



A Warning to Future Americans: “The Lottery”

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In this pithy analysis, Hannah Dudleson explores the uses of narrative irony, symbolism, and descriptive texture to create a harrowing effect in Shirley Jackson’s classic short story “The Lottery.” This essay was composed for Writing about Literature with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

SHIRLEY JACKSONS’ “THE LOTTERY” is a short story with a dark message. First published in 1948, it was shocking for its time and remains shocking today. Spinning a tale of a classic, pure-hearted American town with a fatal flaw, this short story has a powerful moral that forces the reader to stop, think, and examine their own life. Jackson uses literary devices like knives to toy with the reader and stuns them at the end. Her use of tension, texture, irony, and other devices are incredibly artful and create a stunning piece of literature that has withstood the test of time for decades. She did several things well throughout her story but her most artful work in this tale is her use of irony and descriptive texture.

The story opens in a sunny day in June. Townspeople are gathered in the town square for the lottery, a tradition passed down from generation to generation. Old Man Warner, the oldest citizen of the

town, states “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon,” hinting to the reader that the lottery is somehow associated with tradition and even superstition. Mr. Summers, the director of the lottery, announces it has begun and people begin to go up and draw out of the box. The air is sober; women are anxious and chattering. Bill Hutchinson is chosen, and Tess, his wife, begins demanding a redo. This alerts the reader that something is amiss with the lottery and perhaps it isn’t a drawing for something good after all. The rest of the Hutchinson family draws, and Tess is chosen. She begins frantically protesting and the story ends with the villagers beginning to stone her to death, a startling and unexpected end to the story.

The story has abundant symbolism, texture, irony, and tension that weave together to create a jarring and impactful effect. At the beginning of the story the reader is shown a black box that slips of paper are drawn out of. This black box represents tradition, specifically faulty or cruel tradition. The box is broken and falling apart, but the villagers refuse to replace it, just like ideas that are handed down through generations despite being narrowminded and cruel. As for the lottery itself, it represents cruel actions that are present in society today because they have been passed down from generations. There are lots of positive references to things that a reader would associate with farm life, specifically old-fashioned American farm life, such as tractors, schoolbooks, farming, and women working in their homes.

The narrator speaks in the omniscient third person. They know about the lottery and its implications but don’t share any more information than absolutely necessary at each given point throughout the story. Irony can be found throughout this story in abundance, starting with the title itself being a misdirection. Lotteries are supposed to be good (associated with luck and wealth), but this one is for death and is something no one wants to win. Narrative irony is also present in the narrator’s withholding the information from the reader. It feels like the narrator and the characters are playing a trick on the reader. Tension is built throughout the story. The reader is

excited to see what the lottery is for, but this excitement changes into trepidation as Tessie calls out for a redo after her husband wins.

This captivating tale is short and packs a hard punch. Jackson weaves irony and tension seamlessly throughout her short story to create a literary masterpiece. Her characters are flawed and believable, her setting is immaculately described, and the lessons in the story are hard to miss. The reader finishes the story feeling gut-punched and afraid, emotions that are hard to invoke through words on the page, and the fact that Jackson does this so easily is a testament to her authorial skill and to her works. “The Lottery” is a timeless story that will be held as a testament of literary genius for years to come. ►►

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JACKSON, SHIRLEY. “The Lottery.” *The New Yorker*, 26 June 1948, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1948/06/26/the-lottery. Accessed 6 June 2022.