

Shirley Jackson ' The Lottery'

Plot Overview

The villagers of a small town gather together in the square on June 27, a beautiful day, for the town lottery. In other towns, the lottery takes longer, but there are only 300 people in this village, so the lottery takes only two hours. Village children, who have just finished school for the summer, run around collecting stones. They put the stones in their pockets and make a pile in the square. Men gather next, followed by the women. Parents call their children over, and families stand together.

Mr. Summers runs the lottery because he has a lot of time to do things for the village. He arrives in the square with the black box, followed by Mr. Graves, the postmaster. This black box isn't the original box used for the lottery because the original was lost many years ago, even before the town elder, Old Man Warner, was born. Mr.

Summers always suggests that they make a new box because the current one is shabby, but no one wants to fool around with tradition. Mr. Summers did, however, convince the villagers to replace the traditional wood chips with slips of paper.

Mr. Summers mixes up the slips of paper in the box. He and Mr. Graves made the papers the night before and then locked up the box at Mr. Summers's coal company. Before the lottery can begin, they make a list of all the families and households in the village. Mr. Summers is sworn in. Some people remember that in the past there used to be a song and salute, but these have been lost.

Tessie Hutchinson joins the crowd, flustered because she had forgotten that today was the day of the lottery. She joins her husband and children at the front of the crowd, and people joke about her late arrival. Mr. Summers asks whether anyone is absent, and the crowd responds that Dunbar isn't there. Mr. Summers asks who will draw for Dunbar, and Mrs. Dunbar says she will because she doesn't have a son who's old enough to do it for her. Mr. Summers asks whether the Watson boy will draw, and he answers that he will. Mr. Summers then asks to make sure that Old Man Warner is there too.

Mr. Summers reminds everyone about the lottery's rules: he'll read names, and the family heads come up and draw a slip of paper. No one should look at the paper until everyone has drawn. He calls all the names, greeting each person as they come up to draw a paper. Mr. Adams tells Old Man Warner that people in the north village might stop the lottery, and Old Man Warner ridicules young people. He says that

giving up the lottery could lead to a return to living in caves. Mrs. Adams says the lottery has already been given up in other villages, and Old Man Warner says that's "nothing but trouble."

Mr. Summers finishes calling names, and everyone opens his or her papers. Word quickly gets around that Bill Hutchinson has "got it." Tessie argues that it wasn't fair because Bill didn't have enough time to select a paper. Mr. Summers asks whether there are any other households in the Hutchinson family, and Bill says no, because his married daughter draws with her husband's family. Mr. Summers asks how many kids Bill has, and he answers that he has three. Tessie protests again that the lottery wasn't fair.

Mr. Graves dumps the papers out of the box onto the ground and then puts five papers in for the Hutchinsons. As Mr. Summers calls their names, each member of the family comes up and draws a paper. When they open their slips, they find that Tessie has drawn the paper with the black dot on it. Mr. Summers instructs everyone to hurry up.

The villagers grab stones and run toward Tessie, who stands in a clearing in the middle of the crowd. Tessie says it's not fair and is hit in the head with a stone. Everyone begins throwing stones at her.

Specific Details

The specific details Jackson describes in the beginning of "The Lottery" set us up for the shocking conclusion. In the first paragraph, Jackson provides specific details about the day on which the lottery takes place. She tells us the date (June 27), time (about 10 a.m.), and temperature (warm). She describes the scene exactly: there are flowers and green grass, and the town square, where everyone gathers, is between the bank and post office. She provides specifics about the town, including how many people live there and how long the lottery takes, as well as about neighboring towns, which have more people and must start the lottery earlier. In the paragraphs that follow this introduction, Jackson gives us characters' full names—Bobby Martin, Harry Jones, and Dickie Delacroix, among others—and even tells us how to pronounce "Delacroix."

Far from being superfluous or irrelevant, these initial specific details ground the story in reality. Because she sets the story firmly in a specific place and time, Jackson seems to suggest that the story will be a chronicle of sorts, describing the tradition of the lottery. The specifics continue throughout the story, from the numerous rules Mr. Summers follows to the names of the people who are called up to the box. In a way, there is safety in these details—the world Jackson creates seems much like the one we know. And then the stoning begins, turning reality on its head. Because Jackson is so meticulous in grounding us in realistic, specific details, they sharpen the violence and make the ending so incredibly surprising. What Happens in The Lottery?

On June 27th, the residents of a small New England village gather in the town square to conduct the lottery. Mr. Summers, the officiant of the lottery, brings the black box into the center of the square. Mr. Graves, the postmaster, brings a stool for the black box.

- Mr. Summers conducts a quick roll call. Clyde Dunbar is at home with a broken leg, so his wife will draw lots for him. Similarly, the Watson boy draws for his mother.
- Finally, the lottery begins. Each one of the three hundred or so residents of the village draw a piece of paper from the black box. Bill Hutchison, the head of his household, draws a paper with a black dot on it.
- A second lottery is held, this time with only five slips of paper, one each for the members of Bill's family. Bill's wife Tessie draws the black dot. She protests that the drawing wasn't fair even as her neighbors begin stoning her to death.

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Summary

On a late summer morning, the villagers of a small New England town gather to conduct their annual lottery. There is an air of festivity among them, especially the children. Only a few in the crowd reveal slight hints of tension or unease.

The lottery has a long history in this and surrounding towns. The people who run it—in this town, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves—work hard to preserve the rituals that have been passed down from year to year. Changes have crept in, and some old-timers such as Old Man Warner regret what they perceive as a loss of a heritage that has preserved the happiness and prosperity of the town over time.

All the villagers finally arrive, Tessie Hutchinson being one of the last. Mr. Summers conducts the preliminaries, ensuring that each family is represented and that those who are absent have someone on hand to draw for them. Finally the lottery begins: Heads of families step forward and draw small paper slips from the black box that Mr. Summers keeps for the occasion. As this goes on, townspeople engage in small talk, and the air of festivity gives way to a pervasive aura of nervousness.

When all the slips are drawn, Bill Hutchinson discovers that he has picked the one marked with a black spot. Immediately Tessie begins complaining that the drawing was not conducted properly. Others encourage her to be a good sport, however, and her protests fall on deaf ears. She and the other members of her immediate family now come forward and draw slips, as various townspeople whisper apprehensively. Tessie draws the slip with the black spot. Mr. Summers commands, “Let’s finish quickly.”

The townspeople now move off to a cleared spot outside the town, Tessie in the center of the group. A desperate woman now, Tessie entreats the crowd to go through the ritual again, doing things fairly. Ignoring her protests, the men, women, and children of the town begin stoning her.

Character List

Tessie Hutchinson - The unlucky loser of the lottery. Tessie draws the paper with the black mark on it and is stoned to death. She is excited about the lottery and fully willing to participate every year, but when her family’s name is drawn, she protests that the lottery isn’t fair. Tessie arrives at the village square late because she forgot what day it was.

Read an [IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF TESSIE HUTCHINSON.](#)

Old Man Warner - The oldest man in the village. Old Man Warner has participated in seventy-seven lotteries. He condemns the young people in other villages who have stopped holding lotteries, believing that the lottery keeps people from returning to a barbaric state.

Read an [IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF OLD MAN WARNER.](#)

Mr. Summers - The man who conducts the lottery. Mr. Summers prepares the slips of paper that go into the black box and calls the names of the people who draw the papers. The childless owner of a coal company, he is one of the village leaders.

Read an [IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF MR. SUMMERS.](#)

Bill Hutchinson - Tessie's husband. Bill first draws the marked paper, but he picks a blank paper during the second drawing. He is fully willing to show everyone that his wife, Tessie, has drawn the marked paper.

Mr. Harry Graves - The postmaster. Mr. Graves helps Mr. Summers prepare the papers for the lottery and assists him during the ritual. "The Lottery" **key themes:**

- In "The Lottery," Shirley Jackson represents the notion of the scapegoat as someone who is blamed for the evils of a society and banished in order to expel sin and allow for renewal.
- The townspeople are governed by mob psychology and abandon their reason to act with great cruelty.
- The violence of the townspeople who initially seem civilized and genteel reflects the possibility of violent acts taking place in any context.
- The refusal of the townspeople to abandon tradition and question the lottery ritual suggests the negative consequences of blindly following tradition.
- The female identity of the victim suggests the violence committed against women in a patriarchal society.

Themes

The Danger of Blindly Following Tradition

The village lottery culminates in a violent murder each year, a bizarre ritual that suggests how dangerous tradition can be when people follow it blindly. Before we know what kind of lottery they're conducting, the villagers and their preparations seem harmless, even quaint: they've appointed a rather pathetic man to lead the lottery, and children run about gathering stones in the town square. Everyone seems preoccupied with a funny-looking black box, and the lottery consists of little more than handmade slips of paper. Tradition is endemic to small towns, a way to link families and generations. Jackson, however, pokes holes in the reverence that people have for tradition. She writes that the villagers don't really know much about the lottery's origin but try to preserve the tradition nevertheless.

The villagers' blind acceptance of the lottery has allowed ritual murder to become part of their town fabric. As they have demonstrated, they feel powerless to change—or even try to change—anything, although there is no one forcing them to keep things the same. Old Man Warner is so faithful to the tradition that he fears the villagers will return to primitive times if they stop holding the lottery. These ordinary people, who have just come from work or from their homes and will soon return home for lunch, easily kill someone when they are told to. And they don't have a reason for doing it other than the fact that they've always held a lottery to kill someone. If the villagers stopped to question it, they would be forced to ask themselves why they are committing a murder—but no one stops to question. For them, the fact that this is tradition is reason enough and gives them all the justification they need.

The Randomness of Persecution

Villagers persecute individuals at random, and the victim is guilty of no transgression other than having drawn the wrong slip of paper from a box. The elaborate ritual of the lottery is designed so that all villagers have the

same chance of becoming the victim—even children are at risk. Each year, someone new is chosen and killed, and no family is safe. What makes “The Lottery” so chilling is the swiftness with which the villagers turn against the victim. The instant that Tessie Hutchinson chooses the marked slip of paper, she loses her identity as a popular housewife. Her friends and family participate in the killing with as much enthusiasm as everyone else. Tessie essentially becomes invisible to them in the fervor of persecution. Although she has done nothing “wrong,” her innocence doesn’t matter. She has drawn the marked paper—she has herself become marked—and according to the logic of the lottery, she therefore must die.

Tessie’s death is an extreme example of how societies can persecute innocent people for absurd reasons. Present-day parallels are easy to draw, because all prejudices, whether they are based on race, sex, appearance, religion, economic class, geographical region, family background, or sexual orientation, are essentially random. Those who are persecuted become “marked” because of a trait or characteristic that is out of their control—for example, they are the “wrong” sex or from the “wrong” part of the country. Just as the villagers in “The Lottery” blindly follow tradition and kill Tessie because that is what they are expected to do, people in real life often persecute others without questioning why. As Jackson suggests, any such persecution is essentially random, which is why Tessie’s bizarre death is so universal.

Symbols

The Black Box

The shabby black box represents both the tradition of the lottery and the illogic of the villagers’ loyalty to it. The black box is nearly falling apart, hardly even black anymore after years of use and storage, but the villagers are unwilling to replace it. They base their attachment on nothing more than a story that claims that this black box was made from pieces of another, older black box. The lottery is filled with similar relics from the past that have supposedly been passed down from earlier days, such as the creation

of family lists and use of stones. These are part of the tradition, from which no one wants to deviate—the lottery must take place in just this way because this is how it's always been done. However, other lottery traditions have been changed or forgotten. The villagers use slips of paper instead of wood chips, for example. There is no reason why the villagers should be loyal to the black box yet disloyal to other relics and traditions, just as there is no logical reason why the villagers should continue holding the lottery at all.

The Lottery

The lottery represents any action, behavior, or idea that is passed down from one generation to the next that's accepted and followed unquestioningly, no matter how illogical, bizarre, or cruel. The lottery has been taking place in the village for as long as anyone can remember. It is a tradition, an annual ritual that no one has thought to question. It is so much a part of the town's culture, in fact, that it is even accompanied by an old adage: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." The villagers are fully loyal to it, or, at least, they tell themselves that they are, despite the fact that many parts of the lottery have changed or faded away over the years.

Nevertheless, the lottery continues, simply because there has always been a lottery. The result of this tradition is that everyone becomes party to murder on an annual basis. The lottery is an extreme example of what can happen when traditions are not questioned or addressed critically by new generations.

Critical Essay

Donna Burrell has labeled Jackson's method of analysis the "folklore of the modern suburb," noting that Jackson is "concerned with representing particular societies or community systems, not simply a few of the members. To some degree the system is the protagonist; many of the events seem included merely to illustrate the interactions of the elements, and even the rules of the interactions." As a result, Jackson's characters are usually flat rather than round,

developed only as much as is necessary to establish their position in the social system of the story.

"The Lottery," Jackson's most famous story, has been anthologized to a degree that makes it one of the few stories that one can assume nearly every American student has read. Jackson's calm description of the lottery procedure—the reader is given more commonplace details about the workings of the lottery than about any of the characters—helps counterpoint the horror of the final ritual that the story leaves to the reader's imagination. As Barbara Allen puts it, "The point of 'The Lottery' is that blind adherence to traditional forms of behavior that have lost their original meanings and acquired no new, positive ones, can be destructive." A number of specific targets have been suggested for Jackson's story, including American society's obsession with finding scapegoats during the years of the Cold War and the House Un-American Activities Committee witch-hunts. The remarkable openness of the story, however, seems to make it an attack on all forms of destructive social behavior, and Jackson was particularly proud when the then-apartheid-based South African government banned the story. Almost all Jackson's tales make the same point in one way or another, describing traditional forms of behavior that either lose their meaning for the protagonist or come into conflict with and, almost invariably, succeed in suppressing the protagonist's personal impulses.

"Flower Garden," one of Jackson's finest and most fully developed stories, narrates the arrival of a new family, the MacLanes—a young widow and her small son—into a neighborhood from the point of view of Mrs. Winning (note again the ironically emblematic name), who has married into the oldest and richest family in the neighborhood and lives with her husband and children in the family house, under the rule of her husband's parents, especially her mother-in-law, who is an inflexible and repressive domestic tyrant. The MacLanes move into the small cottage down the street that Mrs. Winning had always wished that she and her husband could have lived in, and her increasingly frequent visits to the cottage suggest that she is vicariously living out many of her own dreams of independence through Mrs. MacLane—perhaps the absence of a husband is one of those fantasies. The growing friendship between the two women is abruptly

ended when Mrs. MacLane hires a black man to work in her flower garden and invites his son over to play with hers. Mrs. Winning, who has been set up as a sympathetic character by Jackson's shrewd decision to tell the story from her point of view, represses her own personal affection for the family and takes her place in the neighborhood system as a true heir to the elder Mrs. Winning, treating the MacLanes as social outcasts.

A final permutation on the conflict between social systems and individual impulses is represented by "The Tooth." Clara Spencer's toothache forces her to take a bus to New York City to see a dentist, leaving her husband and children for a day or two. As in other stories, the small town and family she leaves represent a familiar and ordered world, but also repression and self-denial, while the city offers the possibility of personal freedom at the risk of becoming uprooted (like the symbolic tooth) and losing touch with reality. A similar character in "Pillar of Salt" observes with terror, and eventually succumbs to, the phenomenon of "People starting to come apart" in the city; by the end of her story, Clara Spencer abandons her social role and slips into a fantasy world with a mysterious stranger named Jim (Harris, one assumes). As Richard Pascal explains in his insightful reading of "The Tooth," "the sin of feeling solipsistically happy and free, it might seem, is punished by the damnation of madness." **Critical Evaluation**

The publication of "The Lottery" in *The New Yorker* in June of 1948 created a scandal. Many readers canceled their subscriptions to the venerable magazine, and others wrote threatening letters to its author, [Shirley Jackson](#). Later generations were puzzled by this controversy. The sources for the furor and scandal can be found in the structure of the story and its themes, in the mood of Americans in the late 1940's, in the prejudices held by the reading public against certain literary genres, in the venue in which the story appeared, and in Jackson's persona.

"The Lottery" presents a prototypical example of the surprise ending. Many writers, including Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry, Saki, and H. H. Munro, made this sort of plot twist a hallmark of their craft. A decade later, two long-running television series, *The Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, regularly employed this device as well. Surprise endings often lead to reader delight, but not so with Jackson's macabre story of human sacrifice. Jackson provides subtle hints in the story that something grim is in the offing—for example, the gathering of stones and rocks, the crowd's sense of nervousness as the lottery proceeds, and Tessie's alarm when her family "wins" the initial phase of the contest. Also, the lottery is held at the end of June, near the summer solstice, a time of year that features prominently in agricultural festivals throughout the Northern Hemisphere.

Nevertheless, the characters seem so wholesome, so stereotypically small-town American, that it is easy for the reader to overlook the clues that Jackson provides. Such subtlety is a hallmark of Jackson's craft, one to which horror novelist Stephen King made reference in the dedication to his 1980 novel *Firestarter*: "In memory of Shirley Jackson, who never needed to raise her voice." In this dedication, King lists four of Jackson's most celebrated works, one of which is "The Lottery" and the other is Jackson's best-known work of long fiction, [*The Haunting of Hill House*](#). This novel, too, begins in June and ends with a similar, though symbolic, sacrifice.

The surprise ending to "The Lottery" also reveals Jackson's dark themes, including the warping effect on society of mindless tradition. Old Man Warner, the embodiment of rigid tradition, seems to believe that the sacrifice is necessary to ensure sufficient food for the village, but the other villagers are maintaining the practice out of habit and sheer inertia. They have forgotten why they are doing the ritual and have let it become a corrupt, atrophied shade of its earlier form; still, they insist on keeping the lottery because it has always been done. Simply out of tradition, they unquestioningly stone to death a neighbor whom they were laughing and joking with minutes earlier.

An even more pessimistic theme of the story is its interrogation of altruism and humanitarianism. No one in the village shows any concern for justice and

kindness except Tessie—and she, too, starts to complain about the lottery only when she realizes that it is going to directly affect her own family. In short, Jackson suggests that people are not concerned about injustice and kindness unless these problems touch them personally.

The story's surprise ending and its unflattering depiction of human nature must have been especially unsettling to readers in the late 1940's, when Americans were especially proud of the role they had played in defeating the Nazis in World War II. Having recently vanquished a cruel and inhumane enemy, perhaps Americans were not ready for a story that implied that they themselves could be cruel and inhumane. Jackson hints that these characteristics are woven into the fabric of the United States by giving her characters names that were prominent in the nation's early years (for example, Adams and Hutchinson). The names Summers, Graves, and Delacroix—literally "of the cross"—reflect other themes and motifs implicit in the story, such as, respectively, agrarian tradition, death, and sacrifice.

Furthermore, a surprise ending involving human sacrifice placed "The Lottery" in the genre of horror fiction, a type of writing dismissed as unsophisticated and sensationalistic and, therefore, fodder for cheap pulp magazines. *The New Yorker* had been the most prestigious venue for short fiction in the mid-twentieth century, and its subscribers must have felt duped into reading what they thought was "trashy" writing.

Adding to the reading public's angry response to "The Lottery" was Jackson's public persona. In 1948, she was known as a writer of humorous articles and short stories detailing her experiences as a housewife and mother of four children. Few if any readers would have expected from her a harrowing depiction of blind tradition and merciless selfishness, like that revealed in "The Lottery."

