

# The lottery review

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



The specific details Jackson describes in the beginning of “ The Lottery” set us up for the shocking conclusion. In the first paragraph, Jackson provides specific details about the day on which the lottery takes place. She tells us the date (June 27), time (about 10 A. M.), and temperature (warm). She describes the scene exactly: there are flowers and green grass, and the town square, where everyone gathers, is between the bank and post office. She provides specifics about the town, including how many people live there and how long the lottery takes, as well as about neighboring towns, which have more people and must start the lottery earlier.

In the paragraphs that follow this introduction, Jackson gives us characters’ full names—Bobby Martin, Harry Jones, and Dickie Delacroix, among others—and even tells us how to pronounce “ Delacroix.” Far from being superfluous or irrelevant, these initial specific details ground the story in reality. Because she sets the story firmly in a specific place and time, Jackson seems to suggest that the story will be a chronicle of sorts, describing the tradition of the lottery.

The specifics continue throughout the story, from the numerous rules Mr. Summers follows to the names of the people who are called up to the box. In a way, there is safety in these details—the world Jackson creates seems much like the one we know. And then the stoning begins, turning reality on its head. Because Jackson is so meticulous in grounding us in realistic, specific details, they sharpen the violence and make the ending so incredibly surprising.

The village lottery culminates in a violent murder each year, a bizarre ritual that suggests how dangerous tradition can be when people follow it blindly. Before we know what kind of lottery they're conducting, the villagers and their preparations seem harmless, even quaint: they've appointed a rather pathetic man to lead the lottery, and children run about gathering stones in the town square. Everyone seems preoccupied with a funny-looking black box, and the lottery consists of little more than handmade slips of paper. Tradition is endemic to small towns, a way to link families and generations. Jackson, however, pokes holes in the reverence that people have for tradition. She writes that the villagers don't really know much about the lottery's origin but try to preserve the tradition nevertheless.

The villagers' blind acceptance of the lottery has allowed ritual murder to become part of their town fabric. As they have demonstrated, they feel powerless to change—or even try to change—anything, although there is no one forcing them to keep things the same. Old Man Warner is so faithful to the tradition that he fears the villagers will return to primitive times if they stop holding the lottery. These ordinary people, who have just come from work or from their homes and will soon return home for lunch, easily kill someone when they are told to. And they don't have a reason for doing it other than the fact that they've always held a lottery to kill someone. If the villagers stopped to question it, they would be forced to ask themselves why they are committing a murder—but no one stops to question. For them, the fact that this is tradition is reason enough and gives them all the justification they need.

Villagers persecute individuals at random, and the victim is guilty of no transgression other than having drawn the wrong slip of paper from a box. The elaborate ritual of the lottery is designed so that all villagers have the same chance of becoming the victim—even children are at risk. Each year, someone new is chosen and killed, and no family is safe. What makes “The Lottery” so chilling is the swiftness with which the villagers turn against the victim. The instant that Tessie Hutchinson chooses the marked slip of paper, she loses her identity as a popular housewife.

Her friends and family participate in the killing with as much enthusiasm as everyone else. Tessie essentially becomes invisible to them in the fervor of persecution. Although she has done nothing “wrong,” her innocence doesn’t matter. She has drawn the marked paper—she has herself become marked—and according to the logic of the lottery, she therefore must die. Tessie’s death is an extreme example of how societies can persecute innocent people for absurd reasons. Present-day parallels are easy to draw, because all prejudices, whether they are based on race, sex, appearance, religion, economic class, geographical region, family background, or sexual orientation, are essentially random.

Those who are persecuted become “marked” because of a trait or characteristic that is out of their control—for example, they are the “wrong” sex or from the “wrong” part of the country. Just as the villagers in “The Lottery” blindly follow tradition and kill Tessie because that is what they are expected to do, people in real life often persecute others without questioning why. As Jackson suggests, any such persecution is essentially random, which is why Tessie’s bizarre death is so universal.

Family bonds are a significant part of the lottery, but the emphasis on family only heightens the killing's cruelty because family members so easily turn against one another. Family ties form the lottery's basic structure and execution. In the town square, families stand together in groups, and every family member must be present. Elaborate lists of heads of families, heads of households within those families, and household members are created, and these lists determine which member draws from the box. Family relationships are essential to how the actions of the lottery are carried out, but these relationships mean nothing the moment it's time to stone the unlucky victim. As soon as it's clear that Tessie has drawn the marked paper, for example, her husband and children turn on her just as the other villagers do. Although family relationships determine almost everything about the lottery, they do not guarantee loyalty or love once the lottery is over. Rules

The lottery is rife with rules that are arbitrarily followed or disregarded. The intricate rules the villagers follow suggest that the lottery is an efficient, logical ritual and that there is an important purpose behind it, whereas the rules that have lapsed, however, reveal the essential randomness of the lottery's dark conclusion. Mr. Summers follows an elaborate system of rules for creating the slips of paper and making up the lists of families. When the lottery begins, he lays out a series of specific rules for the villagers, including who should draw slips of paper from the black box and when to open those papers.

When someone is unable to draw, the lottery rules determine who should be next in line. At the same time, there are ghosts of rules that have been long forgotten or willfully abandoned altogether, such as those for salutes and

songs that accompany Mr. Summer's induction as the chairman of the lottery. The fact that some rules have remained while others have disappeared underscores the disturbing randomness of the murder at the end of the lottery.

The shabby black box represents both the tradition of the lottery and the illogic of the villagers' loyalty to it. The black box is nearly falling apart, hardly even black anymore after years of use and storage, but the villagers are unwilling to replace it. They base their attachment on nothing more than a story that claims that this black box was made from pieces of another, older black box. The lottery is filled with similar relics from the past that have supposedly been passed down from earlier days, such as the creation of family lists and use of stones.

These are part of the tradition, from which no one wants to deviate—the lottery must take place in just this way because this is how it's always been done. However, other lottery traditions have been changed or forgotten. The villagers use slips of paper instead of wood chips, for example. There is no reason why the villagers should be loyal to the black box yet disloyal to other relics and traditions, just as there is no logical reason why the villagers should continue holding the lottery at all.

The lottery represents any action, behavior, or idea that is passed down from one generation to the next that's accepted and followed unquestioningly, no matter how illogical, bizarre, or cruel. The lottery has been taking place in the village for as long as anyone can remember. It is a tradition, an annual ritual that no one has thought to question. It is so much a part of the town's culture, in fact, that it is even accompanied by an old adage: " Lottery in <https://assignbuster.com/the-lottery-review/>

June, corn be heavy soon.” The villagers are fully loyal to it, or, at least, they tell themselves that they are, despite the fact that many parts of the lottery have changed or faded away over the years. Nevertheless, the lottery continues, simply because there has always been a lottery. The result of this tradition is that everyone becomes party to murder on an annual basis. The lottery is an extreme example of what can happen when traditions are not questioned or addressed critically by new generations.

Many of the seemingly innocuous details throughout “ The Lottery” foreshadow the violent conclusion. In the second paragraph, children put stones in their pockets and make piles of stones in the town square, which seems like innocent play until the stones’ true purpose becomes clear at the end of the story. Tessie’s late arrival at the lottery instantly sets her apart from the crowd, and the observation Mr. Summers makes—“ Thought we were going to have to get on without you”—is eerily prescient about Tessie’s fate. When Mr. Summers asks whether the Watson boy will draw for him and his mother, no reason is given for why Mr. Watson wouldn’t draw as all the other husbands and fathers do, which suggests that Mr. Watson may have been last year’s victim. Jackson builds suspense in “ The Lottery” by relentlessly withholding explanation and does not reveal the true nature of the lottery until the first stone hits Tessie’s head. We learn a lot about the lottery, including the elements of the tradition that have survived or been lost.

We learn how important the lottery is to the villagers, particularly Old Man Warner. We go through the entire ritual, hearing names and watching the men approach the box to select their papers. But Jackson never tells us what

the lottery is about, or mentions any kind of prize or purpose. She begins to reveal that something is awry when the lottery begins and the crowd grows nervous, and she intensifies the feeling when Tessie hysterically protests Bill's "winning" selection. And she gives a slight clue when she says that the villagers "still remembered to use stones." But not until the moment when a rock actually hits Tessie does Jackson show her hand completely. By withholding information until the last possible second, she builds the story's suspense and creates a shocking, powerful conclusion.

1. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. This quotation, from the fifth paragraph of the story, reveals how firmly entrenched the villagers are in the lottery's tradition and how threatening they find the idea of change. The villagers have no good reason for wanting to keep the black box aside from a vague story about the box's origins, and the box itself is falling apart. Beyond shabby, it barely resembles a box now, but the villagers, who seem to take such pride in the ritual of the lottery, do not seem to care about the box's appearance. They just want the box to stay the same. Their strident belief that the box must not change suggests that they fear change itself, as though one change might lead to other changes. Already, some towns have stopped holding lotteries, but these villagers do not seem to be headed in that direction. Instead, they hold firm to the parts of the tradition that remain, afraid to alter even this seemingly insignificant part of it for fear of starting down a slippery slope.

2. Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such



questions formally. This quotation appears about halfway through the story, just before the drawing of names begins. Mr. Summers has asked Mrs. Dunbar whether her son, Horace, will be drawing for the family in Mr. Dunbar's absence, even though everyone knows Horace is still too young. There is no purpose to the question, other than that the question is part of the tradition, and so Mr. Summers adheres to the rule despite the fact that it seems absurd. Even though other parts of the ritual have changed or been discarded over the years, this rule holds firm for absolutely no logical reason.

Large things, such as songs and salutes, have slipped away, and wood chips have been replaced with slips of paper. Yet this silly, pointless questioning continues. The villagers seem strident in their adherence to the tradition. Old Man Warner, in particular, is adamant that tradition must be upheld and the lottery must continue. But the reality is that there is no consistency among what rules are followed and which are discarded. This lack of logic makes the villagers' blind observance of the ritual even more problematic because the tradition they claim to be upholding is actually flimsy and haphazard.

3. Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. This quotation, which appears near the end of the story, distills the lottery down to its essence: murder. The villagers may talk of tradition, ritual, and history, but the truth—as this quotation makes clear—is that the traditional parts of it have long been discarded. The original ritual and box may indeed have borne along a tradition, violent and bizarre as it may be, but now, without the original trappings, songs, and procedures, all that remains is the violence. The haphazard ritual, the bits and pieces that have been slapped together

into some semblance of the original, have led to this essential moment of killing. The villagers are all too eager to embrace what remains, eagerly picking up the stones and carrying on the “ tradition” for another year.

When Tessie Hutchinson arrives late to the lottery, admitting that she forgot what day it was, she immediately stands out from the other villagers as someone different and perhaps even threatening. Whereas the other women arrive at the square calmly, chatting with one another and then standing placidly by their husbands, Tessie arrives flustered and out of breath. The crowd must part for her to reach her family, and she and her husband endure good-natured teasing as she makes her way to them. On a day when the villagers’ single focus is the lottery, this breach of propriety seems inappropriate, even unforgivable; everyone comes to the lottery, and everyone comes on time. The only person absent is a man whose leg is broken. Although Tessie quickly settles into the crowd and joins the lottery like everyone else, Jackson has set her apart as a kind of free spirit who was able to forget about the lottery entirely as she performed her chores.

Perhaps because she is a free spirit, Tessie is the only villager to protest against the lottery. When the Hutchinson family draws the marked paper, she exclaims, “ It wasn’t fair!” This refrain continues as she is selected and subsequently stoned to death, but instead of listening to her, the villagers ignore her. Even Bill tells her to be quiet. We don’t know whether Tessie would have protested the fairness of the lottery if her family had not been selected, but this is a moot point. Whatever her motivation is for speaking out, she is effectively silenced.

Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, has participated in seventy-seven lotteries and is a staunch advocate for keeping things exactly the way they are. He dismisses the towns and young people who have stopped having lotteries as “ crazy fools,” and he is threatened by the idea of change. He believes, illogically, that the people who want to stop holding lotteries will soon want to live in caves, as though only the lottery keeps society stable. He also holds fast to what seems to be an old wives’ tale—“ Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon”—and fears that if the lottery stops, the villagers will be forced to eat “ chickweed and acorns.” Again, this idea suggests that stopping the lottery will lead to a return to a much earlier era, when people hunted and gathered for their food. These illogical, irrational fears reveal that Old Man Warner harbors a strong belief in superstition. He easily accepts the way things are because this is how they’ve always been, and he believes any change to the status quo will lead to disaster. This way of thinking shows how dangerous it is to follow tradition blindly, never questioning beliefs that are passed down from one generation to the next.

Despite his breezy, light-hearted name, Mr. Summers wields a frightening amount of power in the village, power that seems to have been assigned to him arbitrarily. A married, childless business owner, Mr. Summers is “ jovial” and pitied by the townspeople for having a nagging wife. No one seems to question his leadership of the lottery, and it seems to have never been challenged. Perhaps he took on the role himself, or perhaps someone offered it to him. Whatever the case, he now has complete control. Mr. Summers not only draws the names on the day of the lottery, but he also makes up the slips of paper that go into the black box. It’s up to him to make the black

circle that ultimately condemns someone to death. Jackson never explains why the villagers put such pure faith in Mr. Summers, and the assumption that he will continue to conduct the lottery is just one more inexplicable but universally accepted part of the ritual.