

The perpetuation of senseless traditions in Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery'



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Any story can be a story about social expectations but Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is one story that points out the fact that it is the people themselves who perpetuate such social expectations and senseless traditions. Nevertheless, this act of perpetuation is a rather unconscious process going on in a person's mind.

Jackson's "The Lottery" is a testament to the fact that humans are indeed the ones responsible for their fates and for the existence of these otherwise cruel social expectations. This paper seeks to prove, through Jackson's tale, that people unconsciously perpetuate the existence of these otherwise cruel and inhuman social expectations, thereby bringing themselves to their own destruction. Furthermore, this paper will also try to prove that almost always people also do not like the fact that they continue to bring on such traditions thereby making them hypocrites. It is also further said that Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" illustrates "the innate savagery of man lurking beneath his civilized trappings" (Nebeker 100), which is a clear sign of hypocrisy.

Proofs of Toleration and Perpetuation of Social Expectations Jackson's "The Lottery" is filled with several instances where the people themselves decide to continue the cruel tradition of holding a lottery in order to determine the one who would be stoned by friends and family. The Participation of Children. The fact that tradition involves the children is a proof that in one way or another, the adults want the tradition to live on and even forever. One would notice that in the morning of June 27th just prior to the lottery, "the children assembled first, of course" (Jackson), somehow emphasizing the importance of the role and the presence of children in social events. The fact that the children come first may also mean that the event is actually intended for

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them or that it directly concerns them. Nevertheless, whatever the actual reason behind the emphasis on the children arriving first at the scene, this very line suggests that in one way or another, the tradition is specially intended for them.

Another instance where children actively participate in the tradition and consequently in its perpetuation is the fact that older children even decide to draw lots for their parents. When Mr. Summers asked, " Watson boy drawing this year? (Jackson), a tall boy in the crowd immediately raised his hand and said he's drawing for his mother and him, and for which he received a resounding approval from the crowd as " several voices...said things like ' Good fellow, Jack' and " Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it," (Jackson). Such lines of approval from adults are a verbal form of a pat on the back of children who follow their rather senseless traditions. Such signs of approval may have even been anticipated by Jack himself that is why he had the confidence to raise his hand and draw for his mother and him. This particular instance clearly reflects a society which rewards with approval children who always obey authority figures however senseless the traditions advocated by these figures are.

Nevertheless these reward systems are subtle and unconscious. For example, in reality, many parents praise their own children for wanting to become soldiers in exchange for praises, honor and service. But how different is this otherwise noble tradition of becoming a soldier from Jackson's lottery? The only difference is that in Jackson's story stones are used but in our example, bullets are used. Why then are our senseless

traditions and social expectations so deeply ingrained in our minds, habits
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and cultures? It is because it is instilled in our children while they are still very young.

In the story, even the very young Dave Hutchinson had to be asked to draw his own slip of paper from the black box to determine whether he was the one who should be stoned or not. Little Davy, as he is called in the story, is around 5 or 6 years old or even much younger for even Mr. Summers had to ask Harry Jones to “ help little Dave” (Jackson) and young as he is, “ Davy put his hand into the box and [even] laughed” (Jackson). Mr. Summer’s next words “ Take just one paper” and “ Harry you hold it for him” as the latter “ removed the folded paper from the child’s fist” (Jackson) are all proofs that Dave in fact does not know what exactly is going on nor the fact that he was actually drawing lots on whether he should be stoned by friends and family. This is perhaps the most insidious of the ways that society implants senseless and cruel traditions and expectations into an innocent child’s mind - little Dave in particular, and the whole of our posterity in general.

Innocence is taken advantage of and poisoned by replacing it with tradition. The case of little Davy drawing lots here in fact has a twofold evil in it: first, his right to free speech is not recognized as his otherwise “ wise and intelligent” parents and elders make decisions on what he should do, which is to draw lots; and second, his very life is put in great danger for if he were the one who got the piece of paper with the black mark, his young age might not be able to withstand the pain caused by the stones, not to mention the fact that “[Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (Jackson). What if this stone were to hit little Dave who is barely even six? This instance is therefore a proof that in making our children hold <https://assignbuster.com/the-perpetuation-of-senseless-traditions-in-shirley-jacksons-the-lottery/>

on to senseless tradition, we are in fact endangering not only their innocence but their very lives.

In fact, Jackson's "The Lottery" "provokes the reader to question the extent to which a society can incorporate absurdity into accepted ritual, despite a high price in terms of humanity." (Hinchey & Kimmel xi) And after little Dave was spared from what could have been a certain death or perhaps a long stay in hospital, "...someone gave [him] a few pebbles" (Jackson). This is a form of influence where adults use a rather more direct and less sinister approach in making children fulfill their rather destructive traditions and social expectations. Little Dave, based on the aforementioned details of this analysis, is hardly ever aware of what exactly is going on around him and he is given a few pebbles! This is indeed an allusion to fathers who let their sons hold rifles and shoot birds and afterwards praise them for doing it. These are also the same fathers who wonder why one day, the child killed the whole household with a rather smaller version of the rifle his father once taught him how to hold and shoot. This very instance in Jackson's "The Lottery" is in fact a proof of how adults let their children perpetuate the tradition of violence.

Furthermore, this is again twofold in terms of evil: first, Little Dave is encouraged to hit an innocent woman, which is actually tantamount to teaching him injustice; and second, Little Dave is encouraged to stone his own mother, which is equivalent to the perpetuation of domestic and familial violence. We do not exactly know whether Little Dave tried to throw the pebbles at his own mother, but we can somehow make a good guess that even if he did, one of the "helpful" adults would still have probably helped to

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guide his arm to throw the stone. The children, as portrayed by Jackson in "The Lottery," are indeed instruments used for the perpetuation of all sorts of senselessly evil traditions from mere participation in nonsense lotteries to crimes and violence. However, if we are to consider who is to blame for this, then that is no other than the adults themselves.

The Irresponsibility of Adults. Perhaps it is impossible for us to count how many times the adults in Jackson's "The Lottery" acted rather passively and submissively but it is best to enumerate the most salient qualities of adults in the story that lead to the continued existence of society's otherwise destructive traditions, social expectations and culture. First there are adults with a rather strong will but in whose lives and will tradition is deeply ingrained. These men are Old Man Warner, Mr.

Summers, Mr. Graves, as well as Mr. Martina and his oldest son Baxter who both "held the black box securely on the stool" (Jackson). The black box, from which the lots are drawn, is the enduring symbol of the dark traditions that the people of the village just simply cannot let go of. This symbol of senseless tradition of violence is protected by these men who have somehow dedicated their lives to it and who may not be able to recognize themselves anymore if such deeply-ingrained beliefs were taken away from them.

Mr. Summers himself is mentioned to have somehow devoted his whole life to "civic activities" like "the lottery...square dances, the teen club, the Halloween program" and so on. It is also mentioned that "the night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr.

Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box" (Jackson) and this they do almost painstakingly. This alludes to instances in real life where some people simply conduct their affairs in a rather mechanical way without exactly knowing why they are doing these and even why they are teaching their children these. These people are actually those people who immediately react with violence once their deep-seated beliefs are in any way criticized. One can see how Old Man Warner himself reacted to Mr. Adams saying that the north village were talking of giving up the lottery. Without even evaluating the situation or the validity of the claim, Old Man Warner immediately answers him back with " Pack or crazy fools! " and " Pack of young fools! " and finally " There's always been a lottery! " (Jackson). This is indeed a proof of our previous contention that indeed these types of people are almost impossible to change and they are the very agents of the perpetuation of senseless traditions in our society, not to mention the senseless violence. It is also noteworthy to mention that Mr. Summers is a businessman, Mr.

Graves is the postmaster, and Old Man Warner is the oldest man in town at the age of 77, and these personal circumstances somehow give them more authority in their commands. Even at the last part of the story one can see Old Man Warner's authority as he most likely is the one who casts the first stone upon Tessie and thereby inspires everyone else with the words of a leader urging them to " Come on, come on, everyone" (Jackson). If Jesus has mentioned in the Bible that the first one to cast a stone is the one without sin, then that is Old Man Warner in Jackson's story, for this man just like

those mentioned with him clearly believes himself to be infallible. Next we have adults who are weak-willed. Mr.

Adams is a particular example of such an adult. He mentions rather casually in the middle of the story “ that over in the north village [people are] talking of giving up the lottery” (Jackson). But immediately after Old Man Warner’s violent reaction, Mr. Adams speaks no more lest the old man become irate again.

This is indeed cowardice on Mr. Adams’ part which perhaps he would usually justify as an act of respect for such a “ respectable and honorable” old man. The same thing is true with Mrs. Adams for after irritating Old Man Warner by saying that “ some places have already quit lotteries” (Jackson), she did not at all react to the old man’s words.

In addition to Mr. and Mrs. Adams, almost every other adult in the story are in fact weak-willed. The ultimate proof is the fact that when each of their names is called alphabetically from Allen to Zanini, each one of them goes up the stage to draw lots from the black box.

With the black box in the middle of everyone and elevated at the level of the stage, the box seems like an altar, or a symbol of dark tradition, that is worshipped by all the weak-willed. Still, another group of adults in Jackson’s “ The Lottery” is made up of those who have helped and encouraged the children and their fellows to join for they themselves have decided to go with the crowd. These are the class of weak-willed people who do nothing but give advice to their fellows and friends to go on and join the crowd for

advising them otherwise would be too dangerous. Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs.
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Graves are two examples of these people. When Tessie Hutchinson reacts by saying “ It wasn’t fair” (Jackson) upon knowing that the name of her household is the one that is drawn, Mrs. Delacroix immediately retorted “ Be a good sport, Tessie” (Jackson), and Mrs. Graves said, “ All of us took the same chance” (Jackson).

These two women may have understood and felt Tessie’s sentiments themselves, but they rather choose to be on the safe side of things. Towards the end of the story, a few moments before the ceremonial stone-throwing, Mrs. Delacroix is seen telling Mrs. Dunbar “ Come on...hurry up” (Jackson), which could actually mean “ Come on...hurry up...we have to catch up with the others! ” Indeed, Mrs. Delacroix represents all those people who live their lives hurriedly doing this and that just because everyone else is in a hurry doing this and that.

She is a copycat and she is submissive, and most of all, she is a disciple of tradition and the very agent that carries out its perpetuation. On the other hand, Mr. Delacroix may just be trying to play it on the safe side for her own survival. She is then perhaps an exemplification of Jackson’s usual theme of “ Eat or be eaten,” which refers to “ literal and figurative correspondences between consuming or being consumed” (Rubenstein 309) by a society whose very evils Mrs. Delacroix may have already known and which she herself is just trying to avoid. The last group of people who are accused of perpetuating outrageous and violent social expectations is perhaps the group of people who assist the elders in carrying out tradition.

They may be the adults or the younger people. Mr. Harry Graves is one example of these people as he is the one who “ took the hand of [Little Davy and made him] put his hand into the box” (Jackson). Mr. Graves here is likened to a man who under the command of a chief priest, as personified by Mr. Summers, would kill anyone without hesitation.

The very act of him assisting Little Davy up to the black “ altar-like” box with everyone else watching and “ Chief Priest” Mr. Summers at the side commanding him is somehow reminiscent of an ancient human sacrifice with Little Davy as the sacrificial lamb. Another person worth mentioning is the boy who “ gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (Jackson) towards the end of the story (see The Participation of Children, 5th paragraph). Proofs of Dislike for Such Senseless Traditions After gleaning on the instances where people somehow unconsciously bring themselves to support the existence of otherwise horrific and unreasonable traditions such as the fictional one suggested by Jackson, it is now important to prove that in fact these people do not like such traditions. These instances thus establish the proof that most people who live according to tradition are indeed hypocrites.

Hypocrisy. Mrs. Tessie Hutchinson is the perfect example of a hypocrite in the Jackson’s “ The Lottery. ” At first she seems to eager to participate in the lottery and she even tells Mr. Summers, “ Wouldn’t have me leave m’dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe? ” (Jackson) and perhaps she enjoys “ the soft laughter [that] ran through the crowd” (Jackson) after she has said it.

However, upon realizing that it was the name of her household that is drawn by her husband Bill, Tessie immediately “ shouted to Mr. Summers,” which is

a clear sign of hypocrisy since a few moments before that, she has just talked to him in a rather friendly way. After which and until the story ends, one can see that Tessie shouts only one line “ It wasn’t fair! ” (Jackson). The fact that Tessie’s sentiments immediately change upon her being sentenced to stoning somehow implies that she is the kind of person who is only good and even proud when she is on the safe side of things but vindictive when she is on the other side. Tessie represents all those who are only good to others when the situation is in their favor and bad if otherwise.

Nevertheless, the example of Tessie proves that most people do not actually like the senseless traditions that they have built and continue to build. The Reactions of Nervousness and Relief. At several instances in the story, there are various moments where the people would hold their breaths as their heads of household picks up a paper from the black box and each one would also heave a sigh of relief if the paper is blank. These moments are not moments of excitement.

In fact each one is afraid of being stoned and in fact everyone hates the tradition but no one just seems to have the courage to oppose it. Conclusion Shirley Jackson’s “ The Lottery” is a story that shows the fact that people are indeed responsible for the senseless traditions, social expectations and taboos that they have built around themselves, their lives, and their children’s lives. These traditions of nonsense, cruelty and violence are perpetuated mainly by two factors: the participation of children and the irresponsibility of the adults themselves, owing much to a lack of strong will and courage. Above all, one can also conclude that all this perpetuation of senseless traditions is nothing but pure hypocrisy on the people’s part, for <https://assignbuster.com/the-perpetuation-of-senseless-traditions-in-shirley-jacksons-the-lottery/>

actually nobody wants these traditions. Yet, for some reason, traditions continue to live on. With man always proclaiming himself above his thoughts and will and always saying that he is strong enough to make up his own mind, why then does he remain a slave to such senseless traditions?