

The lottery and religion essay sample

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Symbolism in a story is used to express a meaning that goes beyond the apparent literal significance, and suggests a more complex meaning, or a range of meanings. It is a tool that can be used to enhance and stress the theme of a story. Authors use this tool as a way to encompass as much content as possible into a compact story. None have done so better than Shirley Jackson in her most famous work, which received a widespread, scathing rebuke when first released in the magazine, “The New Yorker,” in 1948. In her short story, “The Lottery,” Jackson uses symbolism in the form of objects, character names, and the setting of the story, to convey to the reader, her negative attitude and beliefs about Christianity. Indeed, the symbolic meanings of many of the people and things placed throughout the narrative depict the author’s own feelings on religion, surely shaped by her New England upbringing. For instance, consider the black box from which the pieces of paper are drawn. Jackson uses the box as a representation of the bible.

Christians pass judgment on others based on the things that they take from the bible. Likewise, the village inhabitants pass judgment on Mrs. Hutchinson based on what is literally taken from the box. Also, just as the bible has reluctantly changed throughout the passage of time, retaining pieces of its former self, the black box has been altered as well, rebuilt using the remnants of its predecessors. Although the box has been altered, it is still used in the lottery, just as the bible is used in churches even after its many alterations. The ragged, dilapidated state of the box represents Jackson’s view that the bible and its teachings are outdated. This, in addition to the villagers reluctance to replace the box with a newer version, shows the

authors belief that even though Christianity is not the same religion as it once was, Christians still remain adamant about its infallibility. Also, the box, being a symbol for the bible, rests upon a stool with three legs. This “ three legged stool” is a representation of God, and what Christians refer to as the holy trinity.

Just as the bible is held up and given credibility by the belief of a God, the stool supports the box. The stool and the box almost become one, just as in Christian beliefs, where God and the bible are all but inseparable. Similarly, the slips of paper, as insignificant as they may seem on the surface, take on a meaning of great magnitude in the story. As each individual participant in the lottery finds that their paper does not bear the mark, the paper is released, and it drifts away. The slips of paper are meant to represent the villager’s souls, the untainted souls, drifting away and remaining free, as if going to heaven. In contrast, Mrs. Hutchison’s slip of paper, which has a dark spot, shows that marred souls receive punishment after judgment, a common Christian belief. Furthermore, several of the characters, and attributes of the characters, come to embody Christian, and biblical representations.

The first clue that religion may be the main subject of the story is the use of the last name Delacroix. The literal translation is French for, “ of the cross,” but the townspeople mispronounce it frequently, signifying that the meaning of the name has been lost. The next example is Mr. Summers, who is the head of the procession, and is wearing a “ clean white shirt,” giving the reader the sense that Mr. Summers is almost priest-like, the white shirt reminiscent of the white robes of a clergyman. Mr. Adams is the first to draw

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from the box and to receive his judgment. In the bible, Adam is the first man, and he is also the first to receive judgment from God. Also, the part of the story where Mrs. Adams brings up the fact that other towns have abandoned the lottery, is reminiscent of Eve taking the first bite of the apple. Old man Warner becomes a symbol of the stereotype for those who have attended church the longest, and who are the strongest believers in their church. He is adamant in his belief that the lottery is right, and all those who believe differently are sure to be punished. Through the use of Mr. Warner, the story strikes the reader with the realization of how foolish those people are who simply follow blindly, and points out the fact that Christians are much the same way. Mrs. Hutchinson comes to symbolize those who have tainted souls.

She is late for the lottery, and she doesn't remain faithful to her belief in the lottery when she is the one faced with death, showing that she lacks faith, a true wrong in the eyes of any Christian. Additionally, the author intentionally uses the Hutchinson name to drop a hint that the village in the story is not just any small American town, but a town somewhere in her native New England states. The name of Jackson's victim links her to Anne Hutchinson, whose Antinomian beliefs, found to be heretical by the Puritan hierarchy, resulted in her banishment from Massachusetts in 1638. While Tessie Hutchinson is by no means considered a spiritual rebel, Jackson's reference to Anne Hutchinson emphasizes her hints of a rebellion lurking within the women of her imaginary village.

Since Tessie Hutchinson is the protagonist of "The Lottery," there is every indication that her name is indeed an allusion to Anne Hutchinson, the American religious nonconformist. Anne was excommunicated despite an

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unfair trial, while Tessie questions the tradition and correctness of the lottery, as well as her humble status as a wife. It might as well be this insubordination that leads to her selection by the lottery, and her stoning by the angry mob of villagers. This use of a New England backdrop, mixed with a puritan-like attitude, and an unbending religious fervor, serves as a reminder of the famous Salem Witch trials. In this story, another primitive, religious society went on a rampage, accusing women of witchcraft, and burning these “witches” at the stake.

In conclusion, “The Lottery,” with all of its symbolism, shows the authors contempt for the barbaric and ignorant beliefs that Christians hold dear. It shows that the bible is a relic best left to the past. With the use of symbolism, the story becomes a graphic depiction of the way Christianity affects tradition, showing some of the more negative aspects of this relationship, and how in turn, tradition affects mankind. It shows Jackson’s belief that American society has become so accustomed to the ideas of Christianity, and so convinced that it is the right way of thinking, that we do not even explore the idea that these beliefs may be wrong, or unnatural. The story shows how Christianity can oftentimes be primitive, as with the Salem witch trials, and the persecution of a multitude of different people throughout history, most recently homosexuals. In the end, “The Lottery” is a criticism of how Christians have blindly followed an ancient, outdated belief system, despite the possibility that it may lead to his or her own demise.