

Comparing "the lottery" and "the hunger artist" essay sample



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Rituals are a set of actions performed for a symbolic value, such as through sacrifices, traditions in communities, or to manipulate religious symbols.

Rituals that are performed as traditions can be seen through the short story “ The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson. In this short story Jackson exemplifies the manner in which the meaning of a ritual can be forgotten while aspects of the ritual are still continued by becoming a civic duty to its participants.

Conversely, Franz Kafka’s short story “ The Hunger Artist” expresses the opposite of rituals becoming an individual’s civic duty as shown in Jackson’s story. He illustrates how the meaning of rituals dies when that ritual becomes a commercial spectacle to its audience. One story illustrates how a ritual loses its value once its participants view the ritual as their civic duty, whereas the other short story shows a ritual which fades away once the spirit is gone, diminishing its value. The reader is able to see the way factors affect the spirituality of the ritual which in turn determines how long the ritual will last. Rituals hold cultural significance which makes them important because it is the way many cultures are able to get spiritually closer to their god(s).

Many rituals are able to last decades and are still practiced in today’s society. For example, Lent is a religious ritual practiced today that is comprised of fasting and giving up a material item for self-denial in the forty days preceding Easter Sunday. Rituals such as Lent tend to last decades because every person that participates is allowed to do so without having to pay a fee. When a monetary value is placed on a ritual, the ritual slowly begins to lose its spirituality and cultural significance to the participants.

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Additionally, persons in charge of the ritual can at times be seen as contributors to the loss of the spirituality and significance of the ritual. Preservation of spirituality of a ritual is a contributing factor to the reasons why rituals can last for decades. A loss of spirituality can result when a monetary value is placed upon the ritual and participants are forced to pay a fee in order to view and continue the ritual from generation to generation. Once the ritual has lost its value due to the fee placed on it, as in Kafka's short story, it will turn into a status quo of people that can afford to see it and people who cannot. Kafka states, " While formerly it used to pay very well to stage large exhibitions of this kind under private management, today this is quite impossible... During the later stages subscribers used to sit in specially reserved seats in front of the small barred cage all day long" (713). The status that is now placed on attending this ritual is what begins to lead others away from it.

The ritual has now turned into a hassle to continue spending money on which leads the people to lose interest in the ritual and turn their attention elsewhere. Additionally, the commercialization of rituals inevitably leads to its end as the meaning of why someone would want to continue the ritual changes. Kafka is able to use the symbolism of the hunger artist to represent a religious symbol to show the demise of a ritual as a direct result from its commercialization. He states, " Experience had shown that the public's interest in any town could be stimulated for about forty days by increasing the advertisements, but then the public lost interest, and a substantial drop in attendance was noted; naturally there were small variations in this matter between the different towns and regions, but as a rule forty days was the

limit" (Kafka 715). The hunger artist's ritual of fasting for forty days illustrates the use of fasting to find spiritual fulfillment. This is what the author uses to help the reader see the hunger artist as a religious figure. The author also shows through this quote that the commercialization of this ritual only last for forty days before the public forgets about it. Once the ritual was commercialized it then became a form of entertainment to the audience. Thus the spirituality of the ritual was taken away when a monetary value was placed on it.

Unlike fasting, sacrifices are religious rituals in which something or someone is killed in order for that culture of people to please their god and gain more crops for everyone. Just as the spirituality was taken away in the hunger artist's ritual, so was the spirit taken from the ritual in the lottery. The Lottery was explicitly about a village coming together to randomly select which member should be stoned. Although the author never tells the reader why the village practices this, the reader is able to infer that it is for sacrificial reasons. Jackson states, " Used to be saying about ' Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (590). While Jackson is letting the reader know that the meaning of the lottery was to raise crops, she goes on to state, " Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones, The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box" (592). The spirit of this ritual in this story has completely died and it is evident through the fact that no one really knows the meaning of the ritual and only remembers that they must stone the person selected.

Consequently, rituals that turn out to be either a civic duty or commercial spectacle increase its possibility of ending. When a monetary value is placed on a ritual, it tends to turn the ritual into a form of entertainment for its participants. Kafka exemplifies this when he states, " For as soon as they had reached him, he was immediately deafened by the shouting and cursing from the two contending factions which kept continuously forming - those who wanted to stop and stare at him out of no real interest but only just as a whim or out of defiance, and those others who only wanted to go straight to the animal cages" (718). Kafka is able to show that once a ritual has become another kind of entertainment for the people then they are able to decide for themselves whether or not they would like to participate in the viewing of the ritual. Rituals die faster this way because they are no longer being preserved for future generations.

In contrast, rituals that have developed into the participants' civic duty tends to out-live the rituals that include a monetary value. Jackson's story illustrates a ritual that has become a civic duty by over time developing into a law more than a tradition, in which every able-bodied person of the community, young and old, is required to participate. The author is able to express to the reader how rituals can still be practiced even with the spirituality of that ritual being dead. She states, " The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions; most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around" (Jackson 589). The uneasiness the village people have towards being a part of the lottery shows the reader that this is not something they care to be doing. The ritual of the lottery has

become a mandated law for this village which is the main reason as to why it is still practiced in this village.

The inversion of the conceits of these two stories is what helps the reader to fully understand how a loss of spirituality affects the outcomes of rituals. One story uses the example of a ritual being maintained without any spirit in which the people come together to see who will be suffering. Jackson illustrates in her story how the village people are uneasy about having to participate in the ritual. She states, " The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, ' Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?' there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it" (Jackson 587).

By stating this, the author is foreshadowing that something sinister will be happening. Yet in Kafka's short story the opposite occurs in which the audience accumulates in a ritual to view someone suffering. He states, " Yet there was another reason why he was never satisfied; perhaps it wasn't only his fasting that made him so emaciated that many people, much to their regret, couldn't attend his performances because they couldn't bear the sight of him" (Kafka 714). Once the spirituality of viewing the hunger artist turns into a viewing of someone suffering, then the audience turns their attention to the next best thing. Kafka is able to show through his story that the loss of spirituality of a ritual can evidently lead to that ritual's demise. On the other hand, Jackson is able to express that rituals can survive without its spirituality.

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In essence, rituals can last over decades. For example, Lent is still practiced today. Many factors which can affect the spirit of that ritual can clearly contribute to its end. Primarily, adding a monetary value as seen in Kafka's short story can be a main contributing factor. A monetary value strips away both spirituality and cultural significance of a ritual by turning it into a form of entertainment for the participants. Having to pay a fee causes the audience to lose interest because the ritual has now become a status quo of the haves opposed to the have-nots. Alternatively, Jackson's short story shows that even though the spirit of a ritual has diminished it can still continue in the form of a law.