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Humanities

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### Stoned by Tradition

Most people like to think they would never partake in any activities that cause injustice. That is, until the people surrounding them start to demand it. Shirley Jackson wrote the satirical short story “The Lottery” to expose how easily individuals commit crimes and follow others in making destructive choices. This story was written shortly after WWII in 1948, a time when people conformed to Nazi ideologies and stayed complacent even after witnessing the horrors of the Holocaust. Jackson, herself, dealt with antisemitism and was often treated as an outcast because she presented herself differently from other women at the time, who were expected to be dutiful housewives. Her satire reflects her frustrations from her own experiences with prejudice, cruelty, and complacency. In “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson uses a variety of rhetorical devices through her characterization of a fictional town, its people, and its ritual to raise awareness of the dangers of conformity, blind adherence to traditions, and patriarchal hierarchies.

Jackson uses juxtaposition, ironic contrasts, and a deceptively cheerful tone to satirize how conformity allows ordinary communities to disguise violence beneath an illusion of normalcy and civility. The town holds an annual event called the lottery in which one randomly chosen individual is stoned to death. The townspeople believe this ritual will improve crop yields and the town’s fortune. To introduce the town and its horrific ritual, Jackson begins the story on a beautiful summer day when “flowers were blooming profusely” and the grass was “richly green” (Jackson). Often, winter and dreary weather are used to present violence and darker themes.

However, Jackson uses vivid language and a warm day in June to contrast the weather with the events taking place. She describes the schoolchildren talking of their “teacher, of books and reprimands” and the men “speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes.” The women “greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip” (Jackson). By mentioning these everyday activities, Jackson gives the town a sense of normalcy. The weather and the townspeople’s “civility” juxtapose with the violence that the ritual suggests, exposing how communities can hide their brutality and ignore the serious consequences of their actions. Even leading up to the ritual, the villagers enjoy themselves, as if they do not care about the violence they partake in because it has always been part of their lives. This illusion of normalcy demonstrates how people do not question traditions and are willing to commit crimes to fit in. This irony is reinforced by the name of the story itself; “The Lottery” implies victory and success but promotes murder. The overall setting of the piece and the villager’s apparent friendliness conflict with the violent intentions of the town, effectively revealing how conformity can quickly lead to hazardous choices.

Through symbolism and the structure of the lottery, Jackson satirizes society’s blind attachment to tradition and the bureaucratic systems that ignore and justify collective cruelty. To begin the ritual, a black box, which contains parts of the ritual conducted when the village first formed, is distributed to all villagers. It “grew shabbier each year” and was “faded or stained” in spots (Jackson). The raggedy nature of the box symbolizes traditions of the past that are no longer remembered correctly. Despite this deterioration, the villagers still decide to conduct the event each year, showing how traditions can lose their meaning and become habits instead. When a few people chat about other towns that no longer conduct the ritual, an elderly villager nicknamed Old Man Warner complains that “nothing’s good enough for” the villagers anymore

and that they'll soon “be wanting to go back to living in caves” (Jackson). Old Man Warner represents an enforcer of traditions, and Jackson cleverly places a slippery slope fallacy in his words. Just because the townspeople bring up modern changes, they will not start living in caves. His flawed and exaggerated logic exposes how people would rather defend tradition not because it makes sense, but because abandoning it would force them to question the systems they have always relied on. As part of the tradition, there are slips of paper in the black box, and the person who chooses the one marked paper is selected to die. These slips of paper give the illusion of fairness and disguise violence as a procedure. After the person is chosen, the other villagers pick up stones to throw at them. These stones represent the savagery hidden behind the villagers’ “friendly” smiles. Even though the villagers did not remember the original ritual, “they still remembered to use stones” (Jackson). Jackson uses situational irony to highlight how traditions decay over time: the villagers cannot explain *why* the ritual exists but know exactly *how* to carry out the violence. This reveals the propensity of humans to preserve cruel traditions even when they no longer have any justification. Additionally, the ritual is operated like an official civic process, shocking readers. Mr. Summer acts as the bureaucratic authority—he manages attendance, prepares the slips of paper, and leads the ritual. He demonstrates systems that make cruelty seem orderly. His matter-of-fact and indifferent tone when he says phrases like “guess we better get started” and “let's finish quickly” normalizes violence by framing it as routine business (Jackson). By symbolizing parts of the ritual and describing the lottery’s structure, Jackson expresses contempt for people’s ignorance and unwillingness to address their wrongs.

Through her satirical portrayal of the villagers, Jackson exposes how individuals act out of self-interest and participate in collective savagery, all while enforcing oppressive social norms such as patriarchy. The villagers treat the ritual as any other community gathering. One specific

villager, Tessie Hutchinson, arrives late and in a carefree mood. She jokes with the villagers, and “soft laughter ran through the crowd” (Jackson). However, when her husband draws the marked slip and she is selected during the ritual, the villagers immediately start pelting stones at her without mercy while she cries out that “it isn’t fair, it isn’t right” (Jackson). Tessie only starts to reflect on the morality of the lottery when it affects her personally. This displays the tendency of humans to have self-serving mindsets and highlights the hypocrisy of individuals who participate in harmful systems. In addition, the townspeople’s attitudes before and during the lottery change drastically, revealing how easily people become violent when supported by others. Even Tessie’s own son was given a “few pebbles” to throw at people (Jackson). Not only does this appeal to pathos and shock readers, but it also represents how violence can be inherited and how conformity can turn into cruelty. Furthermore, Jackson criticizes the systemic issues that allow violence to persist. The individuals are able to distance themselves from the violence because there is no one person that clearly commits murder. However, for the readers, it is evident that all the people throwing stones and participating in the barbaric tradition are responsible for killing someone. Beyond exposing collective violence, Jackson also satirizes another systemic issue: the town’s patriarchal customs. Women are excluded and treated as inferiors. They cannot draw slips for themselves or participate independently in the lottery but are suddenly treated “equally” when it comes to being stoned to death. This dark irony demonstrates the absurdity and viciousness of the system, showing how traditions and norms are often followed for comfort and familiarity but can lead to miserable outcomes.

Ultimately, “The Lottery” warns that conformity, blindly clinging to traditions, and oppressive social hierarchies can lead ordinary people to encourage and engage in acts of cruelty.

By exposing these tendencies in her satire, Jackson prompts readers to question societal norms and acknowledge the responsibility individuals have to resist injustice.

Work Cited

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