

The first prize is murder: analysis of shirley jackson's "the lottery" essay samp...

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The First Prize is Murder: Analysis of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" Essay Sample

"The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson is a shocking short story which occurs in the unlikeliest of settings, a small village with a population of 300 people, for violence that is not restricted but rather, implemented by an outdated tradition which highlights both hypocrisy and fanaticism. Therefore, for a story of its length, it unravels intricate themes such as violence, hypocrisy, tradition and fanaticism.

Jackson has delivered a fictional town annual lottery which chills the bones because of the villagers' strong belief in it that they fail to question the merits of the practice. What increases the shock generated by the story is the way people act during the lottery, as if it is the most commonplace practice in the world. The line "in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June" (Jackson) suggests that there are, after all, many other towns which practice the same lottery.

When talking about small towns or villages, the first thing that comes to mind for some people is tradition; tradition in this way is thought of as something old-fashioned, something grandparents pass on to grandchildren, or parents to children. However, in "The Lottery" the tradition is dark for a village wherein the people themselves make decisions - it involves murder which has been agreed on by the whole village.

Of course, whenever there is a tradition, there will always be people questioning traditions: ""Some places have already quit lotteries." Mrs. <https://assignbuster.com/the-first-prize-is-murder-analysis-of-shirley-jacksons-the-lottery-essay-sample/>

Adams said. “ Nothing but trouble in that,” Old Man Warner said stoutly. “ Pack of young fools.”(Jackson)” In this case though, the word of the elders is still the law. It doesn’t matter if some people feel that it is wrong, it is what the elders including the younger generations, have become used to. The people are more afraid of changing what they are used to than of participating in the lottery itself.

Tradition has given way to fanaticism. This is not merely a case of passing on heritage; the villagers believe that the lottery is right without critically analyzing its pros and cons. Fanaticism refers to behavior that ensues from “ excessive enthusiasm and often uncritical devotion” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary); such behavior is displayed by the villagers.

“ 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 Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. “ Come on,” she said. “ Hurry up.”(Jackson)”

Though the villagers no longer use the original box, they try to be true to the original “ ritual” and still subject the “ lottery winner” to a slow and painful death from stoning. Mrs. Dunbar, like the rest of the villagers, seems to be excited and enthusiastic to perform the part where they give the “ lottery winner” the prize, which is death through stoning. There is no empathy for the victim here; only the victim or as he or she is called, the “ lottery winner”

realizes that the lottery is wrong: ““ It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (Jackson).

Even though the villagers in “ The Lottery” appear to be amoral because of their outward indifference towards the results of their annual lottery to the “ winner”, they are still guilty of hypocrisy and duality. Before the lottery is drawn, the villagers look upon Mrs. Hutchinson/Tessie with some humor. This means that she is still part of the community, part of the decision-making. At the end of the story, the other villagers will not be listening to her cries. “ Mr. Summers, who have been waiting, said cheerfully, “ Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie,”” (Jackson).

In retrospect, after having known what the lottery really entails, this dialogue is sinister. Though Tessie is greeted pleasantly despite the fact that she is the only one late for the lottery, Mr. Summers’ worry about Tessie not being there can be interpreted as worrying that the rightful victim will be absent during the time of the lottery. Moreover, the lottery is obviously an event that is better missed than promptly attended. It is ironic or perhaps even prophetic that Tessie seems not be in a rush to attend the lottery; she has even forgotten its date.

Violence is a major theme in the story. The violence is emphasized by the fact that it happens in a place where people seem to be peaceful and united. The lottery is almost like an outlet for the passive and docile villagers. Beneath the calm and picture perfect small town, murder is routine and given the explanation of being part of tradition, of a lottery.

Shirley Jackson produces a strange and shocking tale of unquestioned violence marked in tradition and contained in a community where people who laugh with you at one moment will kill you on the next.

Works Cited

Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." American Literature. 2 February 2008

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