

The Lottery

A Critical Analysis

Shirley Jackson

(1919-1965)

"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."

A native of San Francisco, Shirley Jackson attended Syracuse University and settled in Vermont. "The Lottery" was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1948, just three years after the end of World War II. It was met with great batches of hate mail and "abusive criticism."

Reading Jackson's story today I cannot help but see that the world has not changed. Her horror story is being played out every day, on the streets in Iran, in a shopping mall in Brussels, at a restaurant in Beirut, in the cafes and a music club in Paris, on a train in Madrid, and on the screens of televisions, computers and the phones we carry in our pockets.

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, and perfunctory. The village people were gathering at the square, unaware of the blossoming flowers, unaware of the history of the day's tradition, unaware of the name that would be drawn from the black box. Arriving late, Mrs. Hutchinson claims she "Clean forgot what day it was" and Mr. Summers announces, "guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work." Although "The Lottery" is filled with names of people, there are no characters: There is only a day, a village and an archaic tradition. Shirley Jackson reveals just that.

Tradition, usually, is a means by which the past is operating, either negatively or positively, in the present. In "The Lottery," tradition is a "perfunctory, tuneless chant," much like the composition of the story itself.

From the opening paragraph to the closing line, Jackson carefully, skillfully controls the movement and mood of the day's events, photographing in words a recognizable community in which a lottery "was conducted—as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers, who had the time and energy to devote to civic activities." As a civic event, it is masterfully observed: Children selecting "the smoothest and roundest stones." Women arriving in their faded house dresses. Old man Warner encouraging the villagers, "Come on, come on everyone." Mr. Graves, the post master, carrying with his 3-legged stool upon which to place the black box. Everyone, young and old, gathering to "get this over with," as if the stoning of another human being were just another civic activity.

However startling the stoning of Mrs. Hutchinson is to us the effect of the matter-of-fact presentation of the ritual, the village's people and the fulfillment of the lottery is far more disturbing and unnerving. As readers we are left wondering what could have instigated such a practice, and why would the tradition continue when it seems that no one can recall for what purpose the lottery serves, other than the timeless echoing justification "There's always been. . . ."

The Lottery

A Critical Analysis

Tradition is an extremely powerful artifact in cultures, and extremely vulnerable when challenged by one questioning and curious individual or by a group of people. But when a tradition becomes just another trivial moment in the rituals of a culture, like the lottery, something dies, whether physically or spiritually, something dies.



Forms of Ritual

Rereading this story nearly 40 years later I am reminded of another morning.

The morning of September 11th was clear and sunny, with the warmth of a late-summer day. The flowers were still showing their colors and the grass in Central Park was richly green. The people of the city began to make their way to their offices