

ANALYSIS

“The Lottery” (1949)



Shirley Jackson

(1919-1965)

“The Lottery” is one of the most often reprinted stories in history, a standard in anthologies. At the level of pop culture it is a gothic horror story, a thriller crafted to build suspense and a mystery that leaves a reader asking why. It is also a parable of eternal human nature.

Sacrificing a scapegoat for what is seen as the good of the group has always been common in human societies all over the world, from ancient rituals to current politics. “The Lottery” is shocking because the sacrifice is out of place and time. An innocent person is literally stoned to death every year, all over the place, as indicated by references to other lotteries in other towns. In the opening of the story, this place is called a “village” and words such as “menfolk” evoke rural America, perhaps the Midwest. However, the lack of geographical or temporal specifics, except for dates in June, implies universality. These characters are doing what people have *always* done in one way or another, figuratively speaking. Literal human sacrifice has not been practiced as a public ritual in this hemisphere since western civilization displaced the cultures of tribes such as the Aztecs. “The Lottery” must be taken in the same way as an ancient myth that conveys truths about human nature.

Techniques intensify the shock of the plot. The natural mode of myth and dream is Expressionism, whereas Shirley Jackson renders her myth with a Realism that makes it seem, paradoxically, unnatural. The lighthearted and even festive way the townspeople behave on the verge of death or of helping to kill their own spouse or child is monstrous. Yet the setting, the apparent time and the style make the story appear to be an example of the commonplace regionalism popular in the late 19th century, authentic in dialect and in rendering customs and manners. The meticulous narration detailing actions taken by individuals as the lottery is conducted, step by step, increases the illusion of real life and intensifies suspense. Weather is nearly always used in fiction and film to establish an atmosphere that expresses a mood consistent with plot, tone and theme. In this story Jackson reverses our conditioned expectation, setting us up for surprise.

The morning is “clear and sunny,” a peaceful scene as people gather in the town square. This is apparently a place where government caters to the citizens, since the time of the lottery has been set in order “to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.” School is out for the summer, a liberation likely to induce nostalgia in most readers, drawing them into a familiar state of mind. Children represent innocence, usually, and the story keeps children in the foreground to increase the horror when the lots are drawn. Then the boys start gathering stones into “a great pile.” After this ominous hint, evidence of what is to happen accumulates, yet the conversations of the people are mundane. Their complacent attitudes become increasingly sinister, their actions worse.

The jovial Mr. Summers conducts the lottery, as well as the Halloween program, reminding us that people judged to be witches used to be executed for the good of the community. He also conducts the square dances and the teen-age club, implying that all these activities are equally beneficial and fun. For most people summer is the most enjoyable season, but is only one of four. Mr. Summers runs the coal business that keeps people warm in the winter, providing a fuel made of dead organisms in the season of death. He marks the black spot on the slip of paper signifying a death sentence and he carries the black wooden box that is like a coffin, followed by Mr. Graves, who helps conduct the lottery.

Such names and other details are allegorical, connecting in a coherent pattern of implications. The most explicitly allegorical name after Summers and Graves is Old Man Warner, the stubborn defender of tradition, a warner throughout the story. Among the names called out during the lottery, Bentham stands out as a probable reference to the founder of Utilitarian philosophy, Jeremy Bentham, whose cold-eyed doctrines could be used to rationalize the extermination of minorities, the disabled or the elderly--victims by chance. Another allegorical name, Adams, recurs in American literature evoking the myth of the naive American Adam, the view that America is a new Eden where Americans are starting over liberated from history and human nature, an illusion especially common to the young. Delacroix is the name of a famous French romantic painter who celebrated the French Revolution, reminding us of its excesses, which flipped France from leftwing revolution into the rightwing regime of Napoleon. The most significant historical name in the story is Hutchinson, a reference to Anne Hutchinson, who was not innocent. She preached rebellion in Puritan Massachusetts and was exiled in 1638.

Mrs. Hutchinson is washing dishes and arrives late for the ritual, saying, “Clean forgot what day it was.” Like the Delacroix family, she differs from her namesake. She does not rebel until the name of her family is drawn, objecting only to procedure. Then she draws the black spot. Mrs. Delacroix advises her to “be a good sport,” but now Mrs. Hutchinson complains that the lottery is unfair. The reader agrees of course, yet Hutchinson is not entirely sympathetic because she accepted the lottery until she is finally affected by it herself. Presumably, by her age she herself has participated in stoning to death twenty to thirty of her neighbors and relatives. Her hypocrisy makes her less sympathetic. Though terribly unfair, the lottery is egalitarian and the killers are enforcing the will of the People. Literally, anyone who does not believe in the lottery can move away, though figuratively, the lottery is inescapable. Life is a lottery we all eventually lose, and anyone may draw the black spot at any time.

Old Man Warner embodies the status quo and his only argument is “There’s always been a lottery.” The rural community is conservative. “No one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box,” but the box is growing shabbier each year. “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to throw stones.” Even if the form of the ritual gets lost or wears out, they will replace it because they need to throw stones. In making *this* point about human nature, the author herself is conservative. Old Man Warner sees the lottery as progressive because it disciplines people to accept reality. He sees those who oppose the ritual as undisciplined and lazy, adding an economic dimension to the lottery as a metaphor. Marxists have seen capitalism as a lottery that many lose unfairly. President Barack Obama recently called the rich “lottery winners.” A conservative would not accept the lottery as a metaphor of an economic system that rewards talent and hard work. After all, the capitalist economy of the village seems to be doing just fine.

Mrs. Hutchinson is implicitly criticized for not becoming a rebel like Anne Hutchinson soon enough to save herself and others. Yet Anne did not save herself by rebelling. She got exiled from the community and soon afterward she got killed by Indians. “The Lottery” was originally published in *The New Yorker* and

attributes primitive stupidity, cruelty and injustice to rural conservatives, as if New Yorkers never throw stones. This leftist political implication deep in the story tends to propaganda, but due to the subtlety it does not detract from the story as a whole. Furthermore, the universality of the lottery metaphor includes New York, a world capital of stupidity, cruelty and injustice. Art trumps politics. After Old Man Warner dies, perhaps the villagers will stop being so literal-minded and progress by turning the lottery into a ritual of *symbolic* death and rebirth, like Christianity.

Oppressive tradition is represented by a stinking dead whale still afloat at sea in *Moby-Dick*, which also contains a reference to Jeremy Bentham. Faulkner satirizes rigid and selfish adherence to tradition in *As I Lay Dying* by having the Bundren family cart the stinking corpse of Addie across the countryside to bury her in Jefferson. Friederich Nietzsche said, "Every tradition grows ever more venerable the more remote its origin, the more confused that origin is. The reverence due to it increases from generation to generation. The tradition becomes holy and inspires awe."

Michael Hollister (2015)