EBSCO Publishing  Citation Format: MLA (Modern Language Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA and make any necessary corrections before using. Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates. Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

Works Cited

<!--Additional Information:
Persistent link to this record (Permalink): http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ikh&AN=103331MP421429820000662&site=lerc-plus
End of citation-->

The Lottery
Shirley Jackson
Born: December 14, 1916; San Francisco, California
Died: August 8, 1965; North Bennington, Vermont

Quick Reference

First published: 1948

Type of work: Short fiction

Type of plot: Horror

Time of plot: June 27, late 1940's

Locale: Probably New England

Principal characters
Tessie Hutchinson, a housewife
Bill Hutchinson, her husband, a farmer
Bill, Jr., 
Nancy, and
Dave, the young children of Tessie and Bill
Mr. Summers, a businessperson

Mr. Graves, the village postmaster

Old Man Warner, an elderly villager

Dickie Delacroix, a village child

Mrs. Delacroix, Dickie’s mother

The Story:
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 Hutchinsons 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.

**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 prototypical 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.”

Essay by: Thomas Du Bose

Further Reading

Hall, Joan Wylie. Shirley Jackson: A Study of Short Fiction. New York: Twayne, 1993. Part one is devoted to Jackson’s short stories, including “The Lottery.” Hall’s bibliography, although dated, is extremely thorough and includes critical responses to Jackson’s writings.


Oppenheimer, Judy. Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson. New York: Putnam, 1988. The definitive biography of Jackson. Oppenheimer provides a wealth of detail about the writing of “The Lottery” and the intense controversy that arose when it was first published in the summer of 1948.


SHIRLEY JACKSON (1916-1965)

The New Yorker published Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" on June 26, 148, and hundreds of readers recorded their stunned reaction to the tale of a woman’s ritualistic death by stoning in a twentieth-century American town square. "By the next week," Jackson wrote in her "Biography of a Story," "I 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." Although she joked about the more upset correspondents, who included her own mother, Jackson was unnerved by the sudden notoriety.

Discussed as fable and folklore, praised for its chilling ironies and subtle symbolism, "The Lottery" has become one of the most widely reprinted works of American literature. Maya Angelou stressed its skillful plotting for an Insight Media program in 1978; Richard Ford selected it for The Granta Book of the American Short Story in 1992. Establishing Jackson's artistry in a genre that S. T. Joshi has called "domestic horror," "The Lottery" inevitably shaped readers' expectations for the five novels and the many stories that followed. When she died after a heart attack on August 8, 1965, the New York Times headlined her long obituary "Shirley Jackson, Author of Horror Classic."

Although Jackson lived in Vermont for much of her adult life and is often identified as a New England writer, she was born on December 14, 1916, in San Francisco. Her father, Leslie Jackson, had emigrated from England; her mother, Geraldine Bugbee Jackson, was related to noted California architects — a probable factor in Shirley Jackson's fascination with buildings in her novels and in stories like "The Little House," "A Visit" (formerly "The Lovely House"), and "The House." "Home" (1965), the last work Jackson published before her death, describes an outsider's dangerous encounter with the ghost of a small boy who is trying to
return to the country house she and her husband have innocently purchased. Jackson's childhood in suburban Burlingame is reflected in her first novel, The Road Through the Wall (1948), and in the semiautobiographical story "Dorothy and My Grandmother and the Sailors," an account of two twelve-year-old girls who experience a few moments of panic on an eventful trip into San Francisco. In 1933, Jackson's executive father was promoted, and she strongly resented the cross-country move to Rochester, New York. Mentally depressed (a condition that would recur later in her life), she withdrew from the University of Rochester after two years.

Several of Jackson's early stories appeared in Syracuse University publications, including the Spectre, a magazine she founded with her fellow student Stanley Edgar Hyman. Their outspoken editorials on civil rights anticipated "After You, My Dear Alphonse" (1942), a critique of a middle-class housewife who foolishly assumes that her young son's African American friend comes from a large, poor, and lazy family. It was Jackson's first story for The New Yorker. Jackson and Hyman were married on August 13, 1940, in New York City, and her jobs at a radio station, an advertising agency, and Macy's department store supplemented his modest income from the New Republic and The New Yorker. When Hyman joined the faculty of Bennington College in 1945 and they moved to Vermont, Jackson's sense of dislocation paralleled that of many of her lonely characters. She wrote several hours a day, typing manuscripts between P.T.A. meetings, baseball games, and pajama parties for her four children. Family activities inspired more than thirty semiautobiographical comic stories, which Jackson sold to Ladies' Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Harper's, and other magazines. The most frequently anthologized of these is "Charles," which ends with an O. Henry twist when the startled mother of a new kindergartener realizes that the terror of the classroom is her own son. Another popular story is "The Night We All Had Grippe," which Jackson called "the most direct translation of experience into fiction that I have ever done." Written in a (ever, while the author coped with the demands of her flu-stricken husband and children, the farce of switched beds and a missing blanket is strongly reminiscent of James Thurber's "The Night the Bed Fell." Jackson was an innovator in the field of family comedy, and she skillfully pieced most of these stories into the fictionalized memoirs Life Among the Savages (1953) and Raising Demons (1957), yet she discounted the literary merit of such work. As recent scholars have demonstrated, however, the popular domestic narratives of writers like Jackson, Betty MacDonald, and Jean Kerr are a major branch of American women's humor and a mirror of post-World War II culture.

Jackson's family stories also bear the hallmarks of her more serious short and long fiction. Ordinary situations turn strange, even nightmarish. A young mother and her two small children meet a sinister man on a train in "The Witch"; in "The Daemon Lover," a young woman with dreams of marital bliss is apparently abandoned by her fiancé on their wedding day; the unhappily housewife of "The Beautiful Stranger" falls in love with her husband's mysterious and hallucinatory double and then gets lost, perhaps permanently, while trying to find her way home to him. Jackson's work "has a pervasive atmosphere of the odd about it," says S. T. Joshi, who ranks Jackson with Ramsey Campbell as H. P. Lovecraft's successors in the field of "weird fiction." The haunted tower of a country mansion in "A Visit" and the
demonic stranger who mesmerizes a young woman in "The Rock" are among Jackson's occasional gothic touches, but the oddness of her fiction more often inheres in the everyday. In "The Summer People," for example, an elderly husband and wife stay at their lake cottage after Labor Day, only to find themselves cut off from the outside world, awaiting probable death at the hands of resentful villagers — a violent defense of tradition that parallels the action of "The Lottery."

**The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris** (1949), the only collection that Jackson made of her short fiction, capitalized on the impact of the title story in The New Yorker. Jackson grouped her twenty-five tales into four sections, inserted transitional passages from a witchcraft treatise, revised stories to emphasize a mysterious stranger named James Harris, and appended the "demon lover" ballad to clarify the subtitle of the book. Jackson's most famous story opens on a beautiful June 27 as villagers gather for an annual lottery that is held concurrently in other towns. According to the biographer Judy Oppenheimer, Jackson's own town of North Bennington was the model for both its modern setting and its characters. Playful children arrive on the square before their busy parents, and the boys make a large pile of the "smoothest and roundest" stones, whose grim purpose is revealed only at the story's conclusion. Other foreshadowings are equally unobtrusive. The townspeople keep their distance from the lottery equipment and hesitate when Mr. Summers asks them to steady the black box so he can mix up the slips of paper inside. The degree of ceremony is puzzling: families line up together, lists of kinship networks have been prepared, and every able-bodied person must attend. People seem reluctant to get the winning ticket, and there are rumors that other villages are going to stop holding the lottery; but Old Man Warner counters with a proverb: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." When Bill Hutchinson draws the slip with a black spot, his wife shatters the morning calm, shouting that Mr. Summers rushed Bill's selection. Tessie herself receives the marked paper after the five Hutchinson draw to determine which family member will win the final round. As the desperate woman screams, "It isn't fair," the town advances against her, armed with stones from the boys' stockpile.

"The Lottery" has provoked a variety of critical responses, including mythic, feminist, and Marxist approaches. Jackson told her New Yorker editor that "The Lottery" was "just a story" with no special theme, but Oppenheimer says she told a friend it was about "the Jews," recent victims of Nazi terror in World War II. A student of folklore, Jackson employed archetypes of scapegoating and seasonal sacrifice, timing the lottery near the summer solstice, when farming communities labor to ensure a rich harvest. The three-legged stool that supports the ominously black box could be a modern version of the Greek tripod of prophecy, and the container itself recalls Pandora's box of woes. A neighbor reminds the distraught Tessie that each villager "took the same chance"; however, in Jackson's fiction, women have a knack for drawing disaster.

The disaster is not so macabre in the symbolically titled "Flower Garden," but once again, the weight of tradition brutally crushes a woman's poignant challenge. Mrs. MacLane seems to bring the spring with her when, in late March, she moves to a New England town with five-year-old Davey. A young urban widow, she freshens the rooms of her little cottage with pretty
colors, attracting the villagers' friendly attention. Helen Winning, who lives in the "old Vermont
manor house" up the hill, is especially helpful. Long ago, she yearned to plant a garden and
to make the cottage into a home for her own family, but over the past eleven years she has
so thoroughly adjusted to life in her husband's big ancestral house that she is beginning to
look like her mother-in-law. The older Mrs. Winning clearly holds the authority in the three-
generation household, and the arrival of the free-spirited Mrs. MacLane sparks a crisis in
young Mrs. Winning's well-ordered existence.

Like the repressed women in many of Jackson's other stories ("The Daemon Lover," "The
Tooth," and "Elizabeth"), Helen Winning finally breaks out. Her resistance is mild but
significant as she pays a lengthy call at the cottage and extends warm invitations to the
MacLanes, "all without the permission of her mother-in-law." The young women's friendship
blossoms, and the days become "miraculously long and warm," with the first colors in the
MacLanes' new garden "promising rich brilliance for the end of the summer, and the next
summer, and summers ten years from now."

Abruptly, the villagers' kindness turns to cruelty, and the promise tokened by the garden is
never fulfilled. Shocked when Davey joins in the taunts that little Howard Winning directs
against a mulatto boy from the edge of town, Mrs. MacLane makes her son apologize to Billy
Jones. The defensive Helen Winning is "incredulous," "indignant," and "embarrassed" when
Mrs. MacLane then employs Billy's father to do the heavy garden work. With "the weight of
the old Winning house" in her voice, Helen publicly dissociates herself from the newcomers in
the cottage. Her insinuation that Mrs. MacLane is having an affair with Mr. Jones seals the
community's rejection of Davey and his mother, but the lie also shows Helen's desperate
conformity with the prejudiced neighbors she has known all her life. After a storm throws a
huge branch across the MacLanes' ruined garden, the "tired" Mrs. MacLane decides to leave,
and Helen Winning turns her back on the destruction without a word of comfort. Like Tessie
Hutchinson in "The Lottery," the estranged women are both terribly defeated by village ways.

Stanley Hyman has observed that Jackson's "fierce visions" are "a sensitive and faithful
anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and
the Bomb." Safe haven is an ideal in Jackson's fiction, but, in the spirit of the 1940s and the
Cold War decades, her characters are more likely to discover heart-wrenching betrayals.
Whether the genre is domestic comedy, gothic horror, or realistic narrative, Jackson pulls the
rug from under her precariously balanced housewives and career women. Drawing on myth,
ritual, and literary antecedents, these modern tales of loss and bewilderment create an
atmosphere of quiet threat that was promptly recognized as the signature of a Shirley
Jackson story.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY Works by Shirley Jackson

Giroux, 1966.


Critical Studies


By Joan Wylie Hall

Copyright of this work is the property of Columbia University Press and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission except for the print or download capabilities of the retrieval software used for access. This content is intended solely for the use of the individual user.

Accession Number: 17172493
JACKSON'S THE LOTTERY

Little has been written about "The Lottery," possibly the most widely known American short story. Perhaps that is because the story seems such a transparent attack on blind obedience to tradition that little or no exegesis is necessary, a reading usually encouraged by discussion questions accompanying this much-anthologized story. But "The Lottery" is not an assault on mindless, cultural conformity. It is a grim, even nihilistic, parable of the evil inherent in human nature.

It is not that the ancient custom of human sacrifice makes the villagers behave cruelly, but that their thinly veiled cruelty keeps the custom alive. Savagery fuels evil tradition, not vice versa. This is no chicken-egg question, but a fact evident from the text. From the beginning, the people display no genuine human community, no real bond of love. Considering that one of them could die within the hour, a possibility made more likely by the small number of potential victims, Tessie Hutchinson's tapping her friend Mrs. Delacroix "on the arm as a farewell" hardly seems a sign of sisterly concern. A short time later, it is Mrs. Delacroix who "selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands" when her "friend" Tessie has become the scapegoat. In spite of such communal gestures as the crowd's separating "good-humoredly" to let Mrs. Hutchinson through, the villagers are looking forward to the slaughter, overtly so in the case of the children: "Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of
stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones," the ones best for accurate throwing.

Old Man Warner is usually taken to be the most allegorically evil devotee of custom, but he is merely the most honest. He is also the only villager who seems to believe in the supposed original purpose of the sacrifice: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon," he intones. The others are willing to risk their own lives for the sheer pleasure of an unpunished annual killing. Mr. Adams and his wife mildly oppose the lottery by telling Old Man Warner that some villagers are giving it up, but when it comes time for the stoning, "Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd." Such heavy-handed ironic twists imply that there is no such thing as communal love, or even sympathy, in the human heart.

The soullessness of Tessie Hutchinson even denies the myth of family love. When her family is chosen to supply the victim, Jackson pushes Tessie's survival instinct to the most shameful level by having her turn on her own flesh and blood. Tessie desperately tries to improve her odds for survival by defying tradition and adding her married daughter to the killing pool: "'There's Don and Eva,' Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. 'Make them take their chance.'" Tessie thinks, "It wasn't fair," only because another family was not selected, and her husband "regrettfully" agrees, for he too could be the final choice. Even the children of Tessie's household share this unconcern for the other family members. When they draw their slips, "Nancy and Bill, Jr., opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed" because neither is chosen to die.

Jackson's cold comment on the sacrifice itself makes it clear that the killing is a pleasurable end in itself, not an onerous duty demanded by tradition: "Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones." That "someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" surely isn't required by custom, and the last line of the story, "then they were upon her," suggests enthusiasm rather than reluctance to murder a member of their community.

In a lecture written to introduce her public readings of "The Lottery," Jackson expressed bewilderment at the furor caused by the June 1948 publication of the story in The New Yorker. This lecture implies that Jackson did not understand her story on a psychological level, and did not care to. She apparently wrote it more from instinct than calculation. She says, "The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller," and that when she wrote the story, as soon as she got home, "it went quickly and easily" (1309), the published version "almost word for word the original draft" (1310). When a New Yorker editor asked Jackson what she wanted him to tell complaining callers, she says she informed him that "anything he chose to say was perfectly all right with me; it was just a story" (1310).

Yet because of "The Lottery," Jackson says, "Millions of people, and my mother, had taken a pronounced dislike of me" (1311). There is no doubt some platform exaggeration in that statement, but Jackson's comment that "of the three-hundred-old letters that I received that summer I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from
friends" (1311) has the literal ring of truth. Surely such outrage was not prompted by a perception of negative treatment of ignorant villagers enslaved by a primitive custom. It can only be explained as the public's visceral revulsion toward Jackson's extremely cynical view of human nature as devoid of any shred of goodness or even decency. In her brief lecture, Jackson does not even entertain this as a possibility. But her concluding remark, which sounds suspiciously as though it had been invented for dramatic purposes, reveals the brutal view of Homo sapiens that the author reflected in the ordinary people of "The Lottery": "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" (1312).

"The Lottery" expresses Shirley Jackson's abysmal opinion of her fellow creatures. Her simple villagers are not brainwashed victims but bloodthirsty victimizers. Ironically, it is probably this nihilistic undercurrent, and not the surface attack on subservience to custom, that gives this parable its continued appeal. "The Lottery" is not the story of a custom that makes no sense, but of one that fulfills a deep and horrifying need.

WORK CITED

~~~~~~~~
By A. R. COULTHARD, Appalachian State University

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.
When Shirley Jackson’s story “The Lottery
(http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1948/06/26/1948_06_26) was first published, in the June 26, 1948, issue of this magazine, Miriam Friend was a young mother living in Roselle, New Jersey, with her husband, a chemical engineer who worked on the Manhattan Project. An exact contemporary of Jackson’s—both women were born in 1916—she had recently left her job as a corporate librarian to care for her infant son, and she was a faithful reader of The New Yorker. “I frankly confess to being completely baffled by Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery,’ ” she wrote in a letter to the editor after reading the story. “Will you please send us a brief explanation before my husband and I scratch right through our scalps trying to fathom it?”
Friend’s note was among the first of the torrent of letters that arrived at The New Yorker in the wake of “The Lottery”—the most mail the magazine had ever received in response to a work of fiction. Jackson’s story, in which the residents of an unidentified American village participate in an annual rite of stoning to death a person chosen among them by drawing lots, would quickly become one of the best known and most frequently anthologized short stories in English. “The Lottery” has been adapted for stage, television, opera, and ballet; it was even featured in an episode of “The Simpsons.” By now it is so familiar that it is hard to remember how shocking it originally seemed: “outrageous,” “gruesome,” or just “utterly pointless,” in the words of some of the readers who were moved to write. When I spoke to Friend recently—she is the only one of the letter writers I could track down who is still alive—she still remembered how upsetting she had found “The Lottery.” “I don’t know how anyone approved of that story,” she told me.

In a lecture Jackson often gave about the story’s creation and its aftermath, which was published posthumously under the title “Biography of a Story,” she said that of all the letters that came in that summer—they eventually numbered more than three hundred, by her count—only thirteen were kind, “and they were mostly from friends.” The rest, she wrote with mordant humor, were dominated by three main themes: “bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse.” Readers wanted to know where
such lotteries were held, and whether they could go and watch; they threatened to cancel their New Yorker subscriptions; they declared the story a piece of trash. If the letters “could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public … I would stop writing now,” she concluded.

As Jackson’s biographer, I’ve pored over more than a hundred of these letters, which she kept in a giant scrapbook that is now in her archive at the Library of Congress. There were indeed some cancelled subscriptions, as well as a fair share of name-calling—Jackson was said to be “perverted” and “gratuitously disagreeable,” with “incredibly bad taste.” But the vast majority of the letter writers were not angry or abusive but simply confused. More than anything else, they wanted to understand what the story meant. The response of Carolyn Green, of New Milford, Connecticut, was typical. “Gentlemen,” she wrote, “I have read ‘The Lottery’ three times with increasing shock and horror…. Cannot decide whether [Jackson] is a genius or a female and more subtle version of Orson Welles.”

One of the many who took the story for a factual report was Stirling Silliphant, a producer at Twentieth Century-Fox: “All of us here have been grimly moved by Shirley Jackson’s story…. Was it purely an imaginative flight, or do such tribunal rituals still exist and, if so, where?” Andree L. Eilert, a fiction writer who once had her own byline in The New Yorker, wondered if “mass sadism” was still a part of ordinary life in New England, “or in equally enlightened
regions.” Nahum Medalia, a professor of sociology at Harvard, also assumed the story was based in fact, though he was more admiring: “It is a wonderful story, and it kept me very cold on the hot morning when I read it.” The fact that so many readers accepted “The Lottery” as truthful is less astonishing than it now seems, since at the time The New Yorker did not designate its stories as fact or fiction, and the “casuals,” or humorous essays, were generally understood as falling somewhere in between.

Among those who were confused about Jackson’s intentions was Alfred L. Kroeber, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley. “If Shirley Jackson’s intent was to symbolize into complete mystification, and at the same time be gratuitously disagreeable, she certainly succeeded,” he wrote. In an e-mail to me, Kroeber’s daughter, the novelist Ursula Le Guin, who was nineteen years old when “The Lottery” appeared, recalled her father’s reaction: “My memory is that my father was indignant at Shirley Jackson’s story because as a social anthropologist he felt that she didn’t, and couldn’t, tell us how the lottery could come to be an accepted social institution.” Since Jackson presented her fantasy “with all the trappings of contemporary realism,” Le Guin said, her father felt that she was “pulling a fast one” on the reader.

There were some outlandish theories. Marion Trout, of Lakewood, Ohio, suspected that the editorial staff had become “tools of Stalin.” Another reader wondered if it was a publicity stunt, while several
more speculated that a concluding paragraph must have been accidentally cut by the printer. Others complained that the story had traumatized them so much that they had been unable to open any issues of the magazine since. “I read it while soaking in the tub … and was tempted to put my head underwater and end it all,” wrote Camilla Ballou, of St. Paul.

Even the *New Yorker* staff could not agree about “The Lottery.” The editors accepted it almost unanimously, the sole dissenter being William Maxwell, who found it “contrived” and “heavy-handed.” Brendan Gill, then a young staffer, told Jackson that the fiction editor Gus Lobrano, unsurprisingly, loved it, but reporters Joseph Mitchell, A. J. Liebling, and others were less impressed. (Gill thought it was “one of the best stories—two or three or four best—that the magazine ever printed.”) Harold Ross, the magazine’s editor at the time, never went on record with his personal opinion. But he wrote to Jackson’s husband, the literary critic and *New Yorker* staff writer Stanley Edgar Hyman, the following month that “the story has certainly been a great success from our standpoint…. [The cartoonist] Gluyas Williams said it is the best American horror story. I don’t know whether it’s that or not, or quite what it is, but it was a terrifically effective thing, and will become a classic in some category.”

The largest proportion of the respondents admired “The Lottery,” even if they did not believe they understood it. Arthur Wang, then at Viking Press and later to found the publishing house Hill and Wang,
wrote to Hyman: “We discussed the story for almost
an hour the other evening. It’s damned good but I
haven’t met anyone who is sure that they ... know
what it’s about.” Nelson Olmsted, a producer at NBC,
wrote to Jackson that he was interested in using the
story on television. “I deal with hundreds of stories
every year, but it has been a long time since I have
seen one create as much interest and discussion as
‘The Lottery,’ ” he wrote. His own interpretation was
that “humanity is normally opposed to progress;
instead, it clutches with tenacity to the customs and
fetishes of its ancestors.” (NBC ended up adapting
“The Lottery” for two programs in the early nineteen-
fifties.)

For the rest of her life, Jackson would receive letters
demanding an explanation for “The Lottery.” She
reportedly told one friend that it was based in anti-
Semitism, and another that all the characters were
modeled on actual people in North Bennington. After
receiving a letter of praise from her college professor
H. W. Herrington, she replied that the idea had
originated in his folklore course. The best explanation
for it is probably the most general, something like
what she wrote in response to Joseph Henry Jackson,
the literary editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, who
confessed in his column that he was “stumped” by the
story. “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,” she replied. The New
Yorke's Kip Orr, who was charged with responding to all the letters on Jackson's behalf, echoed this position in his standard formulation: "Miss Jackson's story can be interpreted in half a dozen different ways. It's just a fable.... She has chosen a nameless little village to show, in microcosm, how the forces of belligerence, persecution, and vindictiveness are, in mankind, endless and traditional and that their targets are chosen without reason."

"The Lottery" takes the classic theme of man's inhumanity to man and gives it an additional twist: the randomness inherent in brutality. It anticipates the way we would come to understand the twentieth century's unique lessons about the capacity of ordinary citizens to do evil—from the Nazi camp bureaucracy, to the Communist societies that depended on the betrayal of neighbor by neighbor and the experiments by the psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo demonstrating how little is required to induce strangers to turn against each other. In 1948, with the fresh horrors of the Second World War barely receding into memory and the Red Scare just beginning, it is no wonder that the story's first readers reacted so vehemently to this ugly glimpse of their own faces in the mirror, even if they did not realize exactly what they were looking at.

Recalling "The Lottery" in our conversation, Miriam Friend was no less disturbed by it than she had been upon her first reading, nor had she changed her mind about it in the last sixty-five years. "Such a harsh story," she said.
Ruth Franklin is a book critic and author of “A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction (http://www.amazon.com/Thousand-Darknesses-Truth-Holocaust-Fiction/dp/0199976007).” She is at work on a biography of Shirley Jackson. Allison Bulger assisted with the research for this article.

Illustration by Victor Kerlow.
JACKSON'S THE LOTTERY
A good harvest has always been vital to civilizations. After the fields have been prepared and the seeds sown, the farmer can only wait and hope that the proper balance of rain and sun will ensure a good harvest. From this hope springs ritual. Many ancient cultures believed that growing crops represented the life cycle, beginning with what one associates with the end--death. Seeds buried, apparently without hope of germination, represent death. But with the life forces of water and the sun, the seed grows, representing rebirth. Consequently, ancient peoples began sacrificial rituals to emulate this resurrection cycle. What began as a vegetation ritual developed into a cathartic cleansing of an entire tribe or village. By transferring one's sins to persons or animals and then sacrificing them, people believed that their sins would be eliminated, a process that has been termed the "scapegoat" archetype (Guerin et al. 158). In her short story "The Lottery," Shirley Jackson uses this archetype to build on man's inherent need for such ritual.

Jackson weaves seasonal and life-death cycle archetypes, which coincide with vegetation rituals, into the story. According to Carl Jung, archetypes can be considered "complexes of experience that come upon us like fate" (30), a past collective experience represented in rituals, symbols, and motifs. The lottery takes place every year when the nature cycle peaks in midsummer, a time usually associated with cheerfulness. Mr. Summers, a jovial man who conducts the lottery ceremony, sets the tone of the event with both his name and his mannerisms. But lurking behind him, Mr. Graves quietly assists, his name hinting at a dark undertone. The picnickylike atmosphere betrays the serious consequence of the lottery, for like the seed, a sacrificial person must also be buried to bring forth life. Jackson creates balance by juxtaposing Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves to share in the responsibilities of the ritual: Life brings death, and death recycles life.
At one point in the village's history, the lottery represented a grave experience, and all who participated understood the profound meaning of the tradition. But as time passed, the villagers began to take the ritual lightly. They endure it almost as automatons—"actors" anxious to return to their mundane, workaday lives (Jackson 76). Old Man Warner, the only one who seems to recall the seriousness of the occasion, complains that Mr. Summers jokes with everybody (77). But why do the villagers cling to tradition when they no longer find meaning in the ritual? Jung posits that even if one does not understand the meaning, the experience provides the "individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations" (188). Because there has "always been a lottery" (Jackson 77), the villagers feel compelled to continue this horrifying tradition. They do focus, however, on its gruesome rather than its symbolic nature, for they "still remembered to use stones" even after they have "forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box" (79). The story thus takes the stance that humanity's inclination toward violence overshadows society's need for civilized traditions.

"The Lottery" first appeared in The New Yorker in 1948. Subsequently, distraught readers—uncomfortable with the idea of a relatively modern culture committing such a heinous act—questioned Jackson's intentions. She responded that she wanted to dramatize graphically the "pointless violence" in people's lives (Friedman 64), to reveal the general inhumanity of man. Jung's view is that even "more or less civilized" people remain inwardly primitive (269). When no recollection of a ritual's symbolism exists, the "mass psyche" becomes the "hypnotic focus of fascination, drawing everyone under its spell" (127). The group experience, then, lowers the "level of consciousness [. . .] like the psyche of an animal" (125). Therefore, the base actions exhibited in groups (such as the stoning of Mrs. Hutchinson) do not take place on the individual level, for here such action would be deemed "murder." On the group level people classify their heinous act simply as "ritual." When Mrs. Hutchinson arrives at the ceremony late, she chats sociably with Mrs. Delacroix. Nevertheless, after Mrs. Hutchinson falls victim to the lottery selection, Mrs. Delacroix chooses a "stone so large" that she must pick it up with both hands (79). Whereas, on the individual level, the two women regard each other as friends, on the group level, they betray that relationship, satiating the mob mentality.

Although civilized people may no longer hold lotteries, Jackson's story illustrates that society's tendency toward violence and its tendency to hold onto tradition, even meaningless, base tradition, reveal our need for both ritual and belonging.

WORKS CITED


~~~~~~~~

By Amy A. Griffin, Schreiner College

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.
New Historicism but not a literary analysis of "The Lottery" - Foundation for a New Historical Analysis

EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: MLA (Modern Language Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA and make any necessary corrections before using. Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates. Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

Works Cited

Shirley Jackson

Born: December 14, 1916; San Francisco, California
Died: August 8, 1965; North Bennington, Vermont

Principal Works - Shirley Jackson

children's literature
Nine Magic Wishes, 1963
Famous Sally, 1966

drama
The Bad Children, pb. 1958

long fiction
The Road Through the Wall, 1948 (also pb. as The Other Side of the Street)
Hangsaman, 1951
The Bird's Nest, 1954 (also pb. as Lizzie)
The Sundial, 1958
The Haunting of Hill House, 1959
We Have Always Lived in the Castle, 1962

miscellaneous
Come Along with Me: Part of a Novel, Sixteen Stories, and Three Lectures, 1968 (Stanley Edgar Hyman, editor)
Novels and Stories, 2010
nonfiction
Life Among the Savages, 1953
The Witchcraft of Salem Village, 1956
Raising Demons, 1957

short fiction
The Lottery: Or, The Adventures of James Harris, 1949 (also pb. as The Lottery, and Other Stories)
Just an Ordinary Day, 1996 (Laurence Jackson Hyman and Sarah Hyman Stewart, editors)
Shirley Jackson Collected Short Stories, 2001

Other Literary Forms
Shirley Jackson's dozen published books include novels, humorous fictionalized autobiographies, and children's books. Many of her stories, essays, and public speeches remain uncollected. Several works have been adapted to other media: "The Lottery" for television, We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962) for stage, and The Bird's Nest (1954) and The Haunting of Hill House (1959) for the cinema.

Achievements
Shirley Jackson is probably best known for her short story "The Lottery," which was first published in the June 26, 1948, edition of The New Yorker. As with the majority of her works, both short stories and novels, "The Lottery" explores the darker side of the human psyche, often in a manner disturbing to the reader. In addition to using ordinary settings for extraordinary occurrences, Jackson often injects an element of the supernatural. This is seen, for example, in the story "The Visit" and in the novel The Haunting of Hill House. In addition, Jackson has published Life Among the Savages (1953), a highly humorous account of her home life. In 1961, Jackson received the Edgar Allan Poe Award for her story "Louisa, Please." She was awarded the Syracuse University Arents Pioneer Medal for Outstanding Achievement in 1965.

Biography
Shirley Jackson was born in California on December 14, 1916, and moved with her family to New York when she was sixteen. After an unsuccessful year at the University of Rochester, Jackson enrolled, at age twenty, in the University of Syracuse. This was to be the beginning of an independent life for the author, as she would finally be away from the dominating presence of her mother. At Syracuse, Jackson met Stanley Edgar Hyman, the man she would marry in 1940. Hyman achieved notoriety in his own right as a teacher, writer, and critic. The marriage between Jackson and Hyman was tumultuous in many ways but provided a stabilizing factor for Jackson. Her literary production increased markedly after the marriage and the birth of their four children. Jackson's own phobias, however, kept creeping into this successful, if odd, relationship. She was an agoraphobic and a depressive. Part of the latter affliction was contributed to by her asthma and arthritis, as well as Hyman's extramarital affair in the early 1960's. In addition, Jackson had never really been a social person — she was much too individualistic to fit into any of the polite social molds. In 1963, Jackson began to turn around psychologically. Her husband made a new commitment to the marriage, and an
enlightened psychiatrist began to help her work with the agoraphobia. Her writing continued to be an outlet for her. Although Jackson recovered emotionally, she never recovered physically. She was obese and a chain smoker. She died on August 8, 1965, at the age of forty-five.

Analysis

Shirley Jackson's stories seem to center on a single concern: Almost every story is about a protagonist's discovering or failing to discover or successfully ignoring an alternate way of perceiving a set of circumstances or the world. Jackson seems especially interested in how characters order their worlds and how they perceive themselves in the world. Often, a change in a character's perspective leads to anxiety, terror, neurosis, or even a loss of identity. While it is tempting to say that her main theme is the difference between appearance and reality, such a statement is misleading, for she seems to see reality as Herman Melville's Ishmael comes to see it, as a mirror of the perceiving soul. It is rarely clear that her characters discover or lose their grasp of reality; rather, they form ideas of reality that are more or less moral and more or less functional. For Jackson, reality is so complex and mysterious that one inevitably only orders part of it. A character may then discover parts that contradict a chosen order or that attract one away from the apparent order, but one can never affirm the absolute superiority of one ordering to another. In this respect, Jackson's fictional world resembles those of Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. Perhaps the major differences between her fiction and theirs is that her protagonists are predominantly women; she explores some peculiarly feminine aspects of the problem of ideas of order.

Jackson's middle-class American women seem especially vulnerable to losing the security of a settled worldview. Their culture provides them with idealistic dream visions of what their lives should be, and they have a peculiar leisure for contemplation and conversation imposed upon them by their dependent roles. Men in her stories seem so busy providing that they rarely look at and think about the order of things. Her career women are more like these men. In "Elizabeth" and "The Villager," the protagonists succeed, albeit precariously, in preserving ideas of themselves and their worlds despite the contradictory facts that seem increasingly to intrude. In these two stories, one sees a sort of emotional cannibalism in the protagonists as they attempt to preserve belief in an order that reality seems no longer disposed to sustain. Several stories show a woman's loss of an ordering dream. These divide into stories about women who experience the terror of loss of identity and those who may find a liberating and superior order in what would ordinarily be called infantile fantasy.

Among those who lose a dream are the protagonists of "The Little House" and "The Renegade." In "The Little House," a woman's first possession of her own small country house is ruined by the terrifying insinuations of her new neighbors; they leave her alone on her first night after relating to her their fears that the previous owner was murdered and that the murderer will return. In "The Renegade," a mother discovers an unsuspected cruelty in her neighbors and even in her children when her dog is accused of killing chickens. Although Jackson's humorous autobiographical stories are of a different order, the often anthologized "Charles" tells of a mother's discovery that the nemesis of the kindergarten whose antics her son reports each day is not the mythical Charles, but her own son, Laurie.
Perhaps the most successful escape into fantasy is Mrs. Montague's in "The Island." All her physical needs are provided by a wealthy but absent son and the constant attendance of Miss Oakes. Mrs. Montague lives in her dream of a tropical paradise, virtually untouched by her actual world. This escape is judged by the ironic frame of Miss Oakes's relative poverty and her inevitable envy, suffering, spite, and ugliness; she has no chance of such an escape herself. Some movements into fantasy are terrifying or at least ambiguous. In "The Beautiful Stranger," Margaret resolves a tension in her marriage by perceiving the man who returns from a business trip as a stranger, not her husband. By the end of the story, this fantasy has led to her losing herself, unable to find her home when she returns from a shopping trip. A similar but more ambiguous situation develops in "The Tooth," in which a woman escapes into a vision of an island to evade the pain of an aching tooth. Many of Jackson's protagonists conceive of an island paradise as an ideal order when their control of the immediate is threatened.

Some ideas of order remain impenetrable. In "Louisa, Please," a variation on Hawthorne's "Wakefield," a runaway daughter returns home after a long absence to discover that her family has built a life around her loss and will not be convinced of her return. In "Flower Garden" and "After You, My Dear Alphonse," protagonists find themselves unable to change or to abandon racist ideas because the ideas are too strong or because of community pressure.

"The Visit" A closer look at three especially interesting stories reveals more about Jackson's themes and give some indication of her technical proficiency. In "The Visit," Margaret comes to visit a school friend, Carla Rhodes, for the summer. The beautiful Rhodes estate includes a dream house with numerous fantastic rooms. The house seems not quite real; nearly every room is covered with tapestries depicting the house in different hours and seasons, and there is a mysterious tower of which no one speaks. For Margaret, the house and the family are ideal, especially when Carla's brother, Paul, arrives with his friend, the Captain. This idyll lasts until the evening of Paul's departure, when Margaret discovers that Paul has been a hallucination or a ghost, for the Captain is Carla's brother and no one else has seen Paul. This revelation clarifies several mysteries that have developed, especially that of Margaret's strange visit to the tower. Paul has told Margaret that an old aunt often secludes herself in the tower. When Margaret pays her a visit, she undergoes a not really frightening but certainly haunting experience with old Aunt Margaret. At the end of the story, the reader must conclude Aunt Margaret to be an apparition, that she is probably the Margaret who died for love and whose picture in mosaic appears on the floor of one room. Young Margaret has lost a phantom lover as old Margaret lost her Paul. Young Margaret realizes this at the same time that she is made aware of time's effect on the house: the age and weakness of the Rhodeses, the bitter darkness of their true son, and the physical decay of the buildings. Furthermore, she begins to doubt her own place and identity as she wonders if her visit to the house will ever end. The home of her dreaming now threatens to become an imprisoning nightmare.

In retrospect, the device by which Jackson encourages the reader to share Margaret's hallucination or haunting may seem contrived. This choice, however, seems effective
because the more fully the reader shares Margaret's perceptions and the more subdued (without being absent) are the disturbing elements, the more fully will the reader share the shock of her awakening into nightmare. Also technically effective are the apparent connections with Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Most important among these is the succession of mirror images: multiple pictures of the house, between the house and Mrs. Rhodes, among members of the family, between the two Margarets, and between the decline of the family and of the house. These connections seem deliberately chosen in part to emphasize the contrasts between Margaret and Poe's narrator. Because Margaret's response to the house is so positive, the shock of her discovery is greater by contrast. Furthermore, when she discovers this house to be like what one knows the House of Usher to be, one sees the analogy between her terror at imprisonment and that of Poe's narrator when he sees a universe unnaturally lit by a blood red moon, yet another image of the coffin lit from within. Margaret actually enters one of the dream worlds promised American girls. Under its spell, she overlooks its flaws and forgets about time, but when the Captain breaks the spell, pointing out signs of decay, Paul departs and Margaret becomes acutely aware of time as her nightmare begins.

"Pillar of Salt" Time is often the destroyer of feminine ideals in Jackson's stories because they seem to depend on a suspension of time. In "Pillar of Salt," another Margaret loses her secure world. A trip to New York City with her husband forces a new perspective on her which produces her anxiety and, finally, paranoia. It remains unclear, however, whether her paranoia is illness or a healthy reaction to an inimical environment.

The couple's first week in the city is idyllic, and the fast pace is a pleasant change from New Hampshire. At a party at the end of the first week, however, Margaret begins to feel isolated, unnoticed among strangers who behave in strange ways. She learns there is a fire in the building but is unable to convince anyone else to leave. The fire turns out to be two buildings away, but she is the only one to heed the warning and flee the building. She comes to see this nightmarish experience as symbolic of her experience in New York and perhaps of her life as a whole. She begins to notice new details about the city: dirt, decay, speed, stifling crowds. She feels increasingly isolated and insignificant. Of this life she thinks, "She knew she was afraid to say it truly, afraid to face the knowledge that it was a voluntary neck-breaking speed, a deliberate whirling faster and faster to end in destruction." Even her friends' Long Island beach cottage shows the spreading blight; there they find a severed human leg on the sand. Margaret comes to believe that her former order was illusory. Upon returning to the city, she begins to hallucinate, to see the destruction of the city in fast motion. Windows crumble. Her bed shakes. Driven from her apartment, she finds herself unable to return, paralyzed in a fast-moving, anonymous crowd on the wrong side of a mechanical and murderous river of traffic.

Margaret comes to see herself in a modern Sodom, paralyzed not because she has disobeyed God, but because she has seen in prophetic vision the truth about the city: It is no home for human beings but rather is impersonally intent upon destruction. The allusion of the title and her critique of city life verify her perception; however, those who do not share her vision remain capable of functioning. As in "The Visit," the internal view of Margaret
encourages a close identification between reader and character which makes judgment difficult until the reader can step back; but stepping back from "Pillar of Salt" plunges the reader deeper into mystery. In both stories, the protagonist moves from dream to nightmare, but in "Pillar of Salt," the reader is much less certain that the move is to a better or more accurate view of reality.

"The Lottery" Shirley Jackson's reputation rests primarily upon her most anthologized story, "The Lottery." Her lecture on this story (printed in Come Along with Me) suggests that her creation of a normal setting convinced many readers that the story was largely factual. In fact, the central problem of the story seems to be to reconcile the portrait of typical small-town life in which the characters seem just like the reader with the horrifying ritualistic killing these people carry out. Here, apparently incompatible ideas of order are thrust upon the reader for resolution, perhaps in order to complicate the reader's conceptions.

"The Lottery" develops by slowly raising the level of tension in the semipastoral setting until a series of carefully arranged revelations brings about a dramatic and shocking reversal. The villagers gather at mid-morning on a late June day for an annual event, the lottery, around which a great deal of excitement centers. Jackson supplies details which arouse reader curiosity: Nearly all towns have a similar lottery; it is as old as the town; it has an elaborate ritual form which has decayed over time; every adult male must participate; some believe the orders of nature and of civilization depend on carrying it out correctly. The family of the man who draws the marked lot must draw again to determine the final winner. The tension built out of reader curiosity and the town's moods reverses toward the sinister when the "winner's" wife reveals that she does not want to win. Once this reversal is complete, the story moves rapidly to reveal the true nature of the lottery, to choose a victim for annual sacrifice by stoning. Jackson heightens the horror of this apparently unaccountable act with carefully chosen and placed details.

Several commentators have attempted to explain the story through reconstructing the meaning of the ritual and through carefully examining the symbols. Helen Nebeker sees the story as an allegory of "man trapped in a 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." These attempts to move beyond the simple thriller seem justified by the details Jackson provides about the lottery. This ritual seems clearly to be a tradition of prehistoric origin, once believed essential for the welfare of the community. Even though its purpose has become obscure and its practice muddled, it continues to unify and sustain the community. Critics tend to underemphasize the apparent health and vitality of the community, perhaps feeling that this ritual essentially undercuts that impression. It is important to notice that one function of the lottery is to change the relationship between community and victim. The victim is chosen at random, killed without malice or significant protest, and lost without apparent grief. This story may be what Richard Eastman has called an open parable, a fable which applies at several levels or in several contexts. "The Lottery" creates an emotional effect of horror at the idea that perhaps in human civilization, the welfare of the many depends often on the suffering of the few: the victim race, the exploited nation, the scapegoat, the poor, the stereotyped sex, the drafted soldier. In these cases, instead of a ritual, other aspects of the
social order separate oppressor and victim, yet the genuine order and happiness of the majority seems to depend on the destruction of others. In this respect, "The Lottery" resembles many stories of oppression, such as Franz Kafka's "The Bucket Rider" and some stories by Richard Wright; its purpose may be to jar readers into thinking about ways in which their lives victimize others.

Jackson places the reader of "The Lottery," which lacks a protagonist, in a position similar to that of the protagonists of "The Visit" and "Pillar of Salt." The story moves from a relatively secure agrarian worldview to an event which fantastically complicates that view. Here, as in most of her stories, Jackson emphasizes the complexity of reality. Nature and human nature seem unaccountable mixtures of the creative and destructive. Her best people are in search of ways to live in this reality without fear and cruelty.

Essay by: Terry Heller updated by; Terry Heller updated by Victoria E. McLure

Bibliography

Cleveland, Carol. "Shirley Jackson." In And Then There Were Nine ... More Women of Mystery, edited by Jane S. Bakerman. Bowling Green, Ky.: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985. This chapter provides the reader with an overview of Jackson's major works. In addition, Cleveland provides some useful critical insights.

Friedman, Lenemaja. Shirley Jackson. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1975. Friedman provides the reader with both a biographical and critical study of Jackson and offers information on both her short stories and novels. The volume includes an extensive secondary bibliography.


Oppenheimer, Judy. *Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1988. This volume is the first extensive biography of Jackson. It is finely detailed and provides the reader an excellent view of this author. Oppenheimer interviewed close to seventy persons for this book, including Jackson's family members, friends, and neighbors. Contains numerous photographs.

Parks, John G. "The Possibility of Evil: A Key to Shirley Jackson's Fiction." *Studies in Short Fiction* 15, no. 3 (Summer, 1978): 320-323. This useful article concentrates on Jackson's short stories. Parks draws useful comparisons with authors such as Flannery O'Connor and Nathaniel Hawthorne.


Schaub, Danielle. "Shirley Jackson's Use of Symbols in 'The Lottery.'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 14 (Spring, 1990): 79-86. Discusses how Jackson distracts the reader's attention into thinking the story is a fable or fairy tale; discusses the symbolic use of setting, atmosphere, numbers, names, and objects in the story.

Stark, Jack. "Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery.'" In *Censored Books,* edited by Nicholas Karolides, Lee Burgess, and John M. Kean. New York: Scarecrow Press, 1993. Discusses some of the reasons for the story's being censored in schools and some of the values of teaching the story to teenagers; argues that it encourages reflection on some of the issues teens need to understand to become good citizens.

Yarmove, Jay A. "Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery.'" *The Explicator* 52 (Summer, 1994): 242-245. Discusses the importance of setting, historical time, and irony of character names in the allegorical meaning of the story. Compares the ending of the story to the ending of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.*

Copyright of this work is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission except for the print or download capabilities of the retrieval software used for access. This content is intended solely for the use of the individual user.

**Source:** Critical Survey of Short Fiction, Second Revised Edition  
**Accession Number:** 103331CSSF12380120000237
A Reading of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

The following essay was published in the New Orleans Review, vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 27-32. Students and teachers are free to copy and quote it for scholarly purposes, but publishers should contact me before they reprint it for profit. Students should discuss the essay with each other and in their classrooms. Please do not ask me to answer your classroom essay questions for you; it defeats the purpose of your instructor having given you the assignment.

In her critical biography of Shirley Jackson, Lenemaja Friedman notes that when Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery" was published in the June 28, 1948 issue of the New Yorker it received a response that "no New Yorker story had ever received": hundreds of letters poured in that were characterized by "bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse." It is not hard to account for this response: Jackson's story portrays an "average" New England village with "average" citizens engaged in a deadly rite, the annual selection of a sacrificial victim by means of a public lottery, and does so quite deviously: not until well along in the story do we suspect that the "winner" will be stoned to death by the rest of the villagers. One can imagine the average reader of Jackson's story protesting: But we engage in no such inhuman practices. Why are you accusing us of this?

Admittedly, this response was not exactly the one that Jackson had hoped for. In the July 22, 1948 issue of the San Francisco Chronicle she broke down and said the following in response to persistent queries from her readers about her intentions: "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." Shock them she did, but probably owing to the symbolic complexity of her tale, they responded defensively and were not enlightened.

The first part of Jackson's remark in the Chronicle, I suspect, was at once true and coy. Jackson's husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, has written in his introduction to a posthumous anthology of her short stories that "she consistently refused to be interviewed, to explain or promote her work in any fashion, or to take public stands and be the pundit of the Sunday supplements." Jackson did not say in the Chronicle that it was impossible for her to explain approximately what her story was about, only that it was "difficult." That she thought it meant something, and something subversive, moreover, she revealed in her response to the Union of South Africa's banning of "The Lottery": "She felt," Hyman says, "that they at least understood." A survey of what little has been written about "The Lottery" reveals two general critical attitudes: first, that it is about man's ineradicable primitive aggressivity, or what Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren call his "all-too-human tendency to seize upon a scapegoat"; second, that it describes man's victimization by, in Helen Nebeker's words, "unexamined and unchanging traditions which he could easily change if he only realized their implications." Missing from both of these approaches, however, is a careful analysis of the abundance of social detail that links the lottery to the ordinary social practices of the village. No mere "irrational" tradition, the lottery is an ideological mechanism. It serves to reinforce the village's hierarchical social order by instilling the villages with an unconscious fear that if they resist this order they might be selected in the next lottery. In the process of creating this fear, it also reproduces the ideology necessary for the smooth functioning of that social order, despite its inherent inequities. What is surprising in the work of an author who has never been identified as a Marxist is that this social order and ideology are essentially capitalist.
I think we need to take seriously Shirley Jackson’s suggestion that the world of the lottery is her reader’s world, however reduced in scale for the sake of economy. The village in which the lottery takes place has a bank, a post office, a grocery store, a coal business, a school system; its women are housewives rather than field workers or writers; and its men talk of “tractors and taxes.” More importantly, however, the village exhibits the same socio-economic stratification that most people take for granted in a modern, capitalist society.

Let me begin by describing the top of the social ladder and save the lower rungs for later. The village’s most powerful man, Mr. Summers, owns the village’s largest business (a coal concern) and is also its mayor, since he has, Jackson writes, more “time and energy [read money and leisure] to devote to civic activities” than others (p. 292). (Summers’ very name suggests that he has become a man of leisure through his wealth.) Next in line is Mr. Graves, the village’s second most powerful government official—its postmaster. (His name may suggest the gravity of officialism.) And beneath Mr. Graves is Mr. Martin, who has the economically advantageous position of being the grocer in a village of three hundred.

These three most powerful men who control the town, economically as well as politically, also happen to administer the lottery. Mr. Summers is its official, sworn in yearly by Mr. Graves (p. 294). Mr. Graves helps Mr. Summers make up the lottery slips (p. 293). And Mr. Martin steadies the lottery box as the slips are stirred (p. 292). In the off season, the lottery box is stored either at their places of business or their residences: “It had spent on year in Mr. Graves’ barn and another year underfoot in the post-office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there” (p. 293). Who controls the town, then, also controls the lottery. It is no coincidence that the lottery takes place in the village square “between the post-office and the bank”—two buildings which represent government and finance, the institutions from which Summers, Graves, and Martin derive their power.

However important Mr. Graves and Mr. Martin may be, Mr. Summers is still the most powerful man in town. Here we have to ask a Marxist question: what relationship is there between his interests as the town’s wealthiest businessman and his officiating the lottery? That such a relationship does exist is suggested by one of the most revealing lines of the text. When Bill Hutchinson forces his wife Tessie to open her lottery slip to the crowd, Jackson writes, “It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with a heavy pencil in his coal-company office” (p. 301). At the very moment when the lottery’s victim is revealed, Jackson appendes a subordinate clause in which we see the blackness (evil) of Mr. Summers’ (coal) business being transferred to the black dot on the lottery slip. At one level at least, evil in Jackson’s text is linked to a disorder, promoted by capitalism, in the material organization of modern society. But it still remains to be explained how the evil of the lottery is tied to this disorder of capitalist social organization.

Let me sketch the five major points of my answer to this question. First, the lottery’s rules of participation reflect and codify a rigid social hierarchy based upon an inequitable social division of labor. Second, the fact that everyone participates in the lottery and understands consciously that its outcome is pure chance gives it a certain “democratic” aura that obscures its first codifying function. Third, the villagers believe unconsciously that their commitment to a work ethic will grant them some magical immunity from selection. Fourth, this work ethic prevents them from understanding that the lottery’s actual function is not to encourage work per se but to reinforce an inequitable social division of labor. Finally, after working through these points, it will be easier to explain how Jackson’s choice of Tessie Hutchinson as the lottery’s victim/ scapegoat reveals the lottery to be an ideological mechanism which serves to defuse the average villager’s deep, articulate dissatisfaction with the social order in which he lives by channeling it into anger directed at the victims of that social order. It is reenacted year after year, then, not because it is a mere “tradition,” as Helen Nebeker argues, but because it serves the repressive ideological function of purging the social body of all resistance so that business (capitalism) can go on as usual and the Summers, the Graves and the Martins can remain in power.

Implicit in the first and second points above is a distinction between universal participation in the lottery and what I have called its rules of participation. The first of these rules I have already explained, of course: those who control the village economically and politically also administer the lottery. The
remaining rules also tell us much about who has and who doesn't have power in the village's social hierarchy. These remaining rules determine who gets to choose slips in the lottery's first, second and third rounds. Before the lottery, lists are "made up of heads of families [who choose in the first round], heads of households [who choose in the second round], [and] members of each household in each family [who choose in the last round]." (p. 294). The second round is missing from the story because the family patriarch who selects the dot in the first round—Bill Hutchinson—has no married male offspring. When her family is chosen in the first round, Tessie Hutchinson objects that her daughter and son-in-law didn't "take their chance." Mr. Summers has to remind her, "Daughters draw with their husbands' families" (p. 299). Power in the village, then, is exclusively consolidated into the hands of male heads of families and households. Women are disenfranchised.

Although patriarchy is not a product of capitalism per se, patriarchy in the village does have its capitalist dimension. (New social formations adapt old traditions to their own needs.) Women in the village seem to be disenfranchised because male heads of households, as men in the work force, provide the link between the broader economy of the village and the economy of the household. Some consideration of other single household families in the first round of the lottery—the Dunbars and the Watsons—will help make this relationship between economics and family power clearer. Mr. Dunbar, unable to attend the lottery because he has a broken leg, has to choose by proxy. The rules of lottery participation take this situation into account: "gown boy[s]" take precedence as proxies over wives (p. 295). Mrs. Dunbar's son Horace, however, is only sixteen, still presumably in school and not working; hence Mrs. Dunbar chooses for Mr. Dunbar. Jack Watson, on the other hand, whose father is dead, is clearly older than Horace and presumably already in the work force. Admittedly, such inferences cannot be supported with hard textual evidence, but they make sense when the text is referred to the norms of the society which it addresses. Within these norms, "heads of households" are not simply the oldest males in their immediate families; they are the oldest working males and get their power from their insertion into a larger economy. Women, who have no direct link to the economy as defined by capitalism—the arena of activity in which labor is exchanged for wages and profits are made—choose in the lottery only in the absence of a "grown," working male.

Women, then, have a distinctly subordinate position in the socio-economic hierarchy of the village. They make their first appearance "wearing faded house dresses . . . [and walking] shortly after their menfolk" (p. 292). Their dresses indicate that they do in fact work, but because they work in the home and not within the larger economy in which work is regulated by money, they are treated by men and treat themselves as inferiors. When Tessie Hutchinson appears late to the lottery, other men address her husband Bill, "here comes your Missus, Hutchinson" (p. 295). None of the men, that is to say, thinks of addressing Tessie first, since she "belongs" to Bill. Most women in the village take this patriarchal definition of their role for granted, as Mrs. Dunbar's and Mrs. Delacroix's references to their husbands as their "old [men]" suggests (pp. 295 & 297). Tessie, as we shall see later, is the only one who rebels against male domination, although only unconsciously.

Having sketched some of the power relations within the families of the village, I can now shift my attention to the ways in which what I have called the democratic illusion of the lottery diverts their attention from the capitalist economic relations in which these relations of power are grounded. On its surface, the idea of a lottery in which everyone, as Mrs. Graves says, "[takes] the same chance" seems eminently democratic, even if its effect, the singling out of one person for privilege or attack, is not.

One critic, noting an ambiguity at the story's beginning, has remarked that "the lottery . . . suggests 'election' rather than selection," since "the [villagers] assemble in the center of the place, in the village square." I would like to push the analogy further. In capitalist dominated elections, business supports and promotes candidates who will be more or less attuned to its interests, multiplying its vote through campaign financing, while each individual businessman can claim that he has but one vote. In the lottery, analogously, the village ruling class participates in order to convince others (and perhaps even themselves) that they are not in fact above everyone else during the remainder of the year, even though their exclusive control of the lottery suggests that they are. Yet just as the lottery's black (ballot?) box has grown shabby and reveals in places its "original wood color," moments in their official "democratic"
conduct of the lottery—especially Mr. Summers' conduct as their representative—reveal the class interest that lies behind it. If Summers wears jeans, in order to convince the villagers that he is just another one of the common people, he also wears a "clean white shirt," a garment more appropriate to his class (p. 294). If he leans casually on the black box before the lottery selection begins, as a President, say, might put his feet up on the White House desk, while leaning he talk[s] interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins," the other members of his class, and "seem[s] very proper and important" (p. 294). Jackson has placed these last details in emphatic position at the end of a paragraph.) Finally, however democratic his early appeal for help in conducting the lottery might appear—"some of you fellows want to give me a hand?" (p. 292)—Mr. Martin, who responds, is the third most powerful man in the village. Summers' question is essentially empty and formal, since the villagers seem to understand, probably unconsciously, the unspoken rule of class that governs who administers the lottery; it is not just anyone who can help Summers.

The lottery's democratic illusion, then, is an ideological effect that prevents the villagers from criticizing the class structure of their society. But this illusion alone does not account for the full force of the lottery over the village. The lottery also reinforces a village work ethic which distracts the villagers' attention from the division of labor that keeps women powerless in their homes and Mr. Summers powerful in his coal company office.

In the story's middle, Old Man Warner (an alarmist name if there ever was one) emerges as an apologist for this work ethic when he recalls an old village adage, "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (p. 297). At one level, the lottery seems to be a modern version of a planting ritual that might once have prepared the villagers for the collective work necessary to produce a harvest. (Such rituals do not necessarily involve human sacrifice.) As magical as Warner's proverb may seem, it establishes an unconscious (unspoken) connection between the lottery and work that is revealed by the entirety of his response when told that other villages are considering doing away with the lottery:

"Pack of crazy fools... listening to 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 any more, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's always been a lottery." (p. 297)

But Warner does not explain how the lottery functions to motivate work. In order to do so, it would have to inspire the villagers with a magical fear that their lack of productivity would make them vulnerable to selection in the next lottery. The village women reveal such an unconscious fear in their ejaculatory questions after the last slip has been drawn in the first round: "Who is it?" "Who's got it?" "Is it the Dunbars?" "Is it the Watsons?" (p. 298). The Dunbars and the Watsons, it so happens, are the least "productive" families in the village: Mr. Dunbar has broken his leg, Mr. Watson is dead. Given this unconscious village fear that lack of productivity determines the lottery's victim, we might guess that Old Man Warner's pride that he is participating in the lottery for the "seventy-seventh time" stems from a magical belief—seventy-seven is a magical number—that his commitment to work and the village work ethic accounts for his survival. Wherever we find "magic," we are in the realm of the unconscious: the realm in which the unspoken of ideology resides.

Old Man Warner's commitment to a work ethic, however appropriate it might be in an egalitarian community trying collectively to carve an economy out of a wilderness, is not entirely innocent in the modern village, since it encourages villagers to work without pointing out to them that part of their labor goes to the support of the leisure and power of a business class. Warner, that is to say, is Summers' ideologist. At the end of his remarks about the lottery, Warner laments Summers' democratic conduct: "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody" (p. 297). Yet this criticism obscures the fact that Summers is not about to undermine the lottery, even if he does "modernize" it, since by running the lottery he also encourages a work ethic which serves his interest. Just before the first round drawing, Summers remarks casually, "Well, now... guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work" (p. 295). The "we" in his remark is deceptive; what he means to say is "so that you can go back to work for me."
The final major point of my reading has to do with Jackson's selection of Tessie Hutchinson as the lottery's victim/scapegoat. She could have chosen Mr. Dunbar, of course, in order to show us the unconscious connection that the villagers draw between the lottery and their work ethic. But to do so would not have revealed that the lottery actually reinforces a division of labor. Tessie, after all, is a woman whose role as a housewife deprives her of her freedom by forcing her to submit to a husband who gains his power over her by virtue of his place in the work force. Tessie, however, rebels against her role, and such rebellion is just what the orderly functioning of her society cannot stand. Unfortunately, her rebellion is entirely unconscious.

Tessie's rebellion begins with her late arrival at the lottery, a faux pas that raises suspicions of her resistance to everything that the lottery stands for. She explains to Mr. Summers that she was doing her dishes and forgot what day it was. The way in which she says this, however, involves her in another faux pas: the suggestion that she might have violated the village's work ethic and neglected her specific job within the village's social division of labor. "Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you Joe?" (p. 295). The "soft laughter [that runs] through the crowd" after this remark is a nervous laughter that indicates, even more than the village women's singing out of the Dunbars and the Watsons, the extent of the village's commitment to its work ethic and power structure (p. 295). When Mr. Summers calls her family's name, Tessie goads her husband, "Get up there Bill" (p. 297). In doing so, she inverts the power relation that holds in the village between husbands and wives. Again, her remark evokes nervous laughter from the crowd, which sense the taboo that she has violated. Her final faux pas is to question the rules of the lottery which relegate women to inferior status as the property of their husbands. When Mr. Summers asks Bill Hutchinson whether his family has any other households, Tessie yells, "There's Don and Eva . . . Make them take their chance" (p. 299). Tessie's daughter Eva, however, belongs to Don and is consequently barred from participating with her parents' family.

All of these faux pas set Tessie up as the lottery's likeliest victim, even if they do not explicitly challenge the lottery. That Tessie's rebellion is entirely unconscious is revealed by her cry while being stoned, "It isn't fair" (p. 302). Tessie does not object to the lottery per se, only to her own selection as its scapegoat. It would have been fine with her if someone else had been selected.

In stoneing Tessie, the villagers treat her as a scapegoat onto which they can project and through with they can "purge"—actually, the term repress is better, since the impulse is conserved rather than eliminated—their own temptations to rebel. The only places we can see these rebellious impulses are in Tessie, in Mr. and Mrs. Adams' suggestion, squelched by Warner, that the lottery might be given up, and in the laughter of the crowd. (The crowd's nervous laughter is ambivalent: it expresses uncertainty about the validity of the taboos that Tessie breaks.) But ultimately these rebellious impulses are channeled by the lottery and its attendant ideology away from their proper objects—capitalism and capitalist patriarchs—into anger at the rebellious victims of capitalist social organization. Like Tessie, the villagers cannot articulate their rebellion because the massive force of ideology stands in the way.

The lottery functions, then, to terrorize the village into accepting, in the name of work and democracy, the inequitable social division of labor and power on which its social order depends. When Tessie is selected, and before she is stoned, Mr. Summers asks her husband to "show [people] her paper" (p. 301). By holding up the slip, Bill Hutchinson reasserts his dominance over his wayward wife and simultaneously transforms her into a symbol to others of the perils of disobedience.

Here I would like to point out a curious crux in Jackson's treatment of the theme of scapegoating in "The Lottery": the conflict between the lottery's arbitrariness and the utter appropriateness of its victim. Admittedly, Tessie is a curious kind of scapegoat, since the village does not literally choose her, single her out. An act of scapegoating that is unmotivated is difficult to conceive. The crux disappears, however, once we realize that the lottery is a metaphor for the unconscious ideological mechanisms of scapegoating. In choosing Tessie through the lottery, Jackson has attempted to show us whom the village might have chosen if the lottery had been in fact an election. But by presenting this election as an arbitrary lottery, she gives us an image of the village's blindness to its own motives.
Possibly the most depressing thing about "The Lottery" is how early Jackson represents this blindness as beginning. Even the village children have been socialized into the ideology that victimizes Tessie. When they are introduced in the second paragraph of the story, they are anxious that summer has let them out of school: "The feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them" (p. 291). Like their parents, they have learned that leisure and play are suspect. As if to quell this anxiety, the village boys engage in the play/labor of collecting stones for the lottery. Moreover, they follow the lead of Bobby Martin, the one boy in the story whose father is a member of the village ruling class (Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves have no boys), in hoarding and fighting over these stones as if they were money. While the boys do this, the village girls stand off to the side and watch, just as they will be expected to remain outside of the work force and dependent on their working husbands when they grow up.

As dismal as this picture seems, the one thing we ought not do is make it into proof of the innate depravity of man. The first line of the second paragraph—"The children assembled first, of course" (p. 291)—does not imply that children take a "natural" and primitive joy in stoning people to death. 10 The closer we look at their behavior, the more we realize that they learned it from their parents, whom they imitate in their play. In order to facilitate her reader's grasp of this point, Jackson has included at least one genuinely innocent child in the story—Davy Hutchinson. When he has to choose his lottery ticket, the adults help him while he looks at them "wonderingly" (p. 300). And when Tessie is finally to be stoned, "someone" has to "[give] Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" (p. 301) to stone his mother. The village makes sure that Davy learns what he is supposed to do before he understands why he does it or the consequences. But this does not mean that he could not learn otherwise.

Even the village adults are not entirely hopeless. Before Old Man Warner cuts them off, Mr. and Mrs. Adams, whose last name suggests a humanity that has not been entirely effaced, briefly mention other villages that are either talking of giving up the lottery or have already done so. Probably out of deep-seated fear, they do not suggest that their village give it up; but that they hint at the possibility, however furtively, indicates a reservation—a vague sense of guilt—about what they are about to do. The Adams's represent the village's best, humane impulses, impulses, however, which the lottery represses.

How do we take such a pessimistic vision of the possibility of social transformation? If anything can be said against "The Lottery," it is probably that it exaggerates the monolithic character of capitalist ideological hegemony. No doubt, capitalism has subtle ways of redirecting the frustrations it engenders away from a critique of capitalism itself. Yet if in order to promote itself it has to make promises of freedom, prosperity and fulfillment on which it cannot deliver, pockets of resistance grow up among the disillusioned. Perhaps it is not Jackson's intention to deny this, but to shock her complacent reader with an exaggerated image of the ideological modus operandi of capitalism: accusing those whom it cannot or will not employ of being lazy, promoting "the family" as the essential social unit in order to discourage broader associations and identifications, offering men power over their wives as a consolation for their powerlessness in the labor market, and pitting workers against each other and against the unemployed. It is our fault as readers if our own complacent pessimism makes us read Jackson's story pessimistically as a parable of man's innate depravity.

---

**Notes**


2. Friedman, p. 64.


7. I propose this reading only as the most plausible way of accounting for the distinction between Horace Dunbar's exclusion from the lottery and Jack Watson's participation in it. To account for this distinction on the basis of age alone seems weak to me, given the value that the village places on work.

8. Jackson's representation of women, of course, is exaggerated, even for her own time. But then the entire story is similarly exaggerated in order to highlight a theoretical framework which Jackson feels is necessary before we can even begin to understand the social world to which the story indirectly refers. Most allegory is similarly abstract.


10. My reading makes Jackson's "of course" ironic: a phrase that appeals to her reader's possible assumption that children are innately depraved, an assumption which the story's other detail questions.

© 1984 Peter Kosenko.

| Editing | Writing | Web Design | Programming | Music |

Home Home

E-mail Pete the answers to all his questions.
New Criticism

'The Lottery': Symbolic Tour de Force

Critic: Helen E. Nebeker
Reproduced by permission
Criticism about: Shirley Jackson (1919-1965), also known as: Shirley (Hardie) Jackson

Year of Source Publication: 1974

Critical Essay Title: 'The Lottery': Symbolic Tour de Force

Critic Name: Helen E. Nebeker

Source Publication Title: American Literature

Biography Link: Biographical/Critical Introduction to Shirley Jackson

[(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 meaningless 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 the 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 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.


Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

PEN (Permanent Entry Number): CLC0168DOC01378
[In “A Critique of the Sampling Plan Used in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery’”] John H. Williams notes what he takes to be a “flaw” in the two-stage process by which the victim is selected.... 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.” 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. (p. 259)

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. 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 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.

The reading of “The Lottery” I am developing is reinforced, too, by looking at the story within the contexts established by its most important allusions. Certainly the whole motif of a woman's being stoned to death recalls the eighth chapter of the
Gospel of St. John, in which Jesus frees the woman taken in adultery by directing that man who is without sin among the scribes and Pharisees to cast the first stone.... Unfortunately there is no one in "The Lottery" to rebuke the powers so forthrightly as Jesus does in 8 John. The powers get their scapegoat; the woman pays. Only perhaps in 8 John does the woman escape paying, and that is, of course, because another scapegoat stands in her place.

The name of Jackson's victim, Tessie Hutchinson, links her to two women who do pay. [In her essay, "The Lottery": Symbolic Tour de Force," (see Jackson's entry in CLC, Vol. 11)], Helen Nebecker relates "Tessie" to "Theresa" and "Anastasia," but this seems to me to overlook a much more obvious allusion to Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Hardy's novel is about "the woman pays" for crimes committed by men who hold sexual and spiritual power.... Certainly Jackson's ending is especially reminiscent of Tess's last moments at Stonehenge as the men close in upon her from behind the encircling stones and the "whole country is reared" to prevent her escape.

The name of Jackson's victim also links her to Anne Hutchinson, whose Antinomian beliefs, found to be heretical by the Puritan hierarchy, resulted in her banishment from Massachusetts in 1638. While Tessie Hutchinson is no spiritual rebel, to be sure, Jackson's allusion to Anne Hutchinson reinforces her suggestions of rebellion lurking within the women of her imaginary village. It indicates too that what the men of Jackson's village seek to kill is a principle of rebellion that is specifically female and, I would argue, based in sexuality. We should remember that Hawthorne associates Anne Hutchinson with another woman taken in adultery and accused by Pharisees, her partner among them. As Hester is led out of prison, she passes the wild rose bush that may have "sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson." (pp. 259-61)

One may well ask whether Shirley Jackson understood the connection between Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson in the way that I am suggesting. Is there reason to believe that Tessie Hutchinson stands in some relation to the Anne/Hester figure of history and Hawthornian romance? In answering these questions, a look at Shirley Jackson's little-known first novel, The Road through the Wall, can be of great help. Published in 1948, the same year as "The Lottery," The Road through the Wall displays several remarkable similarities to Jackson's famous story. It is about the people on a single street of a small, isolated community, in this case situated in California. Its theme is scapegoating, directed by the ordinary middle class people of Pepper Street at a whole series of victims: a Chinaman, a young Jewish girl, a somewhat slow-witted boy, a poor girl, a girl whose mother is suspected of prostitution, and a high-school girl who has run away to get married. The name of this last girl, Hester Lucas, quite obviously recalls Hawthorne's great heroine. Jackson's Hester, proud of her sexuality, comes to work as a maid for the Robertses, but loses her job after Mr. Roberts makes unsuccessful advances toward her. Hester's last scene in the novel clearly points up the book's links to "The Lottery." In it she plays a game, "Tin-Tin," with the Pepper Street children, a game whose "elaborate ritual" was "determined by the children and their fathers and their grandfathers operating individually on an immutable theme." This game of the "fathers" has a "victim," although when it falls to her Hester is able to turn this status into an opportunity to embarrass Mr. Roberts. Her victimization remains relatively comic, involving no more than the loss of her job. The most serious scapegoating in the novel is reserved for the slow-witted boy, Tod, who also happens to be remarkably attracted to Hester. When a young girl from the community is killed—her head smashed by a rock—Tod is accused on the silliest evidence. Before it is even clear whether the girl's death was the result of accident or murder, the utterly confused Tod hangs himself. He dies because of the community's need to ascribe guilt.

Clearly The Road through the Wall exhibits many remarkable affinities with "The Lottery." What is most pertinent here is the understanding of sexuality it reveals; Hester is a threat because she accepts her sexuality proudly and arouses the potentially adulterous male. Moreover, in the Tin-Tin game, she occupies a victim's role analogous to that of Tessie Hutchinson in "The Lottery." This close analogy of Hester and Tessie Hutchinson—grounded perhaps in Hawthorne's association of Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson—underscores what is evident from the lottery's selection process: that one goal of the ritual is to contain the potentially disruptive force of an awakened female sexuality.

Jackson's choice of her victim's name strongly reinforces her suggestion about how the lottery is designed primarily to control women, but it ought not to be read as an indication that Tessie is a heroine with the stature of an Anne Hutchinson or Hester Prynne. Tessie fails to be a heroine, and the way that she does so testifies to the success with which the male-dominated order has imposed itself upon her. It is crucial to note that her most grievous failure lies in betraying another woman, her married daughter, by suggesting that she be considered a member of the Hutchinson household for the second stage of the lottery. Jackson emphasizes women's turning against one another, too, through her pointed depiction of the brutality of Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves in setting upon Tessie. At the beginning of the story, the girls stand together watching the boys gather the stones, but as those girls become women, the involvement in marriage and childbearing that the lottery encourages pits them against one another, blinding them to the fact that all power in their community is male.

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 another 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 Karsen has shown [in her dissertation "The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: The Witch in Seventeenth Century Massachussets"] 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 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.... 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. (pp. 261-64)

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100001375&v=2.1&u=sant29651&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=29f0ef456b97fb018045ecc2966e2f48
New Criticism

Title: Shirley Jackson's Use of Symbols in 'The Lottery.'

Author(s): Danielle Schaub

Publication Details: Journal of the Short Story in English. 14 (Spring 1990): p79-86.


Document Type: Critical essay

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Full Text:

[essay date spring 1990] In the following essay, Schaub relates Jackson's symbolic use of numbers, names, and objects to the role of tradition in her story "The Lottery."

At mid morning on a late June day a peaceful village crowd gathers on the square for the annual lottery. The procedures have been handed down over generations with little change. While in the harmless process of drawing lots the villagers reveal their excitement. Suddenly, when the winner is selected, the innocent game turns out to be a horrifying sacrifice: the winner is stoned to death for the welfare of the community. Such is the limited picture that could be given of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" if symbols were overlooked.

Most critics are puzzled by the final shock, its purpose and effect: they feel they are «only (left) shaken up» with «a sense of an unclosed gap». In fact their major concern seems to be with the anthropological allusions to the rituals of the summer solstice. Seymour Lainoff claims that «anthropology provides the chief symbols» so that the lottery is to be understood as a «modern representation of the primitive annual scapegoat rite». Brooks and Warren explain that the story reveals «the all-too-human tendency to seize upon a scapegoat» which Virgil Scott voices as «the human tendency to 'punish' innocent and often accidentally chosen victims for our sins». If these comments are to the point they nevertheless do not disclose how the remarkable reversal of expectations is anticipated. True Helen E. Nebeker throws light on the author's «symbolic tour de force» but then only partially. Indeed she focuses on the underlying theme—the role of tradition in man's life—but fails to consider the symbolism prevailing in the main theme—man's recurrent need of a victim. Yet symbols are Jackson's major device in her tightly-knit handling of both themes.

Although ominous symbolic details prepare for the tragic outcome the reader's attention is skillfully distracted. With her conventional title Jackson misleads the reader into thinking that the story is merely a fable or a fairy tale. The description of the pastoral-like setting implies an idyllic atmosphere. Besides, the lively, decent and friendly population lives as harmoniously as a close community can possibly do. Since the ceremony is official and causes much excitement its true nature is not examined, the more so as it is associated with other pleasant social occasions. No reason then for tradition to be questioned or to be given up. And indeed very little has changed: the original chips of wood may well have been replaced by slips of paper, the present box may be made with some pieces of the preceding one, the former initial recital may no longer be performed but the core of the ritual has remained unchanged. In such a tradition-abiding community there seems little point for the reader to doubt the ceremony's benevolence. Mrs Hutchinson's late arrival therefore merely seems to single her out and to cast a favourable light on her: she has almost forgotten about the lottery because, as a perfect housewife, she would not leave her dishes in the sink. Nobody in the crowd seems to mind. As a good-humoured wife and mother she joins her husband and children while the crowd shows the friendliest feelings. The reader is thus made to sympathise not only with her but also with the rest of the population before the actual drawing of lots. After the first round, when the Hutchinsons are selected, Tessie seems to object but is gently rebuked so that little attention is paid to her apparently inexplicable objections. The second round determines the winner in the selected family: all have blank slips of paper except Tessie who has a black spot on hers. As she does not react at all when the main official urges his folk to finish the ceremony quickly the event is felt as thoroughly natural and in keeping with the general harmony. Then, suddenly, without apparent break, the reader is thrust into a symbolic realm: with no warning Tessie is stoned by all the villagers including her youngest child Davy. Taken at their face value the cold description of seemingly inoffensive and habitual circumstances, the banal structure and narration contrast with the abrupt ending. The shock is thus inevitably enhanced, the more so as the villagers' relaxed attitudes and lively speech
do not prepare the reader for the gory outcome. Clearly the pastoral setting, commonplace characterisation, familiar down-to-earth vocabulary, impersonal and unimaginative style, detached point of view and plain chronological structure, all contribute to mislead the reader.

Yet, all along tension should be felt as several allusions to the villagers' nervousness are made. The talk about giving up tradition, Mrs Hutchinson's emotional outburst, the increasing rhythm also point--even if indirectly--to the unhappy issue. Moreover the author's recurrent use of symbols stresses the duality of things and beings, which paves the way for the final horrendous revelation. Nothing--as a careful analysis of symbols reveals--is left to chance: tension lies at the heart of the story. Most numbers, colours, objects, stars, surnames in the text are ambivalent. Their ambivalence corroborates the message of the story, namely that first-hand impressions may well be deceptive: on the surface, things are smooth; deep down, reality is cruder. The usually positive value of any symbol is to be counterbalanced by its hidden or less well-known negative value so as to have a clearer picture of the text. Its richness and quality result from the mixture of opposite values. Instead of a straightforward account of small-town life, the reader gets a fuller picture of Life with its inescapable conjunction of opposites.

Tension is already present in the description of the setting and in the atmosphere. Like a Janus figure the sun is felt throughout as an ambiguous presence. Its generative heat associated with youth, vitality and fertility heals and restores, but come Midsummer and its scorching heat leads to the poisoning, burning madness of the solstice rite. The sun will provide better crops but only at the cost of the ritual murder of an innocent villager. Besides, the ambivalent character of the rite is stressed by the profusely blossoming flowers. By their very nature they symbolise beauty as well as point to the transitory stages of the vegetal cycle. They suggest not only virtue, goodness and purity but also temptation and deceit. As such they are part of pleasant occasions but also of distressing functions--a last tribute paid at a funeral, Tessie's for example. The green grass too reveals the discrepancy between the character's appearance and deeds. Indeed, on the one hand, green denotes fertility, peace, balance, harmony, freshness, youth: these qualities, at first sight, seem to fit the description of the population. But, on the other hand, green implies ignorance, unripeness, inexperience--the very characteristics attributed to pagan sacrifices. Significantly too, prior to the insane murder of Tessie Hutchinson, the villagers gather in the square. As the square stands for firmness and stability, organisation and construction, it is the source of order. No wonder then that traditions are perpetuated in the square, particularly those regulating the material stability of the community. And if stability is to be gained at the expense of one villager no one need to worry: the existence of the square justifies such injustice provided it serves the group. So the setting and atmosphere prefigure the ritual killing or confirm the villagers' rights and obligations to perform such a function.

If the setting and atmosphere reveal the dramatic denouement, so does the symbolic use of numbers. That they are not chosen at random is made obvious in the choice of the 27th of June as the date for the Midsummer solstice ceremony. Indeed according to Frazer fertility rites take place on Midsummer Eve (that is the 23rd of June) or on Midsummer Day (that is the 24th of June). One may wonder at this point which line of the cabalistic tradition Shirley Jackson follows. Indeed as 27 is not a primary number it has to be fused by mystic addition (2 + 7 = 9) or by succession (2, then 7), or else to be considered the result of multiplications (either 3³ or 3 x 9). Now 9 is a multiple of 3, so the symbolic value attached to 3 is increased, namely completeness, perfection and fertility, and the end of a cycle (death) before the return to unity. So whether 27 is fused or merely the result of a multiplication it reveals the transitoriness of life. As a consequence it alludes to the imminent death that awaits any outcast who prevents the community from being a tightly-knit group. Once the outcast is dead unity is restored and fertility secured. That symbolism fits the story is also true when 27 is interpreted as fused by succession. The number 27 would then reduce its conflict (as symbolised by the number 2) to its solution (as symbolised by the number 7). As 2 stands for the conjunction of opposites, such as life and death, man and woman, good and evil, and 7 for perfect completion of a cycle, the perfect solution is to grant death to either man or woman. Indeed a complete cycle implies decay or death so its perfect completion is closely linked with the death of a man or a woman. This is further emphasised in the twice-drawn lots. Furthermore by the use of the number 2 Shirley Jackson stresses the all-so-human conjunction of opposites. Man is not just good or evil but both. Since all human beings are dual there must be a way to determine which group in the population will provide a victim. The population is made of the elementary nucleus 3, namely children, men and women. As the elementary nucleus is self-sufficient the solution to its problem, in this case the selection of a victim for the material welfare of the community, lies within. And whenever there is a choice of three the magic solution is offered by the third choice. Therefore in The Lottery it is within the third group presented to the readers (the women) that a victim will be chosen. The whole ceremony must take place between 10 and 12 o'clock. By 10 o'clock on the 27th of June the community has fallen from its high position of perfection. By 12, salvation, holiness and perfection are restored so that the community shares with the number 12 in the inner unity and harmony of all matters. So by decoding the numbers used by Jackson the full implications of the fertility rite can be fathomed.
Such is certainly the case with the objects connected with the ritual. The black wooden box, the three-legged stool, the slips of paper for drawing lots combine the idea of death and rebirth, unexpected destructiveness and fertility.\textsuperscript{25} The outcome of the lottery could be anticipated from the sheer repetition of the adjective 'black'--the colour for death, mourning, punishment, penitence in western civilisation. The black box used to draw lots and the slip of paper with a black dot marking out the 'winner' are mentioned too frequently to be coincidental. Like Pandora's box and its unexpected, excessive and destructive gifts, the wooden box is associated with the vegetal cycle, with death followed by rebirth. The three-legged stool too participates in the cycle of fertility and is considered a divine object bringing all solutions.\textsuperscript{26} By allowing the lottery to take place, that is by supporting the box, the stool helps marking out the martyr. The negative connotations ascribed to the preceding objects may well escape the reader but the ominous collecting of stones cannot be overlooked. Stones are indeed the universal symbol for punishment and martyrdom: they can only be part of a morbid ceremony. Consequently the marked emphasis on the objects related to the lottery can only but confirm that the lottery is a death-bringing ritual.

The villagers' fear of changing either the course of the lottery or the ritualistic objects discloses to what extent they are caught in the web of tradition. Even the prevailing tension of their lives will not help change matters. This need surprise nobody as their surnames are symbolic of the overall duality which has governed their lives for generations. They are all friendly commonplace villagers who are capable of the most atrocious deeds. Most of their surnames reflect their gentility, their humanity. Indeed all but four names\textsuperscript{27} refer to past renowned men who have contributed to the welfare of humanity or to the world's cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{28} Their names obviously clash with their baffling potential destructiveness. Death is even announced in the very surname or characteristics of the two officials who conduct the ceremony. Mr Summers is indeed the head of the coal business in which capacity he has close contacts with the Underworld. His childlessness and marital disharmony are both outward signs of his morbid role.\textsuperscript{29} None but Mr Graves could best assist Mr Summers to preserve the ceremony. To crown it all the Delacroix are singled out as the most fervent participants in the ritualistic killing: Dickie is said to stack up masses of stones in advance while Mrs Delacroix is seen picking up a huge stone and hurrying on wholeheartedly to stone her friend. The latter's surname is strikingly indicative of her fate as it refers to Anne Hutchinson, a seventeenth-century American religious enthusiast who founded the Puritan colony of Rhode Island. She had new theological views which opposed her to other ministers. After a local trial banished her she was tried before the Boston Church and formally excommunicated.\textsuperscript{30} The parallelism between her story and Tessie's is clear: to her excommunication meant spiritual death just as to Tessie being cast out from the group implies death. The symbolic use of names thus reveals that human nature is an unaccountable mixture of the creative and the destructive: normal people can turn out to be real monsters capable of the worst atrocities.

Despite its apparently conventional start and artless narration the story, with its shift from realism to symbolism, brings about a striking shock and the sudden realisation that appearances are deceptive. The unexpected awe-inspiring contrast between man's appearance and deeds as well as the abrupt ending after a crime that allows no hope force the reader to ponder over human habits and more specifically over man's need of a scapegoat. He becomes conscious that he too may be a victim or a persecutor if he resorts unquestioningly to tradition as a line of conduct. This newly acquired awareness then prompts him to be suspicious of any systematic line of conduct, arbitrary deeds and sterile habits of mind. In this respect the victim's first and last words throw light on man's contradictory attitudes: at first Tessie's forgetfulness--possibly a premonitory sign of her imminent death--does not result from her questioning the ritual; in the end her cry words her sudden awareness of human irrationality and injustice. Her case is universal: man's awareness of absurd habits of mind always comes too late, that is when victimised and no longer in a position to change things.

Notes


2. Seymour Lainoff, «Jackson's 'The Lottery'», \textit{Explicator} 12, no 5 (March 1954), item 34.

3. \textit{Ibid.}


6. Helen E. Nebeker, «'The Lottery: Symbolic Tour de Force'», \textit{American Literature} 46, no 1 (March 1974), 100-107. Her analysis is based on religious symbolism.
7. Heilman is convinced that «the symbolic intention of the story (should) have been made clear» (op. cit., p. 385) immediately. But then the actual meaning and effect of the story would have been lessened and the reader would quickly forget the message.

8. Even Brooks and Warren compare «The Lottery» to a fable or a parable (op. cit., pp. 72-74).

9. Although Brooks and Warren mention that the «author's point in general has to do with the awful doubleness of the human spirit» (op. cit., p. 76) they do not comment on the use of symbols denoting it.


13. [See note 10.]


15. [See note 10.]


18. [See note 17.]


20. [See note 17.]


23. [See note 22.]

24. These are Harburt, Overdyke, Summers and Zanini.

25. [See note 10.]

26. [See note 22.]

27. [See note 24.]

28. A detailed list of the historical allusions would add little to this point. Suffice it to say that the past counterpart of the villagers were renowned painters, poets, playwrights, actors, storytellers, ministers, legislators, governors, architects, surgeons, pathologists, physicians, botanists, etc.

29. Scott sees in Summers «the appropriate leader of the rite» (op. cit., p. 20) as his barenness and unhappiness predispose him «to shift the burden of his pains and sorrows to another, who will suffer them in his stead» (this he quotes from *The Golden Bough*, p. 1). The main official's name also evokes the pervading duality: at its start the summer brings perfection and light but come its scorching heart or harvest and it refers to death. So with his very surname he points to the inevitable decline of beauty.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420078275&v=2.1&u=sant29651&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=2339955c0a15c0fb498f39808f4f87a1

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420078275
Reader-Response Criticism

Title: The Lottery: Overview
Short story, 1948

Author(s): Linda Wagner-Martin
American Writer (1916 - 1965)

Other Names Used: Jackson, Shirley Hardie;


Document Type: Work overview, Critical essay


First published in The New Yorker, as many of Jackson's stories were, "The Lottery" was an early narrative of a kind of existentialist, world-weary angst that shocked readers. Mail at the magazine was heavy with readers' reactions to the calmly objective recounting of the ritualized murder of the unlucky housewife and mother, Tessie Hutchinson. In the 1940's and the 1950's, when the story quickly became a classroom staple, few people felt it was significant that the victim of the orderly fertility process was a woman. Today, that recognition underlies much of the effect of the story.

Married to literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, Shirley Jackson bore four children and tried to face their unconventional life with humor, most of the time avoiding the depression that troubled her intermittently. Much of her fiction is either purposefully unrealistic or it is focused on the darker side of family life (Hangsaman, about a schizophrenic adolescent; We Have Always Lived in the Castle, about a demonic child). Its tone resembles that of "The Lottery" in its gradual accumulation of relentless—yet seemingly harmless—details. Part of the horrific effect of Jackson's writing stems from the author's technique of unfolding plot as if it were conventional, even though it is not.

In "The Lottery," for example, the reader is first lulled into an appreciation of the beautiful June 27th morning, when the 300 people of the village are gathering stones, positioning themselves to await the drawing, and beginning the interaction that Jackson describes so carefully, and so naturally. Her use of archetypal names for the leaders of the benevolent patriarchy—Mr. Summers, Mr. Graves—seems mundane, until the reader comes to realize that one of the members of the close-knit community is about to be stoned to death by the other residents. Then the idyllic quality of the "summer" quickly metamorphoses into the solemn tone of "graves."

The interaction between men and women of the community is also telling. The men, particularly Old Man Warner who is drawing for the 77th time, accept the meaningless ritual, and will not hear of questioning its reason or its propriety. When Mr. Adams, whose name suggests some power to originate, tells old Warner that a nearby village is thinking of giving up the lottery, Warner's reply is "Pack of crazy fools." Like other primitive fertility rituals, this one supposedly enhances the crop, brings the community prosperity, and is life-affirming. But others in the crowd lament how quickly the years go by, and that it seems as if last year's lottery has just been held. Clearly, opinion within the community is divided as to the usefulness and the efficacy—not to mention the humanity—of this lottery.

Yet when Tessie Hutchinson complains after her husband Bill has drawn the marked slip of paper, it is Bill who tells her to shut up. The polarization of the crowd as they hope it is not any of the children who are chosen shows again the persuasiveness of the patriarchal order: sons have priority as do children in general; mothers, however, are expendable. To Tessie's low-voiced comment that "It isn't fair," none of the villagers responds with sympathy; even her best women friends throw rocks at her, under the justification that the old custom, the old order, is the right premise for living life. And with unexpected rapidity, after the first stones are thrown and Old Man Warner urges everyone to continue the stoning, and Tessie protests more loudly, Jackson's narrative ends abruptly: ""It isn't fair, it isn't right,' Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her."

Jackson's brilliance is to convince the reader that the residents of the community are normal, ordinary people; and that the rule that they accept so unquestioningly is no more extreme than other orders that comprise patriarchal law. Once the reader has accepted this premise (a convention that the quiet conversation among the villagers makes possible—just as no one is upset about this, so the reader can maintain tranquility), Tessie's lateness, her complaining, and her protests at her incipient
death seem almost annoying. The reader quickly fits into the community, and accepts the arguments of Old Man Warner as if he or she also had some vested interest in the traditions of the ritual. Society is like that: it makes people behave, and forces established customs on them in lieu of the new.

Worse, the reader in irritation with Tessie almost echoes Bill Hutchinson's voice when he tells his wife to shut up, inhumane and indefensible as such a reply is. At that point in the story, Tessie is worried for her husband and her children as much as for herself; and her protests are what one might expect from any person who cared about her family. The disjuncture between the community's quiet and Tessie's voicing her concern about her husband's drawing the marked slip of paper—behavior which is itself very normal—is part of Jackson's powerful irony.

Bringing in the small children as she does, from early in the story (they are gathering stones, piling them up where they will be handy, and participating in the ritual as if it were a kind of play), creates a poignance not only for the death of Tessie the mother, but for the sympathy the crowd gives to the youngest Hutchinson, little Dave. Having the child draw his own slip of paper from the box reinforces the normality of the occasion, and thereby adds to Jackson's irony. It is family members, women and children, and fellow residents who are being killed through this orderly, ritualized process. As Jackson herself once wrote, "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." "The Lottery" has made many a reader do just that, as well as to question their unthinking acceptance of tradition.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420004271&v=2.1&u=sant29651&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=17e5d9af6f0f841f82da2129dcf6b793

Gale Document Number: GALEH1420004271
"The Lottery" as Misogynist Parable

GAYLE WHITTIER

The English Department, SUNY Binghamton, New York 13901

ANOMALOUS AMONG American short stories, Shirley Jackson’s "The Lottery" has appeared in print almost without interruption since its publication in 1948, despite women writers' marginal and discontinuous representation in literary anthologies.\(^1\) "It was not my first published story, nor my last," Jackson herself comments, "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."\(^2\) In fact, "The Lottery" has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and turned into a ballet. It continues to be widely taught in high school and college curricula, largely as a psychological allegory of scapegoating or as a cautionary political fable;\(^3\) but cultural resonance, not artistic merit, accounts for its success.\(^4\) My argument in this essay is that "The Lottery" discloses a powerful misogynist parable, satisfying the commonsense and most widespread cultural scapegoating even as the "political" aspect of the story seems to dispel another.

Initial audience response to "The Lottery" was largely negative, letters turning on "bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse," in Jackson's recollection of them.\(^5\) "The Lottery's" stark story of ritual sacrifice, told as if without moral coloration, and in a formal and simple style coincidental with the ceremony it describes, seems to destroy a number of cherished American myths. It exposes, for example, the fiction of idyllic small-town life towards which, in 1948, many Americans looked to recover a pre-war, even a pre-century, innocence. The story also reveals the fragility of the nuclear family, which is necessary for the ritual of the lottery, but which the lottery effectively divides into competing individuals whose survival needs are at odds with one another. Far from being the "haven in a heartless world," the family unit puts its members at risk. Then, too, "The Lottery" suggests that progress is an illusion, especially when one believes it has been attained.

---

Women's Studies, 1981
Vol. 18, pp. 353-366
Reprints available directly from the publisher
Photocopying permitted by licence only

© 1991 Gordon and Breach, Science Publishers S.A.
Printed in Great Britain
Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box.

"Forward-looking" Mr. Summers pushes against the regressive tide of conservatives like old Mr. Warner, who fears a return to caveman life, and against the inertia of citizens to whom "he spoke frequently . . . about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box." Jackson dramatizes all these "heresies" in a New England locale itself popularly associated with the beginnings of democracy and the "town meeting," but the ritual inverts the democratic ceremony of voting: individuals draw rather than enter "ballots;" they do not choose, but are chosen; and election to high office is replaced by selection for death. The story addresses both the shock and the sense of superiority of a readership caught between recent history — the Holocaust, with its explosion of the myth of Western Civilization — and the McCarthy era with its wholesale scapegoating of "unAmericans" nearer home. When Jackson's editor at The New Yorker changed the date of the story to coincide with that of the issue in which it first appeared, he contemporized it, drawing its unresolved "fiction" and current reality so closely together that, unsurprisingly, many readers "wanted to know . . . where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch." The first reactions to "The Lottery" set in motion the political interpretation of this ambiguous story which remains dominant even today, and which obscures Tessie Hutchinson as the victim of the story's own virulent antifeminism.

The ritual of the lottery itself, like the society it seems to preserve, is patriarchal. Men — Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves — conduct it; a head of household, typically male, selects the first ballot; members of the selected household draw in inverse order of their chronological positions in the family hierarchy, except where age breaks down before gender and the wife draws before her husband, who thus becomes "first and last" in the scheme. Men have choice; women choose only when they are already at risk in the lottery pattern. Furthermore, marriage, the patriarchal purchase and renaming of women, preempts blood, so that any married daughter draws her lot within her husband's clan, not her mother's; she moves from man (father) to man (husband). Finally, the lottery's formality and inherited procedures, which may be lost but not voluntarily changed, extermize that order kept by men in explicit opposition to women:
Buddy Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.9

The rook call of potential victims progresses in an orderly way, that is, patronymically, by (male) surname. Against it, two women, Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves, make choric small-talk, exemplifying the verbal role women have in the ceremony, as commentaters rather than full participants in an orality which begins with the name of the first father, "Adam(s)" and ends with the sacrifice of a contemporary Eve. In their choric displacement, the women resemble Old Man Warner, who also comments more than he participates; presumably, although he is still a male, his age has feminized, i.e. weakened, him.11 In any case, the male alphabet continues over the women's voices, defining the ritual despite them, for, in "The Lottery," untoward and vocal females like Tessie Hutchinson will be "shut up."

Exceptions accommodated by the patriarchal order include women who, by default, have to act as men, have to draw for their families:

Mr. Summers consulted his list. "Clyde Dunbar," he said. "That's right. He's broke his leg, hasn't he? Who's drawing for him?"
"Me, I guess," a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. "Wife draws for her husband," Mr. Summers said.12

The incident makes clear that this is a necessity rather than an ideal, for Mrs. Dunbar, properly subservient, only "guesses" at her surrogate place, while the (male) authority of Mr. Summers confirms it. What is more, she stands ready to have her own son assume the burden of choice for her, and regrets that he is not yet old enough to do so.

"Wife draws for her husband," Mr. Summers said. "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey? . . . ."
"Horace's not but sixteen yet," Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year."13

The diminutive "Janey" infantilizes Mrs. Dunbar, eliciting sympathy for her need to assume her husband's rightful place and reducing any sense of her usurpation of maleness. In fact, she "fills in for the old man" with dignity and stoicism, like those women who recently held war jobs and who, presumably, were now eager to return to the hearth. Those around her understand necessity and encourage Mrs. Dunbar.

"Dunbar," Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said, "Go on, Janey," and another said, "There she goes."14
She is then seen quietly holding her slip of paper, standing with her "two sons." She is presented as a vessel of maleness, and, needless to say, her family is spared, news her son carries home to "father."

The lottery also serves as a male rite of passage for the "Watson boy," "drawing for m'mother and me" apparently because his mother is widowed. He is sketched as a late adolescent, raising his hand in schoolboy readiness, "Here." It is his first time. "He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head." Others therefore encourage him. ""Good fellow, Jack,"" they say, and ""Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it." Implicitly, he will attain a manhood which seems to protect women; ironically, of course, it is through the man's luck of the draw that most of these women will be saved or imperilled. As he goes forward, then, the Watson boy secures approval: ""Don't be nervous, Jack,"" and ""Take your time, son." When accident or death requires it, exceptions to the patriarchal order are tolerated, but nevertheless the exceptional characters are marked. Once the names of families are drawn," all the women began to speak at once, saying, 'Who is it?' 'Who's got it?' 'Is it the Dunbars?' 'Is it the Watsons?'

Throughout the lottery process, male dominance — patriarchy's choice, however "blind" — is interpreted in a traditional way, as a burden rather than as a privilege. There is an air of duty and "good form" about the men as a group, and when Summers and Graves ask for help with the black box, a reluctance dignifies their sacrificial purpose. "... when Mr. Summers said, 'Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?' there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady..." Such restraint continues to the end of the account. It is a man, Mr. Summers, who urges, "All right, folks ... Let's finish quickly," and no man is seen holding stones or actually stoning Tessie, though two women are presented as armed. A narrative whitewash covers patriarchal order.

But if the ordering of the lottery is patriarchal, its ancient purpose of human sacrifice in the name of crop fertility remains associated with the matriarchal worship of earth goddesses in an archaic time. Significantly, the men, seemingly reluctant yet duty-bound to perform the ceremony, relish its actual bloodshedding less than either women or uninitiated boys.

Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix — the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy" — eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of other boys. The girls stood aside, talking...
Here we see how the gender roles already marked in childhood, the boys' territorial protectiveness and the girls' exclusion, begin. But the boys' eager and childish cruelty will turn into the sober reluctance of their fathers, whereas the childish apartness of the girls will become the grown women's blood lust. For if the daughters stand apart, the mothers do not. It is Mrs. Delacroix who is first seen, stone in hand, about to cast it, and Mrs. Dunbar who, despite infirmity, tries to keep up with her.

Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands, and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. "Come on," she said, "Hurry up."
Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath, "I can't run at all. You'll have to go ahead and I'll catch up with you."

To put it simply, women "grow up" to become like boys, immature men. It follows patriarchally that men not only can, but must control women if the appearance of "due process" and ritual form is to veneer the savagery of the stoning.

At first male control over women is silent and patient, as when Bill Hutchinson seems to ignore his wife's first protests. When she persists, he takes charge verbally, saying, "Shut up, Tessie." His _commandment_ alone, however, fails to control her, so that, as she disturbs the ritual by refusing to show her black-marked slip of paper, he forces it out of her hand. Male force, then, is presented as "justified" by female dissent, even as male order both accommodates and keeps in check the ritual of goddess worship now obsolete, but, tragically, still followed.

In the story's world of fixed gender roles and complex power alignments, the lottery itself is not, as critics have tended to think, an "issue of life and death turning upon pure chance." It _seems_ random because the critics, like the villagers, accept patronymic place as a given rather than as a significant factor in the fates of individuals. The family's luck depends first of all on the father's in "The Lottery," although their survival does not depend on his (for he himself may be sacrificed to the larger "family of the community"). In the lottery scheme, a woman ordinarily draws her lot only when she is at greater danger, and from a smaller pool than that of the initiating males. Significantly, her chance of survival then is highest when she has many children, especially _sons_ who will not marry out of the family and increase her risk. A sheerly quantitative ability to reproduce becomes salvific in this story. Like Old Eve, a woman may literally be "saved" by childbearing. (Ominously, there are no grown spinsters in the ritual.) Given these narrative circumstances, by what criteria is Tessie Hutchinson selected for sacrifice?

Marginality marks her late arrival on the scene. The others in her family
have already assembled “near the front” of the crowd, curiously without having waited for her or reminded her of a day she almost “clean forgot.” She sees them only “through the crowd,” and her misfit status is emphasized by her haste and disarray: “She came hurriedly along the path of the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. . . .” Drying her hands on her apron, she has abandoned housework, which she seems to mock in a teasing comment to Mr. Summers: “You wouldn’t have me leave m’dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?” By implying that washing the dishes is almost as important as the communal rite of sacrifice, she ridicules both the triviality of woman’s work and the game-playing quality of the male ritual.

As the lottery progresses and her family’s surname is called out, Tessie Hutchinson’s image as the good wife and mother frays. She takes charge verbally, urging her husband to “Get up there, Bill,” at which those around her laugh as at the village character, the nagging or henpecking wife. Soon, however, the laughter stops when Tessie shows herself to be unmotherly, eager to sacrifice her married daughter for her own more probable safety. “There’s Don and Eva,” Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. ‘Make them take their chance!”

In an inversion of the Persephone myth, a mother would sacrifice her daughter — and her daughter’s husband, since she is a coupled woman. Were she to achieve her desire, the blood tie between the women would displace the patronymical and matrimonial one which establishes hierarchy’s order for kinship. Therefore patriarchy saves the daughter — who may yet contribute biologically to its continuation — while it selects the “bad,” the offspring-destroying and older mother, near or at the end of biological usefulness, for execution. Tessie has forgotten the rules and is almost to be pitied, but Eva (Eve?) has already, through patriarchy, been redeemed.

“Daughters drew with their husbands’ families, Tessie,” Mr. Summers said gently. “You know that as well as anyone else.”

But, of course, Eva did not actually draw: the male head of her husband’s family drew in her name, which, like her loyalty, has been subsumed. This incident may be seen as an example of how patriarchy divides mother from child, woman from woman, through its rituals. But its stronger and more lingering effect, I think, is to condemn Tessie Hutchinson as an unnatural, selfish parent, a bad mother. She may be sacrificed, then, because she is not sacrificial enough.

“The Lottery” also presents its ultimate victim as the classic scold, too-vocal
a woman. She first jokes, then, when the initial selection is made, “shouts,” tries to argue for her case “as quietly as she can,” and ultimately “screams.” Her crescendo of protest overrides her husband’s attempt to cut off her objections with “Shut up, Tessie,” so that she is portrayed not only as a woman who is unwilling to be sacrificed for her family and neighbors, but as the antithesis of the old ideal of the demure and silent woman.

Even Tessie’s depiction as a “bad sport,” a seemingly gender-free indictment, is not without sexual bias. Her resistance, which erupts only after her own family has been selected, takes the immediate form of an accusation against a specific male, “a round-faced, jovial man” for whom people feel sorry “because he had no children and his wife was a sold.” Her vocal charge of “unfairness” — a charge she levels three times within one page and twice again before she is stoned — contrasts with her husband’s dignified demeanor.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair!”

What seems “unfair” to her at this point is that the men have not played by the rules. But, significantly, it is other women, not men, who at first bring her back into line. They, too, believe the lottery to be truly random, therefore “fair.”

“Be a good sport, Tessie,” Mrs. Delacroix called and Mrs. Graves said, “All of us took the same chance.”

The women who argue for form typify patriarchy’s use of “acceptable” and “included” women to regularize the rebellious, to ventriloquize patriarchy’s mythos while seeming to speak for themselves. (Mrs. Delacroix will be the one to lift “a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands,” that is, a stone a man might more easily carry.) In challenging the fairness of one man, Mr. Summers, Tessie exposes the entire proceeding, which is based on a male sense of contest, inverted so that, at the end of the “game,” there will be a team of winners and a single, dead loser. She also suggests that her husband is unable to defend himself and his rights, demoting him almost to the status of a child she would protect: “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted.” Bill Hutchinson restores the balance in favor of his dominance by telling her, “Shut up, Tessie.” Then her resistance becomes physical.

“Tessie,” Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute, looking around defiantly, and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.
Now she embodies resistance, in direct contrast to the "good girl" portrait of her own twelve-year-old, decorous daughter:

Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward, switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box.  

When Tessie resists the patriarchal ritual altogether, withholding her slip of paper from public view, male physical force is required. We are reminded that the black mark itself was made by a man.

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had the black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up and there was a stir in the crowd.

 Appropriately, it is not a stranger, but her husband, who exerts this force, for husbandly violence has, until recently, been viewed as legitimate, natural, necessary, and even theologically sanctioned. Only a husband has the legitimate right, too, to open his wife's body, in this case, to extract order from her confining flesh. The slip of paper acts not only as the symbol of that order, but as a piece of evidence against Tessie herself, now stereotyped as the uncooperative, dissident, overly vocal, unmotherly "bad sport." There is a certain justice in her selection as the story's characterization of her and the lottery's outcome coincide. What will be stoned to death at the end of the account is a traditional image of the "bad woman."

Stoning itself is ignoble, brutal and communal. It destroys the human image and obliterates the identity of its victim. As a mode of execution, it requires only the most primitive technology, one which "Mother Earth" ironically supplies. "Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones."

The cultural associations of stoning are ambiguous, evoking both innocence — the stoning of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr — and guilt, the stoning of the adulterous woman. Allusively, a kind of fragmentary Christian allegory threads in and out of "The Lottery," sustained mostly on etymologies like "Delacroix" ("of the cross") and names such as Adams and Eva.  

Indeed, at the last moment, Tessie Hutchinson achieves a vision that jolts from social emphasis on "fairness" to her discovery of a wider moral order: "It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed and then they were upon her.  "Fairness" is based on performing the rules of a given ritual; "rightness" questions the premise of the ritual itself. But Tessie's status as an innocent victim of mindless communal ceremony is counter-balanced by her presentation as the nonconforming scold. I believe that both these aspects of her as a character collide in her own name.
Tessie’s surname and the New England locale of the story associate her with Anne Hutchinson, who was excommunicated from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for misbehaviour, for preaching (as a woman) without permission though it was on the technicality of the antinomian heresy that she officially was turned out. Hutchinson herself has remained an ambiguous American heroine, standing simultaneously for private conscience and free speech, but also for communal disruption in the name of those virtues. Tessie Hutchinson lacks private conscience, as, apparently, do all her neighbors, but she does exemplify a kind of “free speech,” and she does “preach,” though minimally and in bad faith, to her community. Unlike Anne Hutchinson, however, she is not expelled, but isolated and yet confined in “the center of a cleared space.” Her ultimate fate is more like that of the New England witches than of her apparent colonial counterpart. Stronger than the lingering image of Christian martyrdom, then, is the image of the Biblical death reserved for the adulteress, the unfaithful woman who endangers patriarchy by ignoring her place as marital property and procreative vessel. Foremost in the crowd prepared to stone her, we see “Steve Adams” and “Mrs. Graves,” an unmarried couple standing in for Adam and Eve, our primordial ancestors. Since “Eva” (Tessie’s daughter) has already been redeemed — we might imagine her outside the crowd, almost a Virgin Mary — the name of “Eva” cannot be used again. But Eve’s ancient denigration as the bringer of death can be evoked, as it is in an “Adam” and “Eve” who are “Adams” and “Graves.” In retrospect, even the title of the story suggests the disobedient wife, for the “Lot” in “Lottery” echoes the Lot whose spouse, turning back, turned into a pillar of salt.

“The Lottery’s” conclusion confirms a misogynist level in the story. Left unfinished, the stoning carries over into the imagination of the reader, making him or her an accomplice, witness and vicarious participant, in its grim end. Tessie’s untoward voice is cut off by the crowd at once, “upon her,” so that her husband’s admonition that she “shut up” takes on horrible and absolute force. But the image is also one of visible obliteration, for in stoning a body falls, is itself covered with stones, and is obscured from view by the cluster of executioners around it. Although the reader’s share in Tessie’s imminent death implies that savagery is within all of us, I believe that such a hopeful interpretation is ex post facto, and that the stronger case may be made for imaginative experience in which Tessie’s antifeamist portrayal permits us to engage. The date of the story’s composition and publication supports its ultimately bicameral structure, which exposes and seems to condemn political scapegoating while sustaining and seeming to uphold sexual scapegoating: 1948 brought not only the political optimism of the establishment of the
United Nations, but also, in fashion, the New Look, which literally corseted and crinolined women into a neo-Victorian image, and which prophesied the conservative domestic values of the coming Eisenhower era. Both movements are addressed in "The Lottery."

Perhaps with some justice, "The Lottery" placed its author in something like Tessie Hutchinson's exposed position. While the agent who sold but disliked the story and the editor who disliked but bought it foresaw some controversy, Jackson did not. She received a deluge of letters indicating that people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at. An author whose avowed purpose in writing was to "uplift and enrich and delight" her audiences, Jackson unwittingly wrote a work that secured the disfavor even of her own mother, and which convinced her that "I was very lucky indeed to be safety in Vermont, where no one in our small town had ever heard of The New Yorker, much less read my story." Her response, both at the time and twenty years later, was a retreat into disavowing, reconstructed innocence on two levels, that the readers' reactions were somehow atypical themselves, and that she had not intended (and was therefore presumably not responsible for) the volatility of her own material. Such innocence, recurrent in her memoir of the story, must strike contemporary readers as overdone. "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, I would stop writing now." Yet what other readership do the letters reflect?

Jackson's invereterate or reconstructed innocence becomes ignorance once she treats the composition of "The Lottery" itself, which, she recollects both at the time and two decades later, was "just a story I wrote," and "just a story." It is not unusual for writers themselves to be ignorant of the source and even the pattern of their writing process; but few believe that their work is "merely" fiction. Indeed, Jackson's account of the genesis of "The Lottery" shows that her innocence is not, finally, impermeable. It came to her while she was engaged in strenuous woman's work, "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 stoller held the day's groceries — and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards put an edge to the story..." It reflects the dilemma of the creative but domestic woman of that time, to whom writing was not, as Jackson said elsewhere, "honest work" when she spent "50 percent of my life... washing and dressing the children, cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and mending." Her more publicly acceptable mask was to adopt writing as a hobby, motherhood as the real job: "It's great fun, and I love it. But it doesn't tie any shoes."
The writing of “The Lottery” went “quickly and easily from beginning to end without pause, a circumstance not . . . usual” for her. Nor did she spend time in revision. “The story I finally typed up and sent off to my agent the next day was almost word for word the original draft.” An “automatic” story often touches primal recesses which revision, a form of authorial censorship, may hide. If Jackson’s account resembles antique seductions — “He drugged me,” “I didn’t know what was happening until it was too late” — it nevertheless may present the public face of a real private innocence, the blank and terrible innocence of children who commit myth and murder in a casual way.

Whatever the societal influences or the psychic caves from which “The Lottery” emerged almost forty years ago, the story has endured to become a classroom classic. (When, recently, I asked a group of sixty college students how many of them had read the piece, fully three quarters responded affirmatively. I know of no other single work which would have elicited such response.) Taught simply as a writerly tour de force of suspense or as an example of “the awful doubleness of the human spirit,” “The Lottery” readily yields a self-congratulatory interpretation: if we acknowledge that “it can happen,” it won’t. Or, to put it another way, because we have read “The Lottery,” we are equipped to detect bigotry and irrationality in our own “free” society.

Yet neither communists nor Jews nor blacks are the literal scapegoats of the story: a woman is, and is insofar as she departs from the stereotype of the “good woman.” This makes Shirley Jackson’s story doubly useful in a patriarchal world: its author passes for an “exceptional” woman successfully combining motherhood and career, whose work is good enough to be anthologized despite the under-representation of her sisters’; and her story itself perpetuates the cautionary tale of the “bad” woman who ends up disfavored and dead. So long as “The Lottery” is disseminated and taught without attention to its covered misogynist parable, it will sanction and even advance anti-feminism by seeming to expose scapegoating even as it scapegoats Tessie Hutchinson, impressing in the readers’ minds a strong, subliminal and unquestioned sexism.

Notes
2. All references to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” and to her memoir of its composition follow the texts in The Story and Its Writer, ed. Ann Charters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983) because both are available in one readily accessible volume. “The Lottery” is also included in the recent reissue of Shirley Jackson’s short stories, The Lottery and Other
Stories (New York: Ferrer, Strauss and Giroux, 1982).

3. Jackson herself agrees with such a meaning: "Explaining just what I had hoped the story to say is very difficult. I supposed, 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" (The Story and Its Writer, p. 942). Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in their Understanding Fiction (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), concur that "the 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" (p. 74). Almost a decade later, in Insight I, eds. John V. Hagegian and Martin Dolch (Frankfurt am Main: Hirschgraben-Verlag, 1967), John Hagegian sees the story epitomizing: "... the cruelty that can be inflicted on innocent people whenever a community acts irrationally in concert... as in the Inquisition, or under Nazism, and Communism, or during the McCarthy era in America..." (p. 131). Later commentators embellish the theme following Seymour Lipinoff's retrieval of the anthropological backgrounds of the piece: ('Jackson's 'The Lottery', Explication, XII (March, 1954, Item 34); Lenemaja Friedman's comparison of the story's ritual with Thargelia's festival in ancient Athens (Shirley Jackson, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1975, p. 63)) and Shyamal Baghchee's Design of Darkness in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," in Notes on Contemporary Literature (IX, December, 1979, p. 8-9) continue this archaeology of the tale, which we find also in the more recent article "An Old Testament Analogue for 'The Lottery,'" by James M. Gibson (The Journal of Modern Literature, Vol. 11, 1984, p. 193-5). Even Helen Nebeker, in "'The Lottery': Symbolic Tour de Force" (American Literature, 46, 1974), while noting the narrative's "patriarchal order," sees it finally as statement that "man (sic) is a victim of his unexamined and hence unchanged traditions which engender in him flames otherwise banked, subdued" (p. 107).

4. A number of writers have cited "The Lottery" for artistic deficiency, among them, Robert Helen in Modern Short Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace 1930, p. 384-5), and, less rigorously, Brooks and Warren. Nebeker tries to refute this charge by enlarging on the symbolic level of the story in her "'The Lottery': Symbolic Tour de Force," and the work is sometimes taught as example of writerly craft. On the whole, however, it is the theme of scapegoating, not the quality of the prose, which marks "The Lottery's" popular history.

5. The Story and Its Writer, p. 1194.

6. Ibid., p. 943.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., p. 1193.

9. Ibid., p. 1195.

10. Ibid., p. 942-3.

11. Christine Conti, formerly a graduate student at the State University of New York at Binghamton, suggests a more radical reading of Old Man Warner, within the story as the ventriloquized mother of the author, whose negative response to "The Lottery" was to contrast her daughter's gloomy generation with an earlier, less melancholy one.

12. The Story and Its Writer, p. 945. Nebeker believes the "grown boy" Mr. Summers refers to may have been the victim of a previous lottery (p. 104-5).

13. Ibid., p. 945.


15. Ibid., p. 945. Nebeker conjectures that the boy's father may also have selected for the lottery in the previous year (p. 105).

16. Ibid., p. 945.

17. Ibid., p. 947.

18. Ibid., p. 947.

19. Ibid., p. 943.
20. Ibid., p. 948.
21. See Lainoff for a basic treatment of "The Lottery" as solstice rite.
23. Ibid., p. 949.
24. Ibid., p. 947.
27. John V. Hagopian interprets this scene very differently. Having asked, "What does it mean when Mrs. Hutchinson arrives late explaining that she 'clean forgot what day it was' and then jokes that the others 'wouldn't have me leave my dishes in the sink?" he answers himself: "Three possible meanings are involved here. 1) Mrs. Hutchinson subconsciously rejects the ritual of the lottery and really doesn't want to participate in it; 2) but she is an 'either-directed person who doesn't dare even to admit to consciousness the possibility of rebellion against tradition --- she wants to be a 'normal' member of the community; 3) and there is great irony and a touch of pathos in the fact that this cheerful wife and mother rebels only when she is the victim, the scapegoat, and that she will never wash dishes again" (p. 131–2). (Emphasis mine.)
29. Ibid., p. 947.
30. Ibid., p. 947.
31. Ibid., p. 947.
32. Ibid., p. 947.
33. Ibid., p. 949.
34. Ibid., p. 943.
35. Ibid., p. 947.
36. Ibid., p. 947.
37. Ibid., p. 949.
38. Ibid., p. 948.
39. Ibid., p. 948.
40. Ibid., p. 948.
41. Ibid., p. 949.
42. See Nebeker for a full etymological and symbolic treatment of these names.
43. The Story and Its Writer, p. 949.
44. Nebeker regards "Tessie Hutchinson" as "the end product of two thousand years of Christian thought and ritual, Catholic and Puritan merges . . ." and sees her and her fellow citizens "all equally victims and persecutors" (p. 106).
45. The Story and Its Writer, p. 949.
46. The fact that Mr. Adams' first name is "Steve," a shortened version of the name of the first Christian martyr, implies that Christianity itself has come under the repossession of Old Testament blood sacrifice, "Steve" is not free to act because he is old "Adam's" (Adams') son.
47. Jackson has, in fact, a story entitled "The Pillar of Salt," which appears in "The Lottery" and Other Stories. It turns on the mental disintegration of a housewife/mother who, leaving her New Hampshire home and children, comes to New York with her husband only to crack under the strain and vacuity of urban life. Her disintegration rapidly accelerates after they find an amputated leg on the beach. Here, as in "The Lottery," no "moral" is drawn, but it is strongly implied that she should have stayed in New Hampshire rather than trying to recover a past (unmarried?) life.
49. Ibid., p. 1194. Nevertheless, much of Shirley Jackson’s fiction explores the borders of insanity and the gothic.
50. Ibid., p. 1194.
51. Ibid., p. 1194.
52. Ibid., p. 1193.
53. Ibid., p. 1192.
54. Ibid., p. 941.
55. Ibid., p. 1192–3.
56. Brooks and Warren, p. 76.
To continue, in Internet Explorer, select FILE then SAVE AS from your browser's toolbar above. Be sure to save as a plain text file (.txt) or a 'Web Page, HTML only' file (.html). In FireFox, select FILE then SAVE FILE AS from your browser's toolbar above. In Chrome, select right click (with your mouse) on this page and select SAVE AS

EBSCO Publishing  Citation Format: MLA (Modern Language Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=ehost&lang=&feature_id=MLA and make any necessary corrections before using. Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates. Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

Works Cited

<!--Additional Information:
Persistent link to this record (Permalink): http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9410177542&site=ehost-live
End of citation-->

JACKSON'S THE LOTTERY
The underpinnings of Shirley Jackson's famous post-World War II story "The Lottery" demonstrate that the work is far greater than the sum of its parts. The date of the lottery, its location, and the symbolic or ironic names of its characters all work to convey a meaning that is even more disturbing than the shock created by its well-known ending, namely, that despite assurances during the late 1940s that "it couldn't happen here," a microcosmal holocaust occurs in this story and, by extension, may happen anywhere in contemporary America. Coming after the revelation of the depths of depravity to which the Nazis sank in their eagerness to destroy other, "lesser" peoples, "The Lottery" upsets the reader's sense of complacency.

Jackson lets us know the time of the lottery at the outset of the story. From the description of the men's talk of "tractors and taxes" (211) and the depiction of Mr. Summers wearing a "clean white shirt and blue jeans" (213), we may assume that we are in the twentieth century, making the story's impact more immediate. But why does the author choose June 27 as the date on which the village holds its lottery? The summer solstice, June 21, has already passed, and the Fourth of July is yet to come. The date, if not the century, seems to have been capriciously chosen. Such is not the case, however. June 27 falls halfway between June 21 (the summer solstice) and July 4 (Independence Day). What significance do these two days bear that makes June 27 the perfect compromise between them?
In European societies, Midsummer's Day was celebrated at the summer solstice, not in the middle of summer as its name would suggest. Authors such as Shakespeare, August Strindberg, and William Golding have employed the pagan undertones of that day as a motif in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Miss Julie, and The Spire, respectively, for indeed Midsummer's Day has a long, heathen, orgiastic tradition behind it. American Independence Day, on the other hand, is redolent of democracy, freedom, and, to a certain degree, justice, because it marks the birth of a nation anchored in the belief that people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." June 27 bisects the two weeks between these dichotomous dates and may well embody the contrast between superstitious paganism and rational democracy, a dynamic that plays a central role in "The Lottery," especially in light of the story's locale.

At no point does the author tell us where the lottery takes place, but we are made aware of several possible indicators. The town has a population of about 300, and farming seems to be the normal way of making a living. Most of the names are Anglo-Saxon in origin. The land yields an abundance of stones. Most important, the lottery is itself a model--albeit perverted--of participatory democracy, the kind that New England settlers made famous. All of these seem to point to New England as the locale of the story. It is also in keeping with New England's history of witch trials and persecutions. (Being pressed to death by heavy stones was not uncommon as a colonial punishment for witchcraft, as may be seen in Arthur Miller's The Crucible.)

Not only do time and place bear important clues as to the allegorical meaning of "The Lottery," but the very names of the characters are laden with significance. The prominent names--Summers, Adams, Graves, Warner, Delacroix, and (most obviously) Tessie Hutchinson--have much to tell us. For the season of the lottery is summer, and the larger scope of this work encompasses mankind in general (for instance, "Adam" means "man" in Hebrew). "Graves" sounds a somber, forewarning note of what will happen to Tessie, and the oldest man in town, Old Man Warner (the others have either died or been killed off) warns us about the primordial function of the lottery, which is to ensure fertility: "Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon'" (215). Mrs. Delacroix's name alludes to the pseudo-crucifixion of Tessie.

It is the irony that lies behind the protagonist's name, Tessie Hutchinson, that magnifies the allegorical force of this story. Historically, there really was a well-known New England Hutchinson--Anne Hutchinson, who, having been exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638 because of her religious beliefs, emigrated to Rhode Island, where she established her own church. Eventually, she and most of her family died in an Indian massacre outside of what is today New Rochelle, New York. Some might call such a woman a martyr, who was exiled and died for her beliefs. Our protagonist, however, has no strongly held beliefs, except her belief in self-survival. The name "Tessie" parodies the most famous Tess in literature, Tess Durbeyfield, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, who in Hardy's portrait of her as the plaything of fate, dies ignominiously, since "the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess" (446). Now we must ask, Is Tessie Hutchinson in our story an ingenue, as Hardy's protagonist clearly is?
Of course not! Tessie "came hurriedly along the path to the square... 'Clean forgot what day it was' she said to Mrs. Delacroix... and they both laughed softly... 'I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running"' (213). "Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, 'Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?'" (214). Good-natured Tessie actually desires to come to the lottery, going so far as to run to it, although the rest of the townspeople are subdued, even nervous: the men's "jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed" (211). Mr. Summers and Mr. Adams "grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously" (215). Young Jack Watson also appears to be nervous: "He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head" (214). Later, someone in the crowd says," 'Don't be nervous, Jack' "(216). And not only the men are nervous, of course. '"I wish they'd hurry,' Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. 'I wish they'd hurry"' (216). However, to Tessie the lottery seems to be one great lark: when her husband, Bill, is called upon to choose his family's lottery ticket, Tessie urges him," 'Get up there, Bill'" (215), although "by now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously" (215). What a great contrast there is, in short, between the crowd's nervousness and Tessie's nonchalance.

But when Tessie's family is chosen, she becomes a woman transformed. "Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, 'You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"' (216). Subsequently, she yells," 'There's Don and Eva [the Hutchinsons' son-in-law and daughter]. Make them take their chance!' "(216). Putting aside for the moment her perfidy in singling out her married children as possible victims to increase her own chances of survival, we see that she is manifestly not the good-humored, whimsical matron whom we first saw eagerly entering the lottery. Her protests of the unfairness of the process—a thought that only now has occurred to her, since there is every likelihood of her becoming the chosen victim ("'I tell you it wasn't fair" [217])—have a distinctly hollow ring to them, and her defiant glance around the crowd, her lips pursed, as she truculently goes up to the lottery box to pick her ticket, belies her earlier easygoing demeanor. Thus, the irony behind her name has come full circle. Her final assertion ("'It isn't fair, it isn't right""") is neither the cry of an innocent victim (Tessie is definitely not Tess Dur bayfield nor a martyr's triumphant statement (Tessie is also certainly not Anne Hutchinson). It is the peevish last complaint of a hypocrite who has been hoisted by her own petard.

There were many Americans who, after the end of World War II and the revelations of the early Nuremberg trials in 1945 and 1946, smugly asserted that such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States. After all, singling out one person, one religion, one race for pejorative treatment—these things just could not happen here. In her postwar novel Gentleman's Agreement, Laura Z. Hobson showed that such discrimination was in fact alive and well. Shirley Jackson adds an even more disturbing note in her story, which was initially published in The New Yorker in 1948: custom and law, when sanctioned by a selfish, unthinking populace, can bring an otherwise democratic and seemingly just society to the brink of paganism. Thus the date, the location, and the names in Jackson's story help to create the specter of a holocaust in the United States.
In this, "The Lottery" is eerily reminiscent of the ending of Hardy's Tess. When Angel Claire and Tess Durbeyfield flee to the pagan temple at Stonehenge, they see the "eastward pillars and their architraves [standing] up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them: and the Stone of Sacrifice midway" (442-43). This image is an apt metaphor for the plot of "The Lottery": despite modernity, democracy, and American neighborliness, the primitive, selfish, superstitious ghost of paganism has been allowed to rear its ugly head and destroy one of its own.

WORKS CITED


By JAY A. YARMOVE, University of Cincinnati

Copyright of Explicator is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.