

Research Article

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Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework: Advancing Literary Analysis and Pedagogy through the Semantic Study of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The persistent risk of semantic anachronism challenges both literary interpretation and pedagogy, as modern readers frequently impose contemporary meanings onto historically charged vocabulary. This study introduces the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF), a five-layered analytical model designed to trace the evolution of word meaning over time. The primary aim is to demonstrate how CDSF uncovers semantic complexity and prevents misreading in canonical literature, while offering practical applications in literature instruction and critical reading.

Materials/methods. The study employs a qualitative, text-centered methodology, applying the CDSF to five lexical items in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*: "lottery," "village," "tradition," "black box," and "stones." The five analytic layers—Etymological Trajectory Analysis, Diachronic Semantic Mapping, Contextual Literary Function, Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding, and Interpretive Reconstruction—draw from historical dictionaries, linguistic corpora, literary criticism, and classroom pedagogy. Educational implications were derived by aligning findings with strategies for teaching vocabulary and symbolic language.

Results. Findings reveal that each term operates as a site of historical memory, cultural critique, and thematic irony. The CDSF allows for context-sensitive interpretation, helping both scholars and students decode deeper meanings. In pedagogical terms, the framework provides a replicable tool for guiding learners beyond surface-level readings toward historically grounded literary analysis.

Conclusion. The CDSF is a rigorous, interdisciplinary model that enhances scholarly interpretation and supports literature instruction. It promotes critical reading, prevents semantic misinterpretation, and equips teachers with a research-informed strategy for fostering historical empathy and interpretive depth in the classroom.



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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of semantic change poses significant challenges for interpreting canonical literary texts, as the meanings of words inevitably evolve over time. This ongoing evolution can result in semantic anachronism, wherein modern readers, guided by contemporary linguistic frameworks, misinterpret the intentions of historical authors (Wijaya & Yeniterzi, 2011; Mitra et al., 2015). Semantic shifts frequently arise in response to broader cultural and societal transformations that shape language use, as demonstrated by empirical studies employing historical corpora (Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016; Tahmasebi et al., 2018). For example, recent research tracking the development of terms associated with nationalism in Dutch literature illustrates how political and social changes drive contextual shifts in meaning, thereby complicating literary analysis (Timmermans, Vanmassenhove, & Shterionov, 2022). Furthermore, advances in computational methods—such as diachronic word embedding models—have enabled scholars to systematically trace these patterns of semantic evolution, underscoring the necessity of historical awareness for accurate textual interpretation (Rudolph & Blei, 2018). For scholars and critics alike, understanding such dynamics is crucial to navigating the layered meanings that accrue within texts over time and appreciating their broader cultural resonance (Traugott & Dasher, 2009).

This interpretive challenge is especially acute in literary studies, where words that once bore neutral or negative connotations may, through semantic drift, acquire positive or benign associations. Such changes subtly distort the thematic and ideological structure of a work, often leading to unintended readings. Shirley Jackson's renowned short story, *The Lottery* (1948), offers a compelling site for examining the consequences of semantic change on literary interpretation. The story's reliance on seemingly mundane terms such as "lottery," "village," and "tradition" invites misreading by contemporary audiences, for whom these words generally evoke positive or innocuous associations. This semantic dissonance is integral to Jackson's narrative strategy, serving to manipulate reader expectations and intensify the story's ultimate revelation.

Despite the importance of accounting for semantic evolution, literary scholarship has often lacked rigorous interdisciplinary frameworks for analyzing how word meanings shift over time within texts. Traditional models tend to prioritize close reading while neglecting the contextual and historical forces that shape semantic trajectories, thereby limiting their ability to historicize meaning (Hadigheh & Khaghaninezhad, 2013; Neumann, Gilbertson, & Hutton, 2014). Detached etymological accounts, though valuable, are insufficient to capture the complex interplay of history, culture, and cognition that informs the interpretation of literary language. Recent research suggests that an emphasis on cognitive contexts can significantly enrich the analysis of literary texts, bridging the gap between the historical evolution of language and the reader's interpretive process (Freeman, 2010; Williams, 2022). Additionally, approaches that attend to the materiality of literature reveal how texts interact with their socio-political environments, offering deeper insights into their semantic layers (Andersen, 2013; Bronstein, 2014). Therefore, integrating critical linguistic approaches with cognitive and historical perspectives is essential for a more holistic and context-sensitive interpretation of literary works (Hadigheh & Khaghaninezhad, 2013; Freeman, 2010).

However, while the theoretical foundations of diachronic semantics have advanced significantly, there remains a notable gap in their systematic integration into literature education and critical reading pedagogy. Existing pedagogical models often emphasize structuralist or reader-response frameworks, with limited attention to the evolving semantic values of lexical items within historical and cultural contexts. This absence of context-sensitive semantic frameworks in literature teaching not only impairs students' interpretive depth but also contributes to semantic anachronism in classroom analysis. Consequently, there is an urgent need to introduce models that bridge historical linguistics, literary hermeneutics, and educational praxis, enabling readers to interpret texts with semantic precision and historical empathy.

In response to these methodological shortcomings, the present study introduces and applies the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF), a multidimensional analytic model that synthesizes insights from historical linguistics, semantic typology, prototype theory, and hermeneutics. The CDSF is specifically designed to trace the evolution of word meanings in literary texts, offering a systematic and transferable approach for mitigating semantic anachronism in literary interpretation.

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate the analytical rigor and interpretive utility of CDSF through its application to five explicit lexical items in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*: "lottery," "village," "tradition," "black box," and "stones." Employing a qualitative, text-based methodology, this research highlights the potential of CDSF as a context-sensitive framework for literary analysis. By doing so, it seeks to enrich the methodological toolkit available to literary scholars, fostering more nuanced and historically attuned readings of canonical texts.

To this end, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) uncover semantic anachronism in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"?

2. In what ways can CDSF-informed analysis enhance literary interpretation and critical reading pedagogy in contemporary education?

2. Literature Review

The study of semantic change is a foundational concern in both historical linguistics and literary analysis, with profound implications for textual interpretation across time. As words shift in meaning, the risk of semantic anachronism increases, often resulting in contemporary readers misapplying modern meanings to historical texts and thereby distorting authorial intent (Hoffman, Ralph, & Rogers, 2012; Johns et al., 2019). Although skilled readers leverage advanced cognitive processes to facilitate comprehension, they are nonetheless susceptible to misunderstanding when confronted with semantic changes that are not immediately evident (Johns et al., 2019). The inherent polysemy and semantic variability of language mean that a word's meaning is highly context-dependent, compounding the challenge of accurately interpreting texts from earlier eras (Hoffman & Woollams, 2015; Hoffman, Ralph, & Rogers, 2012). Recognizing the implications of semantic change, therefore, is vital for both accurate literary analysis and the broader study of meaning-making across historical contexts. In educational settings, this phenomenon also affects how students engage with canonical texts, making semantic transparency and historical awareness essential components of critical literacy instruction.

Diachronic semantics offers a systematic account of meaning change, including processes such as amelioration, pejoration, widening, and narrowing. These processes have been classified since Bloomfield and have been further refined by contemporary linguists (Swaitti & Yeshoda, 2022; Utami & Candria, 2021; Durant & Davis, 2018). Despite the robust theoretical foundation of diachronic semantics, its integration into literary studies remains limited, as literary analysis has traditionally favored close readings that often lack historical linguistic depth (Wihadi & Fauziah, 2019). This separation restricts a holistic understanding of literature since linguistic shifts are essential for tracing the cultural and temporal dimensions of texts (Dewan, 2023). Recent scholarship increasingly advocates for an interdisciplinary synthesis that bridges linguistic analysis and literary critique, emphasizing how such integration enriches interpretations of semantic evolution within literary artifacts (Durant & Davis, 2018; Levshina et al., 2024). For literature educators, this interdisciplinary insight encourages instructional strategies that foreground the dynamic nature of word meaning and challenge students to critically examine how language evolves alongside culture.

Debates on the role of semantic context in textual interpretation have shaped both pedagogical and critical frameworks. New Criticism, for example, is rooted in close reading and privileges internal textual coherence, but often overlooks the importance of historical semantic shifts (Navarrete et al., 2016). In contrast, hermeneutic and historicist methodologies insist on situating texts within their broader cultural and historical environments, thereby recognizing the impact of evolving language on interpretation (Silva et al., 2019). Nevertheless, these models frequently lack systematic tools for mapping lexical changes across disparate time periods, creating interpretive gaps that can obscure significant aspects of historical linguistics (Anvari & Blumberg, 2021). The absence of structured semantic-historical scaffolds in classroom reading contributes to interpretive inconsistencies among students and underscores the need for pedagogical models that explicitly link lexical evolution with interpretive skills.

Recent advances in context-sensitive analysis have led to the adoption of models such as prototype theory and semantic typology, which explore how meanings cluster and shift in response to context and culture (Biber, 2011). Despite these innovations, there remains a marked deficit in comprehensive analytical frameworks that effectively integrate etymological trajectory, corpus-based evidence, and hermeneutic interpretation (Xu & Xu, 2024; Wardani & Adityo, 2021). While corpus-based methodologies have yielded valuable insights into thematic and stylistic trends in both literary and translation studies, they often fail to offer an integrated model that accommodates the interplay between hermeneutics, corpus data, and historical etymology (McIntyre, 2015; Wrisley, 2016). From an instructional standpoint, these limitations suggest that pedagogically grounded models must accompany corpus and semantic technologies to support student-centered interpretation of historical texts.

The Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) emerges as a response to these methodological challenges. Informed by recent interdisciplinary research, the CDSF fuses diachronic linguistic mapping with literary-critical hermeneutics to deliver a holistic, layered approach to word meaning analysis. This framework not only elucidates historical word senses but also enhances literary interpretation by emphasizing the intricate relationships among semantic history, cultural embedding, and textual function. For classroom application, CDSF offers a replicable and student-accessible model that promotes deeper engagement with historical texts, enabling learners to reconstruct meaning through context-sensitive analysis.

By applying CDSF to a contemporary literary text characterized by deliberate semantic ambiguity and misdirection, this study establishes the framework as a critical innovation for both linguistic and literary research. The CDSF thus enables more nuanced, contextually attuned readings of canonical texts and represents a significant advancement in bridging linguistic and literary methodologies. Moreover, its pedagogical potential lies in equipping teachers with a systematic protocol for guiding students beyond surface-level definitions, fostering interpretive depth, and cultivating historically grounded critical reading.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive paradigm, foregrounding the systematic application of the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) to key lexical items in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* (1948). The study employs a qualitative textual analysis design, structured as an embedded single-case study, with the short story functioning as the bounded unit of analysis. The chosen methodology is anchored in the fields of literary linguistics and qualitative literary criticism, with an explicit focus on rigorous textual analysis, interdisciplinary theoretical integration, and context-sensitive interpretation. Every stage of the methodology is designed to ensure analytic transparency, replicability, and scholarly rigor, addressing the highest standards of contemporary research in literary studies.

3.1. Corpus Selection

The core textual corpus for this study is Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, a seminal short story in twentieth-century American literature. *The Lottery* was selected due to its enduring status in literary pedagogy, its layered thematic complexity, and its masterful manipulation of ordinary language to challenge and subvert prevailing cultural and semantic expectations. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select this text based on its dense lexical ambiguity and its frequent inclusion in literature syllabi and critical discourse. The story's linguistic subtlety and cultural resonance render it an ideal text for tracing the diachronic and contextual evolution of key lexical items, especially those that carry significant narrative and symbolic weight.

3.2. Lexical Item Selection

A rigorous selection process was used to identify five lexical items from *The Lottery* that are both explicitly stated in the text and central to its thematic architecture. The chosen words—"lottery," "village," "tradition," "black box," and "stones"—appear recurrently in both narration and dialogue, functioning as semantic anchors for the story's symbolic and interpretive dynamics. Their selection was determined through a combination of frequency analysis, narrative prominence, and their established significance in existing critical literature (Neumann, Gilbertson, & Hutton, 2014; Freeman, 2010). This ensures that the analysis remains both textually grounded and relevant to ongoing scholarly discourse.

To enhance the validity of lexical selection and interpretation, expert opinions were solicited from two senior faculty members specializing in literary linguistics and historical semantics. Their feedback informed the refinement of both the selected items and their analytic treatment within each CDSF layer.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The core analytical procedure comprises five interrelated layers as operationalized in the CDSF. Each lexical item is systematically subjected to the following stages, ensuring a comprehensive and historically informed semantic analysis:

3.3.1. Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)

This initial stage traces each word's etymological lineage, mapping its root morphemes, earliest attested forms, and major documented semantic shifts. Primary reliance is placed on the Oxford English Dictionary (2024) and corroborated with supplementary diachronic linguistic sources, ensuring an authoritative etymological foundation. Where etymological ambiguities or contested developments arise, secondary sources are carefully consulted, and findings are explicitly documented.

3.3.2. Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)

In this stage, each word's semantic evolution is mapped across major historical periods—such as Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, and Late Modern English—utilizing large-scale linguistic corpora and diachronic lexical databases, including the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) and the Historical Thesaurus of English (Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016; Tahmasebi et al., 2018). This mapping identifies and contextualizes significant shifts in denotation, connotation, and socio-cultural function, as well as moments of semantic bifurcation or narrowing/widening.

3.3.3. Contextual Literary Function (CLF)

This phase involves a meticulous close reading of *The Lottery*, examining the narrative deployment, rhetorical function, and thematic resonance of each lexical item within the text. The

analysis draws on established principles of literary hermeneutics, considering both explicit usages and implicit symbolic significances, and attends to the interplay between language and genre conventions (Bronstein, 2014; Freeman, 2010).

3.3.4. Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)

Each word's broader cultural, philosophical, and ideological embedding is analyzed in relation to historical and intertextual contexts. This layer incorporates insights from critical linguistics and cultural studies, tracing intertextual references, allusions, and sociocultural connotations relevant to the period and literary tradition (Hadigheh & Khaghaninezhad, 2013; Andersen, 2013). The CHE stage ensures that the analysis captures not only the micro-context of the story but also its macro-context within the literary and cultural field.

3.3.5. Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)

The final analytic stage synthesizes the findings from the preceding layers to reconstruct a historically grounded, contextually nuanced interpretation of each lexical item's meaning and function in *The Lottery*. This synthesis is explicitly designed to avoid semantic anachronism and presentist biases, thus enabling a more accurate, layered, and faithful literary interpretation (Traugott & Dasher, 2009; Rudolph & Blei, 2018).

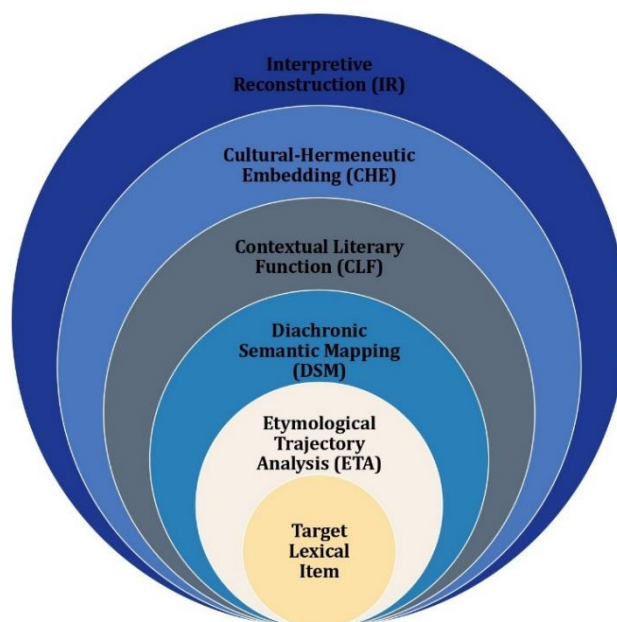


Figure 1. The Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF)

3.4. Data Sources and Analytic Tools

Multiple data sources and analytic tools are employed to ensure the validity, triangulation, and depth of interpretation in this study. The Oxford English Dictionary (2024) serves as the principal source for etymological and historical semantic data, offering authoritative documentation of word origins and meaning shifts. In addition, diachronic linguistic corpora such as the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), the Historical Thesaurus of English, and Google Books Ngram Viewer provide empirical means for tracking usage patterns and semantic developments across time (Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016). Peer-reviewed scholarship, including recent theoretical monographs, research articles, and interdisciplinary frameworks, further informs both the conceptualization and interpretation of semantic change, literary hermeneutics, and cognitive linguistics (Freeman, 2010; Hadigheh & Khaghaninezhad, 2013; Williams, 2022). All data are subjected to a systematic process of triangulation, ensuring that etymological, corpus-based, and interpretive insights are cross-validated for consistency and scholarly accuracy.

3.5. Analytical Rigor and Trustworthiness

To guarantee transparency and replicability, each stage of the analytic process is thoroughly documented. Interpretive decisions are justified through explicit textual and historical evidence, with ambiguous or contested cases discussed and alternative readings acknowledged. Peer debriefing, multiple coding cycles, and iterative re-reading of both primary and secondary sources are employed to ensure interpretive robustness and minimize subjective bias. The methodology is designed so that independent scholars can reproduce the analytic process with a high degree of fidelity.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study is exclusively text-based and does not involve human participants, personal data, or interventions. All secondary sources, including dictionaries, corpora, and scholarly works, are properly cited and attributed in accordance with established academic standards and copyright law. The research fully complies with principles of transparency, intellectual honesty, and academic integrity.

4. Results

The CDSF's layered approach demonstrates how the keywords in "The Lottery" embody, at every semantic and cultural level, the deep contradictions and interpretive tensions that animate Jackson's narrative. Each layer—Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA), Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM), Contextual Literary Function (CLF), Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE), and Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)—is explored in detail for every lexical item.

4.1. Lottery

4.1.1. Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)

The word "lottery" is etymologically rooted in the Italian *lotteria*, which refers to an arrangement for distributing prizes by chance, and in the Middle Dutch *lot* (meaning "lot, portion, destiny"), as well as the Old French *loterie*. Early English uses are attested in the 16th century, describing public or state-sanctioned procedures for the distribution of goods, property, or obligations (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The sense of "lot" as a share or fate emphasizes the collective randomness and the communal nature of decision-making, elements crucial for understanding the original semantic load of "lottery." As Blank (1999) explains, such terms are often motivated by the cognitive domain of randomness, risk, and fate, embedded within the economic, legal, and sometimes punitive practices of society.

4.1.2. Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)

Across history, "lottery" shifted from a process with sometimes grave implications—allocation of land, property, or even, in rare cases, conscription or exile—to a positive or benign game of chance in the 19th and especially 20th centuries. This amelioration is well documented in corpus evidence (Geeraerts, 2009; Traugott & Dasher, 2009), where "lottery" collocates increasingly with "prize," "ticket," and "winner" in modern English, and almost never with punishment or loss. In literary and public discourse, "lottery" is seldom associated with negative outcomes in the modern era, a shift that underpins Jackson's narrative misdirection.

4.1.3. Contextual Literary Function (CLF)

In "The Lottery," the benign sense is foregrounded in both the title and early narrative, drawing on the word's contemporary association with festive chance and communal excitement. Jackson deliberately exploits this expectation, structuring the reader's affective response through strategic ambiguity and gradual revelation. The contrast between expectation and reality is integral to the story's critique of tradition: what appears as a harmless routine is, in fact, a mechanism of collective

violence. As Geeraerts (2009) and Allen (2020) note, such ironization of lexical meaning is central to modern literary practice, particularly in texts that interrogate social ritual.

4.1.4. Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)

The “lottery” in the story resonates with anthropological and religious traditions of drawing lots to determine social outcomes, including sacrificial selection (Evans, 2012). Biblical precedents (such as the scapegoat ritual in Leviticus 16) highlight the practice’s power to legitimize acts that would otherwise be morally unacceptable by framing them as the product of impersonal fate rather than personal agency. Jackson’s ritual thus gains authority from a long history of sacred and profane lotteries, embedding the story’s events within a broader human tendency to disguise violence under the veneer of chance and communal will.

4.1.5. Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)

By reconstructing “lottery” through all previous layers, it becomes evident that the word in Jackson’s story operates on two levels: it is at once a token of modern innocence and a cipher for archaic sacrifice. This polysemy is not incidental but is strategically central to the story’s indictment of tradition as a site of latent violence. The word “lottery” thus serves as both thematic fulcrum and hermeneutic trap, foregrounding the ethical dangers of semantic amnesia in collective life. This insight equips literature educators to critically guide students in unpacking lexical dissonance, encouraging historical awareness when interpreting deceptively familiar terms.

Table 1. Comprehensive CDSF Analysis: “Lottery”

CDSF Layer	Discussion
ETA	Etymology traces to communal fate/distribution by chance, via Italian, Dutch, French.
DSM	Shift from grave/neutral social allocation to benign game, now strongly positive in modern use.
CLF	Jackson manipulates modern sense to generate narrative irony and social critique.
CHE	Mirrors ancient traditions (biblical, anthropological) of using lots to legitimize violence or sacrifice.
IR	Reveals “lottery” as a token of collective violence disguised as tradition, indicting the ethics of uncritical continuity.

4.2. Village

4.2.1. Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)

“Village” comes from Old French *village*, Latin *villaticum* (relating to a farmhouse), and originally denoted a rural cluster of habitations. Its connotation in early English was often neutral, or sometimes even negative, carrying implications of backwardness or marginality in contrast to cities (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The root *villa* emphasizes the agricultural and domestic origins of the settlement.

4.2.2. Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, especially in American literature and culture, “village” acquired a romantic and ameliorated valence, representing idyllic community, innocence, and the pastoral escape from modern urbanity (Geeraerts, 2009). This semantic shift is traceable in literary

and cultural production, where “village” becomes synonymous with safety, communal solidarity, and the “good old days.”

4.2.3. Contextual Literary Function (CLF)

Jackson’s narrative turns this expectation on its head. The ordinary village, described in gentle, familiar terms, is transformed into the site of ritual murder. The effect is one of profound estrangement, as the archetype of innocence becomes an arena for atrocity. The reader’s trust in the semantic comfort of “village” is methodically undermined, inviting reflection on the potential darkness that undergirds communal bonds.

4.2.4. Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)

This subversion connects to a broader literary and philosophical tradition that interrogates the rural ideal. From Hardy’s tragic villages to American modernist critique, the “village” is both haven and potential crucible of violence (Wellek & Warren, 1956). The word thus indexes not only a location but a tension between nostalgia and the realities of collective life, including the community’s role in legitimizing violence.

4.2.5. Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)

A full CDSF reading exposes the “village” as a paradoxical space: it is the heart of tradition and belonging, yet also the locus of exclusion and sanctioned brutality. The evolution of the word’s meaning amplifies Jackson’s theme that violence is not the property of the “other,” but may be woven into the very fabric of ordinary, even beloved, communities. This understanding supports literary pedagogy by prompting students to interrogate the tension between linguistic nostalgia and socio-historical critique in rural representations.

Table 2. Comprehensive CDSF Analysis: “Village”

CDSF Layer	Discussion
ETA	Originates in Latin/French, denotes rural settlement; initially neutral or rustic, not idealized.
DSM	Semantic shift to idealized, safe, communal in modernity, especially in American English.
CLF	Jackson weaponizes the ideal, using the village as a site of shocking ritual violence and reader estrangement.
CHE	Invokes a literary tradition critiquing rural idealism and exposing latent dangers in insular communities.
IR	“Village” is reinterpreted as a locus of both community and exclusionary, legitimized violence, undermining pastoral nostalgia.

4.3. Tradition

4.3.1. Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)

“Tradition” is derived from Latin *traditio*, meaning “a handing over,” and in Middle English referred to the act of transmitting or delivering beliefs, customs, or practices (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The term’s legal and ecclesiastical uses reinforced its neutrality, with positive or negative value contingent upon what was transmitted.

4.3.2. Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)

Over time, particularly with the rise of Romanticism and nationalist movements, “tradition” gained a largely positive semantic charge—emblematic of cultural heritage, continuity, and identity (Blank, 1999; Traugott & Dasher, 2009). Yet, it retained ambivalence, sometimes criticized for perpetuating outdated or oppressive customs.

4.3.3. Contextual Literary Function (CLF)

Within “The Lottery,” “tradition” is the story’s ultimate justification for the ritual, invoked even as participants no longer remember its origin or purpose. The repeated reference to “tradition” as a reason for the violence—“there’s always been a lottery”—exposes the moral vacuum that can result from unexamined inheritance. The word, in this context, operates as both shield and sword: protecting the practice from scrutiny, and enabling atrocity through passive continuity.

4.3.4. Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)

Jackson’s engagement with tradition reflects philosophical debates about the ethics of custom, notably those of Gadamer (2013), who argues for the interpretive necessity of tradition but also its continual re-evaluation. The story dramatizes the perils of tradition detached from rational or ethical assessment—a concern that remains acute in postwar and contemporary cultural critique.

4.3.5. Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)

CDSF analysis confirms that “tradition” in Jackson’s text is not merely a descriptive label but a normative mechanism with profound ethical implications. Its semantic evolution, from neutral to positive to dangerous, reveals the instability of communal memory and the urgency of critical reflection on inherited practices. This layered interpretation enables literature educators to teach students how language naturalizes ideology and to foster critical engagement with inherited discourses.

Table 3. Comprehensive CDSF Analysis: “Tradition”

CDSF Layer	Discussion
ETA	Latin/French initially denotes "handing over" of customs, neutral in value.
DSM	Gains positive value in modernity; an emblem of heritage, yet also carries the risk of inertia or oppression.
CLF	Used in the story as a justification for ritual violence, despite the loss of its original meaning.
CHE	Reflects philosophical debates (Gadamer) on tradition’s dual power—cultural grounding and ethical danger.
IR	“Tradition” becomes a means of legitimizing harm; CDSF foregrounds the necessity of interrogating inherited norms.

4.4. Black Box

4.4.1. Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)

The phrase “black box” fuses Old English *b/æc* (“dark, ink-like”) and *box* (“container”), but as a compound phrase, it is only attested from the 19th century, denoting any container that obscures its

contents or function (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). The color “black” in ritual and symbolic contexts is frequently associated with secrecy, fate, or the unknown.

4.4.2. *Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)*

While “box” retains a stable denotation, “black box” gains specialized technical, ritual, and metaphorical meanings in the 20th century. In systems theory and aviation, for instance, it represents processes that are inscrutable, while in ritual contexts it becomes a token of fate or doom (Geeraerts, 2009).

4.4.3. *Contextual Literary Function (CLF)*

In Jackson’s story, the black box is the physical and symbolic center of the lottery ritual. Its decrepit appearance—“the black box grew shabbier each year”—signifies the decay of meaning and the blind persistence of tradition. It is treated with a reverence disproportionate to its material value, signaling its function as a ritual totem.

4.4.4. *Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)*

Anthropologically, the black box operates as an object of communal memory and sacred anxiety, analogous to religious relics or totemic objects whose power resides not in their physical form but in the traditions and fears projected onto them (Gadamer, 2013).

4.4.5. *Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)*

CDSF analysis positions the black box as an emblem of social complicity: it is a container of fate and collective guilt. The box’s continued use, despite its condition, marks the villagers’ inability—or refusal—to question the foundations of their ritual, thus exposing the dangers of ossified custom. This analytical layer provides students with a framework to examine how symbols acquire meaning through cultural inertia, deepening their interpretive skills in decoding narrative objects.

Table 4. Comprehensive CDSF Analysis: “Black Box”

CDSF Layer	Discussion
ETA	Compound of “black” (dark, unknown) and “box” (container); phrase denotes mystery/fate in ritual contexts.
DSM	Literal meaning stable; gains metaphorical sense as an object of inscrutability or fatalism.
CLF	Ritual centerpiece; physical decay mirrors decay of meaning, but not of power.
CHE	Totemic object of memory, fear, and collective identity; echoes anthropological theories of sacred objects.
IR	The black box symbolizes the opacity of tradition and collective complicity in violence.

4.5. *Stones*

4.5.1. *Etymological Trajectory Analysis (ETA)*

“Stone” is of Old English (*stān*), Proto-Germanic, and Proto-Indo-European origin, with an unchanging literal meaning referring to hard, solid mineral material (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

4.5.2. *Diachronic Semantic Mapping (DSM)*

While “stone” is semantically stable in denotation, its connotations have deepened over millennia, particularly as an instrument of collective punishment. The act of stoning appears in numerous biblical and historical records as a form of communal execution, embedding the object in cultural memories of violence (Evans, 2012).

4.5.3. Contextual Literary Function (CLF)

In “The Lottery,” stones are introduced as innocuous playthings gathered by children, but they acquire menacing significance as the narrative unfolds. Their transformation from mundane to lethal objects encapsulates the story’s exploration of the thin line between ordinary life and horror.

4.5.4. Cultural-Hermeneutic Embedding (CHE)

The stoning ritual links the village to ancient punitive traditions, highlighting the endurance of primordial violence under the guise of law, justice, or custom. Stones, as weapons wielded by the collective, emphasize the shared, impersonal nature of ritualized violence (Gadamer, 2013).

4.5.5. Interpretive Reconstruction (IR)

The CDSF reveals that “stones” in the story function as a synecdoche for the community itself: each individual is implicated in the act of violence. The transformation of stones in the story—from play to murder—embodies the capacity for evil latent in the ordinary, a central concern of both Jackson’s narrative and the history of collective violence. This insight sharpens students’ ability to trace how concrete objects in literature serve as ethical mirrors for societal complicity and normalized violence.

Table 5. Comprehensive CDSF Analysis: “Stones”

CDSF Layer	Discussion
ETA	Old English/Proto-Germanic, literal sense unchanged.
DSM	Denotation stable; connotations expand in ritual/justice contexts (stoning as execution).
CLF	Ordinary object becomes an instrument of communal violence; children’s play shifts to atrocity.
CHE	Links the village’s ritual to ancient, culturally embedded acts of collective punishment.
IR	“Stones” are a vehicle for the story’s meditation on collective guilt and the transformation of the banal.

5. Discussion

The application of the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” has yielded valuable insights into the interpretive possibilities afforded by a multidimensional and historically attuned approach to literary lexical analysis. By examining the selected lexical items—“lottery,” “village,” “tradition,” “black box,” and “stones”—through the five analytic layers of the CDSF, this study foregrounds the dynamic nature of meaning in literature. The findings reinforce the idea that meaning is neither fixed nor solely anchored in the present moment, but is continuously shaped and reshaped by historical, cultural, and textual factors. This is consistent

with prior research, such as Munteanu-Iorga (2022). and Belas & Hopkins (2019), who argue that canonical texts derive part of their power from semantic ambiguity and ideological resonance.

5.1. Uncovering the Polysemy of Canonical Texts

A principal contribution of this research lies in revealing the polysemous nature of canonical literary texts. The seemingly straightforward vocabulary employed by Jackson conceals complex semantic trajectories that significantly enrich the thematic depth of “The Lottery.” For example, “lottery”—now commonly associated with recreational games of chance—once denoted high-stakes mechanisms for communal decision-making, sometimes determining resource allocation or even life and death (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Through the lens of CDSF, it becomes evident that Jackson intentionally draws on both the historical gravity and the contemporary banality of the term, creating a layered irony that challenges surface-level interpretation. This aligns with critical accounts such as those of Aji & Rahayu (2024) and Zhou (2024), who note that Jackson’s lexical precision contributes to the text’s destabilizing force, eliciting discomfort through contradiction.

Similar dynamics are observed with the other target words. “Village,” traditionally idealized as a locus of innocence and community harmony, is transformed in Jackson’s narrative into a site of latent violence, thus subverting conventional literary associations (Robinson, 2019). “Tradition,” which often signals social cohesion and continuity, is exposed as a force of inertia, complicit in the perpetuation of uncritical brutality. Objects like the “black box” and “stones,” while seemingly mundane, accrue ritualistic and punitive significance through their historical, symbolic, and cultural resonances. The CDSF demonstrates how literary texts can reactivate dormant semantic layers, repurposing them for thematic and ideological effects.

More specifically, Jackson’s ironic deployment of tradition echoes concerns raised by critics such as Nugraha & Mahdi (2020), who argue that “The Lottery” reveals the insidious normalization of violence within small-town America. The CDSF brings empirical clarity to this critique by tracing how lexical forms like “tradition” or “village” are semantically reactivated to serve this ideological aim.

5.2. Mitigating Semantic Anachronism and Enhancing Critical Reading

A central achievement of the CDSF lies in its robust mitigation of semantic anachronism—a persistent challenge in both scholarly and pedagogical contexts (Blank, 1999; Traugott & Dasher, 2009). By guiding interpreters through a disciplined progression from etymological origins to semantic evolution, contextual deployment, and cultural embedding, the CDSF ensures that readings remain faithful to the historical realities of the text. This methodological rigor guards against the projection of contemporary assumptions onto historically distant works, which is particularly crucial for canonical texts that manipulate or are vulnerable to lexical misunderstanding. As literary scholars such as Asztalos et al. (2024) and Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky (2016) emphasize, failure to account for diachronic shifts in meaning can lead to serious interpretive distortions, particularly among student readers trained to rely on presentist definitions.

This framework also advances best practices in education and knowledge dissemination. Semantic transparency, or the alignment of word form and meaning, is vital for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension, reducing the risk of anachronistic misreadings (Marelli, Amenta, & Crepaldi, 2015). Structured approaches to vocabulary—such as systematic groupings of related terms—support retention and understanding, further safeguarding against semantic misalignment (Zipoli, Coyne, & McCoach, 2010). The integration of semantic technologies, including ontologies and information retrieval systems, enhances the coherence and interoperability of educational materials, supporting consistent and accurate interpretation (Ermilov, Khalili, & Auer, 2014; Nardi et al., 2013).

Thus, the CDSF not only enriches literary scholarship but also provides a methodological template for effective teaching and curricular design.

Crucially, the framework offers a corrective to surface-level or literalist readings common in literature classrooms. By tracing lexical trajectories and embedding them in historical frames, the CDSF equips students to read critically and contextually. This pedagogical function complements the work of educators like Liu & Dou (2023) and Osman (2016), who argue for deeper semantic engagement as a prerequisite for interpretive sophistication. In the case of “The Lottery,” the framework helps prevent oversimplified interpretations that see the ritual as merely “tradition” without unpacking the coercive and sacrificial forces the word historically connoted.

Furthermore, the framework’s insistence on historical and cultural context prevents the flattening of meaning that often arises when words are read solely through their most recent or familiar definitions (Geeraerts, 2009; Evans, 2012). In “The Lottery,” this approach yields a reading attuned to Jackson’s nuanced critique of tradition, illuminating the moral ambiguities and social costs embedded within communal rituals. As noted by earlier scholars such as Aji & Rahayu (2024), the failure to apprehend the layered symbolism of words like “lottery” and “black box” can lead to moral relativism or ethical detachment. The CDSF intervenes by restoring semantic accountability to literary reading.

5.3. Integrating Linguistics, Hermeneutics, and Literary Criticism

The CDSF stands as a model of interdisciplinary integration, drawing from historical linguistics, prototype semantics, hermeneutics, and literary criticism. Where corpus linguistics supplies empirical evidence of historical usage and semantic drift (Geeraerts, 2009), hermeneutic theory—especially as articulated by Gadamer—underscores the dialogical and historically situated character of meaning (Gadamer, 2013). Literary criticism, meanwhile, insists on the specificity of the text, highlighting the rhetorical, thematic, and ideological dimensions of every lexical choice (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

This triangulation is particularly effective in decoding the moral complexity of Jackson’s narrative. Literary scholars such as Aizaz & Mujahid (2021) and Lootens (2012) have shown that Jackson’s prose relies heavily on understatement and ordinary language to conceal extraordinary horror. The CDSF expands upon these insights by revealing how individual words—such as “stones” or “tradition,” carry the weight of historical violence beneath their modern façade.

This synthesis equips scholars and students to recognize how literary works like “The Lottery” harness and contest the semantic histories of their language. The CDSF’s five-layer structure provides an explicit protocol for uncovering these complexities, making possible more rigorous, nuanced, and contextually responsive readings across a range of genres and historical periods. Unlike conventional close reading or thematic analysis alone, the CDSF adds a historical-linguistic dimension that complements critical theory and textual interpretation.

5.4. Implications for Literary Scholarship

The results of this study have broad implications for the discipline of literary scholarship. The CDSF offers a replicable and systematic methodology for analyzing the key terms of any historical or literary corpus, thus reducing reliance on intuitive or impressionistic interpretations. It also foregrounds the ethical responsibilities of interpreters, reminding scholars that words are not neutral vessels but are often loaded with inherited systems of value, exclusion, and power (Evans, 2012).

This is particularly crucial for canonical texts like Jackson’s, where semantic misreadings can perpetuate reductive or ahistorical interpretations. For example, readers unfamiliar with the violent connotations historically embedded in “lottery” or “stones” may overlook the story’s critique of normalized brutality. As observed by critics such as Suwardi (2016), such interpretive oversights

diminish the political urgency of the narrative. The CDSF offers a corrective to this tendency by making the historical and ideological sediment of each lexical item visible.

Furthermore, this approach demonstrates that the enduring resonance of canonical texts often stems from their capacity to engage, challenge, and contest the semantic histories of their constituent language. The principles and procedures outlined in the CDSF are readily adaptable to other genres, historical contexts, and even non-literary discourses, wherever the evolution of word meaning shapes interpretive outcomes.

In doing so, the CDSF contributes to literary scholarship's growing concern with epistemic justice—the need to recover suppressed or distorted meanings in texts shaped by power asymmetries. This is consistent with poststructuralist and postcolonial efforts to decolonize reading practices and restore interpretive agency to marginalized voices.

5.5. Transformative Impact on Literature Pedagogy

The pedagogical value of this research is substantial. Literature educators consistently confront the difficulty of guiding students beyond superficial dictionary definitions to an appreciation of historical and cultural depth (Traugott & Dasher, 2009). The CDSF provides a concrete, structured approach for leading learners through the complexities of word history and meaning evolution, fostering habits of intellectual humility, critical inquiry, and historical empathy.

By situating meaning at the intersection of history, culture, and ethics, the framework cultivates critical literacy. Students learn to interrogate texts not merely for their content, but for the ways in which language constructs, reflects, and sometimes contests social realities. This aligns with the most current best practices in humanities education, which emphasize interpretive rigor, interdisciplinary thinking, and ethical awareness (Wellek & Warren, 1956).

Unlike surface-level reading strategies that rely solely on plot or theme identification, the CDSF develops semantic awareness—a skill that strengthens learners' ability to detect ideological manipulation and linguistic opacity in texts. This is especially useful in teaching stories like “The Lottery,” which, as Zhou (2024) argues, depend on the reader's delayed realization that ordinary words cloak extraordinary violence. The CDSF thus equips students to recognize rhetorical irony, subverted expectations, and latent cultural scripts embedded in lexis.

The CDSF's adaptability enhances its relevance to curriculum development, lesson planning, and assessment design, making it possible to value the interpretive process as much as the product. The use of contextualized word embeddings in semantic analysis further supports the teaching of language change and cultural shifts (Kutuzov, Velldal, & Øvrelid, 2022; Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016). Research also indicates that understanding the evolution of word meanings enriches students' critical literacy and inquiry-based engagement with texts (Dahl, 2015; Hilpert & Perek, 2015; Hu et al., 2019). As such, CDSF models scholarly rigor and ensures that advances in research methodology are effectively translated into classroom practice (Rodina & Kutuzov, 2020).

Ultimately, by mitigating semantic anachronism and foregrounding interpretive nuance, the CDSF fosters a classroom culture where meaning is understood as historically contingent and ethically significant. This aligns with the goals of transformative education that prioritize reflective reading and civic awareness.

5.6. Limitations and Future Directions

While the CDSF demonstrates significant potential, its application in this study is necessarily limited by the genre, textual scope, and cultural context of “The Lottery.” Future research should test the flexibility and generalizability of the framework across more extensive and diverse literary corpora, including longer prose works, poetry, drama, and texts from different cultural and linguistic

traditions. The integration of quantitative corpus analysis, digital tools, and collaborative interdisciplinary methods could further enhance the CDSF protocol and expand its utility.

Additionally, empirical studies exploring the implementation of CDSF in classroom environments—through lesson design, instructional strategies, and assessment—could validate its pedagogical value and reveal new avenues for curriculum innovation. Such research would not only confirm the robustness of the framework but would also contribute to the evolution of critical literacy and literary education in a rapidly changing linguistic and cultural landscape.

More specifically, longitudinal classroom-based studies could examine how students apply diachronic semantic insights in their literary interpretations and whether these practices improve their reading comprehension, engagement, and ethical reflection. Case studies comparing CDSF-based instruction with traditional teaching approaches could clarify its added value in enhancing literary learning outcomes.

Finally, future iterations of the framework might explore how CDSF can be integrated into teacher training programs, particularly those focused on teaching canonical texts that present ethical dilemmas or culturally loaded vocabulary. As literature teachers are often the first line of defense against interpretive oversimplification, equipping them with historically grounded lexical tools is vital to promoting depth-oriented reading across educational contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the transformative potential of the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) for literary analysis and pedagogy by applying its five interrelated layers to the reading of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Through the systematic examination of explicit lexical items—"lottery," "village," "tradition," "black box," and "stones"—the research has illuminated the semantic complexities and historical resonances that underlie even the most familiar language in canonical texts.

By traversing etymological origins, tracking diachronic semantic shifts, analyzing contextual literary functions, embedding words within broader cultural and hermeneutic traditions, and finally synthesizing these insights into historically responsible interpretations, the CDSF approach has revealed the deep polysemy and ideological tensions at play in Jackson's narrative. The analysis has shown that words are not merely passive carriers of meaning; rather, they are active sites where social memory, cultural value, and ethical conflict are negotiated and contested.

Significantly, this research has addressed the persistent risk of semantic anachronism in literary interpretation and has provided a rigorous, replicable model for avoiding presentist misreadings. The study's findings confirm that a multidimensional and diachronically informed method such as CDSF is indispensable for uncovering the layers of meaning that animate and complicate great literature. This is not only vital for scholarly analysis but also for educational practice, where fostering historical empathy, critical literacy, and ethical reflection is paramount.

Moreover, the CDSF's structure is highly transferable to domains of teacher education, textbook authorship, and academic reading instruction. By equipping educators with a systematic method for unpacking lexical and cultural complexity, the framework enhances teacher training programs, especially in literature and language instruction. Textbook developers can also use CDSF to structure lexical selections and semantic annotations, ensuring that reading materials convey historical depth and cultural nuance.

In academic reading strategies, CDSF enables learners to progress from superficial decoding to interpretive analysis grounded in linguistic evidence and cultural sensitivity. This scaffolds reading

comprehension in ways that align with 21st-century educational goals, particularly the development of historical awareness, critical thinking, and ethical discernment.

While the focus of this study was necessarily limited to a single short story and a select group of lexical items, the CDSF framework is designed to be adaptable across genres, periods, and even languages. Its interdisciplinary foundation—bridging historical linguistics, hermeneutics, and literary criticism—positions it as a valuable protocol for future research and curriculum development in both linguistics and the humanities.

In conclusion, the CDSF advances the field by offering an integrated, context-sensitive approach to meaning in literature, equipping both scholars and students to read with greater depth, historical awareness, and ethical responsibility. Its potential to inform not only research but also pedagogical design underscores its versatility and relevance in diverse educational contexts. As language continues to evolve and as literary texts are re-read by new generations, such a framework will remain essential for ensuring that the richness and complexity of literary meaning are neither lost nor misunderstood.

7. Suggestion

Building on the insights and outcomes of this study, several key suggestions emerge for scholars, educators, curriculum developers, and future researchers interested in lexical semantics, literary criticism, and literature pedagogy.

7.1. For Literary and Linguistic Researchers

Researchers are encouraged to apply the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework (CDSF) to a wider range of literary texts, genres, and periods. Its adaptability makes it suitable for examining novels, poetry, drama, and non-literary discourses where the evolution of word meaning significantly shapes interpretation. Comparative studies using CDSF across different languages or cultural traditions may reveal universal and particular patterns in semantic change and literary function, further validating and refining the framework. It is also recommended that researchers engage in meta-analyses of prior semantic studies in literary texts to determine how historical lexical analysis has been unevenly applied across different traditions. CDSF offers a unifying lens to rectify this gap and establish consistency in interpretive practices.

7.2. For Literature Teachers and Pedagogical Practice

Literature educators should consider integrating the CDSF protocol into classroom instruction and curriculum design. By modeling historical-semantic analysis and encouraging students to investigate the layers of meaning in key terms, teachers can foster habits of critical inquiry, historical empathy, and ethical reflection. For example, teachers can design lesson plans where students trace the historical and symbolic evolution of a word such as “sacrifice” or “tradition” within a literary text, using CDSF stages such as Etymological Trajectory Analysis and Contextual Literary Function.

In classroom practice, CDSF can be incorporated into modules on symbolic language, allegory, and thematic interpretation. Students may work in pairs or small groups to apply the five-step analysis to pivotal terms in the assigned readings, with scaffolded worksheets guiding them through etymological exploration and cultural embedding. Lesson plans, assignments, and assessment tools based on CDSF can deepen students' engagement with texts and develop their capacity for context-sensitive interpretation. Professional development workshops on the practical application of CDSF may also support broader uptake among teaching staff.

7.3. For Curriculum Developers and Educational Policymakers

Curriculum developers at the secondary and tertiary levels can draw upon the CDSF to create modules, syllabi, and resource materials that foreground the importance of language change in literature. Embedding historical linguistics and diachronic semantics within literature courses not only enhances interpretive skills but also aligns with broader educational goals of critical thinking, interdisciplinarity, and ethical awareness. Developers are encouraged to align CDSF-based modules with national curriculum standards, particularly competencies in vocabulary development, historical contextualization, and textual analysis. Sample module themes may include “Words That Shape Worldviews,” “Semantic Shifts and Power,” or “Reading Symbols Across Time.” These may culminate in performance tasks or portfolio-based assessments that demonstrate students’ diachronic interpretive abilities.

7.4. For Future Development of the CDSF

Further refinement and expansion of the CDSF framework are recommended. Empirical studies assessing its effectiveness in classroom settings, its integration with digital humanities tools (e.g., corpus analysis, semantic mapping software), and its utility in multilingual and multicultural contexts would strengthen the model’s generalizability and impact. Collaborative research between linguists, literary scholars, and educators will be crucial for the continued evolution of the CDSF.

In particular, action research conducted by literature teachers can explore how students respond to CDSF-informed strategies in real-world classroom settings, documenting both learning outcomes and challenges in implementation. These practitioner insights can guide iterative revisions of the framework for maximum usability and pedagogical alignment.

7.5. For Interdisciplinary Inquiry

Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations that leverage CDSF in conjunction with history, philosophy, religious studies, and cultural studies are encouraged. Such work may illuminate new dimensions of meaning in canonical and emergent texts and provide more comprehensive strategies for the study and teaching of literature as an evolving, dialogic cultural practice. Scholars may also explore CDSF’s potential in media literacy, sociolinguistics, and translation studies, where semantic histories bear on issues of ideology, representation, and meaning transfer.

These suggestions aim to maximize the scholarly, pedagogical, and practical value of the Contextual Diachronic Semantic Framework, ensuring its ongoing contribution to the advancement of literary studies, linguistics, and education. By offering educators concrete pathways for lesson planning, curriculum alignment, and textual interpretation, CDSF becomes more than a research tool—it becomes a pedagogical bridge between scholarship and classroom practice.

Declarations

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Ethical Approval. This study is exclusively text-based and does not involve human participants, personal data, or interventions. All secondary sources, including dictionaries, corpora, and scholarly works, are properly cited and attributed. Ethical approval was not required.

Data Availability Statement. All data supporting the results of this study are contained within the article and its references. No additional datasets were generated or analyzed for this study.

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