The Lottery, written by renowned horror author Shirley Jackson, explores the psychology of tradition and the power of belief over the lives of seemingly ordinary people. It is a story
that makes the reader shudder to think that such an event could actually take place, and becomes even more disturbing when the reader discovers that Jackson’s story is far from untrue. Human sacrifice in order to attain the blessings of God/the gods has occurred throughout history. It is the fact that Jackson transports this tradition into an idyllic American town that sends shivers up the reader’s spine. It is interesting then to examine how Jackson’s story could be successfully transferred to film. Linda Costanzo Cahir provides four basic but critical criteria for a successful literature to film translation in her book *Literature Into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*.

The goal is not necessarily to produce what Cahir refers to as a “literal” translation, which in essence literally transfers the story from the written word to the recorded image. The problem lies in that what works for the written word does not always work for film, and vice versa. “Thus, the most successful films based on literary works translate the words into images by both interpreting and exploiting the source text” (Cahir 97). With this in mind, as we apply Cahir’s criteria to one of the film versions of The Lottery, “The Lottery,” a “made for TV” film released in 1996, re-written for TV by Anthony Spinner and directed by Daniel Sackheim, we can see that The Lottery can very successfully make the transition from literature to film.

The first criterion on Cahir’s Aesthetic Rubric for a successful literature to film translation is the following: “The film must communicate definite ideas concerning the integral
meaning and value of the literary text, as the filmmakers interpret it.” In this way the filmmaker remains true to the source text, but “faithful in their fashion” (Cahir 97). This means that the film becomes more than a mere plot summary of the text. “Instead, the movie will communicate definite ideas concerning the meaning and value of the literary text, as the filmmakers interpret that meaning and value” (Cahir 100). Spinner remained true to the issues and themes in his version of Jackson’s short story. Both works explore the psychology of the continuation of such an uncivilized tradition in what seems to be, on the surface, the ideal society.

The second criterion of the Aesthetic Rubric is that: “The film must exhibit a collaboration of filmmaking skills.” “The Lottery” is done in the traditional “made for TV” manner, thus there is little in the way of special affects or filming techniques that are available to a project with a larger budget. One filming technique the film uses very successfully is its juxtaposition of two types of society. The film starts on the roads of Boston, highlighting the “rat race” fast pace of life, the crime, and the dangers of living in a city, a place that considered to be civilized. As the main character Jason Smith escapes to New Hope, Maine in search of his mother’s grave, the audience escapes as well and welcomes the countryside of Maine where people are kind and life is easy. However, as Jason searches for his mother and meets more of the townspeople, the audience begins to realize that New Hope is not as innocent as it
seems. In the text, the question of the morality of the “lottery” brought to the attention of the reader the words of Old Man Warner, who criticizes those who have given up the lottery, suggesting that it was a social step backwards. The film exposes the audience to two different lifestyles, each with their own pros and cons, and it is with this knowledge that the audience can analyze the morality of the lottery.

The third criterion of the Aesthetic Rubric has to do with the self-efficiency of the film: “The film must demonstrate an audacity to create a work that stands as a world apart, that exploits the literature in such a way that a self-reliant, but related, aesthetic offspring is born.” This is done very successful in the film version of The Lottery. The text gives the reader a view into the actual event of the lottery as it is happening. “The Lottery” cleverly brings the audience into the life of Jason Smith, whose father has died and has requested that he have his ashes strewn on his wife’s grave. Jason discovers that his mother’s death is shrouded in mystery, and it turns out that she was a victim of the lottery many years back. It isn’t until an hour into the film that it begins to resemble the events in the text in that the audience sees the lottery take place. The result is two very different presentations that include the same central story. The film takes a very different and independent approach to Jackson’s story so that it produces a work that is able to stand on its own and is worth examining, while staying within the bounds of the text. In this way, the fourth criterion
of the Aesthetic Rubric is fulfilled as well, which states: “The film cannot be so self-governing as to be completely independent of or antithetical to the source material.”

While it was a “made for TV” movie, “The Lottery” successfully meets the four criteria set forth in the Aesthetic Rubric. It remains true to the issues and themes of its parent text by making sure the audience is forced to consider the morality of the lottery and the meaning of the term “civilization.” The film effectively uses the tools available to film in order to enhance the story, the way addition description or narration would for text. “The Lottery” also departs enough from the original text to warrant its own examination, but it remains within the bounds of the text so as to not become completely independent.
Works Cited