

The Lottery: The Adventures of James Harris

An Essay by Deborah Markus

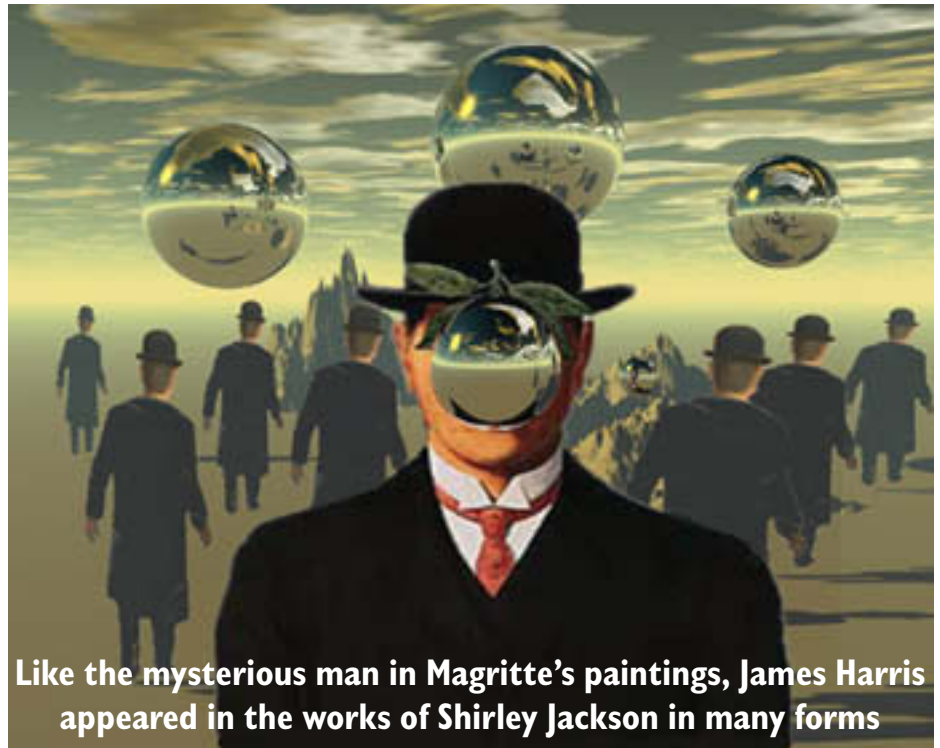
Even non-horror fans tend to know Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery." It's required reading in many schools, and it burns itself like a brand into the mind of every reader, so a brief prod of the memory suffices to bring it back to the recollection of anyone momentarily drawing a blank. ("You know, the story about the little pieces of paper, and the rocks, and, um, the rocks?") Fewer people know that, after the story's overwhelming success in *The New Yorker*, Jackson went on to publish a short story collection also titled *The Lottery*. And only die-hard fans know that this collection was originally subtitled not "and other stories," as it is now, but "The Adventures of James Harris."

It's a pity this subtitle was lost. "The Lottery" is a strange, atypical story even in this collection, which admittedly isn't exactly aglow with sweetness and light. But naming the book after its best-known story shapes your expectations unrealistically: any reader looking for shock endings and threatened violence isn't going to find it here. What you will find is James Harris, all over the place.

Who?

James Harris. The daemon lover. An entity who had a hold on Shirley Jackson long before she named a story after him. There is a longish quote at the end of *The Lottery* from one of the old ballads written about him, but a better place to get an idea of just what he meant to Jackson is a letter she wrote in college, excerpted in Judy Oppenheimer's Jackson biography *Private Demons*:

but all i remember is that i met him (somewhere where was it in the darkness in the light was it morning were there trees flowers had i been born) and now when i think about him i only remember that he was calling Margaret. As in loneliness Margaret, Margaret. And then (did i speak to him did he look at me did we smile had we known each other once) i went away and left him (calling to me after me) calling Margaret Margaret.



Like the mysterious man in Magritte's paintings, James Harris appeared in the works of Shirley Jackson in many forms

This is the overblown, melodramatic writing of a yearning young writer in her twenties. However silly the original vision may seem now, though, it was powerful enough to be a major influence on Jackson and her writing long after she'd had a chance to cool down a bit.

Neither the ballad nor the letter give any real sense of just who Harris is. He first appears by name in "The Daemon Lover," the second story in *The Lottery*. He's referred to, described, and shown in tiny, disturbing flashbacks, but we never actually see him there — he's long gone by the time the story starts. A fact that his jilted fiancée (and perhaps lover; the story is creepily delicate on the point) is slow to catch on to. It's a brilliant piece, though one that bears little resemblance to the work which inspired it. Elizabeth Bowen's story of the same title is a far more faithful rendition of the original tale; and in fact, as Joan Wylie Hall points out in her criticism of Jackson's short fiction, Bowen's *Ivy Grippled the Steps*, in which her daemon lover appears, is very like *The Lottery* in that both works are meant to be read as books rather than merely collections of stories. James Harris is an integral part of the cohering strangeness in *The Lottery*.

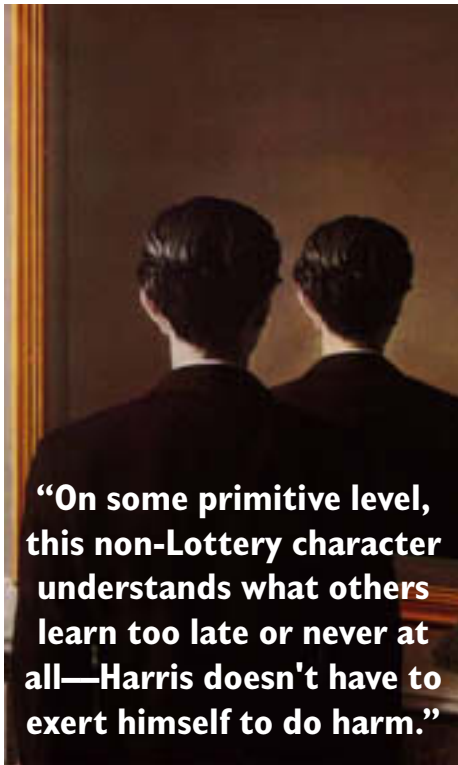
Yes, but who *is* he?

The fact that Harris' first appearance by name is not his first appearance in the book is a clue. At the very end of the collection's first story, "The Intoxicated," the hostess of

a party is found "deep in earnest conversation with a tall, graceful man in a blue suit." Just an ordinary detail, except that with a writer like Jackson there are no ordinary details. The title character of "The Daemon Lover" is a tall man in a blue suit, and though by the end of the story readers may understandably wonder if he really exists, by the end of *The Lottery* no one can doubt. Harris leaves some trace of himself in just over half the pieces in the collection. He's a shapeshifter, free to be rural, urban, old, young, married, single, wealthy, or dirt poor as the situation demands. Sometimes we know him by his full name, sometimes a fragment of it, and sometimes — well, sometimes he's just the tall guy in the blue suit.

It's unsettling to see him in story after story, bearing little resemblance to his previous incarnations. Lenemaja Friedman, author of a book-length critical study of Jackson and her writing, seems both put out by and dismissive of Harris. "The James Harris figure...had no doubt been placed in several stories to provide some semblance of unity," she explains flatly; "however, none of the in-name-only Harris characters has any relationship or likeness to the others, and he is often only a minor character."

That latter bit is certainly true. In some stories he is so minor, in the sense of occupying space or having any dialogue, that you never even see him. You only hear about him, or, as in "The Renegade," hear



“On some primitive level, this non-Lottery character understands what others learn too late or never at all—Harris doesn't have to exert himself to do harm.”

about hearing about him. Is Friedman correct, then, that he's only incidental? Is Jackson just being cutesy with a running character? There's precedent for that. Several of the stories in her recent posthumous collection *Just an Ordinary Day* feature Mallie the family magician, who is sweet enough to give God a toothache. Perhaps James Harris is just another example of Jackson having a little fun with her readers.

And then perhaps not. First off, James Harris is purely sinister, though one story he appears in, “Like Mother Used to Make,” does have some real humor in it. David Turner, a rather prissy and self-important young man, loses (at least for one evening) his apartment, his chances at an attractive girl, even the credit for the cherry pie he's baked — all because he doesn't want to embarrass said girl (who anyway seems beyond embarrassment) by claiming them as his own. A funny little piece. But David's misery by the end is so complete that it's difficult for him or for us to remember that his exile is partly self-imposed and wholly temporary. Isn't it? *Isn't it?*

Second, Harris isn't sprinkled randomly throughout the stories. Whoever he is at *any* given time, even when he's just a name mentioned in passing, feels right, makes sense. Who he is, of course, at any given time, is bad news. He's a locus of evil. He's the place bad things happen.

This holds true, by the by, in the only

place outside the pages of *The Lottery* that he makes an appearance. The main character of Jackson's novel *The Bird's Nest*, a young woman suffering from multiple personality disorder, finds herself abruptly in the very hotel room in which James Harris is enjoying his honeymoon. The woman does what any sensible person ought to do in his presence. She flees.

On some primitive level, this non-*Lottery* character understands what others learn too late or never at all — Harris doesn't have to exert himself to do harm. In only two of his stories does Harris act maliciously: “The Daemon Lover” and “The Witch.” And not everyone would agree he's even *in* “The Witch.” The rest of the time he's just *there*, and that suffices. His presence either warns of bad things to come or sets people off, instigating evil simply by breathing the same air as those around him.

Look at “Seven Types of Ambiguity.” Harris here is a seemingly innocuous bookstore owner and clerk, well-mannered with a “professional smile.” In a wonderful bit of imagery and symbolism, he lurks in the cold dark basement of his shop where the serious books are kept separate from the art books and bestsellers brightly displayed upstairs.

A man and his meek, muted wife come to buy some books. “Good books,” as the man says. “None of this trash they turn out nowadays.” A young man already in the shop — Mr. Clark — offers to take the other man back to the sets of books and help him decide what he wants. Clark is quick, kind and polite, intuiting what the bluff, “hearty-looking” man would enjoy and what would go right over his head. Like the book Clark had been looking at and longing for earlier — the one after which the story is called. The man can't even comprehend the title, much less what the book is about. Which is why it comes as a nasty shock when, after Clark leaves the store, the older man decides to buy that very book, clearly to deprive Clark of it.

Now, what has any of this to do with Harris? He speaks to the older man when he comes in and tallies up his purchases when he leaves, and that's about the extent of his participation. His place in the story is only clear if one remembers what Harris is — a demon. Demons, like the devil who sent them, are tempters. They exist to make good people bad and bad people worse.

The nameless older man of the story is

obviously perfectly “good” by any conventional standards. He left school at an early age to work in his father's machine shop, has labored all his life to support his family, and is touchingly amazed at finally being able to “walk into a bookstore and buy up all the books I always wanted to read.” Not much material here for even the most determined demon to work with.

And yet by the end of the story he's succumbed to envy, one of the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. He repeatedly asks Clark how much he's read, what that book he likes so much is about, whether he's in college. But under the affable questions and praise, the older man is quietly seething with resentment and bitterness — Clark is leading exactly the kind of life the man never got to. The older man can't take that life away from Clark, but he can buy the book Clark wants and can't afford. Now he has a new book for his new shelves that will stand as a constant reminder of his own anger and spite. And Harris has made a hefty profit just by being in the right place at the wrong time. The story would work without him, but his presence adds an extra shade of darkness for those who know what he is.

But why set a demon to haunt stories that take place in the modern world?

The easy answer is that Jackson just liked that kind of thing, the same way she liked having lots of food and books and semi-psychotic characters roaming her pages. But she also wrote what she saw. People are not always what they seem. You think you know someone and then you see him in a different context, a new situation, and you might as well be looking at a stranger.

This isn't just a description of James Harris. In all of his stories, the main character goes through some sort of disturbing shift. Often he's just displaced, like poor David in “Like Mother Used to Make,” or, more subtly, Mrs. Walpole in “The Renegade,” a former city dweller who thought she was successfully settled in a small New England village. Sometimes the character tries to displace or change him — or (usually) herself. Miss Clarence pretends to James Harris that she's the dancer she's always wanted to be in “The Villager.” Her attempted transformation is wistful and sympathetic. Mrs. Winning's, in “The Flower Garden,” is simply foul.

Mrs. Winning married into one of the oldest and most respected families in her village. In doing so, she gave up on the boy

she once had a crush on; she also gave up on the idea of settling into a particular cottage. She now lives with her mother and father-in-law in the house her husband grew up in. When a newcomer to the village, a young widow named Mrs. MacLane with a son the same age as Mrs. Winning's, moves into the cottage, Mrs. Winning instantly befriends her.

Mrs. Winning, like the nameless man in "Seven Types," has all the material advantages but desperately wants what the other has. She wants to have married a man who has real affection for her, rather than one who kisses his mother hello and nods at his wife from across the room. (Losing that loving husband, as Mrs. MacLane did, seems a small price to pay.) She wants a son who adores her, as Mrs. MacLane's does. She wants to live in a house of her own and have a garden growing all around it. She even wants the green and yellow sandals the other woman wears.

She *could* have had all of those things, of course. But she chose solid respectability over passion. And now she wants a new past (just as the man in "Seven Types" did) and she thinks she can have it, vicariously, through her relationship with Mrs. MacLane. She spends every moment with her that she can, and tries, clumsily, to recreate her own life. But it's too late for any real change. When the village turns against Mrs. MacLane for hiring a black man to work in her garden, Mrs. Winning is front man in the attack.

The moment of full realization that her brief friendship is over comes when another villager, Mrs. Harris, makes snide comments about Mrs. MacLane. True, there's "nothing wrong with Lucy Harris getting away from that man of hers wouldn't cure," but still, "Mrs. Harris only says what everyone else says." When Mrs. Winning sacrifices Mrs. MacLane so she can "be one of the nice people again," we can almost hear James Harris laughing off-page.

We can see him in action and at his strongest on-page in "The Tooth," probably the best-known story in the collection other than "The Lottery" itself. Only in "The Daemon Lover" is he more purposefully intent on dominating the life of another character. There he is malicious but passive — evil in what he fails to do, not what he does. Here he's the seducer we never saw in that other story: delicate but commanding, destructive even when he's kind. Ironically, he does the most damage in his

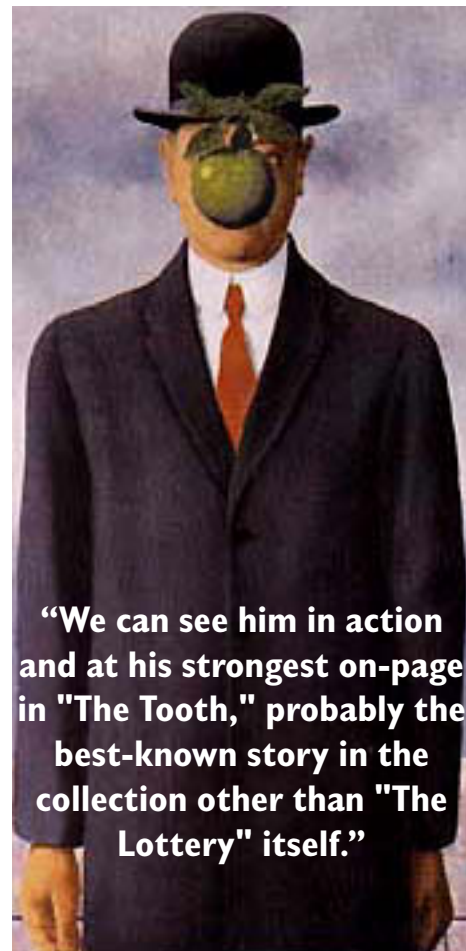
career simply by taking a fragile woman under his wing when it's clear that someone has to. A pity it wasn't anyone but him. His seeming benevolence in this story is the strongest clue to his true daemonic nature. He can't bestow an unmixed favor even if he tries.

"The Tooth" includes some typical Jacksonian elements: bus rides through the night, tooth problems (from which Jackson herself suffered), the uneasy sense that in the midst of very little outward action matters are nevertheless skidding out of control, and of course the daemon lover. The storyline is relatively simple: young married woman rides the bus to the big city to see her dentist, meets a strange man along the way, has a tooth extracted, and loses her mind along with it. Well, yes, that last bit is a strange curve, but one expects a little insanity in a Jackson story.

Clara Spencer is seen off on her bus ride late one night by her seemingly solicitous husband. She's in dizzying pain only kept at bay (never quite under control) by constant doses of codeine. Rather than waxing indignant at being sent away by herself in such a condition, Clara takes care to make sure everyone *else* will be all right during her absence. She reminds her husband about the clothes for the cleaner and the grocery order and the babysitter and so on — and her husband reproaches her for having had a toothache for so long. "You had a toothache on our honeymoon," he says "accusingly."

After she gets on the bus, she is befriended by a man named Jim. Jim is certainly something out of the ordinary. His idea of small talk is telling Clara, apropos of nothing, "The flutes play all night, and the stars are as big as the moon and the moon is as big as a lake." But this James Harris — it's him, he's got the height and the blue suit to prove it — steps into the gap left by Clara's husband and takes care of her on her night-long journey. He buys her coffee and food at rest stops, makes her lean on his shoulder to sleep because he's concerned about her head bumping against the bus window. Even his strange conversation, in a voice "musical and soft," is like stories told to a sick child to distract her from her pain. He's the protector figure no one else has bothered to be for her. He even tells her, when they reach the city, that he'll watch out for her. No wonder she keeps looking for him, and dreams of him while under sedation.

It would be easy to think that Jim is just



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a drug-and-pain vision Clara came up with. When "The Tooth" was first published in *The Hudson Review*, the man Clara met on the bus was named Ray, and so was certainly imaginary. A character in an earlier Jackson novel takes a night bus ride with a nonexistent companion, so there's precedent. But James Harris certainly exists, in his own peculiar way.

Clara may not have asked for or desired Harris' company at first, but by the end of the story she longs for him. She finds him after her operation, when she is left to fend for herself yet again by the people supposedly taking care of her. But never mind. On the sidewalks of New York, Jim takes her hand, and together they run "barefoot through hot sand." He's taken her to the magic place "even farther than Samarkand" he told her stories about all night. That's James Harris for you. You may not want him when you see him, and he may not be there when you need him, but you can be sure he's never quite gone. He's always just around the corner, waiting to flicker into view when you least expect him. ~

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