The Lottery by Shirley Jackson--------Study Guide

Background Information:

Shirley Jackson (December 14, 1919 - August 8, 1965) was an American author who wrote short stories and novels. Her most famous work is her short story "The Lottery", which combines a bucolic small-town-America setting with a horrific shock ending. The tone of most of her works is odd and macabre, with an impending sense of doom, often framed by very ordinary settings and characters.

Born in San Francisco, California, she graduated from Syracuse University in 1940. While a student there, she met future husband Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was to become a noted literary critic.

In addition to her novels, Jackson also wrote a children's novel, Nine Magic Wishes, available in an edition illustrated by her grandson Miles Hyman. She also wrote two humorous memoirs, Raising Demons and Life Among the Savages, about her marriage and the experience of bringing up four children. After her death, her husband released her final unfinished novel, Come Along With Me, containing several chapters of her final work as well as several rare short stories and three speeches given by Jackson in her writing seminars.

Jackson agreed that explaining “The Lottery” was “very difficult,” and later wrote: “I supposed, I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story’s readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives.”

Imagine a place where the townsfolk gather in anticipation of the annual lottery. The winner is picked...and subsequently stoned to death.

Welcome to the world of Shirley Jackson, where things are not always what they seem. The evil that lies within everyone, hiding between the seemingly ordinary and normal, is a prevalent idea throughout Jackson’s works of fiction.
Much of Jackson’s work is TWILIGHT ZONE or alternative-reality. Society, conformity, paranoia, identity are common themes, and her stories speak about who we are and what kind of world we really live in. She explores themes of psychological turmoil, isolation, prejudice and the inequity of fate. Many of Jackson’s works take place in the small, xenophobic towns of New England where she and her husband wrote and taught.

By contrasting commonplace details of contemporary life with a barbaric ritual killing, the story suggests there is a deeply unsettling underside to bucolic, small town America. Reaction to the story was so strong and intense that it initially was blamed for thousands of subscription cancellations and it took its place among the 30 most-often banned literary works in American schools and libraries. However, today it is widely recognized as a classic American short story and is taught in schools throughout the United States.

Since the beginning of time, man has conformed to society’s rules and regulations to keep from having the label of “rebel” tattooed to his forehead and sometimes for stability, order, and safety. Although man can think for himself, his actions usually reflect what society has deemed acceptable. Tradition and conformity are essential parts of “fitting in” with a society when a person has different beliefs or opinions. As we see in “The Lottery,” children, like Davy, are taught what they are supposed to do, rather than why they are doing it, and what the consequences are. The adults in Jackson’s story are the result of these lessons. Many people have a respect for tradition and condemn anyone who dares to go against it, or disregard it. Society gets into a ritual of what should be done just because it has always been done, rather than whether it is humane. In “The Lottery,” the villagers participate

Vocabulary words:

1. assembled –
2. boisterous -
3. reprimands -
4. surveying -
5. reluctantly -
6. jovial -
7. scold -
8. paraphernalia -
9. shabbier -
10. perfunctory -
11. interminably -
12. disengaged -
13. petulantly -
14. stoutly -
15. daintily -
16. defiantly -
**Setting:** Identify the setting of the story.

**Themes:** The underlying themes have been provided for you. Identify where in the story each theme can be found/proven. Tell how it is shown and explain.

Theme 1: **The reluctance of people to reject outdated traditions, ideas, rules, laws, and practices.**

Theme 2: **Society wrongfully designates scapegoats to bear the sins of the community.**

Theme 3: **The wickedness of ordinary people can be just as horrifying as the heinous crime of a serial killer or a sadistic head of state.**

Theme 4: **The unexamined life is not worth living.**

Theme 5: **Following the crowd can have disastrous consequences.**
A List of Horrors

Some first-time readers of "The Lottery" tend to cite the ending, describing the commencement of the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson, as the only disturbing part of the story. But those who have studied the story know otherwise. Consider the following; what makes them especially disturbing?

- "[T]he whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner."

- "Guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work."

- The villagers do not excuse children from the lottery. Even Nancy Hutchinson, 12, and her little brother, Davy, must draw from the black box. If a child draws the slip of paper with the black dot, he or she will be stoned.

- Children take part in the stoning. Little Davy is so small that he throws pebbles.

- Nancy Hutchinson and her brother Bill laugh when they draw blank lots. Only two people remain to draw, their father and mother. How could Nancy and Bill laugh when they know that their father or mother will draw the lot with the black spot and die?

- Mr. Hutchinson pulls from his wife's hand the slip of paper she has drawn--the losing lot--and holds it up for all to see. He does not plead for his wife; he does not exhibit any sympathy. Instead, he becomes one of the executioners.
Foreshadowing:
Shirley Jackson foreshadows the ending when...

Point of View:
What is the point of view?

Climax:
When and what is the climax:

Irony
These are all bits of irony. I don’t care what type of irony; I want to know how they are ironic. Explain what makes them irony. You will need to do research and critical thinking to answer these. Hints have been provided.

- The word lottery implies:
- The sunny day suggests:
When Old Man Warner hears that the north village is considering ending the lottery, he says, "Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves." How is this statement ironic:

- Black box (the connotation of the name & the appearance):
  (1)

  (2)

- Boys gathering stones and pebbles shows what:

- Old Man Warner (the connotation of the name):

- Mr. Summers (the connotation of the name):

- Bill and Davy Hutchinson (their actions vs. their relationship to the “winner”):

- Mr. Graves (the connotation of the name):
• Village (the stereotype of the word):

• Mrs. Delacroix (look up the meaning of the surname):


Study Questions

How do the commonplace details of life and the folksy language contribute to the impact of the story?

Jackson uses common people for her characters. Could she have chosen characters from other levels of sophistication/class with the same effect?

What seems to have been the original purpose of the lottery?

What do the people believe it does for them?

What is the significance of Tessie’s final scream, “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right”?

What aspect of the lottery does she challenge; what aspect goes unquestioned?

Is the lottery a collective act of murder? Is it morally justified?
Is tradition sufficient justification for such actions?

Black is a symbol representing evil or death. Sunlight is a symbol representing joy and happiness. How are symbolic meanings used in this story?

Will the Lottery Die Out?

The story presents the possibility that the lottery is dying out. For example, a passage in the seventh paragraph indicates that the villagers have already permitted certain parts of the lottery ritual to be lost. [A]t one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching.

Later in the story Steve Adams tells Old Man Warner "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery." A moment later, Mrs. Adams says, "Some places have already quit lotteries."

Discussion Question: 1-3 paragraph essay

Will the lottery die out? Why/Why not? Explain your answer with examples pulled from the text.