

The Lottery Shirley Jackson Text



read to me

DEFINITIONS
•profusely: a lot; in large amounts
•assembled: gathered; came together
•boisterous: loud; excited
•surveying: watching; looking for
•reluctantly: unwillingly; not happily
•scold: an angry woman who yells
•paraphernalia: things needed for an activity
•underfoot: in the way
•old man: husband
•petulantly: impatient irritation; angrily
•defiantly: protest; challenge

The Lottery by Shirley Jackson is a compelling short story that delves into the dark side of human nature and the societal rituals that govern our lives. First published in 1948 in *The New Yorker*, the story quickly sparked controversy and discussion due to its chilling narrative and unsettling themes. Jackson's work serves not only as a critique of conformity and tradition but also as a profound commentary on the potential for violence and cruelty inherent in society. This article will explore the plot, characters, themes, and the broader implications of "The Lottery," providing a comprehensive analysis of this significant literary piece.

Plot Summary

"The Lottery" takes place in a small, unnamed village that holds an annual lottery. The story opens on a sunny summer day, with children gathering stones and adults engaging in casual conversation. This seemingly idyllic setting contrasts sharply with the story's grim conclusion.

As the lottery begins, the villagers assemble in the town square. Mr. Summers, the lottery's conductor, prepares the black box that contains the slips of paper. The townspeople are initially friendly, chatting about mundane topics, which creates a sense of normalcy. However, as the lottery progresses, tension builds.

The lottery involves each family drawing a slip of paper from the box. Most slips are blank, but one slip has a black dot, marking the family that will face dire consequences. The Hutchinson family draws the marked slip, leading to a shocking revelation: Tessie Hutchinson, the family matriarch, is to be stoned to death by the villagers as a sacrifice to ensure a good harvest.

Characters

The story features several key characters that represent different aspects of the community and its adherence to tradition:

1. Tessie Hutchinson: The protagonist who arrives late to the lottery, Tessie becomes the focus of the story's climax. Her initial lightheartedness turns to desperation as she realizes the fate awaiting her.
2. Mr. Summers: The lottery's official, Mr. Summers embodies the ritualistic aspects of the lottery. He is responsible for organizing the event and maintaining its traditions.
3. Old Man Warner: The oldest villager, Old Man Warner, represents the voice of tradition. He is staunchly against any changes to the lottery and believes in its necessity for the community's survival.
4. Bill Hutchinson: Tessie's husband, who participates in the lottery with a sense of resignation. His reaction to the lottery's outcome highlights the community's complicity in the ritual.
5. The Children: Their role in gathering stones and participating in the stoning underscores the normalization of violence within the community.

Thematic Analysis

"The Lottery" is rich with themes that provoke thought about human behavior, societal norms, and the consequences of blind adherence to tradition.

Tradition and Ritual

One of the central themes of "The Lottery" is the examination of tradition and ritual. The villagers participate in the lottery without questioning its purpose or morality. This blind adherence to tradition raises critical questions:

- Why do the villagers continue this practice?
- What are the consequences of unexamined traditions?
- How does conformity affect individual morality?

Old Man Warner's unwavering support for the lottery exemplifies the dangers of traditionalism. His disdain for other villages that have abandoned the lottery highlights a fear of change and the unknown.

Violence and Human Nature

Jackson also explores the theme of violence as an inherent aspect of human nature. The lottery culminates in an act of brutality that shocks both the characters and the readers. The villagers, who initially appear friendly and cooperative, reveal their capacity for violence when faced with the ritual. This theme prompts readers to consider:

- What drives ordinary people to commit acts of violence?
- How does societal pressure influence individual actions?
- In what ways do we participate in violence through societal norms?

The chilling conclusion of the story forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that violence can lurk beneath the surface of seemingly civilized behavior.

Isolation and Community

The story also examines the tension between individual desires and community expectations. Tessie Hutchinson's late arrival and her eventual sacrifice highlight the struggle between personal identity and societal roles. The villagers' willingness to turn against one of their own demonstrates how community cohesion can sometimes come at the expense of individual morality.

- Tessie's isolation becomes evident as she pleads for fairness, yet her cries are drowned out by the collective will of the villagers.
- The story raises questions about the cost of belonging to a community and the sacrifices individuals may make to conform.

Literary Devices

Shirley Jackson employs various literary devices to enhance the impact of "The Lottery."

Symbolism

- The Black Box: The black box used for the lottery symbolizes tradition and the unquestioned customs of the community. Its dilapidated state reflects how the lottery has become an outdated ritual that is still upheld without thought.
- Stones: The stones represent the violence that lies at the heart of the community's traditions. They are tools of death that the children play with innocently, symbolizing the normalization of brutality.

Irony

The story is rife with irony, particularly in its juxtaposition of a sunny day and the horrific act of violence that unfolds. The cheerful atmosphere at the beginning stands in stark contrast to the brutal conclusion, emphasizing the theme of the darkness within human nature.

Foreshadowing

Subtle hints throughout the story foreshadow the grim conclusion. The children's gathering of stones is an early indication of the violent act to come, creating an unsettling sense of dread that builds as the narrative progresses.

Conclusion

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" remains a powerful and thought-provoking work that challenges readers to reflect on the nature of tradition, community, and human behavior. Through its vivid characters, chilling plot, and rich thematic depth, the story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of conformity and the capacity for violence that exists within us all. As readers navigate the complexities of Jackson's narrative, they are left to ponder the unsettling implications of a society that prioritizes tradition over morality, making "The Lottery" an enduring piece of literature that resonates even decades after its publication. The story invites discussion and analysis, ensuring its place in the canon of American literature and its relevance in contemporary discussions about societal norms and human nature.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery'?

The main themes in 'The Lottery' include the dangers of conformity, the randomness of violence, and the critique of tradition. Jackson illustrates how societal norms can lead to barbaric practices when blindly followed.

How does Shirley Jackson use symbolism in 'The Lottery'?

Symbolism in 'The Lottery' is prevalent, with the lottery itself representing the arbitrary nature of persecution and the black box symbolizing the tradition and resistance to change within the community.

What is the significance of the setting in 'The Lottery'?

The setting of a small, seemingly normal village contrasts sharply with the horrific event of the lottery, highlighting how ordinary life can mask underlying violence and brutality within a community.

What impact did 'The Lottery' have on readers upon its publication?

Upon its publication in 1948, 'The Lottery' shocked readers and sparked widespread controversy and discussion about the nature of tradition and the potential for cruelty in human behavior, leading to a significant impact on American literature.

How does the character of Tessie Hutchinson contribute to the story's message?

Tessie Hutchinson serves as a focal point for the story's critique of societal norms; her eventual fate illustrates the arbitrary nature of the lottery and how easily individuals can become victims of tradition when they are seen as different or nonconforming.

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