

RESEARCH ARTICLE



CONTROVERSIAL CONFLICTS IN SHIRLEY JACKSON'S "THE LOTTERY"

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ABSTRACT

Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* is one of the most poignant and shocking stories of modern American fiction. A lottery in general is something positive with an exciting reward. But Jackson's lottery is a barbaric ritual resulting with a death by the villagers. Swindled by the nature of the title, the modern reader is shocked by Jackson's portrayal of inhumanity and violence in modern society. In spite of drawbacks, the story has drawn the attention with the Jackson's portrayal of narrative style, structure and organisation and prescribed for study in various schools and colleges. Recently it is modified for stage, television and opera.

The story promotes the primitive human nature prowling beneath civilization and leads to various controversial issues such as sanctioned violence and cruelty, custom and tradition, victimization and gender roles, the dark side of human nature, the subjugation of women, the danger of ritualized behaviour, the potential for cruelty and the theme of social class division. Jackson presents a glimpse of human civilization in the past and questions the reader about the justification and use of capital punishment in modern society. The present article examines the various controversial issues raised in the story in addition to why people pretend enthusiasm although they feel disgust with the terrific ritual.

KEY WORDS

Controversial conflicts, Primitive human nature, victimization, subjugation of woman, human civilization, capital punishment.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 "The Lottery" - Shirley Jackson's sensational creation

"The Lottery" was a sensational, dark and renowned short story written by Shirley Jackson. It was published in *The New Yorker* on June 28, 1948.

The readers were shocked to see community order in the fictional village encouraged by bloodshed. In response to numerous questions raised by readers, Jackson wrote in *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 22, 1948: "Explaining just what I had hoped the story to say is very difficult. I suppose, I hoped, by setting a

particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives". Jackson was surprised by the negative response of her readers. The story was banned in some countries and the publisher received many adverse comments on the story. Also many readers stopped the subscriptions.

1.2 The title, "The Lottery" - adverse to reader's expectations

By the nature of the title, the modern readers would expect the story about a winner who gains a positive experience or a reward. But they were shocked by Jackson's portrayal of inhumanity and violence. At the end of the story, a young boy is being handed a small stone with which to kill his own mother is one of the most shocking incidents in the story. In this case, Jackson's lottery results not with a winner but with a loser who is stoned to death by the village. Perhaps this extremely subversive irony was a factor that led to many readers' outrage over the story when it was first published.

2-SANCTIONED VIOLENCE AND INHUMANITY

2.1 Lack of seriousness

In the beginning of the story the children have been dismissed from school for summer. They are free to play recklessly with the wild kids. People used to talk about everyday events and refrain from laughing. The women are likely to share gossip with children. Besides, the lottery was conducted with square dances and teenage clubs. It is considered a "civic activity," but dances and clubs are hardly on the same level as death-by-lottery. When Tessie Hutchinson finally arrives, Mr. Summers wants to "get this over with so 's we can go back to work." The grave contradiction here is the normalcy with which the town operates. Stoning takes place and it's "business as usual."

2.2 The victim's words unheard

The victim of the lottery has to bear the consequences. Also nobody likes to listen and support the victim. There is no argument to judge what is right or wrong. Tessie begins to argue while Bill selects the black spot. The neighbour calls, "Be a good sport, Tessie." Her husband straight out tells her to shut-up. At this point, they don't know who will die in the family. Tessie shows the vicious

nature of people and their desire to survive at all costs. She insists, "It wasn't fair." But while she pleads and argues, the men put five pieces of paper in the box: one a piece for each parent, and one for each of their children. Uniquely, the violent nature of people is seen to be like that of animals. They will attack and kill adults as well as the young. In the lottery, not even the children are spared. Little Dave isn't even old enough to open his own paper, indicating he wouldn't be old enough to understand what is being done to him if he were chosen to die.

2.3 Prophecy and Suspense

Many of the innocuous details throughout "The Lottery" foreshadow the violent conclusion. In the second paragraph, children put stones in their pockets and make piles of stones in the town square, which seems like innocent play until the stones' true purpose becomes clear at the end of the story. Tessie's late arrival at the lottery instantly sets her apart from the crowd, and the observation Mr. Summers makes—"Thought we were going to have to get on without you"—is dissonantly prescient about Tessie's fate.

Jackson builds suspense in "The Lottery" and does not reveal the true nature of the lottery until the first stone hits Tessie's head. She never tells us what the lottery is about or purpose. She begins to reveal that something is awry when the lottery begins and the crowd grows nervous, and she intensifies the feeling when Tessie hysterically protests Bill's "winning" selection. And she gives a slight clue when she says that the villagers "still remembered to use stones." But not until the moment when a rock actually hits Tessie does Jackson show her hand completely. By withholding information until the last possible second, she builds the story's suspense and creates a shocking, powerful conclusion.

3-IMPLEMENTATION OF ANTIQUE AND INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS

3.1 Inhuman tradition in modern civilization

"The Lottery" is a story about an inhuman, annual tradition of a village and its effects and consequences. It is a ritual which is characterized by the cruelty and the thoughtlessness of the entire society. The inhabitants of the village started to sacrifice humans once a year to improve their harvest by stoning the victims to death, and this tradition never stopped. People feel it as a typical

procedure and don't find any sort of insanity and violence in their acts. Although the victim Tessie Hutchinson screams, cries and protests about the unfairness of the lottery, no one listens to her, as she has chosen the wrong slip.

"The Lottery" presents a weakness in human individuals. This town has been performing such a terrible lottery for many years, with no questions asked and the main purpose being to carry on the old tradition. "There's always been a lottery", Old Man Warner says. "Nothing but trouble in that", he says about plans of quitting the event. However, the villagers show some fear of the event. Comments such as "Don't be nervous Jack" and "Get up there Bill" indicate that the people may not be entirely comfortable with the event. Yet not a single person openly expresses fear or disgust towards the lottery but instead pretend enthusiasm

3.2 Tradition blended with ignorance

In the story, the poor ignorant villagers are respecting the old customs and traditions. They believe that the lottery would allow ritual murder to become the part of their fabric. The blind acceptance of the lottery and the ritual murder has allowed them to be part of the region. Also they feel that they are powerless to change the old traditions. Old Man Warner is very loyal to the tradition and warns the villagers that they will go back to primitive times, if they stop the lottery. The villagers never realise that they have been conducting lottery merely to kill someone. They simply believe that the tradition has reason and justification.

3.3 Dare not to change the old shattered black box

Nobody in the story is dare enough to change the old shattered black box. "Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box". Indeed, Mr. Summers frequently asking the villagers to replace the old trodden black box. But the villagers never mind about the box's appearance fearing that the change would lead to other changes. Being the part of tradition, no one wants to deviate the old lottery system. Although holding lottery was stopped in other places, these villagers are firmly stick on to the parts of tradition. They claim that the black box was made from pieces of another black box. But there is

no logical reason why still they are holding lottery at all.

3.4 Why do the villagers not end this horrible tradition?

Jackson intends to show how violent acts are still parts of human nature despite the long history of civilisation. The lottery also instincts violence among the children. The lottery is conducted by Mr. Summer with so much anticipation by the villagers. Generally the reader expects the winner to receive a prize. But the lottery here decides the winner's fate. The winner is going to be stoned by friends and family. Tessie Hutchinson, one of the victims of this annual tradition – a tradition which has been upheld for more than 77 years and which is just used to improve the harvest. Everyone is scared to draw the lottery. Still it continues for years without any objection from the victim's family or friends.

4-VICTIMIZATION AND GENDER ROLES

4.1-Persecution at random

The lottery is an elaborate and essential ritual of the villagers including children and women and one of them would be the victim of the year. The villagers persecute the individuals at random and the victim is guilty of no transgression other than to draw the wrong slip of paper from the box. The victim is selected through random irrespective of race, sex, appearance, religion, economic class, geographical reason, family background or sexual orientation. It's being a continuous process, each year someone is chosen by lottery and killed. By random, Tessie Hutchinson has drawn the marked paper and according to the logic of the lottery, she was going to die. Jackson suggests that such persecution is essentially random and hence Tessie's unusual death is universal.

4.2-Subjugation of woman

Shirley Jackson, a woman writer of the story suppresses the role of woman. The women along with children should be participants of lottery. She has not exposed any sort of generosity towards woman. Tessie Hutchinson is an ample example how she is brutally killed in the name of a ritual.

Tessie is a free spirit to protest against the lottery. She arrives late to the lottery out of breath. Although Tessie quickly settles into the crowd and joins the lottery like everyone else, Jackson has set

her apart as a kind of free spirit who was able to forget about the lottery entirely as she performed her chores. When the Hutchinson family draws the marked paper, she exclaims, "It wasn't fair!" This refrain continues as she is selected and subsequently stoned to death, but instead of listening to her, the villagers ignore her. Even Bill tells her to be quiet. We don't know whether Tessie would have protested the fairness of the lottery if her family had not been selected, but this is a doubtful point. Whatever her motivation is for speaking out, she is effectively silenced.

4.3 Tessie Hutchinson: Lottery is unfair

Tessie Hutchinson displays human weakness. Though she puts up a brave front and pretends to be unconcerned with the lottery (arriving late, forgetting the date), Mrs. Hutchinson is the first to protest the lottery when her family is endangered. She complains, ironically, "It wasn't fair!". Up until this point, however, Tess has been complicit in allowing the lottery to proceed, though she knows of the gruesome outcome. She does not question the lottery's fairness when she first arrives at the event. She does not have a problem with it until she and her family are put in the spotlight. Then, she flips her original position and begins to decry the lottery process as unfair, simply because she and her family are at risk. However, the reader comes to realize that the lottery has been unfair, unjust and unthinkable all along. When Tess's death is imminent she recognizes most of all the reader's perspective as a matter of basic human nature to be concerned with random violence: "It isn't fair, it isn't right". By then, her fate has already been sealed. No one in the town is willing to voice the clear and rational opinion that the lottery is an inhumane exercise in pointless brutality. Old Man Warner dismisses the notion of discarding the lottery as preposterous.

5-THE DARK SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE

It's a wild act to kill a human for the sake of other humans. They believe blindly that it would help for the better survival of future generations. Indeed it reflects the anecdotes of ancient Greek literature. "Theistic rationalizations of human sacrifice may involve the idea of offering to deities as payment for favourable interventions in an event of special importance, to forestall unfavourable events, or to

purchase disclosures about the physical world". It is assumed that the predominant reason and belief behind taking a human life would ensure the good crops in the village. The bloodshed would be in order to get food and the survival of the people with worth sacrifice. It reveals how the existing society is rotten with outdated rituals by taking away the life of a fellow human in the name of a ritual.

6-BRUTAL RULES TO ELIMINATE FAMILIES

The lottery is a tradition, an annual ritual and a part of the village culture which continues for a very long time. In fact, it is accompanied by an old saying: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon". The villagers are very loyal to the lottery system despite the fact that many parts of the lottery have changed or faded away over the years. Nevertheless, the lottery continues and with the result of tradition everyone becomes a part to murder on an annual basis. The lottery would be an example for new generations until the traditions are questioned.

Despite the most complicated rules the lottery follows, the villagers obliged to follow suggest that the lottery is an efficient, logical ritual and there is an important purpose behind it. But the rules that have lapsed, reveal the essential randomness of the lottery's dark conclusion. Mr. Summers follows an elaborate system of rules for creating the slips of paper and making up the lists of families. When the lottery begins, he lays out a series of specific rules for the villagers, including who should draw slips of paper from the black box. There are brutal rules that have been long forgotten or abandoned altogether, such as those for salutes and songs that accompany Mr. Summer's induction as the chairman of the lottery. Also some rules have remained while others have disappeared underscores the disturbing randomness of the murder at the end of the lottery. Although family relationships determine about the lottery, they do not guarantee loyalty or love once the lottery is over.

7-SOCIAL CLASS DIVISION

In the story, Shirley Jackson explores the theme of social class division. People are occupied with powerful positions. Mr. Summers was the most powerful business man in the town. Mr. Graves and Mr. Martin were other prominent business people in the town. Mr. Summers was the in-charge of

conducting lottery. Mr. Graves and Mr. Martin also helped Mr. Summers during the lottery. The wealthiest people had economic control. But the lottery instilled their political control in the town. It is also obvious that during conducting lottery the men had more powers than women. "The men were the ones to choose the lottery slip for the family, placing them in charge of the family".

CONCLUSION

Shirley Jackson is intended to introduce an odd ritual to the readers which is going on in some part of America. But she is shocked to receive many adverse comments from readers and publishers as the story is associated with "bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse". Readers wanted to know where such lotteries were held, and whether they could go and watch; they threatened to cancel their *New Yorker* subscriptions; they declared the story a piece of trash. If the letters "could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public ... I would stop writing now," she concluded. "The Lottery" takes the classic theme of man's inhumanity to man and gives it an additional twist: the randomness inherent in brutality. Jackson utilizes many literary elements in the story in order to present her theme effective. The story is written primarily in chronological order to provide information related to the lottery being conducted. By writing in a relaxed and simple manner, the heinous act of stoning the lottery "winner" becomes more shocking to the reader than if there had been an overly obvious air of suspense throughout the story. Although Jackson uses foreshadowing and suggestion throughout her story with an extensive use of symbolism, the reader does not expect an audience member to be murdered, especially in the manner that takes place.

SUGGESTED READING

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