

Expect the
unexpected essay



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Expect the Unexpected What thoughts come to mind when you think of “ The Lottery? ” Positive thoughts including money, a new home, excitement, and happiness are all associated with the lottery in most cases.

However, this is not the case in Shirley Jackson’s short story, “ The Lottery”. Here, the characters in the story are not gambling for money, instead they are gambling for their life. A shock that surprises the reader as she unveils this horrifying tradition in the village on this beautiful summer day. This gamble for their life is a result of tradition, a tradition that is cruel and inhumane, yet upheld in this town. Shirley Jackson provides the reader’s with a graphic description of violence, cruelty, and inhumane treatment which leads to the unexpected meaning of “ The Lottery.

” Born in San Francisco, Jackson began writing early in her life. She won a poetry prize at age twelve and continued writing through high school. In 1937 she entered Syracuse University, where she published stories in the student literary magazine. After marriage to Stanley Edgar Hyman, a notable literary critic, she continued to write.

Her first national publication “ My Life with R. H. Macy” was published in The New Republic in 1941but her best-known work is “ The Lottery. ”(Lit Links or Reagan). Jackson uses characterization and symbolism to portray a story with rising action that surprises the reader with the unexpected odd ritual in the village. While one would expect “ The Lottery” to be a positive event, the reader’s are surprised with a ritual that has been around for seventy-seven years , demonstrating how unwilling people are to make changes in their

everyday life despite the unjust and cruel treatment that is associated with this tradition.

According to Hague, Jackson's "powerful visions of suffering and inhumanity" are expressed through symbolism and characterization in "The Lottery". (2005). The short story is a reflection of her despise of cruel and unjust treatment of human beings as she tells the story of a town's tradition of sacrificing a human in return for a good harvest. (Reagan 1997) Jackson begins the story with a description of a small village that held a Lottery in the early part of summer each year. Jackson provides a peaceful description of the village, "... clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green (Jackson 251). The setting she creates symbolizes a happy, pleasant day, leading the reader to believe something positive would occur on this 27th day of June.

Jackson further describes children playing happily, women conversing, and men speaking of "planting and rain, tractors and taxes"(Jackson 252). They speak of farming because the traditional ritual in the story is conducted based on a belief that the ritual has an effect on the crop, "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" is a popular saying in town (Jackson 256). As the reader continues, the prospect of a pleasant day is further symbolized as Jackson describes the people gathering in the square between the post office and the bank before the lottery starts. She describes the gathering of the women prior to the drawing: "They greet one another and exchanged bits of gossip..." (Jackson 252). This further leads the reader to believe they are gathering for a pleasant event, the winning of the lottery. However, much to

the reader's surprise, this pleasant day ends up being a cruel, inhumane ritual, that results in the loss of an innocent life.

The author continues to engage the reader as she describes the role of the children in "the Lottery" who "...broke into boisterous play...and eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raid of other boys" (Jackson 252). This is also one example of foreshadowing that Jackson uses that make the reader question why the children are collecting rocks. The collection of rocks by the children is essential to the plot of the story but the reason does not become evident until the reader has read the entire story. Through the use of subtle hints and symbolism, Jackson continues to develop the inevitably surprising ending. Jackson's symbolism is also present in the names she chooses for the characters.

Mr. Summers is the person in charge of the lottery. Through direct presentation, Jackson describes him as a respected man who jokes with the villagers. His name implies a pleasant, bright man who is in charge of what one is thinking will be a pleasant event. On the other hand, Mr.

Graves, who is Mr. Summer's assistant, has a name that is symbolic for the underlying theme and final outcome of the story. Once Jackson establishes the setting, she introduces the traditions in the village that have been conducted over time and have never changed. The old black box used for the lottery is symbolic to how this tradition has been around for many years. It has grown shabbier every year, no longer completely black, badly splintered along one side and faded.

The black box indicates an item that needs to be changed but has been repeatedly used just like people are not willing to modify situations in their life but continue to tolerate situations regardless of how inappropriate it may be for today's society. It symbolizes something that has always been used in the past but is no longer effective. Another symbol in "The Lottery" is the three-legged stool that is carried by Mr. Graves "...and placed in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool..." (Jackson 252).

Jackson uses the three-legged stool to symbolize the past, present, and future which directly relates to the horrific ritual that started seventy-two years ago, continues today, and the possibility for change in the future. Just as Jackson uses the black box as a symbol for a need to change something that is old and worn out, Jackson indicates that there are a few people that feel the tradition is old and needs to be changed. The Adams' comments "...that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery," and that, "some places have already quit lotteries" (Jackson 256). While Mr.

Adams expresses an interest in change, old man Warner replies, "Nothing but trouble in that" (Jackson 256). He is unwilling to change, bound to the belief that the harvest is dependent on holding the ritual. The reader is led to believe that most of the villagers are against sacrificing an individual in their village each year but in reality, because of a sense of tradition, hypocrisy, and fear of going against the leaders in the village; they continue to conform to the traditions of the lottery. Critics, such as Brian Francoeur, credit

Jackson with attempting to demonstrate individuals who blindly obey authority and continuing to do things just because they are tradition.

He points out that the people in the village don't even stop to think about why they are killing somebody and remarks that Jackson's moral in this short story is to point out that just because something is old doesn't make it good (1999). While Jackson portrays the weakness of these individuals to conform and not stand up and make a case for change, through the use of foreshadowing she does let the reader know that there is a certain amount of anxiety among the village people that is present. Mrs. Delacroix's holding of her breath as her husband went forward and statements such as "Don't be nervous Jack" and "Get up there Bill" indicate that the village people were not completely comfortable with the event (Jackson 256).

The author uses Mrs. Hutchinson, the protagonist in the story, to further demonstrate the hypocrisy and weakness of the individuals. There is an underlying thought that Mrs. Hutchinson considered rebelling and standing up for her own beliefs by not showing up, as she was the last to arrive, and commented that she "Clean forgot what day it was" (Jackson 254). As she rushes in to the crowd, pleasantly commenting to the other women present, she works her way toward her family. Ironically, she is the one who wins the lottery and is stoned.

While Mrs. Hutchinson pretends to be pleased to attend and comments on how she "...remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running" (Jackson 254), the moment she realizes her family has drawn the black dot, she immediately turns against the process. She quietly exclaims "I think we

ought to start over, I tell you it wasn't fair. You didn't give him time enough to choose. Everybody saw that" (Jackson 257). The she turns on her own daughter, " There's Don and Eva" she yells out maliciously, " Make them take their chance! " (Jackson 257).

She continues to scream of the unfairness of the ritual right through her own stoning, knowing all along that the lottery was wrong, but she never did anything about it. Ironically, she became the target of her own fears (Nico 2008). In the short story, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, the author uses many techniques to shock the readers with its surprise ending. The title of the story itself is traditionally correlated with a positive event, which completely contradicts what " *The Lottery*" actually consists of in this short story. At the onset of the story, Jackson uses the peaceful setting to confuse the reader as to the violent event that occurs. She continues to obscure what is actually going on in each character's mind by writing in the third person with an objective view.

The rising action that develops throughout the story continues to confuse the reader until which point the shocking ending is revealed. The unexpected harsh stoning of the winner in this short story is not what one expects when they begin to read " *The Lottery*". ? Works Cited Coulthard, A. R.

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