
Critical Analysis Of Shirley Jackson's The Lottery

Henry S. Haskins once said, 'Tradition is a prison with majority opinion the modern jailer.' The quote is related to the short story, 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson because tradition is substantial and important to their community. They have been doing the lottery for years even though some people may want to break from tradition they will never break from tradition because that is what they know, and it always has been that way.

The story is based around a small community and annually they do a lottery pulling paper from a black box whoever gets the paper with the black dot on it must be stoned by everybody in the town. The theme in the Lottery displayed throughout the short story is 'we' do things out of habit even though it can be detrimental; the story shows great symbolisms of tradition in the use of stones as a weapon and the meaning of the black box to the town's people. In writing the story Shirley Jackson made tradition the driving purpose. When Jackson wrote the short story, the timeframe was very significant to how the story was written.

The story was written around the time of World War II and in that time, people had a mindset of 'if it's not me I'm not worried about it.' For example, The world knew concentration camps were being created by Hitler but didn't try to do anything to stop it leading to 6 million Jews being extinguished; and the US didn't want to get involved until the bombing of Pearl Harbor instead they wanted to be neutral until it was 'them' who got wounded in the fight. In comparison to the story, they [the town's people] had the same mindset as if it's a laissez faire, if a person in their family did not pull the paper with the black dot they enjoyed stoning the person who did. For instance, when the town realized in the final draw that Tessie was the one who ultimately drew the black dot they were all quick to get stones and stone her joyfully because they weren't the ones in her predicament.

Equally important were the great forms of symbolisms relating to the tradition especially in the use of the stones as a murder weapon other than anything else, that could possibly be used in that time zone. The stones are used to show an act of violence because the children pile stones in the beginning and then contribute to the lottery's end with the adults by stoning another. Stones in history have been used by group of people bonding together to murder another, meaning there isn't one executioner. In relation to tradition, in early Christianity a community got rid of an outsider by group punishment in stoning. Another reason stones show great significance is because they were the first murder weapons used by the first humans for violent rituals.

Another way Jackson shows tradition in the lottery is through the black box. The black box is old

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and made of pieces from the box before it they say, and the town's population has grown instead of drawing the original wooden chips the towns people draw paper. The black box represents the physical ties between the town's people and their tradition. They are unwilling to let it go even though they fear the outcome. Honestly, the box itself has no meaning until the day of the lottery. For instance, 'The black box has spent one year in Mr. Graves barn and another year underfoot in the post office...'

The box has no meaning physically, but it has an emotional attachment that they are scared to let go of. Throughout the story the town's people fight with breaking away from tradition and keeping it. Mr. Summers in the story suggested to get a new box but because the box that they have now has emotional meaning they keep it since 'no one likes to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box.' Moreover, when approached with changing a lick of tradition people are looked at as if they are crazy or fools. Old Man Warner expresses that this time will be his 'seventy-seventh time' and that the young folks and other towns are old fools for wanting to quit the lottery or even stopping it all together due to its long-standing tradition. In the town they are also quite old fashion. Mr. Summers asked if the Watson boy was pulling and the boy said yes that he was pulling for himself and his mother. The response to him was, 'Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it' (Jackson). Even though his mother is head of the household since he is the male he is looked to take the job.

All in all, even though people fear the outcome of the lottery and pulling from the black box, they continue to participate in it because of tradition. The Lottery has great meaning to the people which makes them reluctant to just let it sit aside.

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