
Essay On How Psychology Influences Theme In The Lottery By Shirley Jackson

Novelist, short story writer, and nonfiction writer, Shirley Jackson was an American gothic horror fiction author. She was best known for her short story "The Lottery," a classic tale originally published in *The New Yorker*. A story on grotesque prejudice hidden in ordinary life, "The Lottery" established Jackson's central themes that would carry on throughout her work. Jackson's stories exemplify society's universal evil, despair, and madness that lie just below the surface of ordinary life, blurring the line between reality and fiction. With this, comes her ability to transform and shock her reader, manipulating their expectations of her work and the world around them.

The psychological lens is the optimal critical lens to use when analyzing Shirley Jackson's short stories. Based in the principles of Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, psychological critique examines the patterns of personality, virtues, and behavior in an author and their characters. Critics focus on not only the mind of the characters, but the actions and choices they make in correspondence to the society around them. In his contemporary literary criticism of Jackson, Granville Hicks, American novelist and literary critic, states in "The Nightmare in Reality," "well-informed about the views of Freudians and of other schools of psychology, Miss Jackson was never interested in psychological theories for their own sake but only for the literary use she could make of them". By, using psychological theory as a tool of in her work, Jackson repeatedly bases her societies and characters bases in recognizable patterns of human behavior and universal human problems. By writing her fiction like psychological study, Jackson is able develop character and plot in a much more realistic and meaningful way. If Jackson was fond of using psychological theory as a tool of writing, then looking at her work as a form of psychological inquiry is most effective.

One common theme displayed in many of Jackson's stories is the concept of a dream, or more specifically, the conflict of reality vs. imagination. In Freud's principles, the "dream," or in Jackson's case commonly the "nightmare," contains symbolic clues to the subconscious motives and themes of the self. Psychological inquiry is an attempt to study the human nature and its behavior from an outside perspective, a perspective the subject is not fully aware of. Jackson's work is a perfect reflection of this inquiry. As Elizabeth Janeway states in a *New York Times Book Review* of Jackson, "Jackson's fantasy is of the other sort. She begins with reality and her metaphors and analogies always reach out from a living center... In her stories, the boundary between the world and the dream shifts and varies; the dream leaks through and colors reality". With this, comes Jackson's gift: She does not create a world of fiction and terror,

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but rather discovers, or inquires, the existence of terror and madness in the ordinary world. This is most clearly seen in her classic American short story, “The Lottery.” Set in present day, “The Lottery” describes a perfectly ordinary town the environment is comforting and friendly, and as the people of the town begin to gather, the atmosphere is calm, almost carnival-like. Boys collect and stones as girls chat and gossip together. “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. The people of the village began to gather in the square...Soon the men began to gather. surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes... their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed...”.

The village Jackson creates represents an ideal, happy, American community. Friendship, trust, and goodwill are evident everywhere in its members. Like many of Jackson’s stories, however, happiness and perfection is not all what it seems. To maintain paradise, the good citizens must ritually sacrifice one of their members every year by stoning them to death. Barbarism like this is carried out by the lottery every year: One family is chosen by lot, and within that family one person. Here is where the reader begins to see Jackson’s psychological horror. The event is setup to be normal routine, and in tradition by the description Jacksons make and the dialogue of the characters. This was something the villagers repeated every year, thus the reader would suspect nothing out of the ordinary. As Jackson writes, “the lottery was conducted – as were the square dances, the teen club, the Halloween program – by Mr. Summers. who had time and energy to devote to civic activities...”. By establishing a happy, perfect, and civic atmosphere, Jackson tricks her readers by luring them into a facade of ordinary life. They find comfort in what seems like an ideal friendly community. This aspect of Jackson’s writing allows her to blur the line between reality and fiction. By the end of the story, however, the reality the reader has connected to is rooted in violence and prejudice. In psychological critique, characters are often analyzed to portray real life counterparts. Jackson takes advantage of this phenomenon: the stonings are committed by the ordinary of the town, what Jackson had previously perceived as pleasant, often good, people. Yet, without hesitation, they turn away their facade and indulge in an act of such violence and cruelty. Their nature has been sanctioned by tradition and superstition, and thus their judgment of right vs. wrong has been clouded.

In “The Lottery,” Jackson works within the idea of possibly. She continuously asks the questions in her fiction, What can society, the ordinary world, be capable of? What are human beings capable of? What cruelty lies beneath the surface of reality? Stories like “The Lottery” make the reader question the society around themselves. Acting as a base of psychological inquiry, “The Lottery” allows the reader to analyze how a small, ideal, and friendly town could be rooted in such a barbaric tradition. Her stories, again and again, strive to illustrate these details: what humanity could be, and the madness that lies just below the surface of reality. Jackson’s fiction, along with reflecting analytical technique, is also concerned with the psychology of groups and society. Often, the decisions and outcomes of her stories are driven

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by mob mentality, where people are influenced by their peers and surrounding society to adopt certain behaviors. Treating society as its own character, psychological criticism can focus on the motives, desires, and conflicts of a specific group, rather than an individual. As stated in Carol Cleveland's critical review, Shirley Jackson, "in Jackson's world, the guilty are not greedy or crazy individuals, but society itself acting collectively and purposefully, like a slightly preoccupied lynch mob". Consider again, Jackson's "The Lottery." In "The Lottery," the final moments of the story reveal the "winner" is stoned by the rest of the village. The citizens of the town commit murder without hesitation or question. Murder has been burned into their tradition for centuries, and they abide to like, like everyone else does, and everyone else has done for centuries. This is a direct example of mob mentality. Cleveland continues in her critique, "'Crime, even murder, is constantly being committed in her world, but there is usually no one innocent enough to bring the guilty to justice". Everyone in Jackson's fiction town is equally responsible for the story's horror, as every individual contributes in the stoning, not even once second guessing their actions, turning a blind eye to mercy and morality.

Consequently, there is no reason to bring the guilty to justice. In "The Lottery," the society portrayed outlaws any sense that what the village is doing is wrong. The crimes committed are not illegal or wrong in the town, because society does not consider them illegal. The old saying about the event is, "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon". In the story, society murders literary, but is justified by the mob mentality in the town: the expense of the few will bring prosperity for the many. With every sacrifice in the summer comes a successful harvest in the future. At the end of the story, Jackson writes, "although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready...Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her...". Tessie Hutchinson's last words are "It isn't fair, it isn't right". Yet, what is about to happen to her is perfectly fair and perfectly right by the logic and mentality of her community that has guided the actions of the town to that moment. It is only when Tessie is forced to imagine the lottery from the victim's point of view, as she is chosen for sacrifice, that the lottery becomes unfair and immoral. This perspective has been repeatedly avoided by her and the rest of village. Clouded by the fact that sacrifice brings prosperity, "The Lottery's" society has lost its vision. At the end of the story, Tessie pays the price for this lack of vision, and the complete lack of perspective and sympathy in her community.

Other of Jackson's stories, like "The Lottery," also focus on the psychology of society. In Shirley Jackson's story "Colloquy," originally published in The New Yorker, Mrs. Arnold, the main protagonist, is driven to see a psychiatrist due to her confusion and shock about the changing world around her. She has lost, and Ms. Arnold states, "A world where a lot of people lived too and they all lived together and things went along like that with no fuss...". Her psychiatrist attempts to push her to accept "reality" and its changes, as he describes the world

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having “rapidly disintegrating cultural patterns”. Still, Ms. Arnold refuses to accept the reality around her, and refuses to adapt to the doctor’s disorient world. The story ends with Ms. Arnold leaving the doctor’s office, yet readers sense the greater price Ms. Arnold will pay for her inability to change. In “Colloquy,” the rest of society’s definition of reality, represented by the doctor’s opinion, will descend her onto a path of loneliness and madness. “Before the doctor could stop her, she walked to the door and opened it. ‘Reality,’ she said, and went out” (Jackson 45). Here, Jackson uses another example of mob mentality, yet in “Colloquy,” society is represented as a force that destroys the opinion and reality of those who cannot accept it. John G. Parks states this phenomenon clearly in his critical analysis *Chambers of Yearning: Shirley Jackson’s Use of the Gothic*: “...the concern of most of Jackson’s fiction...is to reveal and chronicle the outrage...stemming from the violation of the self by a broken world...”. Like many of her stories, the society in “Colloquy,” the external world, limits the internal self. Ms. Arnold has failed to harmoniously accept the changes in society she has observed, and therefore, she will descend into despair.

In contrast to “The Lottery,” Jackson represents society as the reasonable side. To the reader, Ms. Arnold is already portrayed as crazy and mad. Her dialogue is pure gibberish, while the doctor’s statements are based in fact and observation. There, however, is a simple problem driving her insanity: She cannot see her internal self reflected in the world, and thus her expectations of the world should be unmet. “Colloquy” illustrates a fundamental problem in human and group psychology: One cannot retrofit the world in their own meanings and expectations, as society is far too complex and collective. Aging, society in Jackson’s stories represents a collective force. It cannot shift to serve one individual’s opinion. As Parks continues in his analysis, “most of Jackson’s protagonists are emotionally violated and must struggle desperately to overcome their estrangement and dislocation, and most of them fail”. At the end of the session, the reader is meant to sympathize with Ms. Arnold. Society has done wrong to her, and readers, being apart of that collective force, feel sorry for Ms. Arnold. The society that they and everyone else has accepted seems distorted in Ms. Arnold’s perspective. But, this problem can be flipped. It is clear that the divide between Ms. Arnold’s reality and the reality that surrounds her has no hope of compromise, due to the fact that she is most likely headed down a path of madness. Nevertheless, because Ms. Arnold is in herself “broken” and unable to change, she is continuing to perpetuate a broken society. Broken people creating a broken world. In this perspective, the madness that Ms. Arnold will descend into is not society’s fault, but the fault of Ms. Arnold herself. Flipping the blame creates a change in psychological study: The motives and virtues of an individual are the creation of the problems in a society. Not surprisingly, Jackson’s fiction also displays traits in this focus of psychology.

“The Possibility of Evil,” one of Jackson’s many short stories, acts as a psychological study on individual character. Unlike “The Lottery” and “Colloquy,” the psychological lens can be used to study the internal motives and morals hidden in a story’s characters. Miss Adela

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Strangeworth, the protagonist of "The Possibility of Evil," lives alone in a house on Pleasant Street in a small town. As Jackson describes, "She knew everyone in town, of course...she had never spent more than a day outside this town in all her long life...". Like a database, Miss Strangeworth seems to have a backlog in all present things occurring in her town, whether her business or not. Like most of Jackson's fiction, however, nothing is ever as it seems. Miss Jackson might live in a perfect town, but its perfection comes at a consequence: For a year now, Miss Strangeworth has been sending letters to various townspeople to viciously attack their lives and personalities. After, and without signing her name, she would address each letter, and deliver them at the end of the night. In her eyes, her duty was to alert her town to the "possible evil lurking nearby". As long as evil is in her unchecked world, it was her duty to expose it. This was Miss Strangeworth's secret contribution to the town's happiness and perfection: her private war with the forces of evil. Miss Strangeworth states, "The town where she lived had to be kept clean and sweet, but people everywhere were lustful and evil and degraded, and needed to be watched; the world was so large, and there was only one Strangeworth left in it". Obsessed with the evil in people and the evil clouding her perfect town, Miss Strangeworth has dedicated her life to destroying this evil. At the end of the story, Miss Strangeworth is exposed, due to a careless one night during a delivery. When she opens her own mail the next morning, she finds a little letter like the ones she sends. As Miss Strangeworth opens the letter, Jackson writes, "She began to cry silently for the weakness of the world when she read the words". As John G. Parks states in his critical study of Jackson's fiction, "The Possibility of Evil": A Key to Shirley Jackson's Fiction, "Shirley Jackson reveals a fundamental problem in her fiction, one especially crucial in American culture: the revelation of the imagination that sees evil only out there, and which thus must be smashed at any cost". Here, the irony of the story is prevalent.

Miss Strangeworth finds that the letter she receives is wicked, and in her eyes is further proof of the evil in society. Yet, Miss Strangeworth fails to recognize that her own humanity is corroded in her single struggle against evil. As Parks puts it, she is "...corrupted by her own narcissism". Miss Strangeworth does not understand that by stopping evil, and writing letters, she herself is creating evil. Consequently, this is a paradox: Miss Strangeworth is doing evil in order to further good. The ending of the story brings Miss Strangeworth's problem full circle. Because she fails to see that what others have done is what she has been creating all this time, it is clear that she is only able to see evil in others, rather than identifying the evil within herself. By failing to recognize this, it is clear that Miss Strangeworth only sees evil as a component in others, rather than a component within us all: a universal human problem. In "The Possibility of Evil," Miss Strangeworth has failed to recognize the collective nature of society and human nature. It is not one person's job to dictate what is wrong and what is right in others, nor is it one individual's job to rid the world of evil. It is the collective force and responsibility of society, rather, to recognize the evil within humanity, and accept its ability to invade the commonplace. From Miss Strangeworth's experience, it is clear that only fighting evil will paradoxically produce more evil,

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yet she has failed to recognize the component of evil in all humans, and in turn, the evil in herself. As Parks concludes, "...What Shirley Jackson is doing in her fiction is she brings many of her characters...to the edge of the abyss: some fall, some cling desperately to the edge, and only a few find their way to safety". In her stories, Jackson is psychologically testing her characters, bringing them to their breaking point. In "The Possibility of Evil," "Colloquy," and "The Lottery," Jackson has brought her characters to the very edge of their towns and societies. Their story has been a test of their morals, strength, and willpower. With her work, Jackson has the power to place the minds of her in a constant state of analysis, and they try to discover who has fallen, who has survived, and who is still clinging to any chance of sanity. "...But such are evil's possibilities".

Shirley Jackson's writing, in its most basic construction, is a form of psychological inquiry. As her characters, plot, and settings develop, Jackson attempts to weave reality and ordinary life, blurring the line between what the reader experiences as fiction and reality. This, combined with her use of psychological concepts in individuals and societies, allows Jackson to create the psychological horror she is so widely praised for. The psychological lens therefore is the most effective lens to use when studying her work, as it looks deeply into the motives and actions of characters and groups, something Jackson's stories like "The Lottery," "Colloquy," and "The Possibility of Evil" all express in their protagonists, central themes, and psychological concepts. After publishing "The Lottery" in *The New Yorker*, Jackson received hundreds of letters expressing people's disgust and curiosity for her story. The subject of letters spanned from readers asking Jackson to identify the theme, from people asking for directions so they could observe the fictional event. Jackson later noted that the range of response she received reflected the central themes of "The Lottery," and her short stories: The potential of human moral corruption that lies on the surface of reality. Whether true or false, the vast number of responses seem to confirm the idea that her fiction was based on psychological inquiry in not only her characters, but her readers as well.

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