RESEARCH ARTICLE ⊙

Exploring Postwar Trauma in the American Psyche: A Kleinian Reading of Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' and 'Charles'

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Abstract

The post-World War II era dramatically transformed American society, leaving indelible traces on its cultural narratives and collective consciousness. Shirley Jackson's short stories "The Lottery" (1948) and "Charles" (1948) offer a poignant exploration of this fractured postwar identity, delving into themes of societal conformity, latent violence, and the psychological aftermath of war. Drawing on Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory, this paper examines the psychological mechanisms of projection, splitting, and introjection as depicted in Jackson's characters. These dynamics highlight individual struggles while reflecting a broader societal unease. Through motifs of tradition, childhood development, and the moral ambiguities of human behavior, Jackson critiques the discord between the idealized American Dream and the darker truths of postwar life. By applying a Kleinian lens, this analysis uncovers new dimensions in Jackson's work, shedding light on how her stories encapsulate the anxieties and contradictions of a nation wrestling with its identity in a time of upheaval.

Introduction

World War II marked a transformative period in American history, fundamentally reshaping its economy, society, and cultural identity. The United States emerged from the conflict as a dominant global superpower, its economic and military prowess symbolizing progress and stability. Yet beneath this triumphant exterior lay a nation grappling

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with profound psychological and cultural dislocations. The war's far-reaching consequences left indelible scars on the collective psyche, fostering a pervasive sense of trauma, disillusionment, and a latent anxiety about the fragility of the American Dream. For many, the ideals of freedom and prosperity were shadowed by fears of conformity, moral ambiguity, and societal disintegration in an increasingly modern and mechanized world (Stone, 1992, p. 2).

This fragile cultural landscape found its reflection in the literature of the time, where authors explored the complex intersections of individual psychology and social structures. Shirley Jackson, a writer renowned for her ability to blend psychological horror with biting social critique, stands out as a compelling voice of the postwar era. Her works offer unflinching portrayals of human behavior under the weight of societal norms and expectations, using the everyday to unearth the uncanny. Two of her most celebrated short stories, *"The Lottery"* (1948) and *"Charles"* (1948), provide a searing critique of postwar American society, exposing themes of conformity, repression, and latent violence. These narratives resonate deeply with a culture struggling to reconcile its aspirational ideals with its darker undercurrents.

This paper adopts Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory as an analytical framework to explore the psychological underpinnings of Jackson's characters and their symbolic significance within the broader societal context. Klein's concepts of projection, splitting, and introjection offer a nuanced lens for examining the fractured psyches of Jackson's characters, who serve as microcosms of postwar America's deeper anxieties. By interrogating themes such as tradition, childhood development, and moral ambiguity, this study aims to illuminate Jackson's incisive critique of the era and her exploration of the fractured American identity in the aftermath of global conflict.

Theoretical Background

The works of Shirley Jackson offer a profound lens into the human psyche and societal dynamics, particularly within the context of mid-20th century America. Through her masterful use of psychological and social critique, Jackson explores the tension between individuality and conformity, the complexities of childhood and parenting, and the latent violence embedded in societal norms. Employing Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory as a framework, this paper delves into Jackson's stories, analyzing how psychological mechanisms like splitting, projection, and introjection illuminate the intricate interplay of personal identity and collective behavior

Melanie Klein and Object Relations Theory

Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory offers a profound framework for examining psychological development and interpersonal dynamics, particularly through the lens of early childhood experiences. Klein emphasized the significance of an infant's relationships with primary caregivers, particularly the mother, in shaping the psyche and influencing future emotional and social interactions (Hinshelwood & Robinson, 2013, p. 8). For Klein, the mind is fundamentally relational, and the internalization of these early interactions forms the foundation of how individuals perceive themselves and others (Segal, 1973, p. 14). Her theories extend beyond the individual psyche to illuminate broader social and cultural dynamics, making them a powerful tool for literary analysis.

Key Concepts

1. **Splitting:**

Splitting refers to the mind's tendency to categorize objects (including people) as entirely "good" or "bad" to cope with conflicting emotions. This binary perception helps manage overwhelming feelings but also creates a fragmented view of relationships and reality. Klein saw this as an early defense mechanism that protects the infant from feelings of ambivalence and vulnerability (Segal, 1973, pp. 20–22). In literature, splitting can manifest as characters who idealize or demonize others, reflecting their inner turmoil and struggles with morality.

2. **Projection:**

Projection is the act of attributing one's unwanted feelings, thoughts, or traits onto others as a defense mechanism. This process not only externalizes internal conflicts but also influences how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings (Grotstein, 1981, p. 35). Characters in Jackson's stories often use projection to navigate the discomfort of their suppressed fears and anxieties, revealing the fragile boundaries between self and other.

3. **Introjection:**

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Introjection involves internalizing the traits or qualities of external objects or people, which then become part of the individual's self-perception. This mechanism is crucial in forming identity and managing feelings of dependency or loss (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 113). In the context of Jackson's work, introjection can be seen in characters who adopt societal values or expectations, often to their detriment, as they struggle with the tension between individuality and conformity.

4. **Projective Identification:**

This concept builds on projection but adds a relational dimension. Here, an individual not only projects their emotions onto another but also subtly influences the other person's behavior to align with those projections (Grotstein, 1981, pp. 40–42). This dynamic often leads to destructive cycles of interaction, revealing the complexity of human relationships. In Jackson's stories, projective identification illuminates the toxic interplay between characters, particularly in environments marked by repression and societal pressure.

5. **The Paranoid-Schizoid Position:**

This early developmental state is characterized by feelings of fear, anxiety, and the splitting of objects into extremes of "good" and "bad." It reflects a defensive stance where individuals struggle to reconcile conflicting emotions (Segal, 1973, p. 18). In Jackson's narratives, this position mirrors the heightened anxieties of postwar America, where societal norms were rigidly enforced, and dissent or deviation was met with suspicion.

6. **The Depressive Position:**

A more advanced developmental stage, the depressive position involves the reconciliation of good and bad objects, leading to ambivalence, guilt, and the desire for reparation. This mature perspective often brings deeper emotional complexity, as seen in Jackson's characters who confront the moral ambiguities of their actions and the societies they inhabit (Mitchell & Black, 1995, pp. 120–123).

Relevance to Jackson's Stories

These mechanisms offer a lens through which to analyze the psychological and societal struggles of Shirley Jackson's characters. In *"The Lottery,"* for instance, the townspeople's violent adherence to tradition can be interpreted as a form of projection and splitting, where the collective guilt and fear are externalized onto a scapegoat. Similarly, in *"Charles,"* the protagonist's son embodies projective identification, as his disruptive behavior reflects the underlying tensions within the family and societal expectations of childhood innocence.

By applying Klein's theories, this paper examines how Jackson's stories explore the intersection of individual psyche and societal pressures, offering a rich critique of postwar conformity, repression, and latent violence. Klein's emphasis on internal conflict and its external manifestations makes her framework particularly apt for analyzing the psychological depth and cultural critique in Jackson's work.

Analysis of the Corpus

"*Charles*": Unveiling the Duality of Childhood and Parental Perception

The short story "*Charles*" by Shirley Jackson masterfully explores the intricate dynamics between childhood behavior and parental perception, weaving a tale that is as humorous as it is thought-provoking. Through the lens of a young boy named Laurie and his mischievous tales about a schoolmate named Charles, Jackson unpacks the duality of innocence and cunning in childhood. At the same time, the story examines how parents interpret—or misinterpret—the actions and attitudes of their children, often projecting their own assumptions onto seemingly simple events. This narrative invites readers to reflect on the complexities of family life, trust, and the often-blurred line between perception and reality.

Laurie's Creation of *Charles*

In Shirley Jackson's *"Charles"* (1948), Laurie constructs an imaginary classmate, Charles, to divert attention away from his own misbehavior. Laurie's fabricated tales about Charles—such as "Charles was fresh to the teacher" and "Charles hit the teacher" (Jackson, 1948, p. 41)—reflect a textbook case of projection. By attributing his own

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disruptive tendencies to the fictional Charles, Laurie is able to manage his guilt and maintain a favorable self-image. This behavior aligns with Klein's theory of splitting, as Laurie compartmentalizes his identity into two distinct categories: "good Laurie" and "bad Charles." Splitting, as described by Klein, involves the psychological defense of viewing people and experiences in extremes, without integrating the positive and negative aspects (Hinshelwood & Robinson, 2013, p. 15). This defense allows Laurie to avoid confronting the conflict within himself and to continue navigating the emotional complexity of his development.

Furthermore, Laurie's parents, particularly his mother, remain unaware of the deeper psychological mechanisms at play, revealing an unconscious denial of the complexities inherent in childhood behavior. Laurie's construction of Charles can be seen as a defense mechanism to protect himself from confronting the moral and emotional complexity of his own actions. As Miller (1999) points out, "Imaginary companions in childhood often serve as a conduit for projecting inner conflicts and fears" (p. 108). Laurie's use of Charles illustrates this process and offers a lens into his struggles with developing a coherent self-image.

Parental Blindness and the Idealization of Childhood

Laurie's mother embodies a common postwar tendency to idealize children while remaining oblivious to the darker aspects of their behavior. Her fascination with Charles's misdeeds and her lack of recognition of Laurie's involvement demonstrate a broader societal tendency to overlook the complexities of childhood, preferring instead to maintain an image of innocent purity. This dynamic critiques the postwar ideals of parenting, where surface-level appearances and social norms often took precedence over genuine understanding (Holder, 2005, p. 20). Laurie's mother's idealization of childhood reflects societal pressures to maintain an image of conformity and order, contributing to a psychological blindness that obstructs deeper introspection. This aligns with Klein's theory of introjection, where society internalizes its values and idealizes certain behaviors, often ignoring the underlying complexity (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 113).

The Fragility of Socialization

Laurie's interactions with Charles can be interpreted as a metaphor for the difficulties of socialization in the postwar context. His invented stories highlight the tensions between individual identity and societal expectations, where the desire for conformity may lead to self-deception and denial. Klein's concept of projective identification explains how Laurie externalizes his anxieties and fears about conformity, simultaneously influencing his parents' perceptions while maintaining his emotional equilibrium (Segal, 1973, p. 17). Laurie's use of Charles as a scapegoat allows him to avoid the emotional burden of confronting his own deviant behavior, thereby enabling him to retain a sense of control over his developing identity.

"*The Lottery*": Tradition as a Mechanism of Repression and Violence

Shirley Jackson's iconic short story The Lottery serves as a chilling commentary on the power of tradition to perpetuate repression and violence. Set in a seemingly ordinary town, the narrative unravels the dark reality of a ritualistic practice that the community upholds without question, highlighting the dangers of blind adherence to customs. Jackson masterfully exposes how societal norms can obscure the morality of collective actions, turning ordinary individuals into complicit participants in acts of cruelty. Through its unsettling portrayal of tradition as a mechanism of control, *The Lottery* invites readers to question the ethical implications of their own cultural practices.

The Black Box as an Object of Tradition

In *"The Lottery"* (1948), the black box serves as a powerful symbol of the community's adherence to tradition. Despite its worn and decaying state— "battered and faded" (Jackson, 1948, p. 68)—the villagers resist replacing it, reflecting their fear of change and the unconscious need to cling to outdated practices. Klein's concept of introjection helps explain the community's attachment to the black box. The villagers internalize this object as a symbol of stability, even as it perpetuates a violent and repressive tradition. The black box, in this context, becomes an external object of desire and fear, representing both the continuity of tradition and the anxiety of breaking free from it (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 120).

Tessie Hutchinson: The Scapegoat Mechanism

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The selection of Tessie Hutchinson as the sacrificial victim in the lottery exemplifies the process of projective identification on a communal scale. The villagers, in their collective anxiety and frustration, displace their fears onto Tessie, externalizing their guilt and frustrations through her. Tessie's protest— "It isn't fair, it isn't right!" (Jackson, 1948, p. 75)—reveals the moral ambiguity of this practice and challenges readers to consider the ways in which societies externalize and rationalize violence. This act of scapegoating reflects a psychological need to deflect internal conflict and maintain social order, a theme that Klein (1975) described as central to human group dynamics (p. 134).

Latent Violence and Blind Conformity

The villagers' participation in the lottery underscores the dangers of blind conformity and unquestioned tradition. Jackson critiques the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to rationalize violence, drawing parallels to the broader societal anxieties of postwar America. Klein's paranoid-schizoid position sheds light on the villagers' need to split their perception of tradition into "good" and "necessary," enabling them to avoid the guilt and discomfort associated with their participation in ritualized violence (Holder, 2005, p. 22). The villagers' acceptance of the lottery reveals the ways in which repression and fear of change can perpetuate violence in seemingly ordinary communities.

Thematic Parallels Between "*Charles*" and "*The Lottery*"

Shirley Jackson's short stories *Charles* and *The Lottery* may differ in tone and setting, but they share profound thematic parallels that delve into the complexities of human behavior and societal norms. Both stories explore the tension between outward appearances and hidden truths, as well as the darker undercurrents of everyday life. In *Charles*, the duality of childhood mischief and parental perception mirrors the societal complicity seen in *The Lottery*, where unquestioned traditions mask brutality. By juxtaposing innocence with deception and normalcy with violence, Jackson invites readers to examine the unsettling realities lurking beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary lives.

Childhood and Society: Navigating Identity and Tradition

Both *"Charles"* and *"The Lottery"* explore the tension between individuality and societal expectations. Laurie's creation of Charles and the villagers' adherence to the lottery ritual illustrate the psychological mechanisms—splitting, projection, and introjection—that individuals use to navigate the pressure to conform. These stories demonstrate how individuals, particularly children, are shaped by and simultaneously resist societal norms. Laurie's escape into fantasy mirrors the villagers' unwillingness to confront the violence inherent in their traditions, highlighting the fragility of both individual and collective identity in the postwar context.

The Role of Authority and Power Dynamics

In *"Charles"*, Laurie's fabricated tales subtly critique the authority of parents and teachers, while *"The Lottery"* examines the authority of tradition and communal norms. Both stories reveal how power structures can perpetuate violence and repression, often under the guise of maintaining order. The characters in both stories struggle with the tension between obedience and individuality, reflecting broader anxieties about authority and conformity in postwar society.

Psychological Repression and Scapegoating

The theme of scapegoating runs throughout both stories, with Charles serving as Laurie's scapegoat and Tessie becoming the community's sacrificial victim. These narratives expose the psychological need to externalize guilt and anxiety, mechanisms that allow individuals and societies to maintain a fragile sense of stability. By using Charles and Tessie as objects onto which their own fears are projected, Laurie and the villagers alike navigate the complex interplay of personal and social identity in a postwar world.

Conclusion

Shirley Jackson's *"The Lottery"* and *"Charles"* offer profound insights into the psychological and cultural dynamics of postwar America, using psychological mechanisms to explore the tensions between individuality, societal pressures, and collective identity. By applying Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory, this analysis has revealed the unconscious defense mechanisms at play in Jackson's characters, from Laurie's projection of his own misbehavior

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onto the imaginary Charles, to the community's collective scapegoating of Tessie Hutchinson in *"The Lottery."* These defense mechanisms, such as splitting, projection, and introjection, provide a means of coping with anxiety, but also reveal the deeper fractures within the characters' emotional and psychological worlds. Jackson skillfully portrays how individuals and groups, under the strain of social expectations, externalize their internal conflicts and anxieties.

Jackson's works critique the darker facets of the American Dream, highlighting the psychological costs of conformity, repression, and the unquestioning adherence to tradition. In *"Charles,"* Laurie's fabrication of Charles reflects the lengths to which individuals will go to preserve their self-image and avoid confronting uncomfortable truths about their behavior. Similarly, in *"The Lottery,"* the community's blind participation in a violent and outdated ritual illustrates the dangers of unexamined tradition and the moral contradictions embedded in societal norms. Both stories expose the psychological and moral toll of maintaining social order at the expense of critical reflection and individual moral responsibility, suggesting that the cost of conformity is a loss of moral clarity and authenticity.

These themes remain strikingly relevant in contemporary society, urging readers to confront the unconscious mechanisms that shape their own perceptions and behaviors. Jackson's exploration of projection, scapegoating, and repression serves as a timeless critique of how individuals and communities avoid confronting uncomfortable truths, often to their detriment. By exposing the psychological underpinnings of societal rituals and personal behavior, Jackson challenges readers to reflect on the traditions and power structures that continue to shape their identities and actions. *"The Lottery"* and *"Charles"* thus stand not only as reflections of postwar America but also as a call for ongoing self-examination and critical engagement with the unconscious forces that govern human behavior.

Additional Information
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Ethical Considerations

This research is based exclusively on published literary texts and established psychoanalytic theory. It does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental methodologies. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. All primary and secondary sources have been cited in accordance with scholarly standards, and the study adheres to ethical norms pertaining to literary and theoretical research.

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Conflict of Interest

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