

Gothic elements in "a good man is hard to find" and "the lottery"



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Horrific, extraordinary, macabre, or supernatural events and “ an atmosphere of mystery and suspense” are the essentials of the American Gothic genre of literature (Phillips). The Southern Gothic sub-genre sets the events in the American South, makes extensive use of irony, and includes eccentric, deeply flawed characters but who possess enough positive characteristics that the reader finds herself empathizing despite herself. Unlike its parent genre, Southern Gothic is not concerned merely with suspense for its own sake “ but to explore social issues and reveal the cultural character of the South” (“ Southern Gothic”). The tragic short story “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Connor, is typifies the Southern Gothic genre. On the other hand, Shirley Jackson’s allegorical tale “ The Lottery” incorporates most of these same elements, but the events do not transpire in the South, negating its classification as Southern Gothic. Furthermore, the most common elements of American Gothic fiction: “ ghostly legend[s] ... omens, foreshadowing, and dreams ... highly charged emotional states ... damsels in distress ... [and] romantic themes” (Phillips) are mostly absent in “ The Lottery,” leading one to wonder if the American Gothic genre is its accurate taxonomy. This discrepancy might lead one to question the value of fitting stories into established genres: one might assume that every work in a genre will be alike and disregard or fail to perceive aspects that do not fit the mold. Nevertheless, by carefully avoiding overgeneralization and setting aside preconceptions in order to examine elements common to the genre, as well as those that do not conform, such classification can give supplemental insight into the text and often reveal deeper meaning.“ The Lottery” describes events that are well outside our everyday experience but seem ordinary enough at first. The action takes

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place on a pleasant June day in the town square of a small village. The townspeople gather for a lottery that has been an annual tradition for so long they have forgotten many aspects of the ceremony. The reader discovers at the conclusion of the account that the “ prize” for this lottery is death by stoning, as the other villagers mercilessly stone the unfortunate winner, Tessie Hutchinson. While these events are doubtless horrific, extraordinary, and macabre, the setting does little to create suspense or mystery, though we are briefly in suspense when Mrs. Hutchinson protests the results—clearly something is not normal about this lottery. After the true nature of the lottery is revealed, it can be seen that there is some foreshadowing in the fearful behavior of the townspeople whose “ jokes were quiet and ... smiled rather than laughed” and who “ kept their distance” from the black box (Jackson 573). Prior to the ending, we are unable to deduce the significance of this, and instead interpret these behaviors as nervous excitement. This façade keeps the reader ignorant of the genuine purpose of the ritual, and serves to better illustrate the senselessness of tradition blindly followed. Jackson says about the setting: “ I hoped by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village [North Bennington, VT], to shock the story’s readers” (qtd. in “ Historical,” par. 1). The sense of normalcy drives home the suggestion to the reader that this could be happening in any town, right now, and their town could be next. In contrast, “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is a classic Southern Gothic story. Indeed, one critic portrays O’Connor’s writing as, “ biting and grotesquely comic satire of human arrogance and self-certainty” (“ O’Connor’s A Good Man,” par. 14). The story tells the heartrending tale of a family holiday to Florida that ends in disaster. The grandmother manipulates the family into taking a side trip to <https://assignbuster.com/gothic-elements-in-a-good-man-is-hard-to-find-and-the-lottery/>

see an old plantation, and they wreck the car on the way, leaving them stranded on a desolate dirt road. Before long, an escaped convict, The Misfit, comes along and massacres the entire family. The events the story describes are exceptionally horrific, extraordinary, and macabre, and consistent with the genre, the author uses foreshadowing to heighten suspense, and as we are not deliberately lulled into feeling all is normal (as in "The Lottery"), it is easier to recognize. The graveyard, with "five or six graves" (there were six family members), the town of "Toombsboro," and the way the woods "gaped like a dark open mouth," are a few examples of how O'Connor lets us know something dreadful is about to happen (O'Connor 203; 205; 208). The characters in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" also typify Southern Gothic style, in that they are both eccentric and deeply flawed. We first meet a character known only as "the grandmother," and we immediately see her as a fussy, self-righteous, and quarrelsome shrew. Despite her apparent high opinion of herself, she has no difficulty telling a lie when it suits her, "'There was a secret panel in this house,' she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing that she were" (O'Connor 205). The grandmother also has a tendency to disparage her family rather than show love, and seems to covet wealth as well, telling June Star, "she would have done well to marry Mr. Teagarden," since he had become wealthy from Coca-Cola stock (O'Connor 204). Another character that displays eccentricity is Red Sammy, proprietor of The Tower, who keeps a "gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree" as a pet (O'Connor 204). His chauvinistic tendencies are apparent when he orders his wife around like a slave, and like the grandmother, he only sees the flaws of others, "'A good man is hard to find,' Red Sammy said. 'Everything is getting terrible'" (O'Connor 205). The most peculiar

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character is The Misfit; even his nickname demonstrates how poorly he fits into society, and he is an excellent example of a grotesque character—certainly “ cringe-inducing,” but at the same time, we see how he struggles within himself. When the grandmother pleads with him to pray, we observe his rather bizarre view of religion, “‘ Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead.’ The Misfit continued, ‘ and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown [sic] everything off balance’” (O’Connor 211). His concern with courtesy—even while committing multiple murders, is another of his incongruent traits, “ I’m sorry I don’t have on a shirt before you ladies” (O’Connor 209).

Conversely, the characters in “ The Lottery” are comparatively normal.

Jackson portrays characters such as Joe Summers, the wealthy civic leader of the town who administers the lottery, and Old Man Warner, who is the staunchest advocate of the lottery and tradition, as virtually stock characters to heighten the contrast of the horrifying reality of the lottery. This disparity between the ostensibly ordinary citizens of the village and the unabashed brutality that ensues makes evident that the events could occur anywhere.

Then again, one character we see that is quite consistent with the American Gothic genre is the “ damsel in distress,” in Tessie Hutchinson; while not technically a damsel, she fills the role, although there is no heroic knight willing or able to rescue her, as the custom is of greater importance to the townspeople than individualism or heroism. The characteristic of rich irony is especially present in “ The Lottery.” The entire plot is ironic, with the whole story line unfolding contrary to expectations. The idyllic depiction of the scene as “ clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day” with “ flowers ... blossoming profusely” and “ richly green” grass furthers this

illusion that things are ordinary and tranquil (Jackson 572). When the <https://assignbuster.com/gothic-elements-in-a-good-man-is-hard-to-find-and-the-lottery/>

populace begins to gather on the square, the men are “ speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” and the women are gossiping, everyone displaying typical small-town behaviors that seem even more normal because of the objective and detached style of the narration (Jackson 573). In perhaps the most ghoulish irony, we see Mrs. Delacroix, after chatting amiably with Mrs. Hutchinson in the beginning, urging her to “ be a good sport,” when her family wins the lottery; later, when the stoning begins, she picks up a stone so big she must use both hands, and even encourages others to “ hurry up” (Jackson 576-7). Verbal irony is also used to further reinforce the absurdity of institution when Mr. Summers asks if Mrs. Dunbar has a grown boy to draw for her even though “ Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer ... it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask” (Jackson 575). Consistent with Southern Gothic tradition, irony is pervasive in “ A Good Man Is Hard to Find” as well. Similar to the “ The Lottery,” the story begins with no hint as to the events to come, the grandmother even proclaiming it “ a good day for driving” (O’Connor 203). Darker irony surfaces after the accident when June Star says with disappointment, “ But nobody’s killed,” which of course is true at that moment, but soon will not be (O’Connor 207). Another example of irony is the grandmother herself, a woman that to external appearances has it all together with her “ white cotton gloves ... navy blue straw sailor hat ... and a navy blue dress” (O’Connor 202-3). Ironically, she dresses in this fashion so that “ in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (O’Connor 203). As discussed earlier, the grandmother has no problem with relativistic morality. She is also the proximate cause of the family’s misfortune because of her insistence on the

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side trip; she then seals their fate when she blurts out that she recognizes The Misfit, which is ironic in view of the fact that she had been admonishing the family about the risk of traveling with The Misfit "aloose [sic]" (O'Connor 202). This contrast between how the grandmother seems and how she actually is makes her redemption at the end of the story, when she finally shows sincere Christ-like love, all the more poignant. In addition to the plentiful irony within both stories, the titles themselves are ironic as well. The title of "The Lottery" has a positive connotation of an opportunity to win money or prizes, but this Lottery awards only death. Upon reading the title of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," we believe that the story will be about finding a good man, or perhaps a man who becomes good in the course of the story. Ironically, it is a good woman we find, and that merely because of the influence of The Misfit, who is anything but a good man. Each story uses irony abundantly and in different ways, and each absolutely exemplifies this attribute of the American Gothic genre. While both stories use many of the elements of the Gothic literary tradition, clearly "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" conforms much more closely to the characteristics of the American Gothic genre, and specifically, the Southern Gothic sub-genre. "The Lottery," with its lack of a Southern setting and eccentric, flawed characters is certainly not Southern Gothic, and while it has few of the elements typically seen in American Gothic fiction, its horrific and macabre events and biting irony eliminate uncertainty as to its classification as such. In analyzing the Gothic components of the stories, it becomes clear that despite being classified in different ways, these stories have something in common; in fact, both stories are modern parables, as each contains a hidden lesson, revealed by thorough analysis. "The Lottery" forces us to question the virtue of

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tradition, in light of the indefensible outcome of the story. In a similar manner, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" shows us that above all it is not our outward appearance that makes us a good man or woman, but rather the love that we have for others. Works Cited" Historical Context: 'The Lottery'." EXPLORING Short Stories. Detroit: Gale, 2003. Discovering Collection. Gale. Pellissippi State Tech. Comm. Coll. 4 July 2009. Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Ed. Robert DiYanni. 6th ed. New York: McGraw, 2007. 572-578. O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Ed. Robert DiYanni. 6th ed. New York: McGraw, 2007. 202-212. "O'Connor's A Good Man Is Hard to Find Is Published, 1955." DISCOVERING U. S. History. Online ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. Discovering Collection. Gale. Pellissippi State Tech. Comm. Coll. 6 July 2009. Phillips, Stacy. "Typical Elements of American Gothic Fiction." Gothic Fiction and Poetry: An Online Teaching Resource. Middle TN State U. 11 July 2009. "Southern Gothic." Vade Mecum: A GRE for Literature Study Tool. 7 Dec. 2008. Duke U. 4 July 2009.