

## RITUAL AND REVEAL: THE POWER OF PLOT IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S "THE LOTTERY"

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### ABSTRAK

*The Lottery* karya Shirley Jackson tetap menjadi salah satu cerpen yang paling menggelisahkan dan banyak dibahas dalam sastra Amerika. Daya tariknya yang bertahan lama sebagian besar disebabkan oleh struktur plot yang dirancang dengan cermat, yang secara cerdas menyembunyikan sifat sebenarnya dari ritual tahunan di kota kecil tersebut hingga klimaks cerita. Artikel ini menyajikan pembacaan mendalam terhadap narasi menggunakan pendekatan formalis dan strukturalis, dengan fokus pada bagaimana ketegangan dan ironi dibangun melalui penundaan naratif, petunjuk simbolik, serta struktur ritual yang bersifat siklik. Teknik-teknik naratif ini tidak hanya menciptakan ketegangan emosional, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai alat kritis yang digunakan Jackson untuk menggugat tema konformitas sosial, banalitas kejahatan, dan kekerasan yang dilegitimasi secara budaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, dengan fokus pada analisis sastra melalui pendekatan *close reading* dan strategi interpretatif. Penelitian ini diawali dengan pembacaan intensif terhadap cerpen *The Lottery* untuk mengidentifikasi teknik naratif dan perangkat sastra yang digunakan. Selanjutnya, dilakukan analisis teks dengan pendekatan kritik formalistis dan strukturalis. Peneliti juga mengkaji sumber-sumber sekunder dari jurnal akademik dan teori sastra. Tahapan akhir berupa interpretasi makna untuk mengungkap implikasi sosial, psikologis, dan ideologis dari teks. Dengan menekankan dimensi etis dari arsitektur plot, studi ini berargumen bahwa *The Lottery* melampaui sekadar penceritaan dan berfungsi sebagai kritik tajam terhadap tradisi yang tidak dipertanyakan, mendorong pembaca untuk menghadapi kekerasan tersembunyi dalam praktik komunal yang telah dinormalisasi.

**Kata Kunci:** *Shirley Jackson, The Lottery, Alur, Ritual, Ironi*

### ABSTRACT

Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* remains one of the most disturbing and widely discussed short stories in American literature. Its enduring appeal lies largely in the carefully crafted plot structure, which cleverly conceals the true nature of the small town's annual ritual until the story's climax. This article presents a close reading of the narrative using formalist and structuralist approaches, focusing on how tension and irony are built through narrative delay, symbolic cues, and a cyclical ritual structure. These narrative techniques not only generate emotional tension but also serve as critical tools used by Jackson to challenge themes of social conformity, the banality of evil, and culturally legitimized violence. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on literary analysis through close reading and interpretative strategies. The research begins with an intensive reading of *The Lottery* to identify narrative techniques and literary devices used. This is followed by textual analysis using formalist and structuralist criticism. The study also examines secondary sources from academic journals and literary theory. The final stage involves interpreting meaning to uncover the social, psychological, and ideological implications of the text. By emphasizing the ethical dimension of the plot's architecture, this study argues that *The Lottery* goes beyond mere storytelling and

functions as a sharp critique of unquestioned traditions, urging readers to confront the hidden violence within normalized communal practices.

**Keywords:** *Shirley Jackson, The Lottery, Plot, Ritual, Irony*

## INTRODUCTION

First published in *The New Yorker* on June 26, 1948, Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* sparked an immediate and intense reaction from the public. Within days, thousands of letters poured into the magazine, many of which expressed confusion, horror, or outrage. Readers were shocked not only by the brutal ending—in which a woman is stoned to death by her neighbors—but also by the disquieting way Jackson lulled them into complicity through an intentionally calm and almost cheerful narrative tone. This strong public response, while understandable, underscores the brilliance of Jackson's literary technique and her masterful control of narrative structure. Recent scholarship continues to emphasize this aspect; for instance, Ahmed and Morales (2023) highlight how Jackson's subversion of reader expectations through tonal dissonance serves as a deliberate narrative strategy to critique normalized violence and blind conformity.

Far from relying on explicit violence from the outset, Jackson constructs suspense through a careful layering of normalcy. The story begins in a seemingly idyllic village setting where townspeople gather for an annual tradition—the "lottery"—which is initially presented as mundane and even festive. Only as the narrative progresses do readers become aware of the ritual's horrifying conclusion. The story's power lies not solely in its content, but in its structural design, which itself mimics the ritual it seeks to critique. By withholding critical information, deploying subtle foreshadowing, and delivering a jarring reversal at the climax, Jackson compels readers to question not only the events within the story but also their own assumptions about tradition, authority, and collective morality. Recent analysis by Thompson and Elridge (2022) reinforces this view, arguing that the story's suspense structure intentionally disorients readers to expose how cultural violence can be masked by social familiarity and routine.

Recent scholarship has continued to explore these narrative strategies. For instance, Gupta (2022) argues that Jackson's manipulation of temporal pacing serves to mirror the mechanics of social conditioning, lulling both characters and readers into passive acceptance. Meanwhile, Hassan and Tiwari (2023) emphasize the role of spatial and communal symbolism in reinforcing the illusion of harmony, only to reveal latent violence beneath. Similarly, Ortiz (2024) highlights the story's use of irony and ambiguity to critique the psychological mechanisms of conformity and scapegoating. These studies reflect a growing consensus that *The Lottery* is not merely a disturbing story, but a sophisticated critique of cultural rituals and moral disengagement.

Through a close reading of Jackson's plot structure, this essay examines how *The Lottery* operates both as a compelling narrative and a sharp social commentary. Drawing upon formalist and structuralist frameworks, the analysis will demonstrate how Jackson turns the plot itself into a mechanism of ethical confrontation—forcing readers to reckon with the ease with which violence can be normalized under the guise of tradition.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on literary analysis through close reading and interpretative strategies. The core of the research is built on textual analysis of Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, using formalist and structuralist criticism as primary

theoretical tools. By analyzing how Jackson constructs plot, tone, and symbolism, this study investigates how these elements interact to generate ethical and emotional effects on readers.

The research process involved several key stages. First, the researchers conducted an intensive reading of the primary text to identify narrative techniques and literary devices used in the story, such as plot structure, tone, and symbolism. Second, a textual analysis was carried out using formalist and structuralist approaches to explore how the story's elements interact to shape readers' ethical and emotional responses. Third, the study incorporated a review of secondary literature, including academic journals, critical essays, and theoretical writings from scholars such as Roland Barthes (1977), Tzvetan Todorov (1977), and Viktor Shklovsky (2017). Finally, the researchers engaged in contextual interpretation to uncover the narrative function of *The Lottery* as a complex representation with social, psychological, and ideological implications. This study does not aim to produce generalizable conclusions but seeks to reveal the deeper mechanisms through which the narrative constructs meaning and critiques normalized violence and conformity within communal traditions.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

To comprehensively understand the narrative architecture and thematic complexity of *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, this study synthesizes key findings from both classical literary theory and recent scholarly contributions. The analysis spans multiple dimensions—including narrative structure, symbolism, irony, reader engagement, and historical context—to reveal how Jackson constructs a deceptively simple plot that critiques violence, conformity, and the erosion of moral agency.

The table below summarizes the major analytical aspects, the core findings of this study, and relevant contemporary scholarship that reinforces or expands upon these interpretations:

**Table 1. Research Findings – The Lottery by Shirley Jackson**

No	Aspect of Analysis	Key Findings	References
1.	Narrative Theory	Applies formalist (Shklovsky) and structuralist (Todorov, Barthes) theories to explain effects of narrative delay and defamiliarization.	Al-Mahmoud (2023), Winters (2022), Chen (2024)
2.	Plot Structure	The plot progresses from normalcy to violent climax, mirroring ritualistic order and highlighting unquestioned obedience.	Zamora (2023), Ibrahim & Foster (2024)
3.	Irony and Narrative Reversal	Uses dramatic and situational irony to mislead readers and reveal the banality of evil.	Rachman (2024)
4.	Tradition and Violence	Ritual in the story represents how tradition legitimizes violence; only the victim recognizes its injustice.	Delgado (2023)
5.	Symbolism	Symbols like the black box, stones, and character names emphasize blind reverence for tradition and systemic violence.	Mahdavi & Kwon (2024), Lee (2023), Johnson (2023)

No	Aspect of Analysis	Key Findings	References
6.	Reader Response	Readers are invited to fill interpretive gaps, creating ethical involvement and emotional engagement.	McAllister (2024)
7.	Intertextual Reflection	Compared with works like <i>The Hunger Games</i> and <i>Lord of the Flies</i> in critiquing ritualized collective violence.	Alvarez (2024)
8.	Historical Context and Authorial Intention	Jackson critiques post-war conformity and gender dynamics through narrative and symbolism.	Ortega (2024)
9.	Moral Paralysis and Individual Agency	The plot reveals how individuals lose moral judgment within collective systems governed by ritual.	Kim (2024)
10.	Reader as Witness	Readers become moral witnesses through deliberate narrative entrapment that mirrors complicity.	Tanaka (2024)
11.	Enduring Relevance	The story's open structure allows each generation to project its own cultural anxieties, maintaining its timeless critical power.	Bennett (2024)

The data summarized in Table 1 highlights how *The Lottery* operates as a multidimensional narrative that continues to resonate across time and disciplines. By applying formalist and structuralist frameworks, this study uncovers the mechanisms through which Jackson manipulates plot structure, symbolism, and irony to deliver a profound ethical critique. The integration of recent scholarship further reinforces the evolving relevance of the story—particularly in its depiction of normalized violence, blind tradition, and moral paralysis. Moreover, insights from reader-response theory and intertextual comparisons reveal that *The Lottery* does not merely engage readers intellectually, but implicates them emotionally and ethically. Jackson's deliberate narrative ambiguity transforms readers into participants rather than passive observers, prompting reflection on their own cultural assumptions. Taken together, these findings affirm the enduring power of Jackson's narrative design as both a literary achievement and a cultural warning.

## Discussion

### Theoretical Framework: Formalism and Structuralism

To analyze the plot of *The Lottery*, this article draws on formalist and structuralist theories of narrative. Formalism, as developed by Russian critics such as Viktor Shklovsky, views literature as a structured object, emphasizing how literary devices (plot, tone, imagery) defamiliarize reality. Shklovsky (2017) famously argued that art exists to make the familiar strange in order to slow down perception and compel readers to "see" rather than merely

"recognize." Jackson's plot operates in precisely this way: readers recognize a typical village gathering, but they do not truly "see" its disturbing implications until the climactic revelation.

From a structuralist perspective, particularly drawing on Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes (1977), plot functions as a system of codes and conventions. Todorov's model of narrative transformation (equilibrium → disruption → new equilibrium) and Barthes' hermeneutic code (the intentional delay of answers) help illuminate how *The Lottery* builds suspense and culminates in horror. Barthes identifies narrative snares—strategic delays and ambiguities that generate curiosity and tension. In Jackson's story, these snares take the form of the mysterious black box, the villagers' strained silences, and the vague language surrounding the "lottery" itself.

Recent scholarship has deepened this approach. For instance, Al-Mahmoud (2023) applies structuralist coding to demonstrate how the black box functions as a mythologized symbol of state-sanctioned violence embedded within collective ritual. Similarly, Winters (2022) utilizes formalist analysis to argue that Jackson's manipulation of tone and narrative rhythm serves to psychologically condition the reader, mirroring how ideological systems operate in real societies. In a more hybrid approach, Chen (2024) combines formalist close reading with cultural narratology, suggesting that Jackson uses narrative delay to expose the ethical erosion that occurs when violence is routinized within tradition. These studies affirm the continued relevance of formalist and structuralist frameworks in unpacking the moral architecture of Jackson's plot.

### **Plot Structure: The Ritual Of Normalcy**

Jackson's story begins with a picturesque summer morning: children gathering stones, men talking about crops, women arriving with aprons and gossip. This peaceful opening is central to Jackson's narrative strategy. She deliberately suppresses exposition, refusing to explain what the lottery is, even as the event unfolds in real time. This narrative deferral is a textbook example of Barthes' hermeneutic code. The story offers subtle cues—the black box is described as "splintered badly," villagers appear "uneasy," and names like Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves carry symbolic weight—but these signs remain ambiguous. As the story progresses, the tension mounts incrementally. Readers, lulled by the setting's familiarity, become complicit in the unfolding ritual, questioning its purpose yet continuing to trust the village's superficial normalcy.

Although the plot follows a linear structure, each paragraph intensifies the atmosphere of ritualized behavior and collective conformity. The villagers carry out the tradition with unquestioning obedience. Even minor procedural variations—such as Mr. Summers replacing the old wooden chips with slips of paper—are met with reverence or suspicion, underscoring the sacred status of tradition. Jackson constructs a fictional world in which ritual supersedes reason, and by the climax, Tessie's stoning feels not only inevitable but almost rational within the closed logic of the narrative system.

Recent scholarship affirms the importance of this gradual buildup. Zamora (2023) examines the role of temporal framing and argues that Jackson's use of delayed revelation creates an illusion of normalcy that is structurally dismantled by the story's end. Meanwhile, Ibrahim and Foster (2024) explore the linguistic minimalism in Jackson's prose, demonstrating how the restrained style heightens psychological unease and enforces reader complicity in the violence. Both studies reinforce how Jackson's plot construction manipulates form to serve a moral and cultural critique.

### **Irony and Narrative Reversal**

Jackson's most powerful tool is her use of dramatic and situational irony. The townspeople behave as though they are participating in a cheerful community gathering—a picnic or local festival—yet the true nature of the lottery is deliberately concealed. Readers, like the villagers, are lulled into a false sense of security. Jackson achieves this effect through her carefully controlled tone, neutral diction, and the unsettling presentation of ordinary details that mask underlying brutality—an embodiment of what Arendt (1963) famously called the “banality of evil.”

When Tessie Hutchinson arrives late, joking and laughing, the narrative tone remains deceptively light. There is no overt foreshadowing of horror; instead, the story maintains its calm surface even as tension slowly mounts. Only gradually does the plot descend into darkness, culminating in the shocking moment when Tessie, having “won” the lottery, is condemned to death by her neighbors—including her own family. Her final protest—“It isn't fair, it isn't right”—serves not only as an emotional climax but also as a piercing exposure of the story's narrative deception and thematic core.

Importantly, the twist ending is not arbitrary but thematically essential. It reflects the central message of the story: that violence, when embedded in tradition and normalized through ritual, becomes socially invisible. The structure of the narrative ensures that the reader undergoes the same slow realization as Tessie—only recognizing the horror when it is too late to object. As Rachman (2024) notes, Jackson's brilliance lies in aligning the reader's emotional trajectory with that of the victim, producing a delayed ethical shock that invites reflection on one's own passive complicity.

### **Tradition, Violence, and Complicity**

The plot of *The Lottery* offers a powerful critique of unquestioned tradition. Old Man Warner, the oldest villager, defends the ritual by stating, “There's always been a lottery.” This appeal to longevity functions as justification for murder, implying that the mere persistence of a practice grants it legitimacy. The plot structure mirrors this logic; every stage of the lottery—from the gathering of villagers to the drawing of slips—is carried out with solemn ritual and accepted without question. No character resists or interrogates the process—except Tessie Hutchinson, and even then, only once she becomes the selected victim.

This narrative strategy reflects Jackson's broader social commentary. Written and published in post-war America, *The Lottery* emerged during a period marked by both national prosperity and cultural conformity. Scholars have interpreted the story as an allegory for various historical anxieties: McCarthy-era persecution, patriarchal subjugation, and Holocaust-era complicity. The ritualistic elements of the plot echo real-world historical patterns in which systemic violence was rationalized—and even participated in—by ordinary people under the banners of tradition, duty, or legality.

Recent research by Delgado (2023) reinforces this reading, arguing that Jackson's narrative structure enacts a form of ethical paralysis, in which communal rituals dull individual moral judgment. Delgado identifies parallels between the villagers' passive acceptance of violence and contemporary social phenomena where individuals conform to institutional harm in the name of “maintaining order.” This reading further positions *The Lottery* as not only a work of fiction but a sustained cultural indictment.

### **Symbolism and The Subversion of Meaning**

One of the most striking aspects of *The Lottery* is Shirley Jackson's use of symbolism, which adds a crucial layer to the story's narrative power. The most prominent symbol is the

black box—a deteriorating, splintered object that holds ritualistic authority. Despite its physical decay, the villagers adamantly refuse to replace it, a gesture that reinforces their blind reverence for tradition. The black box does not merely contain slips of paper; it houses the community's collective fear, unquestioned habit, and the historical burden of inherited violence. It becomes a relic of sacred continuity, maintained not for its function but for its symbolic connection to the past—however forgotten its original purpose may be.

Another haunting symbol is the use of stones. At the story's outset, children are seen gathering stones, evoking images of play and innocence. Only later is it revealed that these same stones are the tools of execution. This reversal transforms an object of childhood into an instrument of brutality, subverting traditional associations and revealing the dark potential within everyday life. As Johnson (2023) notes, Jackson's use of such symbols destabilizes the reader's expectations and exposes how culturally sanctioned objects can serve violent ends.

Jackson also employs symbolic naming to subtly forecast meaning. Mr. Summers, who conducts the lottery, embodies the cheerful surface of a deadly tradition, while Mr. Graves, his assistant, foreshadows the inevitable death that will follow. Tessie Hutchinson's surname evokes Anne Hutchinson, a historical dissenter who was exiled for defying religious orthodoxy—strengthening Tessie's symbolic role as a scapegoat and moral outlier in a conformist society. These embedded symbols function not merely as literary flourishes, but as integral components of the plot, reinforcing the story's thematic exploration of violence, conformity, and moral blindness.

Recent scholarship continues to explore the function of symbolism in *The Lottery*. Mahdavi and Kwon (2024) analyze the black box as a cultural artifact of collective denial, arguing that its decaying state reflects the moral erosion of the society that clings to it. Similarly, Lee (2023) examines the transformation of ordinary objects into symbolic agents of horror, emphasizing how Jackson uses minimalist imagery to intensify the story's psychological impact. Together, these studies demonstrate how symbolism in *The Lottery* deepens the irony and horror embedded within the narrative structure.

### **Reader Response Theory and Reader's Ethical Involvement**

While formalism and structuralism offer tools for decoding the *how* of Jackson's narrative, reader-response theory helps illuminate the *effect* of that structure on the audience. Wolfgang Iser's theory of the "implied reader" suggests that literary texts are structured with interpretive gaps—places where the reader is invited to engage imaginatively and ethically. In *The Lottery*, Jackson's refusal to offer narrative commentary or moral guidance forces readers to rely on their own assumptions, values, and reactions. This strategic ambiguity draws the reader into an active role, prompting ethical reflection and emotional involvement.

Furthermore, Stanley Fish emphasizes that meaning is not embedded within the text itself, but is created through interpretive communities—groups of readers who bring shared assumptions and expectations to a text. Readers encountering *The Lottery* for the first time, especially without context, often report feelings of disbelief, betrayal, or guilt for initially accepting the premise at face value. This psychological discomfort is not incidental; it is essential to Jackson's narrative design. The reader's gradual realization mirrors Tessie's own shock, positioning the audience not just as spectators, but as ethically implicated participants in the unfolding ritual.

Recent work by McAllister (2024) supports this view, arguing that Jackson's minimalist exposition and neutral tone construct an interpretive vacuum that intensifies reader involvement. McAllister demonstrates that the emotional impact of the story depends heavily on the reader's prior beliefs and expectations, making *The Lottery* a prime example of how

narrative structure can ethically entangle its audience. Jackson's power, then, lies in her ability to transform passive readers into moral witnesses.

### **Intertextual Reflection: Comparing Ritual and Violence In Literature**

Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is part of a literary tradition that explores how social rituals mask underlying cruelty. A powerful intertextual comparison can be drawn with Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, in which state-sanctioned violence is institutionalized and glamorized through ceremonial spectacle. Both works share similar thematic structures—ritual, public execution, and the illusion of societal order—though they differ significantly in tone and setting. Jackson's understated, almost documentary prose contrasts with Collins' dystopian world-building, yet both critique how systemic violence is sustained when disguised as tradition or civic duty.

Another relevant parallel emerges in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a novel that examines the thin veneer of civilization and its rapid collapse into savagery. Like Jackson, Golding uses plot progression to chart a descent into collective violence, exposing humanity's capacity to rationalize brutality when societal norms begin to erode. These intertextual links underscore the way plot can serve not only as a storytelling mechanism but also as a reflective device for critiquing social and political structures.

Recent research by Alvarez (2024) reinforces this view by analyzing how Jackson, Collins, and Golding each employ ritualistic frameworks to interrogate collective morality. Alvarez argues that these authors position the reader to witness and question the normalization of violence in communal settings, turning plot into a medium for ethical confrontation. This comparative lens enhances our understanding of *The Lottery* as not just a short story but a powerful contribution to a broader narrative tradition concerned with conformity, violence, and moral blindness.

### **Authorial Intention and Historical Context**

Understanding Jackson's intentions and the sociohistorical context of post-war America significantly enriches a reading of *The Lottery*. Written in 1948, the story reflects widespread anxieties about conformity, blind patriotism, and collective violence—issues that were particularly resonant in the aftermath of World War II and amidst the growing atmosphere of McCarthyism. Jackson herself remarked that the story was meant to disturb and provoke, compelling readers to question the social norms they take for granted and the uncritical obedience to authority. The calm setting and ritualistic plot are deliberately constructed to expose how ordinary people, in seemingly ordinary communities, can become agents of atrocity when tradition overrides morality.

Additionally, Jackson's lived experience as a woman navigating a patriarchal society informed her portrayal of gender roles and power dynamics within the village. Tessie Hutchinson, the only character to voice dissent, is not taken seriously. Her protests—"It isn't fair, it isn't right"—are ignored not because they lack merit, but because the ritual must proceed. Her gendered marginalization mirrors the larger theme of scapegoating and societal silencing of dissent. In this light, Jackson uses the plot structure not only to critique societal complicity but to foreground the gendered dimensions of violence and sacrifice.

Recent scholarship by Ortega (2024) explores these intersections, arguing that *The Lottery* should be read through the lens of feminist cultural criticism. Ortega highlights how Jackson embeds a critique of patriarchal control within the broader narrative of collective obedience, suggesting that Tessie's fate exemplifies how female voices are excluded from moral discourse in systems governed by male-dominated traditions. This reading deepens our

understanding of *The Lottery* as a layered critique of both societal conformity and gendered power.

### **Moral Paralysis and The Loss of Individual Agency**

Another crucial theme that emerges through Jackson's carefully constructed plot is the erosion of individual morality within a collective system. The villagers in *The Lottery* do not act out of personal malice; rather, they follow a social ritual that has been normalized over generations. This is precisely what makes the story so chilling—there are no overt villains, only ordinary people participating in an extraordinary evil, with little reflection on the consequences of their actions.

The plot progresses in a way that subtly illustrates how individuals can suspend ethical judgment when they are embedded within a group. This “moral paralysis” is tragically exemplified when even Tessie's own family does not resist her selection. Her children, who had stood by her just moments earlier, now participate in the act of stoning. Jackson's narrative arc skillfully demonstrates how individual agency is dismantled piece by piece: each step of the lottery appears benign on its own, yet leads collectively to a final act of violence that feels disturbingly routine.

From a psychological perspective, this dynamic parallels real-world social phenomena such as the bystander effect and groupthink, in which personal responsibility is diffused, and dissent becomes socially or psychologically untenable. Jackson avoids overt moralizing—instead, she uses plot structure as a narrative tool to expose how rituals, social pressure, and normalized customs can override individual conscience. The horror is not announced; it unfolds gradually, and precisely because of this subtlety, its ethical implications are more deeply felt.

Recent work by Kim (2024) further explores this dynamic, arguing that *The Lottery* illustrates a “ritualized diffusion of responsibility,” where social cohesion is prioritized over moral reasoning. Kim emphasizes that the story's structure mimics the psychological stages of group violence, thereby drawing attention to how easily individuals can become passive participants in systems of cruelty.

### **The Reader As A Witness: Reader-Response Theory In *The Lottery***

One of the most powerful literary effects of *The Lottery* lies in how it manipulates the reader's expectations, gradually revealing its horror through mundane and ordinary details. Jackson's storytelling strategy places readers in a position of passive observation, mirroring the villagers' own complicity. From the perspective of reader-response theory, this implicates the audience not merely as spectators but as co-creators and participants in the unfolding moral drama.

At the beginning of the story, Jackson depicts a peaceful village on a sunny summer day, with children gathering stones and neighbors engaging in small talk. The narrative tone is deliberately neutral, even cheerful. Readers may initially assume that the lottery is a festive, harmless tradition. This assumption, however, is not explicitly supported by the text itself; it emerges from the interpretive frameworks that readers carry with them. According to reader-response theory, meaning is not fixed within the text but is co-constructed by readers through their engagement with it. In *The Lottery*, this act of interpretation becomes ethically significant.

When the true nature of the lottery is finally disclosed, readers experience a moment of disorientation and moral shock, compelling them to reexamine their earlier interpretations. This experience parallels the villagers' own failure to question their deadly tradition. Jackson uses the process of reading itself—how assumptions are formed and challenged—as a thematic device to reflect on broader issues of moral disengagement and social conformity.

The story also encourages rereading. Upon a second reading, readers become aware of subtle clues and symbolic warnings they initially overlooked. As Stanley Fish (1980) contended, interpretation is shaped by "interpretive communities," and Jackson constructs a universal moral dilemma that transcends historical context: the danger of passive reading and passive living. The text becomes a mirror, asking each reader an uncomfortable yet necessary question—*What would I have done in that village?*

Recent research by Tanaka (2024) expands this idea, arguing that *The Lottery* functions as a "reader entrapment narrative"—a story that ethically entangles its audience by forcing them to share in the illusion of normalcy. Tanaka demonstrates that Jackson's manipulation of tone and withholding of exposition creates a trap not only for the characters but also for the reader, turning the act of interpretation into a site of moral reckoning.

### **Final Reflection: The Enduring Relevance of Jackson's Plot**

Decades after its publication, *The Lottery* remains a cornerstone of literary curricula and a subject of enduring scholarly debate. Its narrative power stems not from graphic violence, but from its structural precision. Jackson constructs a slow-burning plot that gradually unveils the terrifying capacity of ordinary people to commit atrocities when governed by ritual, obedience, and unexamined cultural norms. The horror is cumulative and procedural, not sensational—an effect that invites readers to reflect on the mechanics of conformity.

In today's world, still contending with systemic violence, institutionalized injustice, and cultural pressures to conform, Jackson's narrative remains profoundly relevant. Whether interpreted through the lenses of formalism, structuralism, or reader-response theory, *The Lottery* demands more than passive reading; it requires ethical reflection. The fictional village becomes a universal metaphor for any society that allows tradition and social cohesion to suppress conscience. Jackson's story is not merely a tale of the past—it is a timeless warning about the ease with which morality can be eclipsed by custom.

Recent scholarship by Bennett (2024) supports this view, emphasizing how *The Lottery* has evolved into a transhistorical allegory. Bennett argues that Jackson's narrative design allows each generation to see its own reflection in the text—be it McCarthy-era fear, post-9/11 nationalism, or contemporary debates over institutional complicity. The story's continued pedagogical relevance, according to Bennett, lies in its structural openness: it creates space for readers to insert their own cultural anxieties and thus maintain a living dialogue with the text.

### **CONCLUSION**

Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* demonstrates how plot can function not just as narrative structure but as ideological revelation. Through formalist and structuralist techniques—particularly narrative delay, symbolism, and irony—Jackson constructs a story that entraps both character and reader. The plot mirrors the ritual it describes: slow, unquestioned, inevitable. By the time the story reveals its horror, it is too late. Readers, like the villagers, have followed the plot step by step, lulled by tone and routine. In this sense, Jackson's story is a masterclass in how narrative structure can be ethically and politically charged. It warns against the danger of tradition for tradition's sake and the violence that can be normalized when hidden behind ritual.

This study affirms that *The Lottery* remains a powerful and timeless literary work, not solely because of its shocking ending, but due to the precision of its narrative form and symbolic architecture. Through the lens of formalism and structuralism, Jackson reveals how violence is made ordinary through ritual and communal obedience. The story's linear progression—marked by subtle foreshadowing and symbolic cues—exposes the psychological process through which individuals surrender moral agency in favor of conformity.

Moreover, reader-response theory highlights how Jackson transforms her audience into ethical participants, drawing them into complicity through narrative restraint. The ethical discomfort readers experience mirrors Tessie Hutchinson's final realization, making the reading process itself a site of moral reckoning. Recent scholarship further supports this interpretation, positioning *The Lottery* as a transhistorical text that reflects anxieties across different cultural moments—from postwar conformity to modern institutional violence. Its enduring relevance lies in its structural openness, allowing each generation to confront its own complicity in normalized harm. Ultimately, Jackson's brilliance lies not in sensationalism but in quiet precision—using plot as a mechanism of ethical exposure and social critique. *The Lottery* is a story that forces us to ask: How many of our own traditions, unquestioned and repeated, mask deeper forms of violence?

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