the end of the story. Mr. Adams is at the front of the crowd of villagers as they set upon Tessie Hutchinson. No mention, however, is made of Mrs. Adams's being involved in the stoning.

There is a strong pattern of detail in the story, then, suggesting that those who are most discomfited by, or resistant to, the lottery are women. On the other hand, men control the lottery. Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves are its official priestly administrators, and when they need help, they inquire whether any of the "fellows" might want to give a hand. The lottery is arranged by families and households, women being assigned to the households of their husbands, who draw for them in the initial round. That the society is a heavily patriarchal one is suggested in many other ways as well. As the people gather at the outset of the story, the women stand "by their husbands," and Jackson sharply distinguishes female from male authority: when Mrs. Martin calls her son Bobby, he "ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones," but when "his father spoke up sharply," Bobby "came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother." Later when Mrs. Hutchinson complains that the draw has been unfair, her husband tersely and authoritatively commands her, "Shut up, Tessie." And when it becomes clear that Tessie has drawn the marked paper, Bill "forced the slip of paper out of her hand" and "held it up" for the crowd to see. The details Jackson chooses to describe the administrator of the lottery, Mr. Summers, and his wife further clarify the nature of male power and female submission in the lottery's community. Mr. Summers is given his position

Source: Jennifer Hicks, for Short Stories for Students, Gale Research, 1997.
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because people feel "sorry for him" as one who "had no children" and whose "wife was a scold." The woman who is without children is dismissed as a "scold," a challenge to male authority. The childless man, on the other hand, is elevated to a place of special responsibility and even sanctity....

Jackson had a clear precedent in New England history of ritual, collective murder in which women responded to the pressures of male authority by betraying one another: the trial and execution of the Salem witches. Some years after she wrote "The Lottery," Jackson wrote about the witchcraft hysteria in a book for adolescents called *The Witchcraft of Salem Village*.

Some of the similarities between that book and the story are so close as to suggest that the witch trials may have been in Jackson's mind when she was writing "The Lottery." The description of people gathering for the first day's examination of the witches, for instance, closely parallels the opening of "The Lottery": "By early morning, almost the entire population of the village was assembled, the grownups talking anxiously and quietly together, the children running off down the road and back again, with wild excited shouts." As the lottery is conducted by a pair of men, so the witch examinations are presided over by a pair of magistrates, one of whom, Hathorne, is clearly, like Mr. Summers, in control. In addition, Jackson's explanation of how the delusion began could apply equally well to the reasons behind the lottery's continuing hold on its people. Discussing the role of Mr. Paris, minister in Salem village and father of one of the children believed to be afflicted by the witches, Jackson remarks: "No one dared to leave the only protection offered the people—the protection of Mr. Paris and their church. Eventually they came to believe that if they worked together wholeheartedly and without mercy they could root out the evil already growing among them." These lines reiterate the central, terrifying import of "The Lottery": that people can be brought to work together wholeheartedly and without mercy if they believe that their protection depends upon it.

A very important similarity between Massachusetts at the time of the witchcraft hysteria and the village of Jackson's story lies in the relations of power between men and women. As in Jackson's village, all power in the witchcraft trials lay with men: Mr. Paris; Magistrates Hathorne and Corwin; Deputy Governor Thomas Danforth; Judges James Russell, Isaac Addington, Major Samuel Appleton, and Captain Samuel Sewall. The "afflicted" in the trial were girls, who, like Tessie Hutchinson, responded to the pressure of male authority by betraying others of their own sex. Although Jackson does not include specific demographic information about the witches in her book on Salem, it is worth adding that Tessie Hutchinson conforms rather well to the profile of women found to be witches. Carol Karlsen has shown that the group most vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft included women between the ages of forty and sixty, or past the prime childbearing years. Accused women in this age group were also more likely to be executed than younger women suspected of witchcraft. The ages of Tessie's four children indicate that she is past the years of her peak fertility. Jackson does not give us all these ages specifically, but we do know that Tessie has a daughter old enough to be married, a son whose "overlarge" feet and order in the lottery mark him as an adolescent, a twelve-year-old daughter Nancy, and a boy so young that he must be helped to draw his piece of paper. Tessie is, then, both a woman approaching middle age and one who has had recent difficulty in conceiving children, as the age gap between Nancy and little Dave indicates. I am not arguing that there is collusion between the men who administer the lottery and Bill Hutchinson to eliminate Tessie because she has passed the peak years of childbearing. What I am suggesting, however, is this: that given the purpose of fertility within marriage that the design of the lottery unquestionably fosters, Tessie is an extremely appropriate victim.

It might be objected to my line of argument that the lottery also apparently has male victims. But such is obviously a necessary part of the process by which it retains its hold over the people who participate in it. A lottery that killed only women over forty could hardly expect to retain popular support for long, at least in part because it would lose its mystery. The lottery must appear to be fair, and it must give the villagers the sense of being narrowly spared by a mysterious power and thus justified. Still I would insist that we cannot discount Tessie's charge that the lottery is not fair. On one level, as John H. Williams has pointed out, the lottery is indeed unfair; its two-stage design means that the selection of a victim is not a purely random process.
Moreover, we cannot deny Tessie's charge by saying that all the operations of the lottery appear to be fairly handled, for an obviously flawed lottery would neither mystify the villagers nor interest the reader. Neither can we argue for its fairness by saying that no one, other than Tessie, comments on any unfairness, for obviously everyone has a very strong stake in believing it was conducted fairly. In short, if the lottery is unfair, it is reasonable to assume that its lack of fairness would be evident only to the victim.

A reading of the story in the several contexts I have supplied here dramatically underscores what is evident from the design of the lottery itself: that its primary social consequence involves women's turning over the control of their fertility to men. Jackson depicts a society in which authority is male, potential resistance female. As in the history of Anne Hutchison and The Scarlet Letter, women in "The Lottery" represent the personal, the conviction that, as Michael Colacurcio has said of Hester Prynne, life is more than "the sum of its legally regulated outward works." The young girl's simple hope that the victim not be her friend Nancy is the force that would destroy the lottery, as Old Man Warner recognizes. Suppression of the personal is the function of the lottery, which it accomplishes primarily by causing women to submit control of their sexuality to men of secular and priestly authority. The design of the lottery is without flaw; it serves perfectly the patriarchal purpose of denying women consciousness by insisting that they remain part of nature, part of the fertile earth itself....


On the Morning of June 28, 1948, and "The Lottery"
On the morning of June 28, 1948, I walked down to the post office in our little Vermont town to pick up the mail. I was quite casual about it, as I recall—I opened the box, took out a couple of bills and a letter or two, talked to the postmaster for a few minutes, and left, never supposing that it was the last time for months that I was to pick up the mail without an active feeling of panic. By the next week I had had to change my mailbox to the largest one in the post office, and casual conversation with the postmaster was out of the question, because he wasn't speaking to me. June 28, 1948, was the day The New Yorker came out with a story of mine in it. It was not my first published story, nor my last, but I have been assured over and over that if it had been the only story I ever wrote or published, there would be people who would not forget my name.

I had written the story three weeks before, on a bright June morning when summer seemed to have come at last, with blue skies and warm sun and no heavenly signs to warn me that my morning's work was anything but just another story. The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller—it was, as I say, a warm morning, and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries—and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. As a matter of fact, when I read it over later I decided that except for one or two minor corrections, it needed no changes, and the story I finally typed up and sent off to my agent the next day was almost word for word the original draft. This, as any writer of stories can tell you, is not a usual thing. All I know is that when I came to read the story over I felt strongly that I didn't want to fuss with it. I didn't think it was perfect, but I didn't want to fuss with it. It was, I thought, a serious, straightforward story, and I was pleased and a little surprised at the ease with which it had been written; I was reasonably proud of it, and hoped that my agent would sell it to some magazine and I would have the gratification of seeing it in print.

My agent did not care for the story, but—as she said in her note at the time—her job was to sell it, not to like it. She sent it at once to The New Yorker, and about a week after the story had been written I received a telephone call from the fiction editor of The New Yorker; it was quite clear that he did not really care for the story, either, but The New Yorker was going to buy it. He asked for one change—that the date mentioned in the story be changed to coincide with the date of the issue of the magazine in which the story would appear, and I
said of course. He then asked, hesitantly, if I had any particular interpretation of my own for the story; Mr. Harold Ross, then the editor of *The New Yorker*, was not altogether sure that he understood the story, and wondered if I cared to enlarge upon its meaning. I said no. Mr. Ross, he said, thought that the story might be puzzling to some people, and in case anyone telephoned the magazine, as sometimes happened, or wrote in asking about the story, was there anything in particular I wanted them to say? No, I said, nothing in particular; it was just a story I wrote.

I had no more preparation than that. I went on picking up the mail every morning, pushing my daughter up and down the hill in her stroller, anticipating pleasurably the check from *The New Yorker*, and shopping for groceries. The weather stayed nice and it looked as though it was going to be a good summer. Then, on June 28, *The New Yorker* came out with my story.

Things began mildly enough with a note from a friend at *The New Yorker*: "Your story has kicked up quite a fuss around the office," he wrote. I was flattered; it's nice to think that your friends notice what you write. Later that day there was a call from one of the magazine's editors; they had had a couple of people phone in about my story, he said, and was there anything I particularly wanted him to say if there were any more calls? No, I said, nothing particular; anything he chose to say was perfectly all right with me; it was just a story.

I was further puzzled by a cryptic note from another friend: "Heard a man talking about a story of yours on the bus this morning," she wrote. "Very exciting. I wanted to tell him I knew the author, but after I heard what he was saying I decided I'd better not."

One of the most terrifying aspects of publishing stories and books is the realization that they are going to be read, and read by strangers. I had never fully realized this before, although I had of course in my imagination dwelt lovingly upon the thought of the millions and millions of people who were going to be uplifted and enriched and delighted by the stories I wrote. It had simply never occurred to me that these millions and millions of people might be so far from being uplifted that they would sit down and write me letters I was downright scared to open; of the three-hundred-odd letters that I received that summer I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from friends. Even my mother scolded me: "Dad and I did not care at all for your story in *The New Yorker," she wrote sternly, "it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?"

By mid-July I had begun to perceive that I was very lucky indeed to be safely in Vermont, where no one in our small town had ever heard of *The New Yorker*, much less read my story. Millions of people, and my mother, had taken a pronounced dislike to me.

The magazine kept no track of telephone calls, but all letters addressed to me care of the magazine were forwarded directly to me for answering, and all letters addressed to the magazine—some of them addressed to Harold Ross personally; these were the most vehement—were answered at the magazine and then the letters were sent to me in great batches, along with carbons of the answers written at the magazine. I have all the letters still, and if they could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public, or the reading public of *The New Yorker*, or even the reading public of one issue of *The New Yorker*, I would stop writing now.

Judging from these letters, people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at. Many of the writers were positive that *The New Yorker* was going to ridicule them in print, and the most cautious letters were headed, in capital letters: NOT FOR PUBLICATION or PLEASE DO NOT PRINT THIS LETTER, or, at best THIS LETTER MAY BE PUBLISHED AT YOUR USUAL RATES OF PAYMENT. Anonymous letters, of which there were a few, were destroyed. *The New Yorker* never published any comment of any kind about the story in the magazine, but did issue one publicity release.
saying that the story had received more mail than any piece of fiction they had ever published; this was after the newspapers had gotten into the act, in midsummer, with a front-page story in the San Francisco Chronicle begging to know what the story meant, and a series of columns in New York and Chicago papers pointing out that New Yorker subscriptions were being canceled right and left.

Curiously, there are three main themes which dominate the letters of that first summer—three themes which might be identified as bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse. In the years since then, during which the story has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and even—in one completely mystifying transformation—made into a ballet, the tenor of letters I receive has changed. I am addressed more politely, as a rule, and the letters largely confine themselves to questions like what does this story mean? The general tone of the early letters, however, was a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch.


Jackson's "The Lottery"
Shirley Jackson's provocative "The Lottery" is a story in which anthropology provides the chief symbol. Frazer's The Scapegoat (The Golden Bough, Part VI, 3rd ed., 1913) makes it clear that the lottery is Miss Jackson's modern representation of the primitive annual scapegoat rite. The story imagines that, in some typical American community, the rite still flourishes.

The story begins on the morning of June 27. (Frazer: the rite often occurred at the time of the summer solstice.) The first to gather at the square where the lottery is to be held are the children. School recently over, they take to their new liberty uneasily, gathering together quietly at first before breaking into boisterous play, their talk "still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands." (Frazer: the rite was commonly preceded or followed by a period of general license, during which ordinary restraints were thrown aside and offenses went unpunished.)

The scapegoat rite had a double purpose: to exorcise the evils of the old year by transferring them to some inanimate or animate objects, and with that "solemn and public banishment of evil spirits" [The Golden Bough] to appease the forces of the new year, to insure fertility. Primitive man, it seems, could not distinguish natural from moral phenomena: the forces of the seasons had to be placated. Similarly, the men of "The Lottery" (suburbanite and rural) cannot distinguish natural from social phenomena: anybody criticizing the social order works against the natural rightness of things. The evidence: on the public square, after the children have assembled, the men come—"Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes." Old Man Warner says: "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for them. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.'"

The lottery is conducted by Mr. Summers, "who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a roundfaced jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him because he had no children and his wife was a scold." Summers is the appropriate leader of the rite, as his name would indicate, as his job would too, the providing of fuel, but who is more barren, more unhappy, more willing "to shift the burden of his pains and sorrows to another, who will suffer them in his stead" [The Golden Bough]?

The other characters are typical: Old Man Warner, the reactionary advocate of the lottery; Mr. Hutchinson, the typical citizen, disliking the lottery, but accepting it as inevitable; Mrs. Delacroix, the uneasy outsider, the most friendly to the destined victim before the lottery and the most ferocious in her attack afterwards.
The theme of the story: beneath our civilized surface, patterns of savage behavior are at work. The theme is mirrored in the gruesome unfolding of the lottery rite. However, Miss Jackson is optimistic: some villages have abandoned the lottery; and the children, unlike their elders, preserve an uncontaminated affection for one another.

**Source:** Seymour Lainhoff, "Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" in *Explicator*, Vol. XII, No. 5, 1954, p. 34.
The Lottery Jackson, Shirley

Introduction

"The Lottery" Shirley Jackson

The following entry presents criticism on Jackson's short story "The Lottery" (1948). See also Shirley Jackson Contemporary Literary Criticism.

Jackson's fiction is noted for exploring incongruities in everyday life, and "The Lottery," perhaps her most exemplary work in this respect, examines humanity's capacity for evil within a contemporary, familiar, American setting. Noting that the story's characters, physical environment, and even its climactic action lack significant individuating detail, most critics view "The Lottery" as a modern-day parable or fable which obliquely addresses a variety of themes, including the dark side of human nature, the danger of ritualized behavior, and the potential for cruelty when the individual submits to the mass will.

Plot and Major Characters

"The Lottery" concerns an annual summer drawing held in a small unnamed American town. As the townspeople gather and wait for the ceremony to begin, some calmly piling stones together, they discuss everyday matters of work and family, behaving in ways that suggest the ordinariness of their lives and of the impending event. Tessie Hutchinson, arriving late, talks with her friend, Mrs. Delacroix, about the household chores that almost made her miss the lottery. Although everyone appears to agree that the annual lottery is important, no one seems to know when it began or what its original purpose was. As Mr. Summers reads off an alphabetical list of names, the heads of each household come forward to select a folded slip of paper from an old black wooden box. Bill Hutchinson draws the paper with the black mark on it, and people immediately begin speculating about which Hutchinson will actually "win" the drawing. Each member of Bill's family then draws a slip from the box. Tessie selects the paper with the black mark on it, and she vigorously protests the unfairness of the drawing. The townspeople refuse to listen to her, and as the story ends they begin to pelt her with the stones they have gathered.

Major Themes

The principal themes of "The Lottery" rely on the incongruous union of decency and evil in human nature. Citing James G. Frazer's anthropological study of primitive societies, *The Golden Bough* (1890), many critics observe that the story reflects humankind's ancient need for a scapegoat, a figure upon which it can project its most undesirable qualities, and which can be destroyed in a ritually absolving sacrifice. Unlike primitive peoples, however, the townspeople in "The Lottery"—insofar as they represent contemporary Western society—should possess social, religious, and moral prohibitions against annual lethal stonings. Commentators variously argue that it is the very ritualization that makes the murder palatable to otherwise decent people; the ritual, and fulfilling its tradition, justifies and masks the brutality. As a modern parable on the dualism of human nature, "The Lottery" has been read as addressing such issues as the public's fascination with salacious and scandalizing journalism, McCarthyism, and the complicity of the general public in the victimization of minority groups, epitomized by the Holocaust of World War II.

Critical Reception

"The Lottery" was first published in *The New Yorker* magazine on 26 June 1948, and it generated hundreds of letters from readers, the vast majority of whom were confused as to the story's meaning. According to Lenemaja Friedman, three "main characteristics dominated the letters: bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse." Since then, critical reception has generally been very favorable, and "The Lottery" has
been anthologized many times. Those critics who read the story as a traditional narrative tend to fault its surprise ending and lack of character development as unrealistic, unbelievable, and making reader identification difficult. Other commentators, however, view "The Lottery" as a modern-day parable; they argue that the elements of the story often disparaged by its critics are actually consistent with the style and structure of New Testament parables and to stories from the Old Testament. Generally, critics agree only that the story's meaning cannot be determined with exactitude. While most critics concede that it was Jackson's intention to avoid specific meaning, some cite flatly drawn characters, unrevealing dialogue, and the shocking ending as evidence of literary infertility. The majority of commentators, though, argue that the story's art lies in its provocativeness and that with its parable-like structure Jackson is able to address a variety of timeless issues with contemporary resonance, and thereby stir her readers to reflective thought and debate.

Principal Works
The Road through the Wall (novel) 1948
*The Lottery; or The Adventures of James Harris* (short stories) 1949
*Hangsaman* (novel) 1951
*Life among the Savages* (nonfiction) 1953
†*The Bird's Nest* (novel) 1954
*Witchcraft of Salem Village* (juvenile fiction) 1956
*Raising Demons* (nonfiction) 1957
*The Sundial* (novel) 1958
*The Bad Children: A Play in One Act for Bad Children* (drama) 1959
‡*The Haunting of Hill House* (novel) 1959
*We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (novel) 1962
§*The Magic of Jackson* (short stories and novels) 1966
§*Come along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories, and Three Lectures* (short stories, novel, and lectures) 1968

s work was published as *The Other Side of the Street* in 1956.

†This work was published as *Lizzie* in 1957.

‡This novel served as the basis for the film *The Haunting* (1963), written by Nelson Gidding and directed by Robert Wise.

§These works were edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman.

Criticisms
Robert B. Heilman (essay date 1950)

*[Heilman is an English professor and the author of several works on drama, comedy, and the humanities. In the following essay on "The Lottery," Heilman discusses how Jackson's shift "from a realistic to a symbolic technique" intensifies the shock value of the story's ending.]*

Miss Jackson's story ["The Lottery"] is remarkable for the tremendous shock produced by the ending. Let us ignore the problem of meaning for the moment and see how the shock is created. In general, the method is quite easily recognized. Up to the last six paragraphs the story is written in the manner of a realistic transcript of small-town experience: the day is a special one, true, but the occasion is familiar, and for the most part the people are presented as going through a well-known routine. We see them as decent, friendly, neighborly people; in fact, most of the details could be used just as they are in a conventional picture of idyllic
small-town life. Things are easily, simply told, as if in a factual chronicle (note the use of date and hour). Suddenly, in the midst of this ordinary, matter-of-fact environment, there occurs a terrifyingly cruel action, official, accepted, yet for the reader mysterious and unexplained. It is entirely out of line with all the terms of actual experience in which the story has otherwise dealt. It is as if ordinary life had suddenly ceased and were replaced, without warning, without break, and without change of scene, by some horrifying nightmare. Hence the shock, which the author has very carefully worked up to. Note how the shock is enhanced by the deadpan narrative style, which in no way suggests that anything unusual is going on.

In one sense the author has prepared for the ending. A few slight notes of nervousness, the talk about giving up the tradition, and the emotional outburst by Mrs. Hutchinson all suggest some not entirely happy outcome. Still more important in building up an unusually strong sense of expectation is the entire absence of explanation of the public ceremony. (At the end, the reader recalls the gathering of stones earlier in the story. This unobtrusive introduction of stage properties for later use exemplifies the well-made kind of construction.) But all these preparations still look forward to an outcome which will fall within the realistic framework that the author has chosen to use. Yet the ending is not realistic: it is symbolic. We may summarize the method of the story by saying that it suddenly, without notice, shifts from a realistic to a symbolic technique. This is another way of describing the shock.

Here we come to the problem of meaning. The experienced reader will recognize immediately what Miss Jackson has done: she has taken the ancient ritual of the scapegoat—the sacrificing of an individual on whom the evils of the community are ceremonially laid (by looking up "scapegoat" in Frazer's *Golden Bough* the student can find accounts of many such practices)—and plunged it into an otherwise realistic account of contemporary American life. What the story appears to be saying, then, is that though ancient rituals die out, the habits of mind which brought them into being persist; that we still find scapegoats and "innocent victims."

The critical question is: Does the effect of shock really serve the symbolic intention of the story? Ideally, shock should have the effect of shaking up the accustomed habits of mind and, therefore, of compelling a more incisive observation of familiar ways of life. But shock may disturb as well as stimulate the mind and may leave the reader only feeling shaken up. The question here is whether the shock "seizes stage," so to speak, and so crowds out the revelation to which it should be secondary. It is difficult to shift from genial chatter—even with some overtones of fear—to ritual murder without leaving a sense of an unclosed gap. The risk would have been greatly lessened if atmosphere, instead of being used intentionally to emphasize the sense of the ordinary, had been used earlier in the story to introduce an element of the sinister. It would clearly have been most difficult to suggest the coexistence of the sinister and the innocuous from the start. But this would have been an ideal method, since that coexistence is really the human fact with which the story is concerned. But the story gives us the sinister after the innocuous, instead of the two simultaneously. To put it in other terms, the symbolic intention of the story could have been made clear earlier so that throughout the story we would have been seeking the symbolic level instead of being driven to look for it only retrospectively, after it has suddenly become apparent that a realistic reading will not work. (In [Kafka's] "The Hunger Artist," for instance, we have the symbolic figure—the hunger artist—as the center of attention from the start; we know immediately that the story goes beyond realism, and so we always read with an eye on the underlying meaning.) To set us immediately on the track of the symbolism would probably reduce the shock, but it might result in a more durable story.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (essay date 1959)


[Brooks was one of the most influential of the "New Critics"; he espoused a critical method characterized by a close reading of texts in which an individual work is evaluated solely on the basis of its internal components. Warren was the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of All the King's Men (1947), Promises: Poems, 1954–1956]
The plot [of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"] is so simple that to some readers it may seem to lack sufficient complication to be interesting. The story seems to do no more than recount the drawing of lots to determine which citizen of the village shall be stoned to death. There is no conflict—at least of the kind that occurs between tangible forces—no decision to be arrived at, no choice between two goods or two evils. There is no development of plot through human struggle and effort: the issue of life and death turns upon pure chance. The suspense secured is the simplest kind possible: which unlucky person will chance determine to be the victim?

Even this suspense is largely undercut by the fact that character interest in the story is also at a minimum. We are not brought close up to any of the characters. We learn little about their inner natures. There is nothing to distinguish them from ten thousand other people and indeed it becomes clear that they represent no more than the typical inhabitants of a New England village. The author seems deliberately to have played down any distinguishing traits. The victim herself, it is made very clear, is simply the typical small-town housewife.

Yet the story makes a very powerful impact, and the handling of plot and character must finally be judged, in terms of the story's development, to be very skillful. Obviously this story, unlike "The Man Who Would Be King," and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," has been sharply titled toward theme. The reaction of most readers, as a matter of fact, tends to center on this problem: what does the story—granted its power—mean? It is not really a story about the victim, Mrs. Hutchinson. It is not literally about life in an American village, since the events portrayed are fantastic events. What then is the story "about"?

Before trying to answer the question specifically, one ought to say that this story is a kind of fable. The general flatness of characterization—the fact that the characters are all simply variants of the ordinary human being, and the fantastic nature of the plot make this rather clear. The most famous early fables, Aesop's fables, for example, give us fantastic situations in which animals are actuated by human motivations, speak like human beings, and reveal themselves as rather transparent instances of certain human types. But Aesop's fables usually express a fairly explicit comment on life which can be expressed as a moral. For example, a popular translation of the fable of the fox and the grapes concludes with the moral tag: "It is easy to despise what you cannot get."

The family resemblance of "The Lottery" to the fable is concealed in part by the fact that "The Lottery" does not end with a neat moral tag and indeed avoids focusing upon a particular meaning. This latter point, however, we shall consider a little later.

The general pattern of this story may also be said to resemble that of the parable. In a parable the idea or truth is presented by a simple narrative in which the events, persons, and the like, of the narrative are understood as being directly equivalent to terms involved in the statement of the truth. For example, let us look at the parable of the sower, in the Gospel according to Saint Mark:

Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:

And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.

And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:
But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.

And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.

Later, Jesus explains and interprets the parable to his disciples:

The sower soweth the word.

And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.

And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.

And these are they which are sown among thorns: such as heat the word.

And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

In a parable, it is plain, characterization is reduced to a minimum: the sower is any sower. And the action is reduced to a minimum too. We need only so much of narrative as will make the point that the speaker wishes to make. But if "The Lottery" in its relative thinness of characterization and its relative simplicity of narration resembles the parable, it is obviously not a naked parable. The author has taken pains to supply a great deal of concrete detail to make us "believe" in her village, in its goings on this morning of June 27th. It is also obvious that she has preferred to give no key to her parable but to leave its meaning to our inference. One may summarize by saying that "The Lottery" is a normal piece of fiction, even if tilted over toward the fable and the parable form. Yet the comparison with these two forms may be useful in indicating the nature of the story.

What of its meaning? We had best not try to restrict the meaning to some simple dogmatic statement. The author herself has been rather careful to allow a good deal of flexibility in our interpretation of the meaning. Yet surely a general meaning does emerge. This story comments upon the all-too-human tendency to seize upon a scapegoat and to visit upon the scapegoat the cruelties that most of us seem to have damned up within us. An example out of our own time might be the case in which some sensational happening occurs in a family—a child is kidnapped, or a youthful member of the family is implicated in a weird crime. The newspapers sometimes hound the family past all decency, and we good citizens, who support those newspapers, batten upon their misery with a cruelty that would shock us if we ever could realize what we were doing. Or to take another case, a man's patriotism is impugned quite falsely; or, whether the charge against him is false or true, let us say that his wife is completely guiltless. Yet she is "stoned" by her self-righteous neighbors who are acting, of course, out of pure virtue and fervent patriotism. These two instances are merely suggestive. Neither would answer fully to the terms of the story, but they may indicate that the issues with which the story is concerned are thoroughly live issues in our time.
But the author has been wise not to confine the meaning to any precise happening of the sort we have suggested. For evidently she is concerned with the more general psychological basis for such cruelty as a community tends to manifest. "The Lottery" makes such points as these: the cruel stoning is carried out by "decent" citizens who in many other respects show themselves kind and thoughtful. The cruel act is kept from seeming the cruel thing it is by the fact that it has been sanctioned by custom and long tradition. When Mrs. Adams remarks that "Some places have already quit lotteries," Old Man Warner says, "Nothing but trouble in that. Pack of young fools." A further point is this: human beings find it difficult to become exercised over ills not their own. Once a family group sees that the victim is not to be selected from among themselves, they proceed to observe matters with a certain callous disinterest. Moreover, even the individual members of the Hutchinson family are themselves relatively unconcerned once each discovers that he is not the victim chosen. Thus, "Nancy and Bill, Jr., opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning round to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads." The French moralist Roche foucald ruefully observed that we obtain a certain pleasure from news of misfortune to friends. There is truth in this, and our story savagely makes a related point. Only the victim protests "It isn't fair," and she makes her protest only after she has chosen a slip of paper marked with the black spot. We remember that earlier Mrs. Hutchinson had said to Mrs. Delacroix in neighborly good humor, "Clean forgot what day it was," and both had "laughed softly" together.

"The Lottery," then, deals indeed with live issues and issues relevant to our time. If we hesitate to specify a particular "point" that the story makes, it is not because the story is vague and fuzzy, but rather because its web of observations about human nature is too subtle and too complex to be stated in one or two brief maxims.

What requires a little further attention is a problem of a quite different sort: how does this story differ from a tract or a treatise on human nature? Are we actually justified in calling it a piece of fiction?

An answer to these questions might run like this: This is obviously not a tract or merely an essay. The village is made to exist for us; the characters of Old Man Warner and Mr. Summers and Mrs. Hutchinson do come alive. They are not fully developed, to be sure, and there is a sense in which even the personality of the victim is finally subservient to the "point" to be made and is not developed in its own right and for its own sake. But, as we have said, this is not a "naked parable"—and the fact that we get an impression of a real village and real people gives the sense of grim terror.

The fictional form thus justifies itself by making vivid and forceful what would otherwise have to be given prosaically and undramatically. But it does something else that is very important: it provides a special shaping of the reader's attitude toward the climactic event and toward that from which the climactic event stems. The reader's attitude has been moulded very carefully from the very beginning. Everything in the story has been devised to let us know how we are to "take" the final events in the story....

The very fact that an innocent woman is going to be stoned to death by her friends and neighbors and that this is to happen in an American small town during our own present day of enlightenment requires a special preparation. The apparently fantastic nature of the happening means that everything else in the story must be made plausible, down-to-earth, sensible, commonplace, everyday. We must be made to feel that what is happening on this June morning is perfectly credible. Making it seem credible will do two things: it will increase the sense of shock when we suddenly discover what is really going on, but it will ultimately help us to believe that what the story asserts does come to pass. In general, then, the horror of the ending is counter-balanced by the dry, even cheery, atmosphere of the scene. This contrast between the matter-of-factness and the cheery atmosphere, on one side, and the grim terror, on the other, gives us a dramatic shock. But it also indicates that the author's point in general has to do with the awful doubleness of the human spirit—a doubleness that expresses itself in the blended good neighborliness and cruelty of the community's action. The fictional form, therefore, does not simply "dress up" a specific comment on human
nature. The fictional form actually gives point and definition to the social commentary.

Shirley Jackson (essay date 1968)

[In the following edited version of a lecture on "The Lottery" that Jackson originally delivered in 1960 and published in Come Along with Me in 1968, she discusses public reaction to the story.]

On the morning of June 28, 1948, I walked down to the post office in our little Vermont town to pick up the mail. I was quite casual about it, as I recall—I opened the box, took out a couple of bills and a letter or two, talked to the postmaster for a few minutes, and left, never supposing that it was the last time for months that I was to pick up the mail without an active feeling of panic. By the next week I had had to change my mailbox to the largest one in the post office, and casual conversation with the postmaster was out of the question, because he wasn't speaking to me. June 28, 1948, was the day The New Yorker came out with a story of mine in it. It was not my first published story, nor my last, but I have been assured over and over that if it had been the only story I ever wrote or published, there would be people who would not forget my name.

I had written the story three weeks before, on a bright June morning when summer seemed to have come at last, with blue skies and warm sun and no heavenly signs to warn me that my morning's work was anything but just another story. The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller—it was, as I say, a warm morning, and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries—and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. As a matter of fact, when I read it over later I decided that except for one or two minor corrections, it needed no changes, and the story I finally typed up and sent off to my agent the next day was almost word for word the original draft. This, as any writer of stories can tell you, is not a usual thing. All I know is that when I came to read the story over I felt strongly that I didn't want to fuss with it. I didn't think it was perfect, but I didn't want to fuss with it. It was, I thought, a serious, straightforward story, and I was pleased and a little surprised at the ease with which it had been written; I was reasonably proud of it, and hoped that my agent would sell it to some magazine and I would have the gratification of seeing it in print.

My agent did not care for the story, but—as she said in her note at the time—her job was to sell it, not to like it. She sent it at once to The New Yorker, and about a week after the story had been written I received a telephone call from the fiction editor of The New Yorker; it was quite clear that he did not really care for the story, either, but The New Yorker was going to buy it. He asked for one change—that date mentioned in the story be changed to coincide with the date of the issue of the magazine in which the story would appear, and I said of course. He then asked, hesitantly, if I had any particular interpretation of my own for the story; Mr. Harold Ross, then the editor of The New Yorker, was not altogether sure that he understood the story, and wondered if I cared to enlarge upon its meaning. I said no. Mr. Ross, he said, thought that the story might be puzzling to some people, and in case anyone telephoned the magazine, as sometimes happened, or wrote in asking about the story, was there anything in particular I wanted them to say? No, I said, nothing in particular; it was just a story I wrote.

I had no more preparation than that. I went on picking up the mail every morning, pushing my daughter up and down the hill in her stroller, anticipating pleasurably the check from The New Yorker, and shopping for groceries. The weather stayed nice and it looked as though it was going to be a good summer. Then, on June 28, The New Yorker came out with my story.
Things began mildly enough with a note from a friend at The New Yorker: "Your story has kicked up quite a fuss around the office," he wrote. I was flattered; it's nice to think that your friends notice what you write. Later that day there was a call from one of the magazine's editors; they had had a couple of people phone in about my story, he said, and was there anything I particularly wanted him to say if there were any more calls? No, I said, nothing particular; anything he chose to say was perfectly all right with me; it was just a story.

I was further puzzled by a cryptic note from another friend: "Heard a man talking about a story of yours on the bus this morning," she wrote. "Very exciting. I wanted to tell him I knew the author, but after I heard what he was saying I decided I'd better not."

One of the most terrifying aspects of publishing stories and books is the realization that they are going to be read, and read by strangers. I had never fully realized this before, although I had of course in my imagination dwelt lovingly upon the thought of the millions and millions of people who were going to be uplifted and enriched and delighted by the stories I wrote. It had simply never occurred to me that these millions and millions of people might be so far from being uplifted that they would sit down and write me letters I was downright scared to open; of the three-hundred-odd letters that I received that summer I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from friends. Even my mother scolded me: "Dad and I did not care at all for your story in The New Yorker," she wrote sternly; "it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?"

By mid-July I had begun to perceive that I was very lucky indeed to be safely in Vermont, where no one in our small town had ever heard of The New Yorker, much less read my story. Millions of people, and my mother, had taken a pronounced dislike to me.

The magazine kept no track of telephone calls, but all letters addressed to me care of the magazine were forwarded directly to me for answering, and all letter addressed to the magazine—some of them addressed to Harold Ross personally; these were the most vehement—were answered at the magazine and then the letters were sent me in great batches, along with carbons of the answers written at the magazine. I have all the letters still, and if they could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public, or the reading public of The New Yorker, or even the reading public of one issue of The New Yorker, I would stop writing now.

Judging from these letters, people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at. Many of the writers were positive that The New Yorker was going to ridicule them in print, and the most cautious letters were headed, in capital letters: NOT FOR PUBLICATION or PLEASE DO NOT PRINT THIS LETTER, or, at best THIS LETTER MAY BE PUBLISHED AT YOUR USUAL RATES OF PAYMENT. Anonymous letters, of which there were a few, were destroyed. The New Yorker never published any comment of any kind about the story in the magazine, but did issue one publicity release saying that the story had received more mail than any piece of fiction they had ever published; this was after the newspapers had gotten into the act, in midsummer, with a front-page story in the San Francisco Chronicle begging to know what the story meant, and a series of columns in New York and Chicago papers pointing out that New Yorker subscriptions were being canceled right and left.

Curiously, there are three main themes which dominate the letters of that first summer—three themes which might be identified as bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse. In the years since then, during which the story has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and even—in one completely mystifying transformation—made into a ballet, the tenor of letters I receive has changed. I am addressed more politely, as a rule, and the letters largely confine themselves to questions like what does this story mean? The general tone of the early letters, however, was a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and
whether they could go there and watch.

Helen E. Nebeker (essay date March 1974)

[In the following essay, Nebeker discusses the underlying themes in "The Lottery," focusing on the religious symbolism and anthropological elements of the story.]

Numerous critics have carefully discussed Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" in terms of the scapegoat traditions of anthropology and literature, pointing out its obvious comment on the innate savagery of man lurking beneath his civilized trappings. Most acknowledge the power of the story, admitting that the psychological shock of the ritual murder in an atmosphere of modern, small-town normality cannot be easily forgotten. Nevertheless, beneath the praise of these critics frequently runs a current of uneasiness, a sense of having been defrauded in some way by the development of the story as a whole.

Virgil Scott [in Studies in Short Story, 1968], for example, writes that "... the story leaves one uneasy because of the author's use of incidental symbolism ... the black box, the forgotten tuneless chant, the ritual salute—indeed the entire reconstruction of the mechanics of the lottery—fail to serve the story as they might have." Robert Heilman [in Modern Short Stories: A Critical Anthology, 1959] discovers similar technical difficulties. While approving the "deadpan narrative style" which screens us from the "horrifying nightmare" to come, he nevertheless believes that the unexpected shock of the ending "crowds out" the impact of Jackson's thematic revelation. He suggests that the "symbolic intention" should be evidenced earlier in the story because, while "to set us immediately on the track of the symbolism" might reduce the shock, it might, on the other hand, "result in a more durable story." [Cleanth] Brooks and [Robert Penn] Warren praise the story for its "web of observations about human nature" and the "all-too-human tendency to seize upon a scapegoat," visiting upon it "cruelties that most of us seem to have dammed up within us." But then they indicate structural weakness by asserting that Jackson has "preferred to give no key to her parable but to leave its meaning to our inference," allowing "a good deal of flexibility in our interpretation," while yet insisting that "everything in the story has been devised to let us know how we are to 'take' the final events in the story" [Understanding Fiction, 1959].

Perhaps the critical ambivalence illustrated above stems from failure to perceive that "The Lottery" really fuses two stories and themes into one fictional vehicle. The overt, easily discovered story appears in the literal facts, wherein members of a small rural town meet to determine by lot who will be the victim of the yearly savagery. At this level one feels the horror, senses clearly the "dichotomy in all human nature," the "doubleness of the human spirit" [Understanding Fiction], and recoils in horror. This narrative level produces immediate emotional impact. Only after that initial shock do disturbing questions and nuances begin to assert themselves.

It is at this secondary point that the reader begins to suspect that a second story lies beneath the first and that Miss Jackson's "symbolic intentions" are not "incidental" but, indeed, paramount. Then one discovers that the author's careful structure and consistent symbolism work to present not only a symbolic summary of man's past but a prognosis for his future which is far more devastating than the mere reminder that man has savage potential. Ultimately one finds that the ritual of the lottery, beyond providing a channel to release repressed cruelties, actually serves to generate a cruelty not rooted in man's inherent emotional needs at all. Man is not at the mercy of a murky, savage id; he is the victim of unexamined and unchanging traditions which he could easily change if he only realized their implications. Herein is horror.

The symbolic overtones which develop in this second, sub rosa story become evident as early as the fourth word of the story when the date of June 27th alerts us to the season of the summer solstice with all its
overtones of ancient ritual. Carefully the scene is set—the date, the air of festivity, release, even license. The children newly freed from school play boisterously, rolling in the dust. But, ominously, Bobby Martin has already stuffed his pockets with stones and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix follow his example, eventually making a great pile of stones in the corner which they guard from the raids of other boys. By the end of just two paragraphs, Jackson has carefully indicated the season, time of ancient excess and sacrifice, and the stones, most ancient of sacrificial weapons. She has also hinted at larger meanings through name symbology. "Martin," Bobby's surname, derives from a Middle English word signifying ape or monkey. This, juxtaposed with "Harry Jones" (in all its commonness) and "Dickie Delacroix" (of-the-Cross) urges us to an awareness of the Hairy Ape within us all, veneered by a Christianity as perverted as "Delacroix," vulgarized to "Dellacroy" by the villagers. Horribly, at the end of the story, it will be Mrs. Delacroix, warm and friendly in her natural state, who will select a stone "so large she had to pick it up with both hands" and will encourage her friends to follow suit. Should this name symbology seem strained, superimposed, a little later we shall return to it and discover that every major name in the story has its special significance.

Returning to the chronology of the story, the reader sees the men gather, talking of the planting and rain (the central issues of the ancient propitiatory rites), tractors and taxes (those modern additions to the concerns of man). The men are quieter, more aware, and the patriarchal order (the oldest social group of man) is quickly evidenced as the women join their husbands and call their children to them. When Bobby Martin tries to leave the group and runs laughing to the stones, he is sharply rebuked by his serious father, who knows that this is no game. Clearly this is more than the surface "idyllic" small-town life noted by Heilman [in Modern Short Stories], the symbolic undercurrents prepare us to be drawn step by step toward the ultimate horror, where everything will fuse.

In the fourth paragraph, Mr. Summers, who ironically runs the "coal" business, arrives with the postmaster, Mr. Graves, who carries the three-legged stool and the black box. Although critics have tended to see the box as the major symbol, careful reading discloses that, while the box is referred to three times in this paragraph, the stool is emphasized four times and in such strained repetition as to be particularly obvious. Further, in the next two paragraphs it will be stressed that the box rests upon, is supported by, the three-legged stool. It would thus seem that the stool is at least as important as the box: in my opinion, it is the symbol which holds the key to Jackson's conclusive theme. In the interest of structure and coherence, this point must be developed later in the article.

Returning to the symbol of the box, its prehistoric origin is revealed in the mention of the "original wood color" showing along one side as well as in the belief that it has been constructed by the first people who settled down to make villages here (man in his original social group). The chips of wood, now discarded for slips of paper, suggest a preliterate origin. The present box has been made from pieces of the original (as though it were salvaged somehow) and is now blackened, faded, and stained (with blood perhaps). In this box symbol, Jackson certainly suggests the body of tradition—once oral but now written—which the dead hand of the past codified in religion, mores, government, and the rest of culture, and passed from generation to generation, letting it grow ever more cumbersome, meaningless, and indefensible.

Jackson does not, however, attack ritual in and of itself. She implies that, as any anthropologist knows, ritual in its origin is integral to man's concept of his universe, that it is rooted in his need to explain, even to control the forces around him. Thus, at one time the ritual, the chant, the dance were executed precisely, with deep symbolic meaning. Those chosen for sacrifice were not victims but saviors who would propitiate the gods, enticing them to bring rebirth, renewal, and thanking them with their blood. This idea explains the significance of Mrs. Delacroix's comment to Mrs. Graves that "there's no time at all between lotteries any more!" and her reply that "Time sure goes fast." To the ancients, the ritual was a highly significant time marker: summer solstice and winter solstice, light versus dark, life versus death. These modern women only verify the meaninglessness of the present rite. Later, in a similar vein, when one of the girls whispers, "I hope it's not Nancy," Mr. Warner replies, "People ain't the way they used to be," implying that, anciently, honor
and envy were accorded those chosen to die for the common welfare. Another neat symbolic touch tied to the meaningful ritualistic slaughter of the past is suggested by the character Clyde Dunbar. He lies at home, unable to participate in this year's lottery because of his broken leg. This reminds us that in every tradition of propitiation the purity and wholeness of the sacrifice was imperative. This "unblemished lamb" concept is epitomized in the sacrifice of Christ. In view of the interweaving of these ideas, it is difficult to see only "incidental symbolism" or to overlook the immediate and consistent "symbolic intention" of the narrative.

From the symbolic development of the box, the story moves swiftly to climax. Tessie Hutchinson hurries in, having almost forgotten the lottery in her round of normal, housewifely duties. She greets Mrs. Delacroix and moves good-humoredly into the crowd. Summers consults his list, discovers that Clyde Dunbar is missing and asks who will draw for him. When Janey Dunbar replies, "Me, I guess," Summers asks, "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you Janey?" although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well" (italics added). In this seemingly innocent exchange the reader is jarred into a suspicion that the mentioned "grown boy" has been a previous victim and that his father cannot face the strain of being present, raising the question whether the breaking of his leg has been accidental or deliberate. At any rate, this loss of a son will explain the unusual encouragement given Janey by the women as she goes to draw her slip of paper, her great anxiety as she awaits results with her remaining two sons—"I wish they'd hurry, I wish they'd hurry"—and her sending her older son with the news to her husband who, we may surmise, waits in agony for the outcome.

Significantly, the name Dunbar may in itself suggest that thin gray line which separates those who have been personally marked by the horror of the lottery from those who have not. If this seems to be flagrant symbol hunting, we might remember that it is Mrs. Dunbar who, at the time of the stoning, holds back as Mrs. Delacroix urges her to action. Mrs. Dunbar, with only small stones in her hands, gasping for breath, says, "I can't run at all. You'll have to go ahead and I'll catch up." But we may believe that she will not. Marked by the loss of her son, she may still be a victim but she will not be a perpetrator. Herein lies the only humane hope raised in the story.

Next, because of the sequence of details, we are brought to consider that Jack Watson is another villager touched personally by the lottery. Immediately after querying Mrs. Dunbar and making a note on his list, Mr. Summers asks, "Watson boy drawing this year?" Note that the name Watson does not immediately succeed Dunbar; there seems to be a special quality about those whose names are checked previous to the actual lottery when the names will be called from A to Z. When Jack replies, "Here … I'm drawing for m'mother and me," blinking nervously and ducking his head, the crowd responds with "Good fellow, Jack," and "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it," encouraging him excessively as they do Mrs. Dunbar. Later, after the drawing, they will specifically ask, "Is it the Dunbars?" "Is it the Watsons?" Surely, at least the elder Watson—and maybe others in the family—has been a previous victim of the rite.

Now the symbolic names crowd upon us: "Old Man Warner," prototype of the prophet of doom, voice of the past, foe of change, existing from everlasting to everlasting; Old Man Warner, seventy-seven (ancient magic number of indefiniteness) years old, the oldest of them all, juxtaposed with Jack Watson, the youngest patriarch, both part of the same unchanging horror. "Steve Adams"—Adam the father of the race and Stephen the first Christian martyr. "Baxter" [Richard Baxter, 17th-century English Puritan minister, who postulated the doctrine of free grace] Martin, the eldest brother of Bobby, again suggesting primitive origins changed only superficially by even the best thought of the centuries. Tessie Hutchinson, more subtle in reference but "Hutchinson" reminiscent of early American Puritan heritage, while "Tessie," diminutive for "Theresa," derives from the Greek theizein meaning "to reap," or, if the nickname is for "Anastasia" it will translate literally "of the resurrection." What deliberate symbolic irony that Tessie should be the victim, not of hatred or malice, or primitive fear, but of the primitive ritual itself.
Now, as Tessie stands at bay and the crowd is upon her, the symbols coalesce into full revelation. "Tessie Hutchinson," end product of two thousand years of Christian thought and ritual Catholic and Puritan merged, faces her fellow citizens, all equally victims and persecutors. Mrs. "Of-the-Cross" lifts her heavy stone in response to ritual long forgotten and perverted. "Old Man Warner" fans the coals (not fires) of emotions long sublimated ritualistically revived once a year. "Mr. Adams," at once progenitor and martyr in the Judeo-Christian myth of man, stands with "Mrs. Graves"—the ultimate refuge or escape of all mankind—in the forefront of the crowd.

Now we understand the significance of the three-legged stool—as old as the tripod of the Delphic Delphic Delphic oracle, as new as the Christian trinity. For that which supports the present day box of meaningless and perverted superstition is the body of unexamined tradition or at least six thousand years of man's history. Some of these traditions (one leg of the stool if you like), are as old as the memory of man and are symbolized by the season, the ritual, the original box, the wood chips, the names of Summers, Graves, Martin, Warner (all cultures have their priesthoods!). These original, even justifiable traditions gave way to or were absorbed by later Hebraic perversions; and the narrative pursues its "scapegoat" theme in terms of the stones, the wooden box, blackened and stained, Warner the Prophet, even the Judaic name of Tessie's son, David. Thus Hebraic tradition becomes a second leg or brace for the box.

Superimposed upon this remote body of tradition is one two thousand years old in its own right. But it may be supposed the most perverted and therefore least defensible of all as a tradition of supposedly enlightened man who has freed himself from the barbarities and superstitions of the past. This Christian tradition becomes the third support for the blood-stained box and all it represents. Most of the symbols of the other periods pertain here with the addition of Delacroix, Hutchinson, Baxter and Steve.

With this last symbolic intention clearly revealed, one may understand the deeper significance of Jackson's second, below-the-surface story. More than developing a theme which "deals with 'scapegoating', the human tendency to punish 'innocent' and often accidentally chosen victims for our sins" [Scott, Studies in Short Story] or one which points out "the awful doubleness of the human spirit—a doubleness that expresses itself in blended good neighborliness and cruelty …" [Brooks and Warren, Understanding Fiction], Shirley Jackson has raised these lesser themes to one encompassing a comprehensive, compassionate, and fearful understanding of man trapped in the web spun from his own need to explain and control the incomprehensible universe around him, a need no longer answered by the web of old traditions.

Man, she says, is a victim of his unexamined and hence unchanged traditions which engender in him flames otherwise banked, subdued. Until enough men are touched strongly enough by the horror of their ritualistic, irrational actions to reject the long-perverted ritual, to destroy the box completely—or to make, if necessary, a new one reflective of their own conditions and needs of life—man will never free himself from his primitive nature and is ultimately doomed. Miss Jackson does not offer us much hope—they only talk of giving up the lottery in the north village, the Dunbars and Watsons do not actually resist, and even little Davy Hutchinson holds a few pebbles in his hands.

Lenemaja Friedman (essay date 1975)

[Friedman is an English professor and critic. In the following excerpt, she briefly discusses the publication history of "The Lottery" and examines the story's theme of social evil.]

One of the ancient practices that modern man deplores as inhumanly evil is the annual sacrifice of a scapegoat or a god-figure for the benefit of the community. Throughout the ages, from ancient Rome and Greece to the more recent occurrences in African countries, sacrifices in the name of a god of vegetation were usual and necessary, the natives felt, for a fertile crop. Somewhere along the way, the sacrifice of a human for the sins of
the people—to drive evil from themselves—became linked with the ritual of the vegetation god. In Mexico, among the Aztecs, the victims impersonated the particular gods for a one-year period before being put to death; death came then by the thrust of a knife into the breast and the immediate extraction of the heart. In Athens, each year in May, at the festival of the Thargelia, two victims, a man and a woman, were led out of the city and stoned to death. Death by stoning was one of the accepted and more popular methods of dispatching ceremonial victims.

But modern man considers such practices barbaric and, therefore, alien to his civilized behavior. For this reason, many persons were puzzled and shocked by "The Lottery." After its appearance in the June 28, 1948, issue of The New Yorker, a flood of mail—hundreds of letters—deluged both the editorial offices in New York and the post office in Bennington. No New Yorker story had ever received such a response. Of the many letters received, as Miss Jackson recalled, only thirteen spoke kindly to her; and those were from friends. Three main characteristics dominated the letters: bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse. "The general tone of the early letters was a kind of wide-eyed shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant: what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch" [undated letter of Shirley Jackson to her mother]. Later, after the story had been anthologized, televised, and dramatized, the tone of the letters became more polite; but people still wondered what the story meant.

She had conceived the story idea, she said, on a fine June morning as she was returning from a trip to the grocery store and was pushing uphill the stroller containing her daughter and the day's groceries. Having the idea well in mind, she wrote the story so easily that the finished copy was almost the same word for word as the rough draft. Her agent, she recalls, did not care for the story; nor was the fiction editor of The New Yorker particularly impressed; however, the magazine was going to buy it. When Mr. Harold Ross, then editor of the magazine, indicated that the story might be puzzling to some people and asked if she would care to enlarge upon its meaning, she refused. But later, in response to numerous requests, she made the following statement, which appeared in the July 22 issue of the San Francisco Chronicle: "Explaining just what I had hoped the story to say is very difficult. I suppose, I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives."

Several of Miss Jackson's friends had intimated that the village characters were modeled after actual persons in Bennington; but, if so, she took pains to disguise the fact. The names are plain, solid-sounding: Adams, Warner, Dunbar, Martin, Hutchinson, etc. The name Mr. Summers is particularly suitable for sunny, jovial Joe Summers; it emphasizes the surface tone of the piece and underscores the ultimate irony. Mr. Graves—the postmaster and the assistant to Mr. Summers in the administration of the lottery—has a name that might well signify the tragic undercurrent, which does not become meaningful until the end of the story. As in the other stories designating the presence of evil even in the least likely persons, such as in sweet old ladies, the reader discovers the blight in this deceptively pleasant community. In fact, much of the horror stems from the discrepancy between the normal outward appearance of the village life and its people and the heinous act these people commit in the guise of tradition.

The story begins with a fine sunny morning, June 27 (the fiction editor had asked for a change in date, to coincide with this particular edition of The New Yorker). At first, the village appears to have a holiday atmosphere; and the reader's expectations are that the lottery is a joyous occasion, ending with a happy surprise for some lucky individual. The whole lottery, one is told, takes less than two hours, so that, if it begins at ten o'clock, the villagers will be home in time for noon dinner. Not until the truth of the lottery is revealed can the reader appreciate the chilling callousness of this business-as-usual attitude on the part of the community and the willingness of the people to accept and dismiss torture-death as a common occurrence. The gathering of the stones in one corner of the square is the part of the ceremony performed by the schoolchildren during their "boisterous play." The children, too, are guilty; they show no sensitivity or
emotion about the coming event. Miss Jackson's matter-of-fact description is allied to the attitude of the townspeople, and this objectivity sustains the suspense and heightens the shock of the ending.

As the men congregate, they talk of "planting and rain, tractors and taxes." The women exchange bits of gossip. One notices the first bit of tension when the families gather together; the women, standing by their husbands, call to their children. Mr. Martin speaks sharply to Bobby when the boy runs back to the pile of stones, and Bobby comes quickly. As the black box is set down, the villagers keep their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool; and there is hesitation at Mr. Summers's call for assistance. But Miss Jackson so skillfully weaves the tension of the present with description of the past and with the history of the black box that the reader is kept carefully unaware of anything more than what, he supposes, is the normal excitement of the occasion.

Jovial Mr. Summers who, it would seem, is the epitome of civic duty, conducts the lotteries, as he also conducts the square dances, the teen-age club, and the Halloween program. The incongruity of the purpose and the seriousness of these four activities is ironic and testifies to the guilt in Mr. Summers's soul, for he is a willing leader and thus a perpetrator of the evil. His conscience is as blank as the—all but one—little slips in the little black box. He does not recognize evil or, perhaps, know right from wrong. He does not question the tradition of the lottery; instead, his token civic improvements call not for elimination of the lottery but for the substitution of slips of paper for chips of wood—for convenience and expediency.

Mr. Summers's cheerful mien belies the seriousness of the occasion. When Tessie has been chosen, and the fatal moment has come, it is Mr. Summers who says, "All right, folks.... Let's finish quickly." He shows no hesitation and no compassion. Because of his position in the community, he is the one who might successfully repudiate tradition; but he is representative of conservative elements who, though outwardly progressive, are content to retain existing though harmful customs. He is aware of the changing conditions in other villages; for, as Mr. and Mrs. Adams point out, some villages have already "quit lotteries." The Adamses are among the few progressive people who question the tradition and who implicitly suggest action, but their convictions are not strong; worse, they go along with the majority. Indeed, when the mob is upon Tessie, the hypocritical Steve Adams, ready to kill, is at the front of the group.

Old Man Warner, who miraculously has survived seventy-seven lotteries, is a frightening individual because, still completely superstitious, he wholeheartedly believes in the lottery and is convinced that the ritual is necessary for the welfare of the corn crop. He resents the amiable spirit and the jokes of Mr. Summers ("Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody"), for he senses the seriousness of the occasion and the necessity of preserving the religiosity of the ceremony. It is not the death of the victim that disturbs him but the possible consequences of an irreligious attitude on the part of the participants. To Mr. Adams, he repeats the old saw: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." Then he adds, after the comment on stopping the lottery, "First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns"—if the lottery were to be abandoned, the crops would be destroyed and man would soon be foraging for food as he did in his cavedwelling days. He does not want to go back to living in a cave, although in terms of civilization and humanity, he has never emerged from one, "There's always been a lottery," he says, and that alone, he supposes, is reason enough to continue the practice.

Tessie Hutchinson shows both the evils and the weaknesses of mankind faced with immediate death. Her hypocrisy indicates that she would willingly take part in the stoning; but, when she is the chosen sacrifice, she protests the unfairness of the method; she is not willing to be a good sport about giving up her life. "Be a good sport, Tessie," Mrs. Delacroix calls; and Mrs. Graves says, "All of us took the same chance." Instead, Tessie reacts like a frightened animal; but, unlike the animal-mother, the human mother does not always seek protection for her off-spring. In fact, instead of giving her life for her children, Tessie prefers that they take their chances also—and she tries to have her daughter Eva and her husband [Bill] included in the fatal drawing to increase her own chances for survival. The most pathetic figure of all is little Davy Hutchinson who
survives the drawing but who is then forced, unknowing, to take part in the ordeal. Someone gives him a few pebbles so that he, too, may share in the collective murder of his mother; and his silence in this terrible moment is much more chilling than any other response Miss Jackson could have chosen for him.

If anything is illogical about the total ritual, it may be the stoicism of the participants and their complete willingness to sacrifice themselves or members of their families. As not all individuals are equally willing and able to endure pain, much less death, it would seem likely that during lottery time whole families might take to the woods or migrate to other villages. Even the Aztec god-figures, celebrated and worshipped until the sacrifice day, had to be guarded against escape. If the victim escaped, the captain of the guards became the substitute. But, since such practices are not literally a part of our culture, one may say that the story proceeds by way of realism to grimly realistic fantasy. As such, the lottery may be symbolic of any of a number of social ills that mankind blindly perpetuates.

Barbara Allen (essay date December 1980)

[In the following essay, Allen analyzes the elements of folklore and ritual in "The Lottery," contending that Jackson successfully uses them to reveal various kinds of social behavior.]

Most studies of folklore in literature fall into one of two categories. Either they are concerned with identifying specific items of folklore in works of literature, or they attempt to interpret the use of folklore as integral to the meaning of particular literary creations. Historically, folklore-in-literature research has been oriented more toward identification than interpretation; as a result, the preponderance of studies of folklore in specific literary works has focused on the stylistic uses of folklore to set a mood, to delineate a character, or to provide "local color." In spite of repeated pleas for scholars to go beyond the identification of folklore in literature to the interpretation of its use and meaning, relatively little research has been undertaken on the structural or functional use of folklore as thematic content or integral plot elements.... Furthermore, folklorists offering interpretive analyses of folklore in literature have, by and large, followed standard models of literary exegesis. That is, they have not brought their specialized training to bear on problems of interpretation. Their failure to do so seems to stem from the lack of a theoretical base for the folkloristic interpretation of folklore in literature.

In ["The Study of Folklore in Literature: An Expanded View"] published in Southern Folklore Quarterly in 1976, Mary Ellen B. Lewis attempts to fill this void, by urging scholars to consider folklore in processual terms rather than as discrete items. Specifically, Lewis argued that folklore can be analyzed on the three levels of text, context, and texture, and, therefore, that folklore can be represented in literature not just on the textual level (that is, as an item), but on the levels of situation (context) and medium (texture) as well. While the scheme which Lewis presents is intended primarily to expand the bases for the identification of folklore in literary works, it also offers a key for putting the interpretation of folklore in literature on a solid theoretical basis. If, as Lewis and others before her have contended, folklore should be viewed as behavior, as dynamic process rather than static item, then the use of folklore in literature can be examined not as the incorporation of specific items into a novel or poem, but as the literary representation or characterization of certain kinds of behavior. Taking this approach eliminates the logical inconsistency of identifying as true "items of folklore" what are actually representations or characterizations of folklore—or, more accurately, of folkloric performance or behavior.

The premise that folklore in literature is a representation of behavior is implicit in most folklore-in-literature studies, but making the notion explicit can provide objective grounds for what have previously been intuitively-based observations. Recognizing folklore in literature as a characterization of behavior rather than the behavior (or its product) itself makes it easy to account for the appearance in literature of certain items
which look or sound like "folklore" but which have no analogues in published folklore collections. A character citing a proverb or telling a tall tale in a novel or short story, for example, is being represented by the author as engaging in expressive (folkloric) behavior, whether or not the particular proverb or tale being quoted in the narrative has parallels in oral tradition or is the product of the author's creative imagination. Taking this stance means that, instead of going through the sterile exercise of identifying and annotating specific folkloric items, such as traditional proverbs or tale types, in literature, we can concentrate instead on the representation of storytelling, proverb use, and other folkloric activities in literary works. This shift from an orientation toward folklore as item to a consideration of folklore as behavior frees us from the limitations of simple identification and allows us to see how an author uses folklore to create literary meaning.

In their preoccupation with the identification of folklore items in literature, scholars have failed to see that the point of using folklore in a literary work depends on the reader recognizing it as folkloric behavior. In other words, it is types of (folkloric) behavior that are being exploited in literature, not specific items of folklore. If an author considers the use of proverbs to be a traditional means of conveying social wisdom and inculcating desirable attitudes, then characters can be represented as respected authorities by having them use proverbs in interaction with others. If, on the other hand, the use of proverbs is considered to be a substitute for original thinking, then a character can be depicted as unthinking or unimaginative by representing him or her as citing them constantly. The simple identification of folklore items does not provide any clue to the nature of the behavior being characterized; it is only by looking at an author's conception of what kind of behavior is being represented in various forms of folklore that we can begin to interpret how folklore is used in literature to create meaning.

To illustrate my argument with a specific example, I offer Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" as a case in point. The discussion in the following pages shows how standard techniques for identifying folklore in this particular story yield only minimum interpretive results, and then demonstrates how an examination of Jackson's conception of the nature of the ritual she describes accounts more fully for her choice of that particular kind of behavior to carry the message of her story.

"The Lottery" is a fictional account of an annual midsummer ceremony in a contemporary community. The story opens with the residents of a village gathering for the yearly lottery, the nature of which is not disclosed. The procedures of the ceremony are performed matter-of-factly: the head of each family draws a slip of paper from an old black wooden box; then lots are drawn among the members of the family, the Hutchinsons, to whom the first lot has fallen. When the wife and mother, Tessie, draws the paper with a black spot on it, the villagers begin to pelt her with stones.

The lottery which Jackson describes in her story sounds like an atrophied form of a scapegoat ritual. Evidence to support this argument can be found by comparing details in the story with descriptions of such rituals in the Bible, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Theodor Gaster's *Thespis*. The term scapegoat derives from the ritual described in Leviticus 16:21-22:

… and Aaron shall lay both hands upon the head of a live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them on the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness…. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land.

A scapegoat is more broadly defined by Frazer as:

… an animal or human being used in public ceremonies to remove the taint or impairment consequent upon sin which, for one reason or other, cannot be saddled upon a particular individual. Such a scapegoat is a means of "cleansing" a community of a collective stain which cannot be wiped out by the normal procedure of individual penitence, restitution, and...
Frazer discusses four aspects of scapegoats and scapegoat rituals which are reflected in Jackson's story. First, the scapegoat provides a "visible and tangible vehicle for bearing away a community's invisible and intangible evils." Tessie Hutchinson, the victim in the lottery, fills this role for her village. Secondly, according to Frazer, "When a general clearance of evils is resorted to periodically, the interval between the celebrations of the ceremony is commonly a year, and the time of year when the ceremony takes place usually coincides with some well-marked change of season." In "The Lottery," the ritual falls on June 27, a date which closely follows the summer solstice, traditionally a significant occasion for agrarian communities such as Jackson's village. Old Man Warner's proverb, "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon," makes it clear that the ceremony is associated with the success of the year's crop and, by implication, with the community's continued existence. Thirdly, Frazer continues, "This public and periodic expulsion of devils is commonly preceded or followed by a period of general license, during which the ordinary restraints of society are thrown aside." [In Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East, 1950] Gaster adds that the Hebrew scapegoat ritual, associated with the harvest, was marked by a suspension of normal activities. In Jackson's story, the ceremonial license is represented both in the children's sense of their recently gained freedom from school for the summer and in the suspension of work both at home and in the fields during the period in which the lottery takes place. Finally, Frazer notes that the scapegoat victim is often believed to be divine. Scapegoat Tessie Hutchinson's divinity seems to lie in her having been chosen, through the agency of the lottery, by some supernatural force such as fate or providence.

The process of identifying folkloric elements in this particular short story is comparatively simple, for they can be traced fairly easily to the descriptions of scapegoat rituals in published sources. But this identification does not account for the fictional aspect of the ritual—the lottery which Jackson describes has never taken place in real time and space. But, by thinking of the lottery as the representation of a kind of behavior, rather than as the replication of an actual occurrence, it is easier to understand how Jackson and other writers "create" folklore in the speech or actions of their characters by drawing upon traditional models.

A second, and perhaps more important, limitation of simply identifying folkloric elements in the story is that doing so does not explain why Jackson chose the material she did to carry the meaning of the story. By looking at the ritual she describes as a fictionalized characterization of behavior, however, we can see how her conception of the nature of that behavior and the attitude she takes toward it explain how the ritual of the lottery is an apt vehicle for the story's message.

The annual lottery, Jackson intimates, has lost all meaning for the villagers. What keeps its performance going year after year is the momentum of tradition, embodied in the character of Old Man Warner who denounces neighboring villages that have abandoned the lottery as a "pack of crazy fools." It is clear from Jackson's description that the ritual has degenerated over time, for people only vaguely remember that:

... there had been a recital of some sort ..., a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been also a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching.

Even the original paraphernalia of the ritual have been lost and substitutions made:
Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers [the lottery official] had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations…. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done.

The ritual of the lottery, as Jackson depicts it in her story, is clearly characterized as a survival, that is, as a model of behavior which has devolved or degenerated through time until it is virtually meaningless. Jackson consistently describes the event in devolutionary, survivalistic terms. Some parts of the ritual have been forgotten, such as the public confession of sin, presumably the predecessor of the "tuneless chant" which the official of the lottery used to perform before the ceremony began. Other aspects of the ritual, particularly physical objects, have changed in form. Frazer describes the lots used in the Purim festival as small stones; it is not difficult to imagine the replacement of the original stones with chips of wood and finally with the slips of paper used by Jackson's villagers. Still other components of the ceremony have become trivialized: the general feeling of license formerly enjoyed by the entire community is now relegated to the children; the suspension of normal activities has been abrogated to the two hours which it takes to accomplish the drawing of the lots.

In spite of the reduction of the lottery to empty ritual, the villagers cling tenaciously to it; thus, the lottery's continued existence, as presented in the story, is predicated on the idea that forms of behavior can persist through time even when their original meanings have been forgotten. Not only does our identification of the ceremony as a scapegoat ritual depend on this premise, but our recognition that the ritual is represented as a survival is crucial to an understanding of the story. The point of "The Lottery" is that blind adherence to traditional forms of behavior that have lost their original meanings and acquired no new, positive ones, can be destructive. This interpretation is not new, but in the past it seems to have been derived from implicit recognition of Jackson's conception of the behavior she describes as a survival and of the negative attitude she takes toward that behavior in this story. By making the recognition of Jackson's use of folkloric materials explicit, however, we can articulate how she uses those materials to create meaning in the story. By characterizing folklore as behavior and realizing that the use of folklore in literature is the representation of kinds of behavior, scholars can base their interpretations of folklore in literature on solid theoretical grounds rather than on intuitive feelings.

James M. Gibson (essay date March 1984)

[In the following essay, Gibson identifies the similarities between the biblical story of Joshua 7:10-26 and "The Lottery," contending that while the biblical story emphasizes the supernatural triumph of good over evil, Jackson's story reveals a "chillingly impersonal world of gray amorality."]

More than any other short story by Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" has intrigued critics and provoked puzzled guesses about its enigmatic meaning. Seymour Lainoff early on invoked the "primitive annual scapegoat rite" discussed in Frazer's The Golden Bough, and Lenemaja Friedman [in her Shirley Jackson, 1975] more recently has compared the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson to the festival of the Thargelia in ancient Athens and to similar scapegoat rituals of the Aztecs in Mexico. Shyamal Bagchee [in his "Design of Darkness in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" in Notes on Contemporary Literature, IX, December, 1979] has discovered the symbolism of "black magic and primitive pagan rituals" that expose the "hideous primitive faces" lurking under our "civilized modern masks," and Helen Nebeker [in "'The Lottery: Symbolic Tour de Force,"
American Literature, XLVI, 1974] has uncovered the triple symbolism of pagan ritual, Mosaic legalism, and Christian theology in the characters' names, the sacrifice, and the three-legged stool. Richard Williams [in "A Critique of the Sampling Plan Used in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'” Journal of Modern Literature, VII, 1979] has even produced a statistical analysis complete with equations and charts to determine the mathematical fairness of the lottery and ostensibly to support Tessie's objection that "It isn't fair, it isn't right." Shirley Jackson herself steadfastly refused to explain the story either to the editors of The New Yorker or to the writers of the 450 letters that overwhelmed her own post office and the editorial offices of The New Yorker—all demanding to know what the story meant. Maintaining that "it was just a story," Jackson commented only that the story came to her in an inspirational flash.

The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller—it was, as I say, a warm morning, and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries—and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. [Shirley Jackson, "Biography of a Story," in Come Along With Me, 1968]

Following Shirley Jackson's discreet silence, the search for pagan parallels and symbols both demonic and Christian has overlooked perhaps the closest analogue, if not the source, of "The Lottery": an Old Testament story found in Joshua 7. Whether or not Jackson knew the story, she did not tell, but the parallels are there, and the contrasts point up nicely the sharp antithesis between the ironic mode of the modern story and the romance mode of its earlier counterpart. The story from the Book of Joshua recounts the abortive attack on Ai immediately following the spectacular and supernatural conquest of Jericho where Joshua had given the Israelites strict instructions to set fire to everything in the city except the silver and gold and vessels of copper and iron which were to be deposited in the tabernacle treasury. When some two or three thousand Israelites later attacked Ai, they were badly beaten, and Joshua threw dust on his head, lay on the ground before the Ark of the Lord, and lamented God's desertion of his people. The story then proceeds as follows:

10 And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore art thou thus fallen

11 upon thy face? Israel hath sinned; yea, they have even transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: yea, they have even taken of the devoted thing; and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have even put it

12 among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel cannot stand before their enemies, they turn their backs before their enemies, because they are become accursed: I will not be with you any more, except ye destroy the

13 devoted thing from among you. Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to-morrow: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, There is a devoted thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before

14 thine enemies, until ye take away the devoted thing from among you. In the morning therefore ye shall be brought near by your tribes: and it shall be, that the tribe which the Lord taketh shall come near by families; and the family which the Lord shall take shall come near by household; and the household

15 which the Lord shall take shall come near man by man. And it shall be, that he that is taken with the devoted thing shall be burnt with fire, he and all that he hath: because he hath transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he hath wrought folly in Israel.
16 So Joshua rose up early in the morning, and brought Israel near by their

17 tribes; and the tribe of Judah was taken: and he brought near the family of Judah; and he
took the family of the Zerahites: and he brought near the family

18 of the Zerahites man by man; and Zabdi was taken: and he brought near his household
man by man; and Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the

19 son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give,
I pray thee, glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me
now what thou hast done; hide it not from

20 me. And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Of a truth I have sinned against

21 the Lord, the God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: when I saw among the spoil a
goodly Babylonish mantle, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty
shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in
the midst of my tent, and the silver

22 under it. So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran unto the tent; and, behold, it

23 was hid in his tent, and the silver under it. And they took them from the midst of the tent,
and brought them unto Joshua, and unto all the children of Israel;

24 and they laid them down before the Lord. And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan
the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the mantle, and wedge of gold, and his sons, and his
daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and
they brought them up unto the

25 valley of Achor [trouble]. And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the Lord shall
trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones; and

26 they burned them with fire, and stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great
heap of stones, unto this day; and the Lord turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore
the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor, unto this day. [Joshua 7: 10-26, Holy
Bible, English Revised Version. 1885]

Although the lottery follows the same procedure in each story and the winner claims the same prize of death
dystoning, the two stories do not affect the reader in the same way. Cruel as the punishment might be, the
death of Achan does not grip one with the same nameless horror and dread provoked by the death of Tessie.
The story world of the Book of Joshua is carefully ordered, and its moral laws are carefully defined. The
reader, like the characters, knows the rules and the consequences of breaking them. The characters are sharply
delineated in black and white to reinforce the clear demarcation between good and evil. The supernatural
intervenes on the side of right and good in the conquest of Jericho immediately preceding the story and in the
eventual destruction of Ai following this incident. More importantly, the beneficent supernatural guides the
lottery, giving instructions beforehand to Joshua and singling out the wrongdoer for his just punishment.

By contrast, the ironic story world of "The Lottery" is ruled by chance and caprice. The highest authority of
the story world here is the lottery itself in which one's fate is sealed by chance irrespective of merit or demerit.
Although Tessie vainly appeals to a higher law of fairness and right, the story world has no moral rules, for
the lottery has rendered them meaningless. Instead of lining up clearly on the side of good or evil, the
characters exist in a chillingly impersonal world of gray amorality. Mr. Summers performs equally well in organizing square dances and the teenage club or in presiding over the lottery. With equal enthusiasm Mrs. Delacroix exchanges neighborly chitchat with Tessie before the lottery and urges her neighbors to hurry with their stones after the lottery. Unlike the romance hero Joshua, who overcomes with the help of the supernatural, the ironic heroine Tessie is inferior to the laws of the story world and to the other characters. She is trapped in a predicament which she did not seek and from which she cannot escape. No beneficent supernatural exists in the ironic story world to rescue Tessie, and she suffers a punishment undeserved which can only be labeled senseless, meaningless, and capricious. With due allowance for archetypal displacement, then, the two stories follow the same plot, use the same plan for the lottery, and end with the same stoning for the winner; the major difference is that Jackson has shifted her story from the romance narrative mode of the Book of Joshua to the ironic mode of "The Lottery."
Analysis

Style and Technique (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)

A first-time reader of “The Lottery” often finds the ending a surprise. The festive nature of the gathering and the camaraderie of the townspeople as the lottery is conducted belies the horror that occurs at the conclusion of the tale. That is one of the tale’s strongest points. Another strength, however, is the skillful way in which Jackson prepares the careful reader for the denouement by including key details so that, on a second reading, one is assured that there is no trick being played on the reader.

Jackson is able to keep the reader off guard by making use of an objective, third-person narrative style in which details are presented but no judgments are made. It is almost as if one is seeing a film or observing events by looking over the shoulders of the participants, without being able to see into the minds of the people. Any hints of inner turmoil are merely suggested by the actions of the characters: a nervous lilt of the voice, a shuffling of feet, a whisper when normal speech would be appropriate. On the other hand, the description of outward actions and physical setting is direct and, when viewed in retrospect, contributes directly to the macabre climax toward which the story moves. The story opens with a scene of small children gathering stones. Townspeople remark about the absence of certain people. These are chilling foreshadowings of what is to come.

Jackson also makes use of symbolic names to give her story universal significance. “Summers” suggests the association with fertility rites. “Graves” signifies the notion of death that runs through the tale. “Warner” characterizes the voice of the past, warning the citizens of the town that breaking with tradition will have dire consequences. The roll call of townspeople goes through the alphabet—Adams to Zanini. Finally, the choice of New England as a setting will suggest to those familiar with history the notion of witchcraft, for which almost two dozen people were put to death in 1692. These and other details help raise “The Lottery” from a simple tale of terror to a study of a universal human problem that persists in all times in one form or another.
The Lottery (Critical Survey of Contemporary Fiction)

This story is probably one of the best-known in 20th century American literature—not necessarily because it is philosophically profound or artistically excellent, but because its conclusion catches the reader unaware and horrifies him or her with its barbarity.

At first, one expects the usual convention of a lottery—that someone will win a desirable prize. However, as the reader progresses into the story, ominous details suggest that more is at stake. When Tessie Hutchinson draws the unlucky token and objects that “It wasn’t fair,” the townspeople urge her to be a good sport and accept her prize. All the townspeople join in the stoning, even her own children.

The basic social theme focuses on how people often hold on to customs, even when they are barbaric and have lost their earlier meaning. The idea of the lottery itself refers back to a primitive fertility custom of scapegoating; that is, choosing one member of the community to be sacrificed to appease the gods and assure a good crop.

What makes the story so disturbing is that it does not take place in a primitive society in the distant past but rather in America in the 20th century. Moreover, instead of being written as if it were a parable of man’s primitive nature, it is presented realistically as if it were actually taking place. When “THE LOTTERY” was first published, many readers wrote to Jackson demanding to know where such horrors were being tolerated.

Bibliography


Friedman, Lenemaja. Shirley Jackson. Boston: Twayne, 1975. The best introduction to Jackson’s life and work. Chapter 2, “The Short Stories,” is divided into fifteen subsections, surveying some three dozen of the stories, including most of those in The Lottery, under such headings as “Fantasy,” “Social Evil,” and “Use of Irony.” Friedman’s comments are necessarily fairly brief—a story may be covered in three pages or, more often, in three sentences—but generally insightful. Includes bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, the latter annotated.


Pascal, Richard. “Farther Than Samarkand: The Escape Theme in Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Tooth.’” Studies in Short Fiction 19, no. 2 (Spring, 1982): 133-139. Discusses the conflict Jackson’s characters typically encounter between the ties of their communal group—family, neighborhood, or town—and their
impulses toward individual freedom. Pascal focuses on “The Tooth,” but his approach can be profitably applied to many of Jackson’s stories.


Philips, Robert S. “Shirley Jackson: A Chronology and a Supplementary Checklist.” *PBSA* 60, no. 1 (1966): 203-213. The earlier list is restricted to primary works—Jackson’s published writings, including student work published in college. The second listing updates and continues the first list, provides a chronology of Jackson’s life, and covers secondary sources, including book reviews and biographical and critical writings about Jackson. Despite a few errors in the citations, the most complete bibliography for the period covered.

Welch, Dennis M. “Manipulation in Shirley Jackson’s ‘Seven Types of Ambiguity.’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 18, no. 1 (Winter, 1981): 27-31. Offers an additional twist to the usual reading of the story, suggesting that Jackson’s use of ambiguity and irony is more subtle than previous critics had claimed.

Form and Content (Masterpieces of Women's Literature)

The Lottery: Or, The Adventures of James Harris is the only collection of Shirley Jackson’s short stories published during her lifetime. The twenty-five stories are divided into four numbered sections by extracts from Sadducismus Triumphantus, Joseph Glanvil’s seventeenth century defense of witchcraft, and followed by a fifth numbered section, an “Epilogue” presenting the last seven stanzas of the ballad “James Harris, The Daemon Lover.” Although different characters named Harris do appear in several of the stories, critics have been unable to find any real point to their presence, or to the subtitle of the book, the extracts from Glanvil, and the epilogue, other than creating a sort of generally mysterious tone for the book or perhaps capitalizing for commercial purposes on Jackson’s “witchlike” public image; she did have a strong interest in witchcraft and would even write a children’s book on the subject, Witchcraft of Salem Village (1956). Critics thus far, at any rate, have simply treated the collection as a mixed bag of early short stories, arranged in no particular order.

Despite the collection’s apparent lack of formal unity, however, the stories share a number of thematic and stylistic elements. Most are very short, describing in simple, straightforward prose a small cast of ordinary characters engaged in apparently mundane pursuits. All but a handful of the stories have women as protagonists, usually, but not always, in domestic settings of home or neighborhood. The typical Jackson story will introduce the characters, depict enough representative activity for the reader to picture clearly their normal routine—often an oppressively circumscribed one—and then introduce a disruptive element that alters, at least temporarily, that routine.

“The Daemon Lover,” for example, opens with the activities of a woman on the morning of her marriage to a man named James Harris. Detailed descriptions of her domestic rituals—choosing a dress, making coffee, making the bed, and so on—establish her as a methodical, meticulous person who is thoroughly settled in her routine. She is thirty-four and employed but is never given a name, suggesting that she functions here as a representative of a class, perhaps that of the large number of independent career women taking advantage of expanded postwar employment opportunities and leading lives not built around husbands and children. Jackson portrays women in similar situations in “The Villager” and “Elizabeth.” As the story progresses and Harris fails to show up, the woman begins to search the neighborhood for him, becoming progressively more disoriented until the end of the story, when her obsession with Harris’ disappearance has become so pronounced that the reader may begin to doubt her sanity and his existence. The next story in the book, “Like Mother Used to Make,” dramatizes a similar situation with the gender roles reversed. David Turner’s preparation of dinner for his neighbor Marcia is described in painstaking detail, down to the intricacies of the patterning of his silverware. Marcia’s friend James Harris (apparently not the same man as in the preceding story), finding her in David’s apartment and mistaking it for hers, makes himself at home. Eventually, Marcia and Harris drive the insecure and awkward David out of his own clean and comfortable apartment and into her cold and dirty one.

More frequent than such conflicts between men and women are those in which a woman is threatened or dominated by another woman or by her own social and ideological conceptions. In “Trial by Combat” and “Men with Their Big Shoes,” for example, the protagonist finds herself manipulated into an unwelcome situation by an older woman, and “Afternoon in Linen” and “Dorothy and My Grandmother and the Sailors” satirize the efforts of adult women to dictate behavior to girls. Other women are shown to be trapped by bigotry: Mrs. Wilson, in “After You, My Dear Alphonse,” views a black child in terms of racial stereotypes, just as the women in “Come Dance with Me in Ireland” view the Irish, and Mrs. Concord (an example of Jackson’s frequent use of ironically emblematic names) in “A Fine Old Firm” is shown to be prejudiced against Jews.
Context (Masterpieces of Women's Literature)

Jackson achieved both popular and critical success during her lifetime, but apart from the phenomenally well known “The Lottery,” her work has received little serious attention since her death. Lynette Carpenter has speculated that “the reasons for this neglect are also the reasons for the reevaluation of Shirley Jackson by feminist critics”; she argues that traditional critics dismissed Jackson’s work because she specialized in genres that were not considered suitable for serious fiction, especially gothic novels, humorous writing, and domestic sketches. More recent critics have begun to explore the thematic depth underlying Jackson’s sketches, which are ostensibly concerned with what critic Anne LeCroy has called “the paraphernalia of living” but which can be seen with hindsight to challenge all the conservative dogma about women’s roles current in the late 1940’s. Jackson’s women are torn between the relative security of traditional domestic roles, with their demand of complete self-abnegation, and the flight to personal freedom, with its apparently inevitable consequence of the disintegration of the old sense of identity. Her stories offer no easy solution to the dilemma, but pose it in a variety of humorous and/or horrifying terms. As Richard Pascal has remarked, “What seems to fascinate Shirley Jackson most is the possibility that behind the self which we ordinarily assume to be irrevocably ingrained, if not preordained, there is nothing immutably necessary which we can call our own; it is, for her, an idea which is both frightening and alluring.”

Although these issues are of central importance to women’s literature, they are also significant for all human beings. As critic Donna Burrell has observed, Jackson “explored not only the division of the community’s tasks, but also the network of roles available to each gender, the justification, if any, for these divisions, and the problems which occur if a person of either gender does not fit his or her role.” Jackson’s view of human nature is essentially a pessimistic one—none of her stories offers anything like a traditional happy ending for her characters—but also a challenging and fascinating one, dramatizing the tension inherent in the effort to maintain both an individual and a social identity in a series of striking psychological parables.
Historical Context

"The Lottery" was published in 1948, shortly after the end of World War II, but Jackson set the story in an indeterminate time and place. Many critics, however, have maintained that Jackson modeled the village after North Bennington, Vermont, where she and her husband lived after their marriage in 1940. After the story was published, some of Jackson's friends and acquaintances also suggested that many of its characters were modeled after people who lived in North Bennington. Jackson herself, who throughout her life said little about the meaning behind or the circumstances surrounding the story, noted: "I hoped by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general humanity in their own lives."

Some critics have suggested that "The Lottery" is representative of the social, political, and cultural climate of the time it was written. In 1948 the world was still trying to confront the brutal realities of World War II, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb. The Holocaust, in particular, revealed that society is capable of mass genocide if they believe it to be in the name of the common good. Jackson's husband, literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, once wrote about the influence of world events on Jackson's fiction: "Her fierce visions of dissociations and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic fantasies. Quite the reverse: They are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the bomb."

The spread of Communism was also a major concern in 1948. Communists took over in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet occupation force in Germany set up a blockade between Berlin and West Germany, and tensions rose between the democratic Republic of South Korea and Communist-led North Korea. Additionally, the term "Cold War" was coined by President Truman's advisor Bernard Baruch to describe the increasing hostilities between East and West. In the U.S. Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated Alger Hiss, a State Department official accused of supplying the Soviet Union with classified documents. Two years later in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy started a Communist "witch hunt" that continued for the next four years. Also in 1950, the McCarran Act (Control of Communists Act) was passed by congress to severely restrict suspected Communists. A few years earlier in 1947, many figures in the American entertainment industry were accused of having Communist Party affiliations. That year the Hollywood blacklist, which included some 300 writers, directors, and actors, was compiled. Such popular figures as Charlie Chaplin, Lee Grant, and Arthur Miller were accused of being Communists.

The United States during the late 1940s and 1950s was largely a patriarchal society, one in which women were expected to stay at home and raise the children. Recent critics have interpreted "The Lottery" from a feminist perspective, suggesting that Jackson was commenting on the role of women in American society at the time the story was written. Peter Kosenko, for example, stated in The New Orleans Review in 1985 that in "The Lottery," the women "have a distinctly subordinate position in the socio-economic hierarchy of the village."
Literary Style

Setting
Jackson establishes the setting of "The Lottery" at the beginning of the story. It takes place on the morning of June 27th, a sunny and pleasant summer day, in the village square of a town of about three hundred people. The setting is described as tranquil and peaceful, with children playing and adults talking about everyday concerns. This seemingly normal and happy setting contrasts greatly with the brutal reality of the lottery. Few clues are given to a specific time and place in the story, a technique used to emphasize the fact that such brutality can take place in any time or in any place.

Narration
Jackson's narrative technique, the way she recounts the events in the story, is often described as detached and objective. Told from a third-person point of view, the narrator is not a participant in the story. The objective tone of the narrative, meaning the story is told without excessive emotionalism or description, helps to impart the ordinariness of the barbaric act.

Symbolism
Jackson uses symbolism, a literary technique in which an object, person, or concept represents something else, throughout "The Lottery." For example, the story takes place on June 27, near the summer solstice, one of the two days in a year when the earth is farthest from the sun. Many prehistoric rituals took place on the summer solstice, so by setting the lottery at this time, Jackson draws similarities to such ancient rituals. Another symbol in the story is the black box. Although it is old and shabby, the villagers are unwilling or unable to replace it, just as they are unwilling to stop participating in the lottery. Many critics have also argued that Jackson uses name symbology extensively in the story. For example, Mr. Summers's name is said to represent joviality, while Mr. Graves's name represents tragedy. Delacroix, which in French means "of the cross," suggests sacrifice because of its reference to Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

Irony
Jackson also uses irony, the recognition of a reality different from appearance, extensively in "The Lottery." It is ironic that the story takes place in a tranquil and peaceful setting because what actually occurs is brutal and violent. It is also ironic that the events of the story are related in a matter-of-fact and objective way, since the story as a whole seeks to elicit profound emotions and question morality.

Parable
"The Lottery" is often characterized as a parable, a story that presents a moral lesson through characters who represent abstract ideas. While no extensive character development takes place in the story, the shocking ending prompts readers to think about the moral implications of the lottery and how such issues relate to society as a whole. Certain characters represent certain ideas in the tale: Old Man Warner represents tradition and ritual, Mr. Summers represents joviality, Mr. Graves represents tragedy, and so forth. Jackson does not interject into the story any ethical commentary, but rather challenges readers to find their own meaning.

Gothicism
Gothic literature typically features such elements as horror, the supernatural, suspense, and violence. While "The Lottery" is not graphic in its description of Tessie's killing, it is considered an example of the Gothic genre because of the feeling of horror it generates in the reader. Because of Jackson's use of suspense, readers do not understand the full ramifications of the lottery until the end of the story. Readers could, in fact, think that it is a good thing to "win" the lottery. While some critics have faulted this technique, suggesting that Jackson deliberately misleads her readers, others have noted that it is a very effective means of highlighting the brutality of the story. Robert B. Heilman, for example, wrote in *Modern Short Stories: A Critical Anthology*: "Suddenly, in the midst of this ordinary, matter-of-fact environment, there occurs a terrifying cruel
action.”
Compare and Contrast

1948: A Hollywood blacklist is compiled in 1947 and several figures in the entertainment industry are accused of being Communists.

Today: Although all U. S. citizens are able to freely choose their political affiliations, few deviate from major political party lines. Ross Perot and the Labor Reform Party only garnered 8.5 percent of the vote in the 1996 presidential election according to an ABC news report.

1948: The Soviet Union occupies East Germany and blocks traffic between West Germany and Berlin.

Today: The Berlin Wall, which was built in 1961, falls in 1989; East and West Germany reunite in 1990.

1948: Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger founds the International Planned Parenthood Federation, ushering in an era in which women are able to take more control over their own bodies.

Today: Birth control methods such as oral contraceptives and the Norplant implant are legal and widely used in the United States.
Topics for Further Study

Relate "The Lottery" to psychological explanations of scapegoatism.

Discuss the significance of Tessie Hutchinson as victim from a feminist perspective.

Research the 1692 witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts, and compare the events surrounding them to those in "The Lottery."
Media Adaptations

"The Lottery" was recorded by Shirley Jackson for Folkway Records in 1963.

_The Lottery and Other Stories_ was recorded by actress Maureen Stapleton for Caedmon in 1976.

A dramatization of "The Lottery" was videotaped by Encyclopedia Britannica Education Corporation in 1969. Also available is a videotaped discussion of the story by James Durbin. Both are available from Britannica Films.

_The Lottery_ was filmed by the Landsburg Company/Picture Entertainment and aired on NBC in September, 1996. The movie was written by Anthony Spinner, directed by Daniel Sackheim, and starred Dan Cortese, Veronica Cartwright, and M. Emmet Walsh.
What Do I Read Next?

The short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K. Le Guin was published in her 1975 collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. It focuses on the city of Omelas, whose citizens must decide how high a price they are willing to pay for happiness.

Irish writer Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal" was first published in 1729. In it he uses satire to propose a horrifying solution, cannibalism, to the problem of hunger that existed in Ireland at that time.

Elias Canetti's nonfiction work *Crowds and Power* (1962) examines the origins, behavior, and significance of crowds as forces in society.

*The Crucible* (1953) by Arthur Miller is a fictionalized dramatization of the hysteria that led to the witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, during which twenty people were killed for being witches.

James Frazer's 1890 nonfiction work *The Golden Bough* is a collection of anthropological information on folklore, myth, and ritual, in which he examines the basis for human social behavior.
Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


Further Reading
Allen analyzes the elements of folklore and ritual in "The Lottery," contending that Jackson successfully uses them to reveal various kinds of social behavior.

Collection of previously published criticism on Jackson's works.

Friedman, Lenemaja. Shirley Jackson, Twayne, 1975.
Friedman takes an in-depth look at Jackson's life, stories, and novels, and concludes that Jackson is a unique writer who belongs to no particular school of writing.

Gibson identifies the similarities between the biblical story of Joshua 7:10-26 and "The Lottery," noting that while the biblical story emphasizes the supernatural triumph of good over evil, Jackson's story reveals a "chillingly impersonal world of gray amorality."
Bibliography (Comprehensive Guide to Short Stories, Critical Edition)


Friedman, Lenemaja. *Shirley Jackson*. Boston: Twayne, 1975. The best introduction to Jackson’s life and work. Chapter 2, “The Short Stories,” is divided into fifteen subsections, surveying some three dozen of the stories, including most of those in *The Lottery*, under such headings as “Fantasy,” “Social Evil,” and “Use of Irony.” Friedman’s comments are necessarily fairly brief—a story may be covered in three pages or, more often, in three sentences—but generally insightful. Includes bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, the latter annotated.


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