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Midterm Essay, English 2001

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The Sheep Leads the Sheep

According to the unnamed narrator in Edgar Allan Poe’s famous gothic story “The Black Cat,” The Spirit of Perverseness is in everybody, and we are told this is a natural law. But we must also know our gothic limits and not, as the narrator says “do wrong for the wrong’s sake,” or we become perverse. Limits are necessary in order to live and let live. This essay is framed by the Spirit of Perverseness because it helps us understand power and powerlessness.

In the story “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, one of the main characters, Tessie Hutchinson, follows the town’s strange tradition of drawing slips of paper that will condemn one person to be stoned to death once per year. At the end of the story, Tessie is the one chosen in “the lottery” to be murdered. She is a blind follower to this dark tradition until the day she gets the black spot on a piece of paper, and then she tries to rebel. The question is: Does Tessie engage in the Spirit of Perversion and bring around her own death, or does she truly try to fight it?

In the story “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne the main character, Goodman Brown, seems to have a dream about a meeting with the devil but thinks the dream is real. Goodman Brown blindly followed his faith until that fateful dream, but then he disbelieves everything and even distrusts the people he loves, like his wife Faith. In comparing the two characters, I want to ask if they take part in the Spirit of Perverseness or if they are simply tricked by a powerful system. In order to explore this question, I will examine the scene where Tessie rebels against Mr. Summers and even her husband. Then I will examine the scene where Goodman Brown leaves Faith to go on his journey and the scene when he awakes in the morning. Ultimately, the Spirit of Perverseness can lead readers to see how characters hurt themselves even against their best wishes when power institutions coerce them. In the conclusion I wonder if governments and religions are perverse and not individuals.