

The lottery: a critical analysis



Since the dawn of civilization, human beings have participated in acts of sacrifice. In ancient cultures these sacrifices came in a physical form, usually in the form of blood. The fuel behind these acts of hostility and violence performed by these ancient cultures was simply an effort to satisfy their god or gods and gain their favor to ensure the fertility of the land and the survival of the people. These cultures truly believed that such acts were vital in their ability to survive in environments filled with uncertainty and chaos.

However, throughout the years, the acts of sacrificing began to evolve to suit a world where the shedding of blood was no longer socially acceptable. As the idea of salvation spread around the world and different religions became prominent, human beings moved away from acts of sacrifice involving the flesh and moved toward acts of moral sacrifice. Just as physical sacrifice was fueled by a need to control one's physical environment, moral sacrifice is an attempt to transform one's environment from an ethical point of view.

This type of sacrifice occurs when an individual forces his moral beliefs upon a person tearing at their self esteem and identity. In the end, this affects the person's ability to lead a happy fulfilling life. In both types of sacrifice a type of death can be found; the only real difference is that one is physical and the other is emotional. In her short story "The Lottery," Shirley Jackson uses the shocking act of physical sacrifice, misleading imagery, and symbolism to show that though the act of sacrifice has transformed from a physical to an emotional act, the effects are equally damaging.

"The Lottery" is an ominous tale that spotlights the barbaric behaviors that still exist among the people of the world in their outdated traditions. The

story begins on a beautiful day as the town is beginning to gather in the Town Square. The children appear first, shortly followed by their parents all waiting for the start of the town's annual lottery drawing. The characters send a very mixed message throughout the story as to what the town's overall feelings are on the lottery.

Everyone seems to accept the events taking place, but soon Jackson begins imparting clues, helping the reader to realize that this is not a typical lottery. As this information is revealed, the climate begins to shift with characters becoming nervous and restless as the heads of household begin to draw out of the black box. Jackson ends the story with the lucky winner of the lottery, Mrs. Hutchinson, pleading for her life as her neighbors close in around her with the intention of stoning her to death.

In her portrayal of this sinister tale, Jackson uses two literary devices to effectively advance her point of view to her audience. The first is her utilization of misleading imagery. Jackson does this by creating beautiful images that bring a sense of peace and reassurance to the reader, in a way, she knits a blanket of security for him/her. Secondly, Jackson uses the characters' family names to symbolize the injustice inflicted upon people in today's society through traditions and religious beliefs.

In order to gain the reaction she wanted, Jackson begins the story by creating serene images that allow the reader to feel invited and comfortable with the direction she takes. Helen Nebeker, of Arizona State University, also believes that Jackson's intention in creating this pleasant village is to create a certain shock value. Nebeker asserts, " Most acknowledge the power of the

story, admitting that the psychological shock of the ritual murder in an atmosphere of modern, small-town normality cannot be easily forgotten” (100).

These images play well with the senses and are easily relatable to the average reader. With her eye set on imagery, Jackson begins by writing, “The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green” (25). In reading these lines, the reader’s imagination is consumed in the warmth and brightness of this environment, unaware of the cold darkness looming just a page or two away.

Jackson continues by beginning to introduce the people of this quaint town, further encouraging the reader to remain in the carefree world she has created: “The children gathered first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather quietly for awhile before they broke into boisterous play” (25). Jackson’s audience can find comfort in this description of the children because it is an image readers can identify with as they think back on their days as adolescents.

Jackson makes a final connection that connects the reader with their community. She writes, “The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teen club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers” (25). With this statement, Jackson is giving the reader a way to connect his/her experiences as a member in a normal community to the fictional community she is creating. It is the innocence of these events that completes her illusion

of this serene, normal town. This deceptive depiction of the town and its people, really makes the horrible ending so appalling.

Along with her use of imagery, Jackson's use of symbolism proves to be a very powerful tool in expressing her point of view to the audience. Part of that point of view refers to traditions and rituals and the importance of both to humankind throughout history. For example, when reading the name Mr. Summers the reader envisions sunshine and warmth. This in general sums up Mr. Summers' easy-going and sunny disposition. Summer is also the time of year that corn is planted and the season the lottery takes place.

When these two points are combined with a statement from Old Man Warner, " Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (27), it is easy to assume that this sacrificial act began with the townspeople's ancestors, who believed that sacrificing a human being would bring an abundant harvest, honing in on just how this ritual began. Mr. Graves is another symbolic figure used by Jackson. His presence in the story suggests serious business and grave importance. The name also brings a heaviness to the story; it reminds readers of death and burials. It is Mr. Graves' job as the postmaster to swear in Mr. Summers as the official of the lottery.

It was this relationship between these two men that led Amy Griffin, who once was a literary scholar at Schreiner College, to write, " Jackson creates balance by juxtaposing Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves to share in the responsibilities of the ritual: Life brings death and death recycles life" (44). The cycle Griffin is referring to was of great importance to many ancient cultures and fueled the beliefs that without death, there could not be life.

Jackson uses Old Man Warner to represent tradition, as he is the only villager who remembers the original purpose behind the lottery. It seems in the story that his only real concern is to keep the tradition alive.

Lenemaja Freeman, the author of Shirley Jackson, makes this connection also when she states, “ It is not the death of the victim that disturbs him but the possible consequences of an irreligious attitude on the part of the participants” (67). This is why he spends all of his time warning of the disaster that lurks if the old traditions were to be abandoned, as can be seen in this quote: “ Old Man Warner snorted. ‘ Pack of crazy fools,’ he said. ‘ Listening to the young folks, nothing’s good enough for them.

Next thing you know, they’ll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody works any more, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about ‘ Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon. ‘ First thing you know, we’d all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There’s always been a lottery,’ he added petulantly” (27). Clearly, Jackson is making a statement on the ignorance of humanity in putting so much faith in such superstitious and outdated ideas. It is the fear of change and the unknown that fuels such faith, and the human being’s desire to try and control his/her environment.

Jackson also uses symbolism to represent the moral sacrifices forced upon people in a religious sense. For Example, the name Delacroix, that when translated in French means of the cross, the cross being the symbol of Christianity and of Jesus as a martyr. It is Mrs. Delacroix that first greets Mrs. Hutchinson as she arrives late to the annual festivities. Mrs. Delacroix greets Tessie with kindness and reassures her that she has made it on time. This

kindness is obliterated at the end of the story, as it is Mrs. Delacroix who “selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (28).

Jackson uses this transition to make a statement about Christianity and other religions of salvation. At first glance they offer acceptance and promises of vitality and growth, but when a closer look is taken, what can be seen is religious justification to openly and emotionally crucify certain groups of people for their beliefs or lifestyle choices. Nathan Cervo, of Franklin Pierce College, believes that Jackson was making a similar point, when she had the villagers mispronounce the name Delacroix as Dellacroy.

Cervo asserts, “The mispronunciation signals the villagers’ botching of the traditional Christian understanding of the Crucifixion” (183). It is this misunderstanding of the Crucifixion, that Jackson is drawing our attention to. Many followers of the Christian faith often believe, that because Christ died for the sins of mankind, that it is their duty to stop any behavior they deem to be sinful. This is where the misunderstanding comes into the picture, for it is all of the sins of mankind that Christ made that great sacrifice for, and by interfering in others lives they are downplaying this gracious act of their savior.

Along with Delacroix, Jackson uses the name Adams to portray a similar idea to her audience. When the Mr. and Mrs. Adams make their first meaningful appearance in the story, they present themselves as the voices of reason. It is this voice of reason that initially brings to mind our founding fathers, John Quincy Adams to be more specific. These men fought for the freedoms of individuals, including the right to freedom of religion. But in a confusing twist

Jackson writes, “ Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him” (28).

It seems now that Jackson wants the reader to look at the Adams through a different lens. From this view, Adams represents the Adam of the Christian creation myth. She had previously set up for this transition as he was the first man to draw from the box. In her transition in the roles that the Adams play, Jackson is making a statement about the path America has taken. Originally created by men striving for equality and freedom, America has become a country that allows a religion to oppress and pass judgment on its citizens.

In its history, America has made many different groups victims of moral sacrifice through its ignorance and bias including women, people of different ethnic backgrounds, and homosexuals. It is no wonder why “ The Lottery”, caused so much controversy after being published in 1948. Jackson truly turned a mirror at us as “ civilized” human beings to truly reflect how little humanity has evolved away from the barbaric ways of our ancestors. What makes it worse is that our ancestors believed in these practices because of their lack of knowledge in the way their world worked and needed these rituals to feel they had some control over their own.

However, in today’s society with the amount of information available to us at the press of a button, the fact that we continue with such harmful practices says little for the future of mankind. There is a dire need for the human race to let go of their irrational fears and to learn to live harmoniously among each other instead of making scapegoats out of our neighbors. Even though

Jackson's message wasn't well received at the time it was published, it later became the subject of many classrooms discussions, leaving hope that one day people will read this story and no longer see themselves, but their ancestors instead.