“The Lottery:” Tradition Kills

Tradition provides many people with a feeling of accomplishment; that if they carry out what their ancestor put into motion, they are doing what is right. In “The Lottery,” author Shirley Jackson shows that this is not always true by creating a world where tradition equals certain death. Shirley Jackson wrote from a dark place within herself; a place that is necessary to write a story such as “The Lottery,” but so dark it couldn’t have been pleasant for her. This dark theme lurks throughout “The Lottery,” and subtly approaches the surprise ending that forces the reader to question human nature.

Education would play a key role in this small town where everyone wants to live. It would help eliminate the sacrifice-seeking lottery, and allow the town to focus on their crops. Shirley Jackson likely wrote this story to encourage the reader to break the chains of tradition when necessary and to value life, even if it isn’t your own. Many readers and critics agree with the author on every level of this story and see the corruption of the powerful who are not affected by harsh circumstances that many individuals face.

Like most, Shirley Jackson had her own demons to deal with. In fact, her case of demons was a bit more to deal with than the average person. “‘… she believed that she was in touch with a whole ungodly assortment of demons. I don’t think it was very pleasant for her’” (Oppenheimer). This quote from Shirley Jackson’s son, Laurence Hyman, allows you to better understand how someone could write a story with such a
dark meaning, and brutal ending. Author Shirley Jackson lived a harsh life mentally due to these demons she faced, but it was not in vein. Stories such as “The Lottery” open doors for readers to learn more about life and themselves; giving the world a higher number of well-rounded people.

Continuous learning, and evolving, is how the human species has come so far in such a short amount of time. A sound education is the base of this continued learning in today’s times. If the town in “The Lottery” had any type of education they would not find themselves in a situation where annual sacrifice is allowed, or believed to be effective. “ ‘Used to be a saying about “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” ’ ’” (Jackson).

Obviously, this traditional sacrifice will not help their crops in any way, and any educated person will know that to be fact. Unfortunately, the useless tradition does not end there, and arguably becomes darker.

Simple traditions of celebration or games can be harmless and even peaceful; but, in this town, it is quite the opposite. “ ‘…blind adherence to traditional forms of behavior that have lost their original meanings and acquired no new, positive ones, can be destructive’ ” (Nelles). The consequences in “The Lottery” are obvious at the end, and clearly destructive. However, not all the readers realize just who is being sacrificed, and what other characters are lending a hand. Not only are they selecting one of their own to sacrifice, they are teaching the children and young adults of the town ways that will only bring darkness into ones life. “The children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson few pebbles.” The winner of the lottery is to be stoned to death by the rest of the town and that includes family of the doomed. The thought of supplying a child with the ammunition to participate in his own mothers murder is unsettling for the reader
to say the least. This is how many of today’s traditions, which are handed down by the political and religious leaders of the world, are viewed by the educated people on earth. Generally, the only people exempt from these harsh realities are the leaders themselves.

People say that a politician will not change his or her views until something happens close enough to home for he or she to feel the pain. The corruption of today’s government in the America, and other countries all over the world, is an example of the powerful abusing their position to benefit only themselves. “Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning” (Jackson). Mr. Summers is the wealthy organizer of this town and this gives him the window to insure he will not be compromised in any way during this drawing. Another way Mr. Summers avoids the pains dealt out by the black box is by having no children, and a wife that he likely despises. “…he had no children and his wife was a scold” (Jackson). The chances of being effected by the black box is very low considering only he and his wife, that is so mean to him others feel for the man, must draw a slip of paper. He is satisfied with the rules of the game so long as he is not subject to them, much like today’s powerful. Practically all the characters in this story lack empathy, but maybe this character more than others.

Most Americans have no problem turning the other cheek to death’s happening over seas of innocent foreign children, but will raise all hell if their child is killed in combat in that same war. “The Lottery” is full of characters that are nervous about the lottery, but would never dare say that it isn’t right. Everyone, but the person who has his or her name drawn, is able to maintain this mindset. ” ‘It isn't fair, it isn't right,’ Mrs.
Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (Jackson). The lottery doesn’t seem at all unfair to Mrs. Hutchinson until her name is drawn. At this moment, the reality of what is taking place, and how absurd it is, comes crashing down on her, but it is too late. If Mrs. Hutchinson, and the rest of the town, weren’t so selfish, this may not have occurred.

Being selfish was part of Mrs. Hutchinson’s nature; as it is part of humanities’ nature. However, after the surprise ending of “The Lottery,” human nature is called into question. “Jackson suggests that people are not concerned about injustice and kindness unless these problems touch them personally.” (Bose) The reader is pushed to question if it is simply in our nature to be so self centered. And if we are not naturally kind, does that mean we are cruel by design? Author Shirley Jackson believed that in our deepest of hearts rest something dark that each of us carry, and it is the reason for all the evil is seen today.

Luckily for the citizens of the United States, and people all across the globe, it is not too late to get our priorities straight, and decide to be kind. Many have become more educated over time, and, as a result, do not stand for such unthinkable acts. There is a constant struggle between day and night, dark and the light; as humans, we are caught in the middle of this ever-waging war. One great thing about being human is making your own decisions, and we can choose not to go with our instincts may tell us, and instead be kind to other. The powerful individuals know how powerful the masses are, and how effective we can become. It is necessary for people to be unhappy with the way things are currently set, and make moves towards equality by looking inside their own lives. Are
you fed up with the way we treat others? Or, will you continue to cast stones until your name is called?
Works Cited


