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ENGL 3308-001

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9 December 2025

A Stone's Throw: How Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* Encapsulates the Southern Gothic

Abstract

Southern gothic literature utilizes themes and elements of the grotesque, social critique, violence, and, of course, religious undertones. Authors such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Cormac McCarthy have become icons in the genre, pioneering a new sense of horror in the familiar and the unconscious. When I began the search for this paper's topic, I knew I wanted to cover something from the Southern Gothic space, and I wanted to focus on female authors. Back in English Composition 2, I was given the opportunity to student-teach *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson and was surprised to learn that she was not named among Southern Gothic writers. *The Lottery* reads as classic Southern Gothic, and while Shirley Jackson is a markedly strong presence within the modern Horror genre, hers is a name that rarely surfaces in a Google search for Southern Gothic genre writers. Her short story is rife with those elements, of the grotesque in the familiar, religious tone, and social critique, how could Jackson *not* be mentioned more frequently? In this paper, I will be taking a psychoanalytical lens to the short story, and present Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* as a proper Southern Gothic text by examining 3 elements from the scene where the townspeople gather around the Black Box containing the Lottery, before fates are sealed. The actions of the citizens building up to the pinnacle of terror, the drawing of the name, give the readers much to fear before it is revealed what happens to the poor soul whose name is chosen from the ominous black box.

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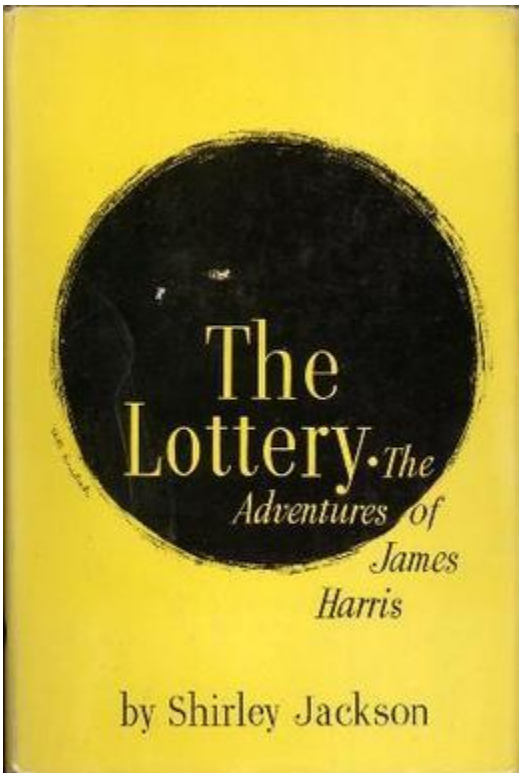
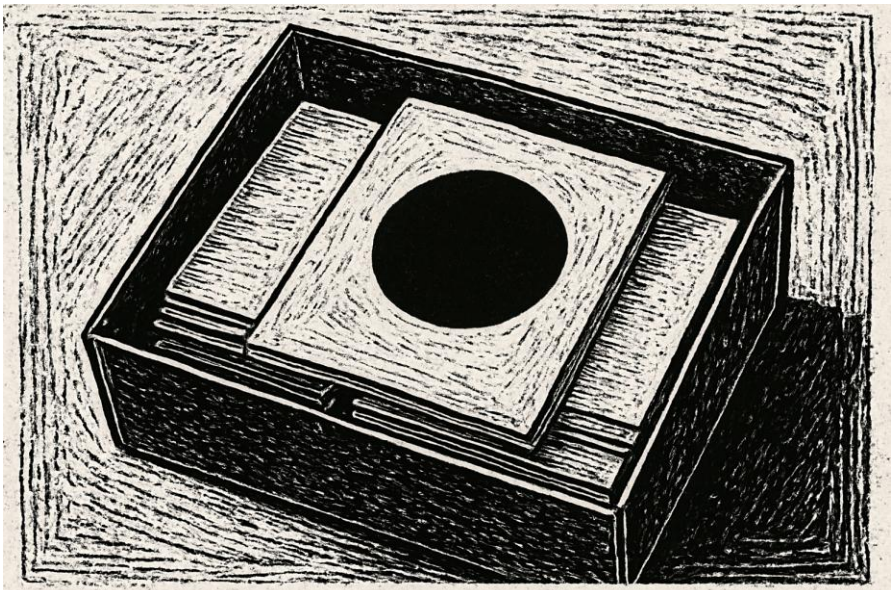


1: Shirley Jackson's The Lottery

In this short story, merely four pages long in the Cengage Portable Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing textbook, a small village is preparing for an annual event. People are gathering in the square, the mayor is in attendance and will emcee the event, and children are playing nearby a pile of rocks. As the scene plays out, more and more people gather until most of the village is in attendance. This is when the village elders bring forward a large, ancient, black box and set it upon a three-legged stool. As this is happening, villagers in the crowd greet one another, exchange small talk, and generally avoid any real discussion of what is to come.

The elders do a general roll call, making sure everyone is accounted for; either representing themselves and a parent, or by proxy, and one by one, they are called to draw a slip of paper from the old black box. As names are being called, comments can be heard from the crowd; Mrs. Hutchison shows up late, saying "Clean forgot what day it was" (Jackson 339), and Mrs. Graves sighs that "Time sure goes fast" (Jackson 341), from the back row. A general discussion of surrounding villages who are either considering giving up or have already given up their lottery system, spurring disdain from the crowd listening in, Old Man Warner saying "Pack of crazy fools…'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.'...There's *always* been a lottery" (Jackson 341). Thus far in the story, we have learned a few truths. First, the town is steeped in this lottery tradition, as Old Man Warner draws his seventy-seventh year. Second, the town is very close-knit. The mayor can tell if there are people missing from the crowd, calling out to them by name. Third, something, we do not know what yet, is about to happen and no one feels safe or good about it.



2: The omnious black box the lottery is pulled from

These three truths underlined in the first part of the story are traditional Southern Gothic elements. First we have deep seeded tradition, second is contradictions and grotesqueries of familiar life, and third is deeply flawed aspects of human nature, as summarized from the article, "Reinventing Southern Gothic: A Contemporary Writer's Guide to the Genre" on

GilliamWritersGroup.com (no author listed). These characteristics are typically projected onto a southern community, such as Atlanta, Georgia in *A Rose For Emily* by William Faulkner or in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find* which mentions several southern states from Tennessee to Florida. What Jackson has done to subvert this requirement is keep the village anonymous. We do not know where physically this takes place on the map, the ambiguity of the location allowing this tale to potentially take place in a southern state. Certainly the staunch upholding of an unquestioned tradition parallels that same theme in Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily.*

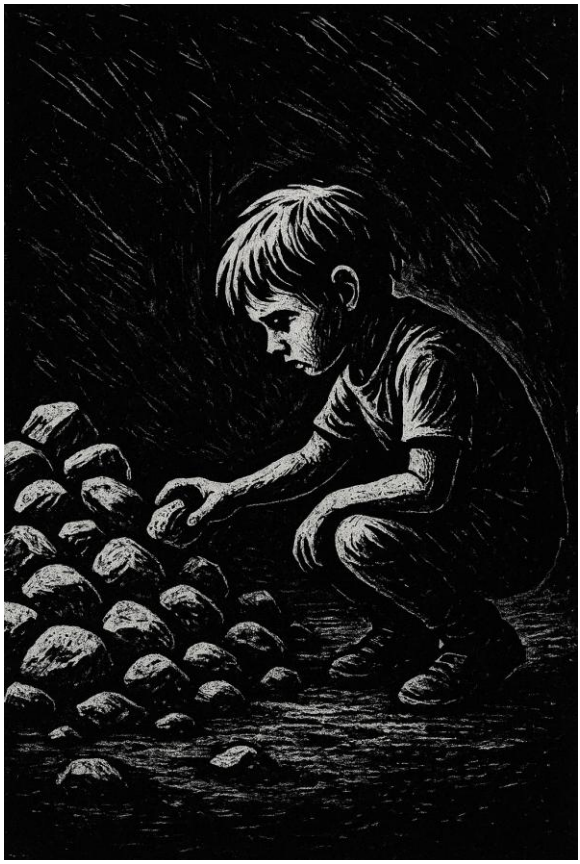
As previously stated, Old Man Warner has participated in seventy-seven lottery drawings and does not intend to see this tradition die. From a psychological standpoint, this refusal of letting go of tradition begs the question "why". It could very well be a stubborn old man not willing to change at his later age, but something he says earlier mitigates this theory. He brings up the old adage "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon". This complicates things by adding a layer of a transactional relationship with either weather or some sort of deity that controls the village's food source. In short, it can be boiled down to one word: fear. While some surrounding villages are doing away with the "old ways", the lottery, this village refuses, citing bountiful harvest as their reasoning.

Psychologically, resistance to change is not a new paradigm. In the introduction to Doris Betts' *3 By 3: Masterworks of the Southern Gothic*, Lewis Simpson states that "the terror and pathos of the self's difficult, maybe impossible, attempt to achieve a meaningful identity" (Simpson xiii-xiv). When one's traditions are so deeply embedded in one's identity, the natural reaction is to protect one's identity fiercely. In *The Lottery*, Old Man Warner is more willing to allow one citizen a year to draw a paper with a black dot from an old black box sitting on an old stool and be stoned to death by the entire village than allow his tradition, his identity, to die. That

would mean that those previous seventy-seven people would have been murdered for nothing and his identity would be complicit. As aske in the article The Psychological Boundaries of the Ego: Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Lacan, “where is the limit between that which is part of the ego and that which is foreign to it, if an “uncanny” is at work in the very functioning of the ego, possessing it like a demon?” (Lepoutre et al. Introduction). Being complicit is a direct lead-in to the next characteristic, deeply flawed aspects of human nature. Whether the village’s motivation is fear of starvation or fear of being realized for who they are and what they’ve done, the result of this lottery that has been going on for at least one hundred years is always the same- the one who pulls the black dotted paper is fated to being stoned to death. This being a short story and fairly ambiguous in nature, we the reader are never told what the selected villager is being sacrificed to or even if this is truly a sacrifice. Perhaps whatever first began this tradition was sated long ago and no one knows that sacrifice is no longer needed.

The ambiguity is delicious for the imagination as it almost encourages the reader to devise some way to either exonerate these people or further damn them to whatever fate they fear. The deeply flawed nature of these humans is underscored several times throughout page 338 by bringing up “the children” five times. The children are described as playing, laughing, and joking, after all it is their summer break from school. A boy, Bobby Martin, stands at a pile of stones and “had already stuffed his pockets full” (338). The adults around the children are going about their day as though a town hall meeting had been called to discuss budgetary restrictions on the village’s finances. Fathers watch their children play, though they are not nearly as cheerful as their progeny. Of course, the adults all know what is going on, what they are set to do that day, and as they watch their own children fill their pockets with what will soon be blunt-force weapons, no wonder they cannot find it within themselves to laugh along with them.

It begs the question of why the children are there in the first place. A writer from the University of Montana, Jerry Elijah Brown states that "instead of condemning or scolding, the humor celebrates and preserves. The human spirit in its commonest, randiest forms triumphs, somehow, over the awfulest of circumstances and survives" (132). This can be applied to why the children are participating in this “event”. While the children certainly are providing a lighter atmosphere for the dour occasion, they also represent what everyone is there for and why they do it. Holding on to the tradition is one thing but participating in a communal stoning to potentially provide a full and happy life for one’s child carries in itself a strength; perhaps the strength needed to do what they need to do. That guilt-strength is succinctly reflected in the quote from the article, Upheaval: Psychoanalytical Perspectives on Trauma, stating that “The child then meets a response charged with passion, and perhaps above all, the feeling of guilt that emanates from the adult person, that is introjected by the child” (Rydén 84). It also feels like going to church. The younger the indoctrinated, the more readily they hold fast to the doctrine. By turning their children into murderers, they are saving them from a life without security. This can easily be defined as rationalization. Psychologically, rationalization is a form of a mental “defense mechanism in which apparent logical reasons are given to justify behavior that is motivated by unconscious instinctual impulses” (APA Dictionary of Psychology). The urge to protect what is yours along with your legacy is embedded into our brains so deeply we



3: A boy choosing a stone from the pile created with ChatGPT

barely question it when its time comes, and as long as it keeps theirs safe, stoning someone else to death seems to be a small price to pay for these people.

Finally, a personal favorite characteristic of mine: The Grotesque. Typically, papers that begin with the phrase “Webster’s Dictionary defines [word] as…” tend to turn my stomach, but in this case, I find it apt. The dictionary definition of grotesque is as follows: “1. Odd or unnatural in shape, appearance or character; fantastically ugly or absurd; bizarre" (dictionary.com). Shirley Jackson’s *The Lottery* has it all. The odd and unnatural shape of the stool, which being three-legged, could be a representation of either the life cycle with the birth, harvest, and death, or even the Holy Trinity. In character, the unnatural being allowing children to pick out their own stones marked for killing. Fantastically ugly, absurd, and bizarre is the entirety of this practice– a sacrificial lamb chosen at random to be that year’s protector and savior from an unknown entity that may or may not actually work. On one hand, everyone is equal in that no one is excluded from potentially being chosen as the sacrifice, but on the other, every single attendee and their children are responsible for at least one death by their own hands every single year.

4: Shirley Jackson

When researching this topic, I was shocked at the lack of connection between Shirley Jackson and the Southern Gothic literary style. While she does not meet all of the criteria all of the time in her stories, this text and the characteristics it does display are classic Southern Gothic. My purpose in this paper was not only to substantiate Shirley Jackson not only as a true

contributor to the Southern Gothic genera, but that *The Lottery* is a paramount example of Southern Gothic without having been classified as such. Under a psychological microscope, she utilizes comfort, the innocent, and the profane to cause an unease so deep it could shift the perception of Shirley Jackson as a Southern Gothic contributor and author.

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