

## **SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED DEATH IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S THE LOTTERY**

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### **Abstract**

Death as a literary theme has long served as a reflection on life, existence, and cultural values. This study investigates how social traditions legitimize inherited violence in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, arguing that the story represents death not as a natural or inevitable occurrence, but as a culturally sanctioned and ideologically constructed event. Employing a qualitative content analysis grounded in structuralist and deconstructive theory, the research examines how meaning is produced through recurring symbols—the black box, stones, and ritual—revealing the mechanisms by which violence becomes normalized within communal structures. By integrating structuralist attention to narrative systems with deconstruction's critique of fixed meaning, this study contributes to literary scholarship by demonstrating how Jackson's story functions as a critique of social complicity and ritualized violence. Theoretically, the paper advances discussions on the intersection of ideology, tradition, and power in literary representations of death, offering insights into how fiction can expose the constructed nature of social norms and the ethical consequences of collective obedience.

**Keywords:** *death, tradition, symbolism, structuralism, deconstruction*

### **Introduction**

Death is often perceived as something terrible and frightening. It is the other side of life that is full of mystery because it is related to the transition to another dimension that cannot be explained empirically. Like life, death is a necessity, an inevitable phase that every living being will experience. However, the fear of death often stems not from death itself, but from an individual's unpreparedness to face it. This unpreparedness often stems from the unwillingness to let go of all that is worldly - possessions, relationships, ambitions, even the physical body that has been the medium of existence in the world.

According to Becker (1973) in his book *The Denial of Death*, humans throughout history have been looking for ways to avoid the realisation of death. He mentions that most human activities are a form of "hero project" - an attempt to solidify existence in order to stay alive in collective memory, as a way to fight mortality. This shows that

death is not only a biological reality, but also an existential and cultural reality that shapes the way humans think and express themselves.

Death, which is considered mysterious and frightening, is often a dominant theme in literary works. The theme of death and dying in literature is not only interesting, but also functional. It serves as a medium for reflection on mortality, existential dread, and the search for the meaning of life. Through literature, the concept of death, which is abstract and enigmatic, is transformed into a narrative that can be reached, interpreted, and even accepted by readers. In this case, literature acts as a symbolic language of death, as said by Walter Benjamin, which is able to convey truths that are not expressed through literal language.

It is not surprising that literary works often make death the centre of the narrative, because death implies the deepest conflicts in human beings. Stories about death present not only the final event, but also the journey towards that end-full of philosophical, spiritual, and even political questions. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, for example, death becomes the turning point of the protagonist's realisation of the life he has lived with social illusions. Death forces Ivan to reflect on his empty life, from which comes true spiritual understanding.

In different traditions, death is also depicted with various meanings and functions. Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, for example, presents death not as an individual destiny, but as a collective ritual institutionalised by society for the sake of collective survival. In the story, death does not come as a result of illness or old age, but through an absurd drawing process, in order to maintain the fertility of the land and crops. In this case, death becomes part of the social structure and ideology of tradition. As Roland Barthes said, "death is not only a biological ending, but also a cultural signifier," meaning that how death is perceived and represented is largely determined by the cultural context of society.

While previous analyses of *The Lottery* have focused on themes of conformity, tradition, scapegoating, and social cruelty, fewer studies have investigated how death is ideologically constructed and legitimized through symbolic and narrative structures in the text. Much of the critical discourse tends to treat the act of violence as a moral or psychological issue, rather than analyzing the formal and semiotic mechanisms through which death is made culturally acceptable. This study addresses that gap by applying structuralism and deconstruction to uncover how Jackson's story normalizes ritualized violence and embeds it within the fabric of community identity and tradition.

Furthermore, the depiction of death in literature often follows a certain formula that reflects the mindset and value system of the society. The concept, pattern, and function of death in a work can be repeated or modified in other works. This shows that although death is universal, the way humans understand and depict it in literature is highly contextualised. According to Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, narrative structures in literature often form archetypes that can be recognised across time and cultures, including the archetypes of death as sacrifice, transcendence, or moral punishment.

Thus, the topic of death and dying in literary works is not only an atmosphere of melancholy or horror, but also a tool to convey philosophical, spiritual, and social ideas. Literature has the power to represent death in its many faces-as mystery, tragedy, liberation, even as a collective imperative that is accepted without question.

It is this power that makes the theme of death a powerful magnet in the world of literature, as it encapsulates and evokes various dimensions of human existence. This study aims to examine how death is represented in *The Lottery* as a socially constructed and ideologically legitimized act. Using structuralism and deconstruction as analytical frameworks, this research investigates how symbols and narrative structures contribute to the normalization of ritualized violence in the name of tradition.

### **Research Methods**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a content analysis method to examine the concept of death in the short story *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the symbolic, structural and cultural meanings contained in literary texts. The analysis aims to interpret the literary text as a representation of social and cultural constructions of death, as well as to reveal the ideological and moral values hidden behind the narrative.

The object of study in this research is the text of the short story *The Lottery* written by Shirley Jackson and first published in 1948. This text was chosen because it explicitly presents death as a result of collective traditional practices legitimised by society. The focus of the analysis is on the representation of death, the use of symbols in rituals, and how tradition is used as a tool to perpetuate socially legalised violence.

Data collection was conducted through close reading of the text of *The Lottery*, paying attention to narrative elements such as characters, dialogue, setting, and symbolism. In addition, the researcher also examined important quotations in the text that are directly related to the themes of death, tradition, and collective morality. Each data found was then categorised into themes such as symbols of death, ritualisation of violence, and resistance to tradition.

In analysing the data, this research uses the theories of structuralism and deconstruction. Structuralism theory is used to identify patterns and narrative structures that shape social meanings in the story, such as the binary opposition between life and death, individual and society, and tradition and modernity. Meanwhile, the deconstruction approach is used to uncover contradictions in the value system displayed in the story, especially regarding the meaning of tradition and justice. This analysis aims to show that the meaning of death in *The Lottery* is not something fixed and universal, but culturally and ideologically constructed.

The validity of the data in this study is maintained through triangulation of theory and interpretation. The researcher compared the results of the analysis with literary and cultural theories from figures such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and René Girard, as well as with relevant previous studies. Thus, the analysis in this study is not only subjective, but also rests on a strong theoretical framework and can be academically accounted for.

### **The Social Construction of Death in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery***

Death is an inevitable certainty for every human being. As an existential reality, it cannot be evaded, delayed indefinitely, or bargained with. Yet Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* (1948) presents a disturbing reimagining of death—not as a natural, biological event but as a carefully structured societal decision, rooted in ritual and tradition. In this short story, death becomes a collective cultural practice, an annual sacrifice

disguised as civic duty. What makes it particularly horrifying is that the death is not caused by fate or divine will, but by social consensus and inherited ritualistic belief, where the victim is chosen by chance, then killed by their own community.

The story's central irony is that a "lottery"—typically associated with luck, wealth, or reward—results instead in a public stoning. This inversion of expectations signals a deconstruction of death as a passive occurrence; instead, Jackson presents death as an outcome manufactured by social mechanisms. As Bennett and Royle (2004:165) point out, literature does not merely present moral goodness or beauty but also confronts us with cruelty and violence, thereby reflecting the darker potentials of human behaviour. Jackson's work exemplifies this through the ritualistic execution of Tessie Hutchinson, which serves as both a narrative device and a cultural critique.

### **Death as a Cultural Ritual**

The concept of death in *The Lottery* is deeply entangled with culture and tradition. Clifford Geertz defines culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973: 89). Jackson's fictional village adheres to an inherited practice, the annual lottery, as a form of symbolic communication, signalling their allegiance to the past, their fear of change, and their belief in sacrificial causality.

Old Man Warner, the oldest member of the village, articulates this connection clearly when he defends the lottery as essential to agricultural prosperity: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." His view reflects a mythical causality, in which the offering of a human life ensures a fertile harvest. This links to Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion that myths function to resolve contradictions, particularly between the sacred and the profane (1963: 229). The contradiction between communal murder and moral righteousness is neutralized by the belief that the ritual ensures survival. In this logic, death is not personal but utilitarian: the community kills to save itself.

Moreover, the villagers' reluctance to question the lottery aligns with Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses. Althusser suggests that ideology operates through institutions like religion, education, and tradition, conditioning individuals to accept their social roles and values (1971). The Lottery operates as such an apparatus, masking violence as tradition, normalizing sacrifice as necessity.

In most belief systems, death is interpreted either as a natural process or as part of divine providence. However, Jackson subverts this framework by presenting death as the outcome of a systematic and arbitrary mechanism. The villagers draw slips of paper from a worn, black wooden box, an object treated with near-religious reverence despite its dilapidated state. The use of this object reflects what Jacques Derrida calls "archive fever", an obsessive clinging to tradition regardless of its rationality or morality (1995). The villagers preserve the black box as a sacred artifact, even though they no longer remember the original purpose or meaning behind its use. In this way, death becomes a ritualized performance, devoid of introspection or ethical scrutiny.

The ritual culminates with Tessie Hutchinson's desperate protest: "It isn't fair, it isn't right!" (Jackson, 1948). This brief resistance is significant; it marks the only moment when the machinery of the tradition is questioned. Yet even her own family does not come to her aid. Her husband, Bill Hutchinson, coldly tells her to "shut up," demonstrating the internalization of collective ideology over individual morality. The

violence is not enforced by tyrants or the state but by the community itself, fulfilling what Hannah Arendt described as the “banality of evil”, the capacity for ordinary people to commit atrocities under the guise of social conformity (Arendt, 1963).

### **Symbolism and Death Rituals in The Lottery**

The story's most powerful symbols, the black box, the slips of paper, and the stones—reveal the structuralist underpinnings of Jackson's critique. According to structuralist theory, cultural practices are built on systems of signs and binaries (life/death, tradition/progress, victim/community). The black box, although decayed, is never replaced, symbolizing the decay of reason and the enduring power of obsolete customs. As Lévi-Strauss posits, symbolic systems persist not because they are rational, but because they offer cohesion (1963). Thus, the villagers continue the practice because it connects them to a shared past—even if that past is violent and irrational.

The slip of paper with the black mark signifies arbitrary fate. It transforms death into a game of chance—a parody of democratic process where equality is reduced to equal probability of execution. Tessie's protest, “You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted,” reveals her illusion of fairness being shattered.

The stones themselves—collected even by children—are perhaps the most chilling symbol. They represent violence made banal, taught, and normalized. As Girard (1972) suggests in *Violence and the Sacred*, ritual violence is a mechanism of social cohesion, where the scapegoat absorbs communal tensions. In *The Lottery*, Tessie becomes this scapegoat. Her death satisfies not divine will but a psychosocial need for unity through exclusion.

The behaviour of the villagers reflects a Foucauldian system of power, in which individuals regulate themselves based on societal norms rather than overt coercion. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics where power is exerted not through force but through regulation of life and death (1978). The villagers are not forced to participate; they do so willingly, driven by internalized beliefs about the necessity of the ritual.

This internalization is evident when even Tessie's children are handed stones. Her young son, Davy, participates in her execution, revealing how violence is institutionalized through family and education. The tragedy lies not only in Tessie's death but in the community's collective abdication of moral agency. As readers, we are forced to confront the unsettling reality that violence thrives not only through hatred but through tradition, politeness, and routine.

In *The Lottery*, Shirley Jackson uses symbolism as a narrative strategy to reveal the deep-rooted cultural forces in society. One of the most significant symbols is the black box used in the drawing process. The box is described as old, shabby and broken, but it is still used because it is considered a legacy of tradition. This symbol reflects how the society in the story holds on to old values, without questioning their relevance or morality.

These symbols, according to the structuralist approach, are important elements of the sign system that shape social meaning. Claude Lévi-Strauss emphasises that in myth and cultural systems, “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” (1963:229). In this case, the myth of death as a sacrifice for a good harvest justifies violent practices. The binary opposition between abundant

harvest and the death of a person becomes the basis of a false but accepted social logic.

In addition to the black box, stones also became a symbol of violence that was collectively legitimised. Even children are given baskets to collect stones, which shows how cruelty has been passed down between generations. This shows that violence is naturalised when it is ritualised (Girard, 1972), i.e. violence becomes normal when it becomes part of a ritual that is performed repeatedly.

The lottery paper containing the black mark is a symbol of a randomly determined yet fatal fate. In terms of structuralism, these objects are not just tools, but signifiers that construct how society understands the concepts of life, death and sacrifice.

Thus, the symbolism in *The Lottery* is not just an ornament of the story, but a structural device that shows how society forms a collective belief system that justifies death as part of the social order.

### **Tradition as a Medium of Moral Deconstruction**

Jackson through *The Lottery* inserts a sharp criticism of traditions that are no longer questioned. The people in the story perform the rituals because they are used to it, not because they understand its essence or urgency. When the character Old Man Warner says, "There's always been a lottery," he is showing how culture can kill common sense and close the space for criticism of inhumane practices.

Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1976) states that meaning is never fixed or absolute because there is nothing outside the text (p.158), meaning that all meanings are the result of a process of signification that can be questioned. In this context, the traditions that are considered sacred in *The Lottery* are actually fragile arbitrary constructions, which can be deconstructed by looking at their inconsistencies. For example, many neighbouring villages are said to have abandoned the ritual, but the people in this village continue to do so in order to maintain an illusory balance.

When the act of killing becomes legal in the name of tradition, then we see how the meaning of tradition has been shifted from its ethical roots. This shows that meaning can slip and not have a stable centre - a key concept in deconstruction. Even the act of violence at the end of the story is not considered a murder by the villagers, but an annual obligation. This shows that "justice is not always just" (Derrida, 1992: 15).

It is this attitude of resignation to cultural structures that Jackson criticises. He seems to highlight that a society that does not criticise its own traditions is walking towards moral destruction. Deconstruction helps us see that traditions that look intact and established actually have gaps and contradictions that show that they can-and should-be questioned.

### **The Pattern and Function of Death in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery***

Basically, the formula of a theme in a literary work will be repeated in the form of similar patterns. These patterns are like repeating a concept and function from previous literary works. In relation to the concept of death and dying, there are also certain patterns that form the basis for the creation of works on the topic of death. Basically, works that discuss death and the things that surround it are a form of ideas about death offered by the author through his work. In these works, we will find patterns and functions of death that are the ideas of the author.



In *The Lottery*, we find a pattern that death is part of a tradition constructed by society. This means that individuals as part of society have their minds colonised with the doctrine that one member of the community must be sacrificed by stoning to death as a form of offering so that their farms become fertile with good and abundant harvests. The determination of who should die is determined by drawing papers from a black box, one of which has a black mark on it, which means that the person who gets it is the one who will be rewarded with death. Mrs Hutchinson and other members of the community were deprived of their lives simply because of an ancient tradition that had been perpetuated for generations. Although death by drawing and stoning is considered inhumane, it has persisted for seventy-seven years. No one took the initiative to end it even though they were tired of the tradition. Mrs. Hutchinson as a free human being is deprived of her freedom by a death that she did not want at all. Death in *The Lottery* is a form of colonization of human freedom to live and Mrs. Hutchinson deserves to defend her life like the main character in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Deborah James mentions in her review that the main character in *Beloved* has the right to defend her life because she deserves it even though she has to fight hard (Bloom, 2009: 27). There are similarities between Mrs. Hutchinson in *The Lottery* and the main character in *Beloved* where both of them struggle hard to avoid death that threatens them. In this case Mr. Hutchinson does not manage to control his fate to stay alive by going against the traditions that bind him and he has to die as an individual whose right to life is taken away in the name of society's interests. He must become a sacrifice for the fertile farming and good harvest in his village.

The function of death found in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is that the death of an individual is part of a tradition carried out for generations to ensure a good harvest in a village. The right to individual life is taken away in the name of community interests. The actions of the people who perpetuate the tradition of drawing death in *The Lottery* are depicted as a form of dehumanization that refers to mental degradation because they are willing to cruelly take someone's life just for a fertile farm. Death in *The Lottery* makes us realize that the right to life can be taken away so easily by ignoring our humanity. The desire to achieve something that is still vague/uncertain becomes the basis for humans to legalize their actions, so they will prioritize their id (lust) over their superego.

In literary works about death, the existence of symbols is also very important because it is a representation of death itself. The use of the symbol of death, the black box in *The Lottery*, refers to a death that is full of mystery. Shirley Jackson, who is known for her supernatural works, describes death with the symbol of a black box that is full of mystery. We will never know when and where death will occur. We will also never know who will be picked up by death. The papers inside the black box in *The Lottery* symbolize the possibilities of death that can happen to everyone, without exception. Death hides all the possibilities that will happen to a person in a mystery. Irony about death is also often found in literary works with the theme of death. In *The Lottery*, there is some irony in relation to the depiction of death. The use of the word lottery as the title of this short story indicates that the person who wins the lottery should get a pleasant prize, but in *The Lottery* the reality is the opposite because the lottery won by a person gives him a prize in the form of death. Another form of irony in this work is the death of Mrs. Hutchinson who is a character with a cheerful and humorous character in the story, her humor and cheerfulness must end in sadness

because she must die at the end of the story as a sacrifice of tradition for a fertile farm and good harvest.

## Conclusion

The theme of death in a literary work is considered as something interesting and can inspire its readers with the depiction of death in a variety of different perspectives. Death in *The Lottery* is portrayed in a concept that one's death is a right for the social group, that one's right to life is in the hands of society. Death in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* depicts the death of a person as a form of violation of the traditions prevailing in society. These traditions eventually force individuals in a society to legalise actions that are beyond human reason. They feel that what they are doing is the right thing to do, ignoring the humanity of the act itself, even if it means sending someone else to their death.

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