

Human Rights at Stake: Shirley Jackson's Social and Political Protest in "The Lottery"

Zaid Ibrahim Ismael¹ & Sabah Atallah Khalifa Ali²

¹Department of English, Al-Mansour University College PO box 69002, Baghdad, Al-Mansour University, Iraq

²Department of English, Baghdad University, Baghdad, Iraq

Corresponding Author: Zaid Ibrahim Ismael, E-mail: zaid.ibrahim@muc.edu.iq

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: April 04, 2018

Accepted: July 13, 2018

Published: November 01, 2018

Volume: 7 Issue: 6

Advance access: September 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Nowhere is American author Shirley Jackson's (1916-1965) social and political criticism is so intense than it is in her seminal fictional masterpiece "The Lottery". Jackson severely denounces injustice through her emphasis on a bizarre social custom in a small American town, in which the winner of the lottery, untraditionally, receives a fatal prize. The readers are left puzzled at the end of the story as Tessie Hutchinson, the unfortunate female winner, is stoned to death by the members of her community, and even by her family. This study aims at investigating the author's social and political implications that lie behind the story, taking into account the historical era in which the story was published (the aftermath of the bloody World War II) and the fact that the victim is a woman who is silenced and forced to follow the tradition of the lottery. The paper mainly focuses on the writer's interest in human rights issues, which can be violated even in civilized communities, like the one depicted in the story. The shocking ending, the researchers conclude, is Jackson's protest against dehumanization and violence.

Key words: Violence, World War II, Holocaust, women, dehumanization, human rights

INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in *The New Yorker* in 1948, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" has been one of the most controversial stories ever written by an American author. The early readers of Jackson's story objected the gratuitous, violent conclusion, finding in it an oblique criticism of their society and an unrealistic portrayal of American life. As a result, many readers suspended their subscriptions in *The New Yorker* in protest against the story and Jackson was threatened with murder and was boycotted even by her parents. The readers' hostile reaction was mainly triggered by the setting of the story in what seems to be a modern American rural town, where the people congregate, waiting to stone the winner of a sinister lottery. The victim-winner is randomly scapegoated for no obvious committed sin or crime. The bewildered public not only refused to believe the story, but they also demanded to know the place "where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch" (Friedman 34).

Jackson, like any other professional writer, refused to elaborate on the implicit meaning of her story, even when the editor of the magazine asked her for a laconic explanation, as she herself recalled:

Mr. Harold Ross, then the editor of The New Yorker, was not altogether sure that he understood the story, and wondered if I cared to enlarge upon its meaning. I said no. Mr. Ross, he said, thought that the story might be puzzling to some people, and in case anyone telephoned the magazine, as sometimes happened, or wrote in asking about the story, was there anything in particular I wanted them to say? No, I said, nothing in particular; it was just a story I wrote. ("The Morning of June 28, 1948, and 'The Lottery'" 1991, 1459)

Commentators on Jackson's story mainly focus on Jackson's regional setting of her native Vermont, her treatment of gender roles, her Gothic style, and the genesis of her story. This study deals with the writer as an advocate of human rights and it explores her implied social and political protest against violence and inhumanity.

VIOLENCE IN "THE LOTTERY"

When Jackson wrote and published her story (three years after the end of World War II), the vicious images of destruction and mass murder were still fresh in the readers' memory. The publication of the story coincided with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, owing to the disastrous consequences of World War II, mass deaths, inhuman confinements, and the Holocaust. Jay A. Yarmove notes: "... there were many Americans who, after the end of World War II ... smugly asserted that such atrocities could happen in Nazi Germany but not in the United States. ... Jackson's story help[s] to create the specter of a holocaust in the United States" (245). The readers were disgusted with the brutality of the villagers in stoning an innocent woman. They forgot the annihilation of thousands of innocent people by the atomic bomb. Jackson's humane message might extend to remind the public of the vicious genocide, represented by the Holocaust, which many Americans feared to see, without being able to do anything to save the helpless civilians confined in the Nazi camps. The readers who misunderstood Jackson's humane message of the rights of civilians to live peacefully insisted on banishing the whole story as being alien to American character and culture. Jackson's husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was a renowned critic, defending his wife in the face of the hostile public opinion towards the story, asserted:

Shirley Jackson's ... fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic, fantasies. Quite the reverse: they are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the Bomb. (viii)

Jackson's political criticism is implied in the very silence of the townspeople in the story, who passively participate in this barbaric rite, without questioning its inhumanity and gruesomeness. Because of their silence, all of them, according to the author, are involved and should be condemned. The fact that Jackson does not name the rural town or give a specific time to the story emphasizes the universality of the theme. In one of the scant comments Jackson made on the story in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1948, she clarified:

... what I had hoped the story to say is very difficult. I suppose, I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village to chock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives. (qtd in Friedman 34)

The long history of abuse and violence in the town is epitomized in the old, shabby black box of the lottery which the townspeople are so resistant to change. The people believe that this box has been made out of the material of the previous, decaying one. This makes them so stick to it because they believe that it is reminiscent of the legacy of their ancestors:

... the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. ("The Lottery" 137)

It is believed that this annual rite of sacrificing an innocent villager is undergone for the welfare of the society. Old Man Warner is convinced that the lottery is necessary for the survival of the townspeople, since it provides fertile crops: "There used to be a saying about Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" ("The Lottery" 141). Ironically, the old man believes that dispensing with the lottery will only lead the people backwards to primitive, stone-age times: "Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves" ("The Lottery" 141). He is unaware of the fact that the lottery is itself an uncivilized and inhuman tradition, which only causes the death of innocent people. A. R. Coulthard attributes the arbitrary violence of the mob in the story to their innate sadistic nature, rather than to their belief in the significance of the "human sacrifice" in providing a good harvest:

'The Lottery' ... is a grim, even nihilistic, parable of the evil inherent in human nature. It is not that the ancient custom of human sacrifice makes the villagers behave cruelly, but that their thinly veiled cruelty keeps the custom alive. Savagery fuels evil tradition, not vice versa. (226)

Another effective technique, employed by the author, is the conversion of the traditional way of thought in order to shock the readers and urge them to reform and change their outdated social mores. The readers expect the lottery to offer a reward for the winner, but s/he untraditionally receives a fatal prize: stoning to death by the assembled villagers. This legacy of violence has a long history since the first villagers settled in this place: "There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here" ("The Lottery" 137).

Jackson exposes man's instinctive tendency for violence and bloodshed: "although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones" ("The Lottery" 144). The people are blindly devoted to this tradition, even though the consequences of this irrational ritual are the brutal killing of a relative, neighbor, or an acquaintance. The human rights attested by the early founders of America in 1776 during its declaration of independence that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," ("Declaration of Independence." U. S. National Archives) are all violated in the story.

The characters do not have the freedom to express their dissatisfaction with the primitive ritual of the lottery, and when they do, they are silenced. Two villagers, Mr. and Mrs. Adams, voice their desire to follow in the footsteps of neighboring villages that “have already quit lotteries” (“The Lottery” 141). But they are forced into silence by Old Man Warner, who is a symbol of tradition and who has participated in the lottery seventy seven times: “Pack of crazy fools ... Listening to the young folks, nothing’s good enough for them ... There’s always been a lottery” (“The Lottery” 141).

The children are brought up not only to be bystanders, but also to participate in this horrific ritual. The story opens with the boys, working hard to make “a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of other boys” (“The Lottery” 136). One of the boys, Bobby Martin, prepares himself for the gruesome reward of the winner/loser by “stuff[ing] his pockets full of stones” while his playmates “followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones” (“The Lottery” 136). Even the Hutchinsons’ younger children, Nancy and Bill Jr., are not excluded from Jackson’s list of savage individuals. They “both beamed and laughed” (“The Lottery” 144) when they realize that their slips of papers are not the marked slip, which means that one of their parents is prone to be the sacrificial victim. Meanwhile, the younger Hutchinson son, “little Davy” is given “a few pebbles” (“The Lottery” 144) by the villagers who encourage him to stone his mother. Jackson intends to give her readers a shock of a remedial kind by forcing them to see the dark side of human nature. The story, as Helen Nebeker points out, is Jackson’s criticism of man’s unjustified cruelty towards his fellow humans, and it also represents “the innate savagery of man lurking beneath his civilized trappings” (100).

THE FEMALE VICTIM IN “THE LOTTERY”

The women in this rural town are marginalized and persecuted by the patriarchal order. They are denied their human rights of equality and dignity. They are subjected to different kinds of abuse, exemplified in the process of conducting the lottery. The male heads of each family draw for their households. Only when one family is chosen as the winner of the competition, women are allowed to draw for themselves. Fritz Oehlschlaeger stresses the patriarchal nature of the society in the story, arguing:

The lottery is arranged by families and households, women being assigned to the households of their husbands, who draw for them in the initial round. That the society is a heavily patriarchal one is suggested in many other ways as well. As the people gather at the outset of the story, the women stand ‘by their husbands,’ and Jackson sharply distinguishes female from male authority (61)

Women are not given the rights to protest the unjust tradition of the lottery, and when they do, they are humiliated and silenced. When the Hutchinson family is identified as the winner of the contest, Tessie decries the act as unfair. She hysterically endeavors to convince the congregation that her husband is not given a good chance, similar to the other men who have enough time to select their slips of paper: “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair!” (“The Lottery” 142). But no one listens to her and her protest is viewed as a defiant act. Then, she is silenced and insulted by her husband, Bill Hutchinson, who firmly orders her to “Shut up” (“The Lottery” 142).

As Tessie stands motionless, unable to show the marked slip to the crowd, Bill “forced the slip of paper out of her hand” and “held it up” (“The Lottery” 144) to show it to the public. Ultimately, when she is marked as the winner of the atrocious lottery, she is savagely stoned to death, not only by her neighbors and friends, but also by the members of her own family. Her final refrain “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right” (“The Lottery” 144) emphasizes her position as a victim. Her husband who is responsible for her dilemma is at the front of the crowd when the stoning begins. It is Tessie’s freedom of expression and humanity that is sacrificed. Such revolutionary voices are viewed as being dangerous for patriarchal societies like the one depicted in the story. Any woman who objects this unjust tradition is, thus, severely silenced.

Tessie’s tragic end symbolizes Jackson’s protest against the oppression women endure in a male-dominated society. Even in a free and civilized society, women are abused and silenced and their human rights are desecrated. But Tessie’s hypocrisy and selfishness are also denounced. She does not protest until her family is threatened and her chances of being the victim escalate. Realizing that her fate is inevitable and her chance of getting out of this horrible situation is slight, she is ready to sacrifice her motherhood and familial bonds just to survive the vicious stoning. She reminds Mr. Summers, the town’s official administrator of the lottery, that her married daughter and son-in-law should also be included in the second round of the draw lots in order to reduce her chance of being the victim: “There’s Don and Eva,” Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. “Make them take their chance!” (“The Lottery” 142).

In this dystopian world, there is no place for emotional bonds as each individual struggles for survival. Women can manifest savage behavior even when another woman is singled out as the scapegoat. Mrs. Delacroix is supposed to be a close friend of Tessie. She laughs and gossips with Tessie and is so kind to her at the beginning of the story. However, when Tessie is identified as the unfortunate winner, she launches at the front of the assembly, choosing “a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (“The Lottery” 144).

Any social and familial connection sound loose at the end of the story, as family members, friends, neighbors, and other acquaintances join force in stoning the victim. No sign of sympathy or regret is obvious at the end of the story. Amy A. Griffin states that Jackson intends to show how "humanity's inclination toward violence overshadows society's need for civilized traditions" (45).

CONCLUSION

Jackson denounces all kinds of abuse and violence in her controversial story. Still, her humane message was misunderstood by the early readers to be an affront to American character and culture. Her criticism extends to encompass vicious acts of violence worldwide through the universal themes and setting of the story. The death penalty inflicted on innocent victims in the story is a violation of human rights, according to the preamble of the civil rights, included in the human rights declaration. Jackson survived to see the Civil Rights Movement and the demonstrations of the African Americans and other oppressed minorities in the United States, but she did not live to see any drastic change in human rights issues during her lifetime. Still, she was one of the early voices to protest inhumanity of any kind.

REFERENCES

- Coulthard, A. R. "Jackson's 'The Lottery'" *The Explicator*, vol.48, no.3, 1990, p.226.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1990.9934004>
- "Declaration of Independence". U. S. National Archives. 19 June 2018: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>
- Friedman, Lenemaja. "Shirley Jackson". *Bloom's Major Short Story Writers: Shirley Jackson*, edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers, 2001, pp. 32-4.
- Griffin, Amy A. "Jackson's 'The Lottery'", *The Explicator*, vol.58, no.1, 1999, pp.44-45.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00144949909597002>
- Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965.
- Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery". *American Short Stories: 1920 to the Present*, edited by Julie A. Schumacher, Perfection Learning Corporation, 2003, pp.135-146.
- "The Morning of June 28, 1948, and 'The Lottery'", *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, edited by Ann Charters. Bedford Books, 1991, pp. 1458-59.
- Lainhoff, Seymour. "Jackson's 'The Lottery'" *The Explicator*, vol. XII, no. 5, 1954, p.34.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1954.11481741>
- Nebeker, Helen E. "The Lottery: Symbolic Tour de Force". *American Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1974, pp. 100-7.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2924129>
- Oehlschlaeger, Fritz. "The Stoning of Mistress Hutchinson: Meaning and Context in 'The Lottery'", *Essays in Literature*, vol. XV, no. 2, 1988, pp. 259-65.
- Yarmove, Jay A. "Jackson's The Lottery". *The Explicator*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1994, pp. 242-45.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.1994.9938792>

