
Human Morality in The Lottery by Shirley Jackson

Humanity is best known for confusing one thing for another and doing things in the name of following cultural guidelines or social expectations. But, is that action justified? Is it even a rational mindset? Most times, such behavior is very harmful and dangerous to individuals. That is why it is important to analyze how, if, and why that behavior is acceptable or unacceptable. In the short story *The Lottery* Shirley Jackson uses imagery, irony, and symbolism in order to assert that human morality is heavily dependent on the desires and expectations of the individual and ultimately the society in which the individual is a part of.

Jackson starts the narrative as any narrative should be started, by introducing the setting. This is helpful in the lines of developing the themes due to the background that the setting provides us with. In the beginning of the short story she is setting up the layout for the Lottery and she informs us that "The children assembled first, of course," (Jackson). This allows the audience both insight to the attitudes toward the lottery and the process of the lottery, itself. The attitudes shown through the children can be seen as eager or even excited, considering that "Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones," (Jackson). Even if the villagers want to deny it, they are eager and excited to get the lottery started. What is even worse about it is that it obviously starts at a young age.

Not only does setting play a role in developing this theme, but so does irony. There are several examples of irony throughout the text that show the unpredictable nature of human behavior. At the beginning, as everybody assembled, there were some signs of some affection and caring for one another. There was even some hesitance, later, when Steve Adams began talking about how other villages had stopped doing the lottery. However, later, he becomes more than supportive of the ritual when Tessie Hutchinson became the set target of the violence and "[he] was in the front of the crowd,"(Jackson). This is an ironic twist and further proves the villagers to be cruel, because Adams discussed the idea of quitting the lottery so long as he was at risk. As soon as the air has been cleared, and somebody else turns out to be the victim, he seems to be all too excited about ending the ceremony and going out on a strong note. Other people pick up on his excitement as well, "Such heavy-handed ironic twists imply that there is no such thing as communal love, or even sympathy, in the human heart," (Coulthard). Which happens to be a pretty accurate inference. Also, Tessie Hutchinson is responsible for an ironic twist of her own. She, however, starts the story with a negligence toward the people. She seems as if she does not really care what happens either way. Nonetheless, when the tables are turned she seems as if she changes her attitude completely screaming "It isn't fair, it isn't right," (Jackson) just before they were upon her. This ironic twist serves to prove, once again, how people's mindset can be affected under pressure.

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Symbolism also plays a huge role, as the symbols throughout the story provide a form of mainstay for the theme. There are several symbols throughout *The Lottery*, one of the most prominent being the stones. We are first introduced to the stones in the beginning of the text as the people begin to assemble. After that, the stones re-occur, making them symbols. One of the first instances of the stones is in the beginning when the children are gathering and

“Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix—the villagers pronounced this name ‘Dellacroy’—eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys,” (Jackson).

The stones are unadvanced weapons or tools, making them primitive. Even more so, they are given to children, and the children are eager to gather them as well, symbolizing human instinct for violence. Especially if the children are aware of the fact that the stones they have chosen are “The ones best for accurate throwing,” (Coulthard) as Coulthard implies. If they have an extension of knowledge on the subject, then there is a reason they have it. Coincidentally, there is another example of symbolism, the marked slip of paper. Jackson best describes it as “[Having] a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal company office.” (Jackson). This little paper says a lot more about the story than people infer. The paper is a symbol that is representative of how easy it is for the people to literally take somebody else’s life into their own hands. Also, if the people wished to end the tradition they easily could, however they allow the violence to continue.

Primarily, Jackson conveys a theme that not many people pick up on. Jackson’s spin on the concept of morality and humanity is a dark one, as she makes implications that people will do what is expected of them, so long as it does not cause them any harm. Jackson makes the implication that people are selfish and that society is cruel with the help of a few literary devices.

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