Mrs. Kator and her son Howard visit with [Mrs. Lennon](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-lottery-and-other-stories/study-guide/character-list#mrs-lennon) and her granddaughter, Harriet. Everyone listens to Howard play the piano, though Harriet privately remembers that she played the same piece the previous year. However, Harriet does not want to play the piano for the guests. She comforts herself with the thought that, though Howard is bigger than she is, Harriet is older.

As she expects, Harriet’s mother urges her to play the piano for the Kators. Unwilling to be a pawn in the adults’ passive-aggressive competition regarding their children’s talents, Harriet lies and insists that she does not know any pieces on the piano. Mrs. Kator condescendingly exaggerates her understanding of Harriet’s shyness. To compensate for her granddaughter’s reticence, Harriet’s grandmother reveals that Harriet writes wonderful poetry.

Harriet does not want to share her poetry with the adults and Howard, particularly as she can tell that Howard will tease her about this in front of other children. Nonetheless, Harriet’s grandmother forces her to retrieve her envelope of poems. When Harriet refuses to read one aloud, the grandmother recites one in her stead, and Howard is delighted by the prospect of teasing Harriet. Frustrated and angered that her wishes have not been respected by the adults, Harriet insists that she in fact plagiarized the poems, thus embarrassing her mother and her grandmother.

Analysis

As seen in "After You, My Dear Alphonse," this story demonstrates the unwillingness of children to play along with adults in their passive-aggressive comparisons of lifestyles, success, and wealth. Though the Kators and the Lennons are outwardly friendly towards one another, Mrs. Kator takes pride in Howard's accomplished skill at the piano and considers this a status symbol. Likewise, the Lennon women hope to use Harriet's skill, first as a pianist, then as a poet, to upstage Howard and Mrs. Kator.

The conflict of the young protagonist, Harriet, lies in her refusal to entertain her mother’s and grandmother’s attempts to use her as a pawn in showing up the Kators. She chooses not to play the piano for the Kators, although she is well capable of doing so. By refusing not to play along in their implicit competitiveness, Harriet displays her refusal to conform to societal conventions. As seen in "The Witch" or "After You, My Dear Alphonse," Jackson's youthful characters are most often removed from social constraints, and Harriet is another example of such a character. She would rather be considered a liar or a plagiarist, thus breaking away from the normal desire to be accepted and respectable, than take part in her mother's and grandmother's competition with the Kators.

The antagonists in this story are both Harriet's grandmother and [Howard Kator](https://www.gradesaver.com/the-lottery-and-other-stories/study-guide/character-list#howard-kator). Howard's insistence upon teasing her for writing poetry further quenches her willingness to share her poetry to the Kators. However, the story reaches a climax when the grandmother forcefully thrusts Harriet into the spotlight and reveals her poetry. This causes Harriet to lie about plagiarizing. Her only resolution to the conflict is to lie, as Harriet would rather impugn her own integrity and say that she has plagiarized, than allow her works to be used for such a purpose.

Since the reader knows that Harriet's claim of plagiarism is untrue, this is an example of dramatic irony. The Kators and Harriet's family believe her, but the reader knows better.

In addition, Jackson subtly employs irony in her description of the visit to highlight the adults’ transparently constructed social niceties. "Although Mrs. Lennon and Mrs. Kator lived on the same block and saw each other every day, this was a formal call, and so they were drinking tea" (75). The reader recognizes how foolish Lennon and Kator are in maintaining the facade of extreme formality, but Jackson describes this in a serious tone, which results in the irony.

"Afternoon in Linen" illustrates a young girl whose grandmother insists on showing her off like a pet poodle. She wants and then tries to demand that her granddaughter perform for the neighbor. Well, Harriet has the last laugh. A subtext of the story is the cruelty kids have with each other. The nuances of shame and bullying are exhibited truthfully. The story is barely over five pages long and was first published in 1943. The themes and sentiment are still relevant today, 2020.

Everyone is in linen. It all sounds very crisp. I think the moment in which the character shifts is right at the beginning when she thinks of Alice.

Like in Alice Through the Looking-Glass, the little girl thought, looking at her grandmother; like the gentleman all dressed in white paper. I'm a gentleman all dressed in pink paper, she thought.

When Alice enters that other world, she must think like a survivor. She must act from the hidden cues, not the obvious ones. This little girl must now act in a way that will horrify her grandmother, because there are other matters to think about than those her grandmother has in mind.  
  
At first she thinks she'll refuse to play the piano just because. That sends her further into the other-rational world of Alice. She must have a reason for not playing. She contradicts her grandmother at every turn. "I don't know any," the little girl said. Then it becomes about saving face in the schoolyard...the boy Harold will tell they other kids she writes poetry. She can't have that.  
  
She still can't avoid the poetry...her grandmother has it in an envelope, and even has the boy fetch it. He laughs and gloats. Harriet is backed into a corner.

He'll tell all the kids on the block, Harriet though. "I didn't write it," she said.  
"Why, Harriet!" Her grandmother laughed. "You don't need to be so modest, child. You write very nice poems."  
"I copied it out of a book," Harriet said. "I found it in a book and I copied it and gave it to my old grandmother and said I wrote it."

Three times Harriet must say she copied the poems. Now it might even be about impressing the other kids.

Harriet looked at Howard, who was staring at her in admiration. "I copied it out of a book," she said to him. "I found the book in the library one day."

Oh her poor poor grandmother.

It was a long, cool room, comfortably furnished and happily placed, with hydrangea bushes outside the large windows and their pleasant shadows on the floor. Everyone in it was wearing linen – the little girl in the pink linen dress with a wide blue belt, Mrs. Kator in a brown linen suit and a big, yellow linen hat, Mrs. Lennon, who was the little girl’s grandmother, in a white linen dress, and Mrs. Kator’s little boy, Howard, in a blue linen shirt and shorts. Like in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, the little girl thought, looking at her grandmother; like the gentleman all dressed in white paper. I’m a gentleman all dressed in pink paper, she thought. Although Mrs. Lennon and Mrs. Kator lived on the same block and saw each other every day, this was a formal call, and so they were drinking tea.