

The lottery by shirley jackson essay



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“ The Bedford Reader” offers brilliant collection of insightful, well-developed and thoughtful essays devoted to political, social and cultural issues, but the most appealing for me are the themes of social inequality, hypocrisy, women oppression and subordination presented in the horrific short-story “ The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson.

The story emerged in 1948 and raised much controversy and criticism. Jackson was always interested in black magic and, therefore, her stories are filled with sense of doom, despair and inevitable death. Nevertheless, the author prefers to convey horrifying themes through ironic narration.

Therefore, the primary objective of the paper is to provide in-depth analysis how Jackson represents the themes of hypocrisy, weakness of human mind, social inequality and women subordination in the short-story.

Hypocrisy, Social Inequality and Gender Discrimination The story of “ The Lottery” takes place in a small village, where people remain obedient to cultural and traditional roots. The lottery is a common yearly event, during which a ‘ winner’ is chosen to be violently stoned by community members. The lottery has been practiced for more than seventy years and every member of the community has nothing to objectify. For example, Peter Kosenko in his “ A Reading of Shirley Jackson’s ‘ The Lottery’” argues that “ her use of friendly language among the villagers and the presentation of the lottery as an event similar to the square dances and Halloween programs illustrates the lottery as a welcomed, festive event”. (Kosenko, 28) We see how Jackson described the atmosphere of the women before lottery takes place: “ They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip...” (Heilman, 384) It means that the practice of the lottery was nothing more than

laundering, washing or cooking. However, till the end readers aren't allowed to recognize the winner of the lottery will be stoned by friends and family.

In such a way the author makes a statement about hypocrisy and human evil as she shows that the lottery takes place in a small town where people know each others, where people have ordinary names as, for example, Martin, Warner and Anderson. The author tends to show what evil is hidden beyond kindness and readiness to help. Extreme evil is hidden in ordinary and friendly atmosphere and the author makes readers think that people are not as they may seem. Jackson argues that underneath outward congeniality and openness, there may be pure evil. Till the end the story doesn't become pernicious, but this idea is entailed in the characters of Mr.

Summers and Mr. Graves who are on the highest steps of social ladder. Mr. Summers is a man who charges the lottery, preparing the slips of paper for drawing.

He is the mediator of activity. Jackson describes Mr. Summers as respected man who carries on his foreboding even with no conscience: “ Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins”.

(Heilman, 384) It becomes apparent that Mr. Summers symbolizes the theme of the novel and the final outcome. His character underlines weakness of ordinary villagers. Kosenko assumes that the lottery is only illusion of democracy, although it has ideological affect preventing villagers from criticizing or objectifying the class structure of their society. However, illusion

of democracy is not the full force of the lottery. The lottery reinforced social inequality, women subordination and weakness in human individuals as women are kept powerless in their homes being provided with opportunity to draw only after their husbands.

Villagers are presented as weak individuals as the town has performed the lottery for many years, though no questions or objections has been made to identify the purpose of tradition. The reason is simple: " There's always been a lottery. Nothing but trouble in that". However, people doesn't feel comfortable with the event and comments as, for example, " Get up there Bill" and " Don't be nervous Jack" illustrate that people show some anxiety toward the event. Nevertheless, no one dares to objectify and still goes along with it.

People seem to be afraid to express fear and anxiety toward the lottery - traditions force them to feign enthusiasm. Jackson is willing to show the weakness of villagers as they aren't strong enough to show their disapproval. They prefer sacrificing their lives and happiness for sake of others without any reasons. Further, the author highlights unfair social inequality and women subordination. Women are subordinate and they have no rights except house work and children.

In social structure of the village women are treated as inferior. For example, when Mrs. Hutchinson's family is chosen in the first round of the lottery she argues that her son-in-law and her daughters " didn't take their chance", but her husband explains that " daughters draw with their husband's families". (Heilman, 384) Jackson shows that power is held in the hands of men who

take dominant positions in all spheres of life. Women are only inferior housewives who have to subordinate their husbands' power. The explanation is that men work providing community economically financially.

However, Mrs. Hutchinson is the only women in the story who rebels about subordination. She is late at the lottery and raises suspicious resistance. When she shows disagreement with the lottery, she ironically contradicts custom endangering the power relations between men and women, husbands and wives. It is necessary to note that the name of Mrs.

Hutchinson is symbolic as Jackson shows religious reformer Anne Hutchinson who was considered a threat to strict Puritan laws. Mrs. Hutchinson realizes that the lottery is wrong, but she can do nothing to change her destiny. In world literature examples of social inequality and women subordination are among the most widely referred themes.

It is known that the beginning of the 19th century is characterized by strong discrimination and oppression of women in society meaning that women were something like private property being able only to keep house and to bear children. Gilman, Wharton and Chopin come from a long list of freedom fighters for women's rights and they were concerned with the role of women in society and, especially, in family interactions. The authors made an attempt to create new ideal of free and independent women. Their works are full of symbolic meanings persuading women to change their lives, to be provided with opportunity to receive proper education and job, to have suffrage. For example, Gilman in her short-story "The Yellow Wallpaper" also refers to the themes of social subordination and exclusion.

From the very first pages of the short-story the author illustrates that it is a men's world and men are dominating force in the society. So, Shirley Jackson is not the only writer who painfully observes gender discrimination, women subordination and oppression. She ironically represents that women are nothing more than men's property. However, she shows that people are not strong enough to change anything they disagree with. (Bloom, 34-35)

Conclusion " The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson is representation of eternal themes: women subordination, social inequality and hypocrisy in societal relations.

The lottery is the paradox of the human psyche between compassion and violence. The author shows that kindness and evil can co-exist in society wrapped up in hypocrisy. When one realizes the possibility of death, his nature comes down to instinctive desire to survive. When Mrs.

Hutchinson wins the lottery she screams for mercy. The pieces of the lottery paper are take away by the breeze as well as human life can be easily taken by other humans. The author shows that many civilizations are doomed to extinction because of blind obedience to traditions and living according the God's word. The most horrifying thing is that nobody asked why he or she should die. Such blind obedience represents weakness of human nature and failure to defend lives of innocent people who die for nothing.