

## **'LET HIM WHO IS WITHOUT TRADITION...': SCHEMA DISRUPTION AND ACTIVE READING IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S 'THE LOTTERY' AS A REREADING OF JOHN 8:1-11**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Shirley Jackson's short story *The Lottery* (1948) portrays a chilling piece of short fiction in American literature. It depicts an apparent idyllic small town preparing for an annual traditional event, but this appearance of ordinary life is carefully broken to reveal a brutal ritual of collective violence. This paper analyses the narrative texture and stylistic choices of *The Lottery* as a contemporary, secular rereading of the biblical account of the woman caught in adultery, in John 8:1-11. In the biblical story, the Pharisees, acting upon the Mosaic Law, prepare to stone a woman who had committed adultery, but they are dispersed by Jesus, who challenges them by subverting the logic of their accusation; Jackson's story presents an inversion where a community, without any moral intervention, proceeds with a traditional lottery that involves stoning the chosen individual. Using a stylistic approach, this paper investigates how Jackson's narrative prompts a reading experience that forces a confrontation with the dangers of moral passivity and blind tradition. The central argument is that the story's thematic core derives from a systematic process of schema disruption, where the reader's initial understanding of the story's world is deliberately built up only to be disrupted. This process is intensified by textual gaps, which compel the reader to actively participate in constructing the meaning of the story. To explore these textual aspects, the analysis is grounded in two complementary approaches: schema theory and gap theory. Schema theory, a concept from Psychology, posits we make sense of new information by referencing pre-existing mental schemata, which are 'packs of knowledge' (Whitt, 2024) about the world, textual conventions, and language; According to this theory, 'new experiences and information are processed in the mind by contrasting their deviations to background memory' (Noletto, 2024, p. 17). Adapted to literary analysis by theorists such as Cook (1994), it states that literary texts can engage with the reader's cognitive frameworks, or schemata, in three primary modes. Schema reinforcing, that is an accretive process that strengthens the reader's pre-existing mental schemata. In contrast, schema preserving occurs when new information is introduced but does not alter previous schemata. The most crucial of these interactions for literary analysis is schema disruption, in which the narrative actively challenges, deconstructs, or compels a radical reevaluation of the reader's established schemata. Complementing this is Iser's (1980) theory of textual gaps (*Leerstellen*), which posits that a literary text carries gaps that can be filled in the act of reading. These gaps can manifest as ambiguities, shifts in perspective, breaks in the expected sequence of events or other elements. In the short story *The Lottery*, Jackson (2005) employs an initial reinforcement of a familiar schema, followed by its systematic disruption. Initially, the narrator dedicates significant textual space to building a schema of a peaceful, rural American town, using positive sensory information:

‘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, 2005, p. 217). This schema is solidified by descriptions of mundane activities, leading the reader into a state of comfort and peacefulness. However, the disruption subtly begins with a significant narrative gap: the children collecting stones and making a *great pile* of them. This dissonance intensifies with the introduction of the black box, a *splintered* and *faded* artefact that cannot be replaced because it represents the community’s ancient tradition. Similarly, the biblical account in John 8:1-11 recounts a story in which the authorities present to Jesus a woman accused of adultery, invoking Mosaic law as justification. In this confrontation, Jesus challenges their moral tradition by declaring ‘Has any one of you not sinned? Then you be the first to throw a stone at her’ (New International Reader’s Version, 2014, Jn. 8:7). Both narratives are notably centred on the theme of communal violence justified by entrenched tradition. Moreover, in both scenarios, an individual is selected to face collective judgment, and the act of stoning itself is performed as a punishment. The results of this analysis demonstrate that this narrative structure stands in contrast to its biblical parallel in John 8, where the disruption comes from Jesus, whose moral challenge subverts a violent tradition and leads to a merciful outcome. Jackson (2005) subverts this expectation by beginning with a schema of peace only to reveal that the tradition itself is the source of violence. By reading *The Lottery* as an inversion of the John 8 account, its thematic core becomes even clearer. Whereas the biblical account portrays tradition being challenged by mercy, *The Lottery* depicts a community ruled by absolute tradition, where mercy is absent.

**Keywords:** Schema Theory, Gap Theory, The Lottery, Shirley Jackson, Biblical Rereading.

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