A New Contributor

Censorship and “The Lottery”

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For over two generations, high school and college students have been reading Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery.” This deceptively simple horror tale, first published thirty-five years ago, has been included in anthologies at least since 1950. Its initial publication in The New Yorker magazine on June 28, 1948, precipitated more responses from readers than any other fiction ever before published by that magazine. Of the three-hundred letters that were received by the author herself that summer, only thirteen of them could have been considered kind. Most letter writers had taken the story literally. They thought that the fiction was based on fact and wanted to know the details of where, when, and to whom the events described had happened.

While the letters were almost wholly negative, none suggested that the story should not be available to the public. Up until 1982 it was only a character in fiction who suggested “The Lottery” be removed from a school’s curriculum, a candidate for school board in Elizabeth Peter’s 1977 novel, Devil May Care, who says people do not “want their children to read a book that shows kids stoning their mothers to death.”

Although in six separate nation-wide surveys conducted between 1965 and 1981 “The Lottery” was not among the most frequently challenged works in American high schools, a 1982 survey sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English found “The Lottery” to be among the forty-eight works most frequently challenged by local censorship groups as unsuitable for high school students. This could, of course, be partially due to the increase in the number of groups currently trying to limit the choice of materials available in high schools. However, since “The Lottery” has remained almost unchallenged for over a third of a century, it may not be just the increased number of would-be censors but what the story actually says.

On the literal level, “The Lottery” is almost pastoral in its simplicity, at least until the last few paragraphs. The setting is a small farming village of about 300 people. It’s a clear June morning, and the people of the village gradually leave their farms, kitchens, and shops for an important civic event, a lottery which has taken place annually for as long as any of them can remember. The children feel restless, only recently out of school for the summer. Neighbors greet each other, chat, and joke quietly while preparations for the lottery are made by Mr. Summers, the town’s most civic-minded citizen. Just as it is about to begin, the last resident to arrive, Mrs. Hutchinson, comes running to join her husband and three children. Mr. Summers calls the names in alphabetical order, and heads of families go forward to receive a piece of paper, exchanging small pleasantries with Mr. Summers on the way. When all of the family heads have received their slips, they look to see who has the slip with the black mark. It is the Hutchinson family. Tessie Hutchinson complains that the drawing was not conducted fairly. A second drawing takes place, and we learn that it is she who has the black mark.

The ritualistic end follows. Children and grownups pick up pebbles, stones, and rocks and begin to stone Mrs. Hutchinson who screams, “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right.”

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Critic Robert Heilman suggests that readers have been tricked. We have been led to expect that a story which began realistically will end that way. Heilman says that the switch from realism to symbolism leaves readers “shaken up,” but that such a shocking ending detracts from the realization of the author’s intent in telling the story.

Seymour Lainoff, on the other hand, sees the story as an example of the scapegoat rite of primitive cultures, an annual event which often took place at the time of the summer solstice. Although he says that the theme of Jackson’s story is the savagery that lies beneath our civilized surface, Lainoff believes that the story shows that the author is optimistic about the future, giving as evidence that fact that some towns have given up their lotteries.

Perhaps the real core of the story might better be seen through the use of semiotic analysis to examine some of its significant codes. According to semiotician Robert Scholes, readers use narrativity when they read fiction. Readers, both visualize the scenes of the narrative and predict the coming events of the plot based on prior events. In doing so, readers subordinate their own beliefs and their own freedom of thought to the narrative. Some writers, such as Bertold Brecht, have deplored this abandonment of the reader’s self to the narrative and have used various means to prevent it. Brecht, for example, used time-lapse devices that interrupt the narrative. The concluding paragraphs of “The Lottery” have a similar effect. They interrupt the narrativity of readers, making them stop to say, “What’s happening here?” Then readers begin to predict again, this time more slowly, suspiciously, wondering how this trick came to be played and what it can mean. It becomes evident to readers that the surface structure of the story does not convey its whole meaning. Readers must look below the surface to find the deep structure or underlying meaning of the story.

Going back to the beginning of the story, we read again the description of an idyllic day of “fresh warmth,” “clear and sunny” with flowers “blossoming profusely,” the “grass richly green”—in short, perfect weather for a picnic. But now that we know that the morning is not going to culminate in a picnic, but in ritual murder, the irony of the beauty of the day becomes clear. Showing the peaceful, pastoral setting, of happy children and friendly villagers assembling for what we had supposed to be a happy event makes the shock of the violent ending more profound.

In re-examining the story we want to discover the reason that this lottery, this annual murder, takes place. The village is said to have a population of about 300 and “likely to keep on growing.” Could the lottery be a form of population control? But one less villager a year wouldn’t be very effective, so that can’t be the reason. Is entertainment the purpose? No—one seems to enjoy the stoning. We might wonder whether the purpose is for excitement, to feel more alive in having escaped being chosen, except that the villagers obviously just want to get it over with. They are getting bored with the ritual. There is no reason for the lottery, except that of tradition. The village is a traditional community. Men and women fill traditional roles, the women working in the kitchens, the men in the fields. Tradition dictates that the male head of the family choose the slip from the traditional black box. The lottery is held, year after year, only because it has always been done that way. For as long as Old Man Warner can remember, “There’s always been a lottery.” When Mr. Adams remarks that a neighboring village is thinking of giving up the lottery, Warner quotes an old saying which implies a cause-effect relationship between the lottery and the harvest: “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” Without the lottery, he says, “We’d all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns.” None of the younger citizens challenge the logic of this remark, which strongly suggests the relationship of sacrifice to the harvest, like that practiced by primitive people and documented by anthropologist Sir James Frazer in the Golden Bough.

Frazer, besides giving examples of the relationship of sacrifice to the harvest, also cites incidents of the sacrifice of innocent human beings to ward off evil:

. . . whether the evils are conceived of as invisible or as embodied in a material form is a circumstance entirely subordinate to the main object of the ceremony, which is simply to effect a total clearance of all the ills that have been infesting a people. (p. 665)

Tessie Hutchinson, who almost arrived too late for the drawing because she would not leave her sinkful of dirty dishes, can be characterized an innocent. However, the village depicted in this story can hardly be termed primitive. Judging by the surnames of its inhabitants and by the description of the town, it is probably a fairly typical
New England village. But people in modern New England villages don’t put innocent women to death, although such was not always the case, as Shirley Jackson wrote in her *The Witchcraft of Salem Village* (1956).

Witchcraft may no longer be practiced in Salem, but our modern world still has its scapegoats. Barely three years before the appearance of “The Lottery,” the world was horrified to learn of the extent to which Hitler and his followers had gone in their persecution of Europe’s Jews, Gypsies, and other victims, the scapegoats for what some perceived to be the evils of Europe. By their deaths Germany was to be purified. It was against this background that “The Lottery” was written. The theme of mindless and unchallenged tradition has as its corollary the theme of control. The children, out of school for summer, are described as not quite knowing what to do without someone to tell them. They still talk “of books and reprimands.” There were no teachers to control their behavior and “the feeling of liberty set uneasily on them.”

The adherence of people to unconsidered traditions and unchallenged controls is held up to examination in “The Lottery” in such a way as to suggest that traditions ought to be re-examined from time to time. The story establishes that a group of ordinary people has the ability to commit extraordinarily horrible deeds, if people in the group are unable or unwilling to think for themselves.

What the villagers in Shirley Jackson’s story did was to go along with a tradition that required the murder of a member of the community each year. What the citizens of Germany did a few decades ago was to go along with a leader whose expressed goal was the extermination of a group of people. What the voters of South Africa are doing now and were doing when “The Lottery” first appeared is to allow a government policy to continue which drastically limits the freedom of millions of its black inhabitants. The Union of South Africa banned Shirley Jackson’s story when it appeared. Her husband said that she was always proud of that fact. She felt that they, at least, understood it. They apparently could not allow in that country a story which might persuade people to reconsider long-standing policies.

The United States is currently undergoing a wave of conservatism and attempts by some groups to forcibly preserve traditions that seem to be changing (for example, the traditional roles of men and women). In their efforts, some groups try to control the curricula and values taught in public schools. “The Lottery” would have us reconsider traditions. Perhaps, as in South Africa, the would-be censors understand its deep meaning very well.

Notes


2. “Study Notes . . . Increase in Challenges to School Library Books,” Alex Heard, in *Education Week*, December 8, 1982. The book, *The Lottery*, is according to this study being challenged. However, it is the volume’s culminating short story, “The Lottery,” which is by far the best known part of the book and, I assume, the reason for using the book. (This is not to say that Shirley Jackson’s uniquely ironic view of human nature depicted in some of the other stories might not bring forth censors’ ire if they read them.)


6. It is interesting to note that, at the time she wrote “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson was a resident of the small New England village of North Bennington, Vermont.

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