The antipathy that many literary critics have felt for allegory applies most directly to what I am calling “strong allegory,” a designation that encompasses those complete works of fiction that comprise the “genre” of allegory. Works such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Psychomachia*, and even *Animal Farm* clearly evince some characteristics that readers and critics generally associate with allegory. Yet these same characteristics—including the presence of personified abstractions or animals, the overriding sense that there is a “message” to be gleaned, and a pronounced antimimeticism—also serve as the metaphorical shovels that many critics have used to dig allegory’s grave. Thus, before looking more closely at strong allegory, it will be worth our effort here to pursue what we might fittingly see as the figurative (more precisely, metaphorical) death of allegory.

Looking back over the course of the history of literary criticism, one will note that the numerous twentieth-century obituaries for allegory constitute what would seem to be the natural result of earlier decrees from literary scholars, many of which called for something like a death sentence for allegory. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example,

the demotion of allegory was the dominant concern of German classicism; that concern inevitably resulted from the emergence of the concept of genius and from art’s being freed from the fetters of rationalism. Allegory is certainly not the product of genius alone. It rests on firm traditions and
always has a fixed, stable meaning which does not resist rational comprehension through the concept—on the contrary, the concept of allegory is closely bound up with dogmatics: with the rationalization of the mythical (as in the Greek Enlightenment), or with the Christian interpretation of Scripture in terms of doctrinal unity (as in patristics), and finally with the reconciliation of the Christian tradition and classical culture, which is the basis of the art and literature of modern Europe and whose last universal form was the baroque. With the breakup of this tradition allegory too was finished. For the moment art freed itself from all dogmatic bonds and could be defined as the unconscious production of genius, allegory inevitably became aesthetically suspect. (79)

The combination of the distaste for dogmatics and rationalism and the conception of the artist as genius ultimately manifests itself in the devaluation of allegory, as Gadamer shows, and the concomitant elevation of a highly idiosyncratic notion of the symbol. As opposed to allegory, the symbol was seen as a more natural trope, one that might spring organically from the mind of a true poet.

The allegory/symbol distinction was most famously articulated by Coleridge (who was strongly influenced by the German classicists), and it reflects Romantic ideas concerning the nature of the poet and his craft. “Of most importance to our present subject is this point,” Coleridge writes, “that the latter (allegory) cannot be other than spoken consciously;—whereas in the former (the symbol) it is very possible that the general truth may be unconsciously in the writer’s mind,—as the Don Quixote out of the perfectly sane mind of Cervantes, and not by outward observation or historically. The advantage of symbolic writing over allegory is, that it presumes no disjunction of faculties, but simple dominance” (qtd. in Fletcher 17). In this scheme, the symbol is preferable to allegory primarily because it is less calculated and more natural. According to Angus Fletcher, the trouble with allegory, as Coleridge uses the term, is that “there is always . . . an attempt to categorize logical orders first, and fit them to convenient phenomena second, to set forth ideal systems first, and illustrate them second” (18). Such planning and ordering works against the more naturalistic predilections of the Romantics, and might lead to the kind of “disjunction” to which Coleridge refers.

In Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory Edwin Honig effectively demonstrates the extent to which Coleridge’s ideas regarding allegory and symbol (and what differentiates the two) depend on Coleridge’s personal aesthetic prejudices. “Coleridge’s idea of the way symbolism works,” Honig explains, “includes the notion of a general truth concealed in the writer’s unconscious
mind, having its origin there and growing spontaneously into the fictional work. But this view illustrates Coleridge's principle of organic form better than it does the symbolic principle” (46–47). It is not surprising, then, that allegory suffers, in Coleridge's system, from seeming less organic and more “denotative”; “its form must be imposed from the outside, 'consciously.' Hence allegory must be taken as a specimen of mechanical, and not of organic form” (Honig 47). Whatever the origin of Coleridge's particular biases, however, the end result was that allegory, in comparison to the symbol, emerged with the stigma of being less artistic because more artificial. This belief has been surprisingly persistent, despite the numerous rehabilitative efforts aimed at allegory since the middle part of the twentieth century.

The second complaint against allegory has grown out of these perceived shortcomings of allegorical works, but it also reflects a twentieth-century change in the emphasis of literary criticism. The problem with allegory, in this second scenario, has evolved from a concern with its suspect aesthetic credentials to a belief that it handcuffs the literary critic by too consciously limiting the text's signifying potential. In other words, the relationship between reader and allegorical text has too little mystery. This is precisely the point that Northrop Frye makes in *Anatomy of Criticism*: “The commenting critic is often prejudiced against allegory without knowing the real reason, which is that continuous allegory prescribes the direction of his commentary, and so restricts its freedom” (90). This is especially apparent in what Frye calls “actual allegory,” which we have “when a poet explicitly indicates the relationship of his images to examples and precepts, and so tries to indicate how a commentary on him should proceed” (90). In a literary climate that prizes the autonomy, freedom, and creativity of the reader, a prescriptive mode such as allegory is unlikely to find favor with the very critics whom it “directs.”

Like the argument against the aesthetic aspect of allegory itself, the argument against the interpretive limitations supposedly inherent in allegory has a second component. This second component involves what I will call the distaste for exhaustibility. The problem with allegory might not simply be that it controls and directs our commentary, as Frye argues, but also that once we have “correctly” commented on allegory we have done all there is to do. If allegory simply “says one thing and means another” (Fletcher 2), then once we have arrived at that other meaning we have exhausted the text. In the twentieth century, the ascendance of undecidability as both the aim and the result of much interpretation made such interpretive closure highly suspect.

The suspicion of closure has extended beyond recognizably allegorical texts, however, and encompassed the idea of interpretation more gener-
ally. As Fredric Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious*, “... a criticism which asks the question ‘What does it mean?’ constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically rewritten in terms of some fundamental master code or ‘ultimately determining instance.’ On this view, then, all ‘interpretation’ in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code or ‘transcendental signified’: the discredit into which interpretation has fallen is thus at one with the disrepute visited on allegory itself” (58). At this point, the suspicion of closure is now cast in a different direction. It is not that allegory inherently closes off or too easily exhausts interpretive possibilities, but rather that readers, when they “interpret” a work, necessarily do this themselves. The result, however, is the same—a text and a reader that are both too easily exhausted.¹

Regardless of where one stands on the issue of the aesthetic or hermeneutic value of allegorical narratives, we must recognize that when we are dealing with certain kinds of allegories the limits on interpretation are real and intentional. Despite the persistent claims by numerous theorists of allegory that it is, as Jon Whitman claims, “an oblique way of writing” (1), that it “conceals many of its secrets” (1), and that “it provides an initiation into a mystery” (2), there is often nothing particularly mysterious about the intended meaning of an allegory. That meaning, in fact, is often so obvious and so pedantic, so “sermonlike,” that readers reject the narrative used to convey it precisely for this reason. As Fletcher points out, “By means of his ‘message’... the allegorical poet is... trying to control his audience. He seeks to sway them... to accept intellectual or moral or spiritual attitudes” (192).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Orwell’s *Animal Farm* provides a good example of this particular bias. So, while I postulated that the interplay of genetic considerations, textual phenomena, and readerly concerns accounts for the allegorical nature of this novel, it seems clear to me that much of the “input” that makes that novel an allegory comes from Orwell himself and, through him, his text. We can safely call this work a strong allegory largely because we know that its author intended it as such and because he composed it in such a way that it would convey that intention fairly clearly to his readers. Those readers, then, find themselves in the position of discovering and verifying Orwell’s meaning rather than creating it through the reading process, and this is the usual position of readers vis-à-vis strong allegories.

¹. In “Allegory and Allegoresis, Rhetoric and Hermeneutics,” Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville make the plausible claim that, since the work of Paul de Man to reenergize discussion of allegory, “The older polarity ‘symbol-allegory,’ which valued symbol over allegory, appears to have been replaced with the polarity ‘allegory-allegoresis,’ in which allegory stands as the preferred mode” (161–62).
To understand more clearly what I mean by the term “strong allegory” and the reader’s role in realizing it, we need to return to my definition of allegory: that class of works that fulfills its rhetorical purpose by means of the transformation of some phenomenon into a figural narrative. In strong allegories, the reader has the overriding sense that the author both intends and does the work of the transformation, and this intuition activates, as I indicated in the previous chapter, what E. D. Hirsch calls the “intrinsic genre,” or “that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy” (Validity 86, emphasis in original). When the reader senses that the whole is allegorical, he or she will adopt a reading strategy that attempts to uncover the phenomenon that has been transformed into a narrative structure, or, if the author has made it clear what that phenomenon is, to verify its transformation by a process of reconciling the text and the phenomenon.

Such a reading strategy approximates what Peter J. Rabinowitz calls “authorial reading.” In Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation, Rabinowitz proposes that we recognize three categories for the reader of fictional narratives: the actual audience, which is composed of the individual flesh-and-blood readers; the narrative audience, which Rabinowitz describes as a “role” in which the reader is willing to enter the world of the narrative on its own terms (95–96); and the authorial audience, or the hypothetical audience for whom authors have designed their works (21). In many cases, that authorial audience will be more sophisticated and more educated than the narrative audience, as this former group is expected to be capable of joining “a particular social/interpretive community,” one whose membership includes the author him- or herself (22). This authorial audience is a construct that is presumed to be capable of “getting” the author’s full intended meaning, even as members of the actual or narrative audience, or both, might not. As Rabinowitz makes clear, though, that meaning is determined by the author and his or her text, and, as far as the reader is concerned, is “found rather than made” (22).

Strong allegories, I submit, ensure a significant gap between the narrative and the authorial audiences; they encourage readers to enter into the authorial audience, and, most significantly perhaps, actively facilitate that entry. While it is conceivable that a reader (a child, perhaps) could miss the

2. Rabinowitz uses the distance that separates these two audiences as a way to characterize realistic versus antirealistic texts. In the former, he argues, the narrative audience and authorial audience are very close, whereas in the latter—which would include allegorical tales, I believe—there is a significant distance between the two (99).

3. Indeed, in some cases that entry is more or less guaranteed, and this is one of the aspects of allegory that has turned many critics against it.
figural aspect of Animal Farm, for example, both Orwell and his text guide us strongly toward an understanding that the real significance of the novel is not in the plot or characters, but rather in how that plot and those characters are really the transformation of a political conviction into a figural story. A sophisticated reader, then, would have to resist willfully moving from the relatively naïve position of the narrative audience (a position that would credit talking animals, etc.) toward the more informed position of the authorial audience, where he or she can “discover” the full meaning of the text and enter into a kind of community with the author. Wayne Booth points out an interesting distinction between allegory and irony in this regard. In A Rhetoric of Irony he claims that “A naïve reader who overlooks irony will totally misunderstand what is going on. A naïve reader who reads an allegory without taking conscious thought, refusing all invitations to reconstruct general meanings out of the literal surface, will in effect obtain an experience something like what the allegory intends: the emotional and intellectual pattern will be in the direction of what it would be for the most sophisticated reader” (25). When one becomes aware of the “second order of meanings” in allegory, Booth adds, “a mild pleasure is added, but the essential experience remains the same” (25). As Booth notes, with some allegories any reader who takes “conscious thought” and who recognizes the author’s hermeneutic “invitations” will in all likelihood find his way to the authorial audience.

I disagree, however, that all that is at stake if the reader does not make that transition is the lost opportunity for the addition of “a mild pleasure” to the reading experience. Consider tennis as an analogy: does actually playing a tennis match add only a mild pleasure to the act of hitting balls back and forth as one does, for example, when warming up? A tennis court is a space the structure of which has been determined by a set of rules meant to encourage a specific activity; similarly, an allegorical narrative has a form that emerges from an author’s intended purpose, and that purpose should guide the reader’s engagement with the text. While this does not have to be the case (just as people do not have to use a tennis court to play tennis, properly speaking), two readers, one of whom understands or acknowledges the author’s purpose and one of whom does not, will end up doing very different things with that author’s text. A reader of Orwell’s Animal Farm who remains confined to the narrative audience—a reader, that is, who is oblivious to the second order of meaning and who processes the novel only as a story about life on a peculiar farm for some animated animals—has, like the person simply returning volleys from a partner across the net, a very different experience with this narrative than does a reader (or tennis player) who truly engages with what he or she is meant to be doing. Orwell’s stated aim, after all, was to “Expose the Soviet myth”; if the reader never makes the
jump from pigs and sheep to Trotsky and Lenin, then the entire rhetorical premise of the act of narrative communication has broken down. We are not simply dealing with some measurement of how much fun one might be having—as Booth’s comments would imply—but rather with basic issues of comprehension.

While we can acknowledge some validity to Booth’s point that one can read an allegory from the perspective of the narrative audience and still derive some enjoyment from the activity, just as we can surely observe two people happily hitting a ball back and forth on a tennis court, successfully facilitating entry into the authorial audience strikes me as being an essential aspect of strong allegory, just as understanding the aims of tennis as a competition is an essential aspect of making full and good use of a tennis racket and balls. As the anonymous author of the strongly allegorical medieval morality play Everyman avers, “The matter [of the play] is wonder precious, / But the intent of it is more gracious / And sweet to bear away” (7–9). To my mind, the author here implies that reading this play from the authorial position will result in not just a slightly more pleasurable experience, but rather in an experience that differs qualitatively from that experienced from the narrative perspective. Moreover, this claim, coming as it does at the outset of the play, serves as an invitation into the authorial community by facilitating recognition on the part of the reader-audience, a recognition that we are both welcome and expected to uncover the transformation that the “matter” of the play (the textual phenomena, in other words) represents.

The reader’s recognition in cases such as Animal Farm has two components: that the literal text is the transformation of some extratextual phenomenon and that that phenomenon actually occupies a position of primacy even if it remains implied. When a reader recognizes allegory, she tends to realize at the same time that she is close to “meaning,” in the sense that E. D. Hirsch uses that term in Validity in Interpretation. Indeed, if we are to believe the author of Everyman, authorial intent is accessible and there to be borne away in allegory. The recognition that accompanies allegory sets in motion a distinctive hermeneutic reader response. The strongest allegories produce the strongest sense of recognition, and the stronger the recognition, the more certain the reader is of the ultimate nature of his or her interpretation—the more certain he or she is, in other words, of gaining access to the authorial audience. This dawning certainty activates a mode of interpretation that I will label concordant, a term that applies when the reader has clear

4. “Meaning is that which is represented by the text,” Hirsch claims; “it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent” (8, emphasis in original).
indications that the author and the author's text are paving a clear path from narrative to authorial reading. In the terms of the feedback-loop metaphor, such texts produce a positive feedback loop, one in which all of the inputs propel the interpretation in the same direction. As Rabinowitz notes, the authorial audience does not remain entirely passive in the reading process, but its job is not to invent or construct its own meaning; rather, it “makes what the author intended to be found” (28). In the case of allegory, what the audience makes are connections and concordance between the narrative and the implied phenomenon that has been transformed but not entirely effaced by that narrative.

Narratives that produce the strongest allegorical effect comprise a subset of narratives that also encourage and reward thematic interpretation. This is so because these narratives are generally constructed so that the disparate parts of an individual narrative work together to produce a strong sense of thematic coherence, something that is not usually characteristic of more mimetic narratives. Typically, when we think of “theme” we do so along the same lines as those proposed by Eugene Falk in his _Types of Thematic Structure_: “the term ‘theme,’” Falk explains, “may . . . be assigned to the ideas that emerge from the particular structure of such textual elements as actions, statements revealing states of mind or feelings, gestures, or meaningful environmental settings” (2). Falk refers to these various “textual elements” as “motifs,” and he concludes that “the idea that emerges from motifs by means of an abstraction” is a “theme” (2). Yet in the context of strong allegory, this conception of theme does not go far enough; I do want to propose that the authors of strong allegories construct narratives that not only facilitate the process of abstraction and that limit both the number and range of themes that might be abstracted from the various motifs, but I also suggest that the theme of a strong allegory includes what we might call a predicate, or a proposition, relating to the emergent idea. In other words, the rhetorical concept of purpose must guide our thinking about theme as it relates to allegorical—particularly strongly allegorical—narratives.

The dominant theme(s) of narratives that produce a strong allegorical effect can almost always also serve as the narrative's meaning or message, that which defines authorial purpose in my rhetorical approach to allegory. Falk, however, cautions against equating theme and message: “A message . . . is the result of reflections in which motifs are not under immediate consideration. The theme is a ‘first intention,’ whereas the message is a conception obtained through reflection upon a previous conception gained by abstraction from the motifs themselves. A message is thus a ‘second intention’; and when we confuse a message with a theme we do so at the risk of assuming wrongly that a work is a preconceived embodiment of a ‘philosophy’” (3).
Yet in the case of strong allegory, narratives often are the embodiment of a philosophy, an ideology, or some other authorial position, intention, or purpose. Strong allegory effectively collapses Falk’s distinction between theme and message. Thus, as we will see below, when the reader of a work that produces a strong allegorical effect extrapolates themes from the textual phenomena (or “motifs”), he or she also uncovers the narrative’s purpose. With regard to such narratives, to say what they are about is also to say what the author intends by them. Such a hermeneutic move serves to take us deeper into the authorial audience and to cement our sense of community with the (implied) author and other readers.

At this point we would be well served by moving to a concrete example and some practical criticism as a means of anchoring this theoretical discussion. The text I have chosen for this task is Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” Jackson’s story, first published in June 1948 in the *New Yorker*, is the well-known and oft-anthologized tale of a small town’s annual lottery, the “winner” of which is subjected to a brutal stoning that results in his or her death. The implied rationale for the lottery in Jackson’s story harks back to the ancient practice of using scapegoating and ritual sacrifice as a way to appease a deity and, often, to ensure a good harvest. Yet Jackson has set the story in what seems to be contemporary times—at least as of her writing in the mid-twentieth century—and in the United States, so we cannot dismiss the ritualized scapegoating that she describes as the product of a time long past or of some benighted culture.

By nature more circumspect about the meaning of her work than was Orwell, Jackson was reluctant to offer much in the way of interpretive keys in her subsequent commentary on the text. Her reticence on this score proved troubling to many readers of the story, one that garnered, according to Jackson in a piece that she called “Biography of a Story,” “more mail than any piece of fiction [the *New Yorker* had ever published” (127), undoubtedly because the narrative’s cold cruelty leaves many readers emotionally disturbed. As Judy Oppenheimer attests in her biography of Jackson, “No one, not then, not ever, would be able to read the story without having a powerful reaction. Its quiet tones and everyday setting only contributed to the force of its final, shattering climax” (128). Given the powerful emotional effect of “The Lottery,” the incredulity and inquisitiveness of Jackson’s readers make perfect sense, even if Jackson herself was left with the impression—based on the responses that she received—that “people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at” (“Biography” 127). Jackson’s rather harsh view of her reading public (the “actual

5. I treat the idea of theme in more detail in chapter 4.
audience” in Rabinowitz’s terms), or at least the segment of it that bothered to write to her through the *New Yorker*, undoubtedly results from the fact that those readers proved largely incapable of making the interpretive transition from the narrative audience to the authorial audience. As a result, they are left with the nagging sense that other readers might be more in the know and therefore liable to mock their failure to understand the text, and Jackson is left wondering if they are actually capable of reading with enough sophistication to be considered literate.

As I indicated above, the gap between the narrative audience and the authorial audience is large and significant in what Rabinowitz calls “anti-realistic” texts. A narrative such as “The Lottery” does not announce its antirealism in quite the same way as does *Animal Farm*, for example, but rather leaves one with the disquieting sense—almost a hope, really—that what transpires in the story does not actually happen somewhere in modern America. Without the equivalent of Orwell’s scheming and talking farm animals, though, the allegorical markers in Jackson’s text prove less obvious, potentially putting even very astute readers on uncertain footing. Describing the period between Jackson’s submission of her story to the *New Yorker* and its publication, Oppenheimer relates that

Even *The New Yorker* must have sensed some of [the story’s] potential for disturbance. The magazine bought it immediately, but fiction editor Gus Lobrano thought it prudent to call Shirley and ask if she had any explanation she would like to pass along. Editor Harold Ross, he said apologetically, was wondering—Ross had often said he would never publish a story he himself did not understand. Was there anything special she was trying to convey? Not really, said Shirley, who hated explaining her work, it was just a story. Well, said Lobrano, even more apologetically, did she think the story might be called an allegory which made its point by an ironic juxtaposition of ancient superstition and modern setting? Sure, said Shirley kindly (she had no use for that kind of fancy-pants academic drivel), that would be fine. Good, good, said Lobrano, that was what Ross thought it meant. (128)

This episode speaks to Hirsch’s idea of the intrinsic genre (that “sense of the whole”) that experienced readers of narrative fiction formulate as they make their way through “The Lottery.” At the same time, it illustrates the fate of readers who fail to do so: the inability to access the authorial audience,

6. Many of those who wrote letters apparently demanded that they not be published, thereby convincing Jackson of their fear of being mocked (“Biography” 127).
the failure to have properly read the story, and a nagging sense of literary inadequacy.

Jackson’s rather flippant and dismissive response to the question that Lobrano poses notwithstanding (if indeed Oppenheimer has presented it faithfully), the allegorical reading Ross proposes hits the mark and helps to explain why the readers who failed to see the story as an allegory seemed so hopelessly far off the mark; we are not dealing just with varying levels of enjoyment here, but rather with examples of misprision egregious enough to cause people to cancel their subscriptions to the *New Yorker* and, in some cases, to write abusive and threatening letters to the magazine and the story’s author (“Biography” 127–28). The gulf separating those in the narrative audience—characterized by readers who wrote to Jackson curious about “where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch” (“Biography” 128)—and those who, like Ross, joined her in the authorial audience is wide indeed.

Although Jackson apparently preferred to let her work speak for itself rather than to interpret it for others, she did provide a revealing comment concerning her rhetorical aim to the San Francisco *Chronicle* on July 22, 1948, less than a month after her story had appeared in the *New Yorker* and during the height of the small maelstrom that it produced. “Explaining just what I hoped to say is very difficult,” Jackson confesses. “I suppose 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” (qtd. in Oppenheimer 131). Even if it does lack some of the traditional and obvious markers of allegory—personified animals or abstract qualities as characters foremost among them—“The Lottery” does contain numerous contextual and textual clues that, when we piece them together, reveal the narrative to be a strong allegory built to effect this rhetorical aim.

One of the reasons that the text has such a powerful effect on so many readers seems, at first glance, to be counterintuitive: Jackson’s narrator adopts a style that exhibits little emotion and that abjures any kind of overt commentary on what is happening in the story. Such a style departs significantly from the kind of overt moralizing that we often associate with the strong, mainly religious allegories from the Middle Ages. Yet Jackson’s intent also differs significantly from these earlier examples of strong allegory; rather than imparting a moralistic lesson, Jackson wants to provoke a particular reaction, and restricting her narrator to the matter-of-fact reporting of a series of increasingly disturbing events effectively serves that purpose.

As that description of the narration suggests, the allegorical nature of the story becomes apparent only through the relatively leisurely progres-
sion of the plot. This buildup to the work's climax (which coincides with the readers' recognition of the allegorical nature of the text) heightens the shock value that Jackson sought. Thus, Jackson has her story begin positively idyllically, in “the fresh warmth of a full-summer day,” with flowers “blooming profusely,” the grass “richly green,” and children poised to break into “boisterous play” (291)—a description that could easily be occasioned by a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover typical of the era.

The small-town agrarian setting further reinforces the Rockwell-like feel of the story’s opening, a feel that relies heavily not only on the ludic qualities that attend summer vacation but also on the reassuring cadence of cyclical routine in the adult world, a cadence that is mirrored in both the content and the rhythm of Jackson's prose: “Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (291). The lottery and the ritual behind it—including the continued use of a “shabby” receptacle for the slips of paper that function as the lots only because “no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box” (293)—contributes to the comfort that certain abiding rites or traditions can engender in a society.

Aside from its occasionally striking lyricism, the other distinguishing feature of Jackson's style is the distance that characterizes her narrator from the events that she tells. This distance—which takes the form of a remarkably disinterested reportorial style—characterizes the story even from the opening paragraph:

> The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th [the day before it occurs in the location Jackson describes], but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the 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. (291)

While the narrator is heterodiegetic, her detailed knowledge of the logistics of the lottery and, indeed, her initial reference to it simply as “the” lottery, with no additional information, also suggests that she is an insider relative to the community she describes, and this position affords her a certain authority in the mind of the reader. Thus, Jackson’s narrator is able to invite us readers into what at first seems to be a very hospitable setting of which she (the narrator) has personal knowledge.

Even so, a careful reading of the language that Jackson employs reveals blemishes on this pastoral image of mid-century Americana, blemishes that
should put readers at least slightly ill at ease about what we are reading, even if we do not yet know how the story concludes. As the men discourse on “planting and rain, tractors and taxes,” for example, they stand together, but “away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed” (292). Even without full knowledge of the intended use of the stones, readers can sense the apprehension that dampens the men’s jokes and prevents smiles from evolving into laughs. And later, as Mr. Summers prepares to get the lottery underway, we are told that he announces “soberly” that they had better “get started, get this over with” (295). We sense at this point that the winner of this lottery will not likely feel fortunate to draw the distinguishing mark. And finally, as the men of the families go about drawing their slips of paper from the black box, Jackson’s narrator remarks that those who had already drawn were “holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously” (297).

By this point the slow progression of the narrative has heightened the suspense and anxiety that both characters and readers experience. Speaking for herself, her family, her entire community, and, I suspect, the majority of Jackson’s readers, Mrs. Dunbar finally exclaims to her older son, “I wish they’d hurry . . . I wish they’d hurry” (298). The moment of release finally does come for all involved (characters and readers) when, after the “long pause, a breathless pause” that follows the last family’s pulling of lots (298), Tessie Hutchinson realizes that her husband Bill has the tainted slip of paper. Tessie reacts so forcefully that no doubt about the endgame remains: “You didn’t give him [Bill] enough time to take any paper he wanted,” she protests to Mr. Summers. “I saw you. It wasn’t fair!” (298). We know now how serious the consequences of the lottery truly are, but readers who participate in the authorial audience also realize that what is about to happen to someone in the Hutchinson family should not be taken literally; we strongly suspect we are dealing with allegory because we believe, at least intellectually, that nothing that could occasion Tessie’s terrified response should be determined by random chance without some compelling and rational social need (which would not include superstitions about crop yield).

What doubt remains in the reader’s mind at this point about Jackson’s intentions dissipates quickly as the second stage of the lottery occurs. Now, each member of the Hutchinson family must choose lots among themselves to determine the sacrificial scapegoat. The image of “little Davy,” too young to understand that he should pull just one slip of paper from the box, the thought of Bill and Tessie’s two older children forced to confront the possibility of their own or a sibling’s imminent death, and the anguish that the two parents must be experiencing, all drive the increasingly incredulous
reader toward the necessary conclusion that this cannot be real. Yet this growing conviction of the text’s “antireality” does not, I should stress, compromise the force of Jackson’s narrative because by this point most readers have also been strongly drawn into the narrative audience, and in that place we feel the affective and ethical force of the Hutchinsons’ situation.

Jay A. Yarmove helps us to understand the allegorical resonance that Jackson’s story has for a mid-twentieth-century audience by providing an important contextual reading, one that addresses the rhetorical situation in which Jackson was working:

> The underpinnings of Shirley Jackson’s famous post–World War II story “The Lottery” demonstrate that the work is far greater than the sum of its parts. The date of the lottery, its location, and the symbolic or ironic names of its characters all work to convey a meaning that is even more disturbing than the shock created by its well-known ending, namely, that despite assurances during the late 1940s that “it couldn’t happen here,” a microcosmal holocaust occurs in this story and, by extension, may happen anywhere in contemporary America.

Yarmove understands “The Lottery” as an allegory, and one that gains some of its force from its appearance just a few years after the Holocaust, when more and more information about the extent of the Nazi genocide was being discovered. Thus, even though Jackson’s story is not a direct allegory of the Third Reich’s final solution (the Christian villagers, after all, sacrifice one of their own members), it does, as Yarmove contends, “help to create the specter of a holocaust in the United States” because it forces readers to confront the fact that “custom and law, when sanctioned by a selfish, unthinking populace, can bring an otherwise democratic and seemingly just society to the brink of paganism.”

As readers piece together the meaning of this text and thereby make sense of what it means to enter the authorial audience, we must also come to terms with the fact that Jackson invites us to discover her own distance from her narrator, a narrator who appears to have intimate knowledge of this microcosmic holocaust, but who chooses to accept it. Looking back with a full understanding of what the lottery accomplishes and what it means for the person who draws the unfortunate lot, we can draw two important conclusions: 1) the narrator understands the full meaning of the lottery from the outset without appearing to be disturbed by its implications and 2) refuses to question it. Indeed, so ingrained is this ritual that virtually the entire community—including the victim herself, who objects to the unfairness of the
process but not the concept of the lottery—simply accepts it. The fact that Jackson’s narrator appears to go along with the crowd in this regard makes the gap between her and the author enormous and leaves us with the distinct possibility that Jackson’s work critiques such passive acceptance as much as it critiques a heartless and senseless act. Jackson folds both of these aspects of her rhetorical target nicely into a subtly horrific scene immediately following the revelation that Tessie is the Hutchinson to die. “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box,” the narrator tells us, “they still remembered to use stones” (301). And more coldly to the point, without a hint of approbation or sympathy: “The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (301).

These revelations and the certainty that we are dealing with a figural narrative force the reader into a radical reconfiguration of the earlier parts of Jackson’s story. The reader’s incredulity at the narrator’s insensitivity only increases as events and descriptions previously encountered that should produce moral outrage, or at least prompt serious questions, mount. In the second paragraph, for example, the village children, recently released from school for the summer, begin to gather the stones that will be used as murder weapons to conclude the story, but the narrator describes this as if she were observing a group of kids about to enjoy a harmless snowball fight on an unexpected day off from classes: “Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix—the villagers pronounced this name ‘Dellacroy’—eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys” (291). And just a page later, the narrator connects this abhorrent lottery—albeit indirectly—with a trio of utterly inoffensive social rituals: “The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities” (292). Blithely associating the oversight of a ritualized stoning with “other” civic commitments surely offends the sensibilities of most contemporary readers.

And this is precisely the point: the narrator’s general lack of emotional or ethical engagement is provocative, and its provocations contribute significantly to the feedback loop that produces the allegory for the reader. The narrator’s flat affect focuses readers’ first attention acutely on the events of the story; rather than getting caught up in an analysis or critique of the narrative’s voice, readers are left to encounter the shocking and bare fact of the action that lies at its center. Jackson herself noted in “Biography of a Story” that early readers of “The Lottery” were somewhat transfixed by the story’s signature event: “People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held,
and whether they could go there and watch” (128). This rather morbid reac-
tion does illustrate the power of the central action of Jackson’s narrative and
her ability to focus her readers’ initial gaze on it.

Once the reader commits to this figural turn, the hermeneutic feedback
loop provides nothing but positive reinforcement to the allegorical hypoth-
esis, as we can see by looking at Jackson’s use of character names. Mr. Sum-
mers oversees the lottery that occurs each summer, of course, and his name
carries a seasonal appropriateness as well as a healthy dose of irony; his
somber duty stands in stark contrast to the more positive connotations we
associate with the summer season. Mr. Graves’s name, on the other hand,
captures perfectly the tenor of the story and its main event, and one can
imagine a slight nod of Shirley Jackson’s head as she penned the line “[Mrs.
Graves] watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box,
greeted Mr. Summers gravely, and selected a slip of paper from the box”
(297, emphasis added), confident that she was pointing readers in the right
direction.

And of course we have Old Man Warner, who objects strenuously when
Mr. Adams points that some communities have purportedly abandoned
the ritual of the lottery, implying that perhaps their own could follow suit.
“Nothing but trouble in that,” Mr. Warner warns, convinced that it’s the lottery
and the scapegoat that it produces that are responsible for ensuring a good
harvest every year (297). The scapegoat herself is called Mrs. Hutchinson,
whose name necessarily recalls that of Anne Hutchinson, another New Eng-
land woman who was victimized by what we now see as backward-thinking
communal paranoia. Fittingly, Mrs. Hutchinson taps one Mrs. Delacroix on
the arm “as a farewell” just before the former makes her way to the front of
the crowd and toward the box that contains her fate. Meaning “of or from
the cross” in French, “Delacroix” calls to mind for the careful reader the
entire narrative of Christianity’s most central wronged martyr/scapegoat/
victim and functions as an effective bit of foreshadowing regarding what
will ultimately befall Mrs. Hutchinson. The thematic potential in so many
of the names in “The Lottery” makes it clear that Jackson’s intentions were
more figural than verisimilar and strongly reinforces the notion that we are
dealing with allegory.

A short essay by Nathan Cervo illustrates the amplification of a figural
hypothesis that occurs in the hermeneutic feedback loop of a strong alle-
gory. Cervo agrees that the name “Delacroix” “plays a key thematic role”
in the story, a role that has unmistakable religious overtones. This conclu-
sion then helps Cervo to see equal significance in the date on which the
story takes place, June 27. “That Jackson wishes to suggest the specifically
Christian parallel or intent of ‘Delacroix’/‘Dellacroy,’” Cervo contends, “is supported by the fact that the lottery takes place on June 27. Twenty-seven is three cubed. So what we have is the motif of the Trinity in a total, intensified interplay with itself, rather than the hypostatic interplay of the ‘Three Persons comprising it.’8 I am less interested in the issue of whether Cervo is on target or overreading than I am in the way that his analysis illustrates the kind of interpretive activity prompted by the recognition that the story is a strong allegory. For Cervo, the name “Delacroix” invokes the theme of Christianity; the date on which the story takes place confirms and amplifies this invocation. From here it is a short step to the idea of the scapegoat and to Cervo’s ultimate conclusion that Mrs. Hutchinson “is a parodic Christ-figure, slain to appease a demonic entity that is the personification of involuted . . . ignorance masquerading as primitivistic piety.”

Finally, I want to return to Yarmove’s interpretation of “The Lottery” and argue that we can extend the point he makes about the work being “far greater than the sum of its parts” to all strong allegories. In these works, the individual textual phenomena invariably produce an impact that exceeds the value of the sum of each individual textual unit. Authors consciously construct strong allegories so that the hermeneutic feedback loop amplifies the thematic value of such phenomena as names, dates, and so forth, ultimately producing a work whose intended meaning emerges clearly. Strong allegory results, in other words, when the careful reader picks up on the significant textual phenomena, understands how the details fit together, and thereby arrives at an interpretation that is concordant with the author’s aims. This process is one of the hallmarks of an authorial reading.

As we saw at the outset of this chapter, many critics have viewed this process as overly contrived, mechanistic, or perhaps even stultifying for the ambitious reader, but as Yarmove implies and as readers’ letters to Jackson testify in a different way, strong allegories can still have a profound, haunting, and chilling effect on the reader. Jackson set out to shock her readers through the transformation of a ritual of violence (in the form of the lottery) into a figural narrative that transcends the literal. The history of the work’s reception and its continued relevance today speak to its ultimate success and, by extension, to the persistent vitality of allegory.

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8. It is unclear whether Cervo is aware that the June 27 date was actually suggested by the editors of the New Yorker because it coincided with the release date of the issue that contained Jackson’s story. Jackson, according to Oppenheimer, had originally set the story a few days earlier in June.