
Critical Analysis of a Short Story the Lottery by Shirley Jackson

Born on December 14th, 1916 Shirley Jackson was a well-established American writer until her death on August 8th, 1965. She primarily wrote horror, mystery, and supernatural stories. Within her two-decade long career she wrote six novels, two memoirs, and over 200 short stories, with some of her most prominent works including: "The Haunting of Hill House" and "The Bird's Nest". Among those short stories dwells a controversial and dark story called "The Lottery". "The Lottery" tells of an annual ritual held in a distant land, shrouded in a dark and uneasy feeling. It is not until the final lines of the short story that the story takes a very sudden turn and our suspicions are confirmed.

Shirley Jackson did not write "The Lottery", to simply expose an evil tradition carried on in a foreign land, but to expose the "evil traditions" we in the modern world have followed mindlessly for centuries. Through the expert use of irony, symbolism, and imagery, the author is able to convey her thoughts about the everyday evils carried out without a second thought by most, and that evil could sprout from anywhere. This story is set in a small village in a distant land, on a beautiful summer day. The story begins with the author painting a wholesome picture, with blossoming flowers and richly-green grass fields. Children innocently play and collect rocks in their pockets as their parents and families assemble in the square of the town for the conducting of the annual lottery. As the families gather the reader is able to infer that the village social structure is highly patriarchal, with children disregarding their mothers' commands, but being very quick to action when told by their fathers.

They focus their attention on a local volunteer and business tycoon Mr. Summers as he carries a black box onto the stage, followed by the town's postmaster, Mr. Graves. These two men carry out the annual lottery every year, however not even they can remember the proper protocols, or details of this long-running ritual. Mr. Graves and Mr. Summers begin the procedure and proceed to call the names of a handful of villagers. The chosen few approach the black box, near the two men, and pull out folded slips of paper. The chosen are comprised mostly men, however they are joined by a few women, including a twelve-year-old girl and Mr. Hutchinson's wife, Tessie. This seemed to gain some reluctant reaction from the crowd, however not a strong enough reaction to obstruct the Lottery. The chosen few line up on stage, put on display for their entire community, holding their own slips of paper. Mr. Summers commands the few to open their folded slips of paper, which are followed with some sighs of relief, along with a sense of intrigue. Tessie seems to have a heavy, black dot on her slip, while the other slips remain blank. Following the order to "finish this up quickly" from Mr. Summers,

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the villagers seem to approach Mrs. Hutchinson, however reluctant, without hesitation.

The words “This isn’t fair” leave Mrs. Hutchinson’s mouth, right before she is struck in her head with a rock. The story takes a dark turn as the townspeople, including the children who collected stones earlier, stone Mrs. Hutchinson to death as she lets out one final scream, “This isn’t fair, this isn’t right”. This short story takes an abrupt and macabre turn when it is finally revealed that the ritual is a means of selecting a person to be sacrificed and stoned by the other villagers. This short story was published by the New Yorker in 1948, which is absolutely crucial to the story’s analysis. A post-World War 2 America was revolted by the senseless violence and barbaric ritual explained in the story and demanded action be taken. However, the readers were unaware that the story was completely fictional, and that the author was not simply telling them a story, but was intending to shed light on the “evil traditions” we practice in our very homes and communities without second thought. Shirley Jackson accomplishes the intention by an astounding use of symbols, irony, and imagery. One of the many symbols in this short story, and perhaps the most obvious, would be the Lottery itself.

The Lottery is held annually and it is not just an isolated tradition, but a regional tradition as explained in the story. It is a tradition that has been carried out continually for generations, without hesitation or moral revulsion. However, it is nothing but a systematic, and arbitrary construction of evil. Jackson, through this story, condemns blindly following traditions simply due to familiarity, or routinization, as many of the most heinous acts of violence were executed by people with the same ideals and reason. For example, the holocaust had just taken place before the publishing of this story, and it is known as probably the most evil and heinous deeds carried out by humans against other humans. The murders committed by the Nazi party were not seen as evil or heinous by those involved, and this was due to the routinization of murder and the glorifying of it by people with high authority. This could also be seen in “the Lottery” with three of the most powerful men in the community being responsible for conducting this ritual annually, and the villagers not questioning their decisions and actions.

Another symbol within this story that heavily reinforces peoples’ stubbornness to change would be the Black Box. Although the Black Box is worn and falling apart, the villagers revere the box almost as a religious artifact, and are very reluctant to let it go, much like the Lottery itself. This had caused a great amount of controversy among the readers of this story due to a “...tapping into the universal fear of arbitrary condemnation and unsanctioned violence”. Jackson responded to those upset by saying, “she wanted to dramatize graphically the ‘pointless violence’ in peoples lives, to reveal the general inhumanity to man”. Shirley Jackson does an outstanding job using imagery to influence the readers’ thoughts about the story and its outcome. For example, the reader is first greeted by the lines, “The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.” From this line alone the reader can infer that the

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story is that of a kind, tender, and wholesome theme. This kind of imagery can be found throughout the short story reinforcing the wholesome image manifested in the reader's mind. Children play innocently on a beautiful day, men and women socialize with neighbors and a sense of community can almost immediately be felt, making the situation relatable to most people. The story fulfills our expectations; however, it does not stop there.

The story takes a very abrupt and macabre turn when the reader discovers that the Lottery is an arbitrary way of executing villagers annually, and that it is done so without hesitation. The author used tender terms and relatable situations heavily influencing the reader to infer a specific outcome of the story, only to completely catch the reader by surprise with a dark, horrid, and ultimately realistic theme. In conclusion, Shirley Jackson wrote "The Lottery" as a means to tell the modern world something they did not wish to hear or believe, that blindly following traditions because it's done by a vast majority of people or its being asked of by someone of high or ultimate authority, does not make it just or right. She wished to raise awareness that evil could be anywhere, and it might not always seem obvious at first, but that it could be born from a simple "tradition".

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