



A Reading of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

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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."¹ 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 chock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives."² 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."³ 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."⁴ 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."⁵ 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."⁶ 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 major, 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 appends 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 give 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, inarticulate 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.² 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.³

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 singing 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."⁴ 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 singling 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 stoning Tessie, the villagers treat her as a scapegoat onto which they can project and through which 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

1. Lenemaja Friedman, Shirley Jackson (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 63.
2. Friedman, p. 64.
3. Stanley Edgar Hyman, ed., *The Magic of Shirley Jackson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. viii.
4. Hyman, p. ix.
5. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *Understanding Fiction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959; 2nd ed.), p. 74; Helen E. Nebeker, "'The Lottery': Symbolic Tour de Force," *American Literature*, 46 (1974), p. 103. Barring book reviews, dissertations and fugitive references in surveys of American writing, the following criticism should also be mentioned: (1) Skyamal Bagchee, "Design of Darkness in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 9, iv, pp. 8-9; (2) Horst Brinkman, "Shirley Jackson, 'The Lottery' (1948)," in *Die Amerikanische Short Story der Gegenwart*, ed. Peter Freese (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1976), pp. 101-09; (3) John V. Hagopian, *Insight I. Analyses of American Literature* (Frankfurt: Hirschgraben, 1971; 4th ed.), pp. 128-32; (4) Robert B. Heilman, ed., *Modern Short Stories, A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), pp. 384-85; (5) Seymour Lainoff, "Jackson's 'The Lottery,'" *Journal of Modern Literature*, 7 (1979), pp. 543-44. This bibliography is no doubt not complete and has not been updated since 1985.
6. Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p. 291. Further page references will occur in the body of the paper.
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

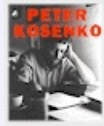
entire story is similarly exaggerated in order to highlight a theoretical framework which Jackson feels is necessary before we can even begin to understand the social world to which the story indirectly refers. Most allegory is similarly abstract.

9. Brinkman, p. 103; my translation.

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.

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