

The danger of ritual and tradition in "the hunger games" and "the lottery"



"The Hunger Games" by Suzanne Collins and the short story "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson both illustrate the dangers of blindly following ritualized practices and traditions. The stories involve the use of an institutionalized drawing system, one which is employed to blindly choose a sacrifice for the respective societies. "The Hunger Games" uses a system entitled, the reaping, which is used to select two adolescents to participate in a gladiatorial battle to the death. Similarly, in "The Lottery," the lottery system enables a town to single out a sacrifice that is subsequently stoned. Both systems utilize a combination of mood and dialogue, references to the chaos prior to the order, and the characterization of authority figures to portray the outcomes of communities thoughtlessly submitting to the practices of tradition. The results of these systems are that individual members of that community are made to bear the consequences.

In both narratives, the societies treat the lottery and the reaping with an attitude of deference and veiled apprehension. The mood surrounding these events demonstrates the communities' feelings of anxiety toward the ceremonies, despite apparent unwillingness to change them. In each story, the writers establish a foreboding mood through the demeanor and dialogue of the characters. Characters joke before the events, but gradually become more solemn as the drawings get closer. In "The Hunger Games," Gale and Katniss laugh while they mimic the ceremony and its leader Effie Trinket. However, Katniss notes that they only joke "because the alternative is to be scared out of your wits" (6).

Correspondingly, the townspeople in "The Lottery" smile and make small talk, "speaking of planting and rain" (1). This nervous attitude becomes

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increasingly solemn as the ceremonies approach, and is meant to serve as a veil for the underlying feelings of fear towards what the reaping and lottery represent, the idea of impending sacrifice and death for the people selected. In both stories, the reactions of the characters toward the formalities of the services indicate that they are overly familiar with the rites of the traditions. In "The Lottery," the townspeople are complacent during the reading of the directions, "had done it so many times that they only half listened" (3). The repetition of this ensures that they have internalized its rituals. In "The Hunger Games," the mayor also reads "the same story every year" at the reaping, and all of the members of the community are familiar with the history of the Games and the back story, as well as the rituals of the ceremony itself. In the stories, characters all share a similar feeling of dread toward the rituals, but the events are so institutionalized that no one attempts to question them.

In each story, authority figures utilize references to past chaos to emphasize why rituals are important in maintaining order and preventing backsliding. Old Man Weaver functions as this figure for the townspeople in "The Lottery," and he notes that if institutions like the lottery were not in place, they might revert to an uncivilized lifestyle, and return to "living in caves" (4). His justification is that "there has always been a lottery," and he relies solely on the foundations of the importance of tradition to support his claims (4). Likewise, in "The Hunger Games," the mayor alludes to the "Dark Days" and the disorder of the uprisings before the implementation of the Hunger Games (16). The references to past chaos serve to underscore how

figures of authority employ fear to manipulate a collective into blindly following traditions rather than thinking for themselves.

In both stories, the characterization of authority figures connected to the rituals demonstrates how the societies have come to accept the control that these figures and corresponding institutions have over them. In "The Lottery," the authority figure is Mr. Summers, who serves as a spokesperson for the function. Jackson describes him as jovial, but makes it clear that the townspeople feel sorry for him, because his wife is a nag. Despite this, Mr. Summers also "seemed very proper and important" as he fulfills his duty, which illustrates how the town views the importance of the lottery. This significance is attached to Mr. Summers, who gains authority through association (2). Similarly, in "The Hunger Games," Effie Trinket, the Capitol's liaison to the reaping, is "bright and bubbly" in a way that makes her seem ridiculous (17). However, her involvement in the reaping ensures that the community will not question her role in the ceremony or her status. In the stories, the characters who are chosen in the drawings, Mrs. Hutchinson in "The Lottery" and Katniss and Peeta in "The Hunger Games," fall outside of the realm of authority, and as a result, their communities blindly accept their fates, and their almost definite death sentences.

In "The Lottery" and "The Hunger Games" Shirley Jackson and Suzanne Collins, respectively, use mood and dialogue, references to disorder before the ceremonies, and the characterization of authority figures to illustrate the consequences of communities blindly submitting to rituals. In both narratives, individual members of these societies are forced to endure the horrific outcomes of the lottery and the reaping, because their societies

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thoughtlessly accept the importance of tradition, and their own unwillingness and powerlessness in instigating change.