

The black box



Shirley Jackson's monumental, and often controversial, short story "The Lottery" is a symbol-laden work that conveys a number of themes expressed through her diction, setting, symbols, and characters. The scene she paints, which rapidly changes from a bright sunny day in the community to a cloudy and ominous afternoon, expresses the thematic direction of her prose from start to finish. By using all of these symbols, and combining them to reach the culmination of the plot with the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson, Jackson encourages her reader to read the work actively, keeping an eye on how the characters and scenes are interacting with one another. The symbols she uses indirectly communicate the major theme of the work, in addition to the seemingly innocuous dialogue of the seemingly innocuous lottery happening in the town.

One of the more potent symbols Jackson uses throughout her story is the black box, and, more generally, just the color black. Black, as it is traditionally interpreted, stands for death, decay, ignorance, and decline. The black box, of course, holds the lottery slips. While a similar ballot box would receive slips from voters in an election, this box only gives out slips, showing the lack of individual choice and freedom in this ritual. The blackness of the box gives off an ominous foreshadowing of events, and is itself a symbolic description of how the townspeople have sacrificed their individual wills to the social decree., as Jackson writes, "The black box grew shabbier each year: by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained". The keen reader recognizes that the box's decay indicates not only the physical corrosion of the box but of the social and moral corrosion of what it represents: the lottery.

As the process accelerates during the course of "The Lottery", Jackson writes that the townspeople stay as far away from the box as possible. Once again, this description is clearly relating to physical distance; but it may also refer to the concept of responsibility, and the moral qualms people have about participating in the lottery. The townspeople avoid the black box as if it were some kind of evil spirit, and because of this endow the box with such great power. Jackson writes, "The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool..." What otherwise would be just some old dilapidated box is, as a result of the social order and status quo, is an enormously powerful object and Jackson plays off this point throughout the story. The lottery's organizers, not coincidentally, are the most powerful men in the town, giving more insight into the hierarchical nature of the process. The power of these men forces the ordinary townspeople to give even more reverence to the black box.

In Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery", the black lottery box serves numerous symbolic functions. Most simply, its color black represents death and decay, both foreshadowing the climax of the story and symbolizing the institution of the lottery itself. Secondly, it represents a source of almost divine power for some members of the town. While the organizers of the lottery use the box to reinforce their power and the status quo (the belief that the lottery is necessary for the crops to grow, as stated by Old Man Warner), the other townspeople regard it with fear and loathing of what may happen to them. Lastly, the physical decay of the box represents, on a figurative level, the decay of the lottery practice which had been carried out for many years. Not only has the box been used throughout that time, but no one can even

remember when the lottery practice started, and even fewer remember why it is still carried out.