

WORK CITED

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Jackson's THE LOTTERY

The underpinnings of Shirley Jackson's famous post-World War II story "The Lottery" demonstrate that the work is far greater than the sum of its parts. The date of the lottery, its location, and the symbolic or ironic names of its characters all work to convey a meaning that is even more disturbing than the shock created by its well-known ending, namely, that despite assurances during the late 1940s that "it couldn't happen here," a microcosmal holocaust occurs in this story and, by extension, may happen anyplace in contemporary America. Coming after the revelation of the depths of depravity to which the Nazis sank in their eagerness to destroy other, "lesser" peoples, "The Lottery" upsets the reader's sense of complacency.

Jackson lets us know the time of the lottery at the outset of the story. From the description of the men's talk of "tractors and taxes" (211) and the depiction of Mr. Summers wearing a "clean white shirt and blue jeans" (213), we may assume that we are in the twentieth century, making the story's impact more immediate. But why does the author choose June 27 as the date on which the village holds its lottery? The summer solstice, June 21, has already passed, and the Fourth of July is yet to come. The date, if not the century, seems to have been capriciously chosen. Such is not the case, however. June 27 falls halfway between June 21 (the summer solstice) and July 4 (Independence Day). What significance do these two days bear that makes June 27 the perfect compromise between them?

In European societies, Midsummer's Day was celebrated at the summer solstice, not in the middle of summer as its name would suggest. Authors such as Shakespeare, August Strindberg, and William Golding have employed the pagan undertones of that day as a motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Miss Julie*, and *The Spire*, respectively, for indeed Midsummer's Day has a long, heathen, orgiastic tradition behind it. American Independence Day, on the other hand, is redolent of democracy, freedom, and, to a certain degree, justice, because it marks the birth of a nation anchored in the belief that people "are endowed by their

Creator with certain unalienable rights." June 27 bisects the two weeks between these dichotomous dates and may well embody the contrast between superstitious paganism and rational democracy, a dynamic that plays a central role in "The Lottery," especially in light of the story's locale.

At no point does the author tell us where the lottery takes place, but we are made aware of several possible indicators. The town has a population of about 300, and farming seems to be the normal way of making a living. Most of the names are Anglo-Saxon in origin. The land yields an abundance of stones. Most important, the lottery is itself a model—albeit perverted—of participatory democracy, the kind that New England settlers made famous. All of these seem to point to New England as the locale of the story: it is also in keeping with New England's history of witch trials and persecutions. (Being pressed to death by heavy stones was not uncommon as a colonial punishment for witchcraft, as may be seen in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.)

Not only do time and place bear important clues as to the allegorical meaning of "The Lottery," but the very names of the characters are laden with significance. The prominent names—Summers, Adams, Graves, Warner, Delacroix, and (most obviously) Tessie Hutchinson—have much to tell us. For the season of the lottery is summer, and the larger scope of this work encompasses mankind in general (for instance, "Adam" means "man" in Hebrew). "Graves" sounds a somber, forewarning note of what will happen to Tessie, and the oldest man in town, Old Man Warner (the others have either died or been killed off) warns us about the primordial function of the lottery, which is to ensure fertility: "Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon' " (215). Mrs. Delacroix's name alludes to the pseudo-crucifixion of Tessie.

It is the irony that lies behind the protagonist's name, Tessie Hutchinson, that magnifies the allegorical force of this story. Historically, there really was a well-known New England Hutchinson—Anne Hutchinson, who, having been exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638 because of her religious beliefs, emigrated to Rhode Island, where she established her own church. Eventually, she and most of her family died in an Indian massacre outside of what is today New Rochelle, New York. Some might call such a woman a martyr, who was exiled and died for her beliefs. Our protagonist, however, has no strongly held beliefs, except her belief in self-survival. The name "Tessie" parodies the most famous Tess in literature, Tess Durbeyfield, the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, who in Hardy's portrait of her as the plaything of fate, dies ignominiously, since "the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess" (446). Now we must

ask, Is Tessie Hutchinson in our story an ingenue, as Hardy's protagonist clearly is?

Of course not! Tessie "came hurriedly along the path to the square . . . 'Clean forgot what day it was' she said to Mrs. Delacroix . . . and they both laughed softly. . . . 'I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running' " (213). "Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, 'Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?' " (214). Good-natured Tessie actually desires to come to the lottery, going so far as to run to it, although the rest of the townspeople are subdued, even nervous: the men's "jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed" (211). Mr. Summers and Mr. Adams "grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously" (215). Young Jack Watson also appears to be nervous: "He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head" (214). Later, someone in the crowd says, "'Don't be nervous, Jack' " (216). And not only the men are nervous, of course. "'I wish they'd hurry,' Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. 'I wish they'd hurry' " (216). However, to Tessie the lottery seems to be one great lark: when her husband, Bill, is called upon to choose his family's lottery ticket, Tessie urges him, "'Get up there, Bill' " (215), although "by now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously" (215). What a great contrast there is, in short, between the crowd's nervousness and Tessie's nonchalance.

But when Tessie's family is chosen, she becomes a woman transformed. "Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, 'You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!' " (216). Subsequently, she yells, "'There's Don and Eva [the Hutchinsons' son-in-law and daughter]. Make *them* take their chance!' " (216). Putting aside for the moment her perfidy in singling out her married children as possible victims to increase her own chances of survival, we see that she is manifestly not the good-humored, whimsical matron whom we first saw eagerly entering the lottery. Her protests of the unfairness of the process—a thought that only now has occurred to her, since there is every likelihood of her becoming the chosen victim (" 'I tell you it wasn't *fair*' " [217])—have a distinctly hollow ring to them, and her defiant glance around the crowd, her lips pursed, as she truculently goes up to the lottery box to pick her ticket, belies her earlier easygoing demeanor. Thus, the irony behind her name has come full circle. Her final assertion (" 'It isn't fair, it isn't right' ") is neither the cry of an innocent victim (Tessie is definitely not Tess Durbeyfield) nor a martyr's triumphant statement (Tessie is also certainly not Anne Hutchinson). It is the peevish last complaint of a hypocrite who has been hoisted by her own petard.

There were many Americans who, after the end of World War II and

the revelations of the early Nuremburg trials in 1945 and 1946, smugly asserted that such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States. After all, singling out one person, one religion, one race for pejorative treatment—these things just could not happen here. In her post-war novel *Gentleman's Agreement*, Laura Z. Hobson showed that such discrimination was in fact alive and well. Shirley Jackson adds an even more disturbing note in her story, which was initially published in *The New Yorker* in 1948: custom and law, when sanctioned by a selfish, unthinking populace, can bring an otherwise democratic and seemingly just society to the brink of paganism. Thus the date, the location, and the names in Jackson's story help to create the specter of a holocaust in the United States.

In this, "The Lottery" is eerily reminiscent of the ending of Hardy's *Tess*. When Angel Claire and Tess Durbeyfield flee to the pagan temple at Stonehenge, they see the "eastward pillars and their architraves [standing] up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sunstone beyond them: and the Stone of Sacrifice midway" (442-43). This image is an apt metaphor for the plot of "The Lottery": despite modernity, democracy, and American neighborliness, the primitive, selfish, superstitious ghost of paganism has been allowed to rear its ugly head and destroy one of its own.

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Ashbery's DOWN BY THE STATION, EARLY IN THE MORNING

The opening sentence in this poem, "It all wears out," seems to be offered as a response to someone who has just said, "If we do not agree on what it is, then nevertheless there must be *something* in the universe that is everlasting (Ashbery 14). What usually "wears out," of course, are "things," such as shoes, for instance. However this sentence implicates a much broader sweep of human experience, including our ideas and cherished beliefs. But the hopeless tone of the opening is put in a slightly