

The Lottery

Shirley Jackson



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Genre

- Short story
- Novel

Style

- Realism

Category

- Horror
- Gothic
- Comedy



Born in 1916, American author Shirley Jackson wrote poetry as a teenager. Forced to withdraw from college due to depression, she formed the habit of writing at least one thousand words a day. After her marriage and the birth of her four children, she wrote at a furious pace, producing four novels, more than forty short stories, a children's book, two family chronicles, and numerous articles. She died in her sleep of heart failure in 1965.

Historical Context

Some critics have suggested that "The Lottery" is representative of the social, political and cultural climate of the time it was written. In 1948, the world was still trying to confront the brutal realities of World War II, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb. The Holocaust, in particular, revealed that society is capable of mass genocide if they believe it to be in the name of the common good. Jackson's husband, literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman, once wrote about the influence of world events on Jackson's fiction: "Her fierce visions of dissociations and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic fantasies. Quite the reverse: They are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the bomb."

The spread of Communism was also a major concern in 1948. Communists took over in Czechoslovakia, the Soviet occupation force in Germany set up a blockade between Berlin and West Germany, and tensions rose between the democratic Republic of South Korea and Communist-led North Korea. Additionally, the term "Cold War" was coined by President Truman's advisor Bernard Baruch to describe the increasing hostilities between East and West. In the U.S. Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated Alger Hiss, a State Department official accused of supplying the Soviet Union with classified documents. Two years later in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy started a Communist "witch hunt" that continued for the next four years. Also in 1950, the McCarran Act (Control of Communists Act) was passed by congress to severely restrict suspected Communists. A few years earlier in 1947, many figures in the American entertainment industry were accused of having Communist Party affiliations. That year the Hollywood blacklist, which included some 300 writers, directors, and actors, was compiled.

Historical Context

The United States during the late 1940s and 1950s was largely a patriarchal society, one in which women were expected to stay at home and raise the children. Recent critics have interpreted "The Lottery" from a feminist perspective, suggesting that Jackson was commenting on the role of women in American society at the time the story was written. Peter Kosenko, for example, stated in *The New Orleans Review* in 1985 that in "The Lottery," the women "have a distinctly subordinate position in the socio-economic hierarchy of the village."

The Lottery

Setting

- Location: Village square of town of about 300 people; few clues given in order to emphasize that brutality can occur anywhere
- Time: Morning on June 27, a sunny and pleasant summer day
- Mood: Normal and happy at beginning in contrast to brutal at end of story

The Lottery

Style

- Gothic

The Lottery

Point of view

- Limited omniscient: The story is told without excessive emotion or description, helping to emphasize the ordinariness of the barbaric act.

The Lottery

Characters

Mr. Adams

Mr. Adams is one of the men of the village. While he seems to be one of the few who questions the lottery when he mentions that another village is thinking about giving up the ritual, he stands at the front of the crowd when the stoning of Tessie begins.

Mrs. Adams

Along with Tessie Hutchinson, Mrs. Adams seems to be one of the few women of the village who questions the lottery. She tells Old Man Warner that "some places have already quit lotteries."

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Characters (cont.)

Mrs. Delacroix

An acquaintance of Tessie Hutchinson's, Mrs. Delacroix is the first person Tessie speaks to when she arrives late at the lottery. When Tessie protests the method of drawing, it is Mrs. Delacroix who says, "Be a good sport, Tessie." Mrs. Delacroix, however, is among the most active participants when the stoning begins, grabbing a stone so heavy she cannot lift it. Some critics suggest that Mrs. Delacroix represents the duality of human nature: she is pleasant and friendly on the outside, but underneath she possesses a degree of savagery.

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Characters (cont.)

Mrs. Janey Dunbar

Janey Dunbar is the one woman at the lottery who has to draw for her family because her husband is at home with a broken leg. When Mr. Summers asks her if she has an older son who can do it for her, she says no and then, regretfully, "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year." She seems to accept the patriarchal system with complacency, but when the stoning begins she picks up only small stones and then says she cannot run and will "catch up." This is one of the few hopeful and seemingly compassionate actions in the story.

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Characters (cont.)

Mr. Graves

Mr. Graves is the village's postmaster, the second most powerful person in the village. He helps Joe Summers administer the lottery and, like Summers, represents tradition and the status quo.

Mrs. Graves

Mrs. Graves is a villager who seemingly accepts the lottery. When Tessie complains about the method of the drawing, she snaps, "All of us took the same chance." She is also at the front of the crowd when the stoning begins.

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Characters (cont.)

Bill Hutchinson

Bill Hutchinson is Tessie Hutchinson's husband. When Tessie questions the method of drawing, he says, "Shut up, Tessie." He also forces the slip of paper with the black spot out of her hand and holds it up in front of the crowd. Bill's control over Tessie highlights the patriarchal system of the village. His unquestioning acceptance of the results of the lottery emphasizes the brutality the villagers are willing to carry out in the name of tradition.

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Characters (cont.)

Tessie Hutchinson

A middle-aged housewife and mother of four children, Tessie Hutchinson “wins” the lottery. She questions Joe Summers about the fairness of the drawing after her family draws the unlucky slip. She also questions the tradition of married daughters drawing with their husband’s family. Later, Tessie cries out as she is being, “It isn’t fair; it isn’t right.” By challenging the lottery’s results, she represents one of the few voices of rebellion in a village controlled by tradition and complacency.

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Characters (cont.)

Mr. Martin

Mr. Martin, grocer, holds the lottery box while the slips are drawn by the villagers.

Joe Summers

Joe Summers, as the most powerful and wealthiest man in the village, is a respected member of the community and the administrator of the lottery. Representing tradition, he continually talks about how important the lottery is for the survival of the village.

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Characters (cont.)

Old Man Warner

The oldest person in the village, Old Man Warner has participated in the lottery 79 times. When told that another village is considering giving up the lottery, he calls them a “pack of fools.” Resistant to change and representing the old social order, he insists that the lottery is necessary for the survival of the village. At the front of the crowd when Tessie draws the slip with the black spot, he encourages the others to stone her.

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Themes

Dual nature of humans/societies

All individuals/societies have the capacity to commit and condone barbarous acts.

Custom and tradition

Blindly following customs and traditions can result in negative consequences.

Victimization

Humans/societies have the capacity to victimize others.

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Symbolism

June 27

Many prehistoric rituals took place on the summer solstice. June 27 is near the summer solstice.

Black box

The villagers are unwilling to replace the box with a new one just as they are unwilling to discard their traditions.

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Symbolism (cont.)

Names

Mr. Summers: joviality

Mr. Graves: tragedy

Mrs. Delacroix: sacrifice

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Irony

1. The story takes place in a peaceful setting although what later occurs is brutal and violent.
2. The story is related in a matter-of-fact way despite the fact that the intent of the author is to elicit profound emotions.

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Parable

"The Lottery" is often characterized as a parable, a story that presents a moral lesson through characters who represent abstract ideas. While no extensive character development takes place in the story, the shocking ending prompts readers to think about the moral implications of the lottery and how such issues relate to society as a whole. Certain characters represent certain ideas in the tale: Old Man Warner represents tradition and ritual, Mr. Summers represents joviality, Mr. Graves represents tragedy, and so forth.

Source

"The Lottery: Introduction." Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. eNotes.com. January 2006. 5 April 2011. <<http://www.enotes.com/lottery/introduction>>.