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Thesis: In the short story—"The Lottery"—the cheerfulness of the summer day, the lottery's details and rituals, and the abstruseness of the villagers illustrate Shirley Jackson's savvy use of three literary elements: irony, symbolism, and theme.

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Literary Analysis

### “The Lottery” Abyss

First published in 1948, “The Lottery” written by Shirley Jackson is full of controversy. The way in which she presents the brutality of human nature, pointless traditions, and sadistic morals and values of the human race still offends readers today. The story begins in a quaint little town of about 300 people, and it persuades the reader to believe the people in the town are excited and happy to be participating in the town’s yearly lottery drawing. However, the tone of the story soon changes to that of tension, nervousness, trepidation, and rebellion which leaves the reader eagerly waiting to learn what is about to take place next. In the short story—“The Lottery”—the cheerfulness of the summer day, the lottery's details and rituals, and the abstruseness of the villagers illustrate Shirley Jackson's savvy use of three literary elements: irony, symbolism, and theme.

When one first starts reading “The Lottery,” he/she experiences happiness and excitement at the prospect of one person of the town becoming the lucky lottery winner. Even though the lottery in this town is about the “luck of the draw,” so to speak, luck is not what is bestowed upon the winner. “‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (qtd. in Wagner-Martin, par. 5). Ironically, instead of winning a large sum of money or other prize as Jackson wants the reader to believe is about to happen, the winner is stoned to death instead. Furthermore, Jackson skillfully chooses her opening statement to create an easy-

going and calm atmosphere for the reader. “The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green” (Jackson, par. 1). This gives the reader a sense that they are about to read a story of a cheerful and happy town full of delight and levity. The cheerful summer day conceals the abstruse undertones hiding within the story. “The picniclike [sic] atmosphere betrays the serious consequence of the lottery . . . Life brings death, and death recycles life” (Griffin, par. 2). Paradoxically, the day turns out to be a sadistic day in the end—Tessie is sacrificed—for the benefit of the community.

Jackson’s use of symbolism strengthens the significance of the parable in proving that the dupe enigma of the world at large is out of focus. The lottery symbolizes the idea and the manner in which people in society today are used as dupes. Tessie Hutchinson is the sacrificial dupe in this story. Old Man Warner asserts, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (Jackson, par. 16) which implies that the town holds the annual lottery as a sacrificial offering to ensure a better crop of corn. Tessie’s life is offered up for the profit of the village, so to speak. The black box is another use of symbolism by Jackson. The box is black to symbolize evil and gloom which insinuates death, although the reader does not completely understand this until the end of the story. Jackson’s choice of using black for the box comports with the theme of the parable and preponderates as yet another element adumbrating the pending death of the unfortunate winner of the lottery. “No one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box,” Jackson adds, gently betraying the villagers’ cruel adherence to the “old ways” (“Explanation,” par. 2). The handed-down, weathered, old box that the village people keep procrastinating on changing, symbolizes the old and haggard ritual. The box is antediluvian and dilapidated as is the ritual of the lottery.

Jackson effectively uses theme in this story to implore the reader, as well. Society often follows tradition aimlessly, meaning that they have no clue what the original meaning of the tradition is. Christmas, for example, is about the birth of Jesus Christ. However, over the years adults have given children the wrong idea about Christmas—it is more about the presents and how much money can be spent—rather than teaching them the true meaning behind Christmas. For this reason, children today have lost sight of the original and spiritual meaning behind the annual tradition of Christmas. People are naturally followers and are unable to see that certain aspects of some traditions should not always be followed. Children are maimed by tainted candy every year in October, yet the tradition of Halloween continues. Affiliated with every major holiday and weekends, alcohol destroys people every day. However, people continue to devour it. “The Lottery” signifies the practice of continuing to follow a tradition, even though it may be catastrophic, and the meaning is not totally understood. “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” (Schaub, par. 9). Jackson uses the story to implore the reader to question why people choose to continue following traditions that do not make any logical sense. Jackson also uses this story to explore the brutality of human nature. Peer pressure is a powerful thing in society. For an American, it is easier to go with the flow instead of challenging something that he/she knows is morally wrong. One is afraid of being dubbed the outcast in his/her circle of friends. In “The Lottery” the villagers are willing to follow the savage tradition because that is what the group feels is the right thing to do. Tessie is stoned to death just because that is what the town has done for the last 77 years. “Her case is universal: man’s awareness of absurd habits of mind always comes too late, [in] that [it] is when victimised and no longer in a position to change things” (Schaub, par. 10). The brutal reality in society—is that people will often follow

others—so they can remain part of an elite group without regard to other's feelings or well-being. "The Lottery" is an overstated reverie of society today.

This is a horrific story about many aspects of real life. The story leaves one wondering how seemingly good-natured people can so easily and savagely turn on their friends, neighbors, and family without giving it a second thought. This goes on every day in the real world, but people tend to ignore it for the sake of remaining in the "in crowd." With this story, one is left to examine the reasons why people do the horrible things they do for no apparent reason. In the end, the reader is compelled to come up with his/her own answers to all the questions posed in this piece. Although the story may be filled with controversy, Jackson has effectively succeeded in getting her point across to the reader. Utilizing the "shock" factor, she expects the reader to think outside the box. Thinking outside the box forces the reader to question some of the traditions and beliefs prevalent in society today.

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