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In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. 'The Lottery' is the best-known story of the American writer Shirley Jackson. Published in the New Yorker in 1948, the story is about a village where an annual lottery is drawn. However, the fate of the person who draws the 'winning' slip is only revealed at the end of the story in a dark twist. 'The Lottery' forces us to address some unpleasant aspects of human nature, such as people's obedience to authority and tradition and their willingness to carry out evil acts in the name of superstition. You can read 'The Lottery' here before proceeding to our summary and analysis of Jackson's story below. 'The Lottery': plot summary The story takes place one morning between ten o'clock and noon on 27 June, in a village somewhere in (presumably) the USA. The year is not stated. The three hundred villagers are gathering to undertake the annual ritual of the lottery, which is always drawn on this date every year. Some of the children of the village are busy making a pile of stones which they closely guard in the corner of the village square. The lottery is led by a Mr Summers, who has an old black box. Inside the black box, slips of paper have been inserted, all of them blank apart from one. The head of each household, when called up to the box by Mr Summers, has to remove one slip of paper. When every household has drawn a slip of paper, the drawn slips are opened. It is discovered that Bill Hutchinson has drawn the marked slip of paper, and it is explained that, next, one person from within his family must be chosen. His family comprises five people: himself, his wife Tessie, and their three children, Bill Jr., Nancy, and Dave. Bill's wife, Tessie, isn't happy that her family has been chosen, and calls for the lottery to be redrawn, claiming that her husband wasn't given enough time to choose his slip of paper. But the lottery continues: now, each of the five members of the Hutchinson household must draw one slip from the black box. One slip will be marked while the others are not. Each of the Hutchinsons draw out a slip of paper, starting with the youngest of the children. When they have all drawn a slip, they are instructed to open the folded pieces of paper they have drawn. All of them are blank except for Tessie's, which has a black mark on it which Mr Summers had made with his pencil the night before. Now, the significance of the pile of stones the children had been making at the beginning of the story becomes clear. Each of the villagers picks up a stone and they advance on Tessie, keen to get the business over with. One of the villagers throws a stone at Tessie's head. She protests that this isn't right and isn't fair, but the villagers proceed to hurl their stones, presumably stoning her to death. 'The Lottery': analysis 'The Lottery' is set on 27 June, and was published in the 26 June issue of the New Yorker in 1948. Perhaps surprisingly given its status as one of the canonical stories of the twentieth century, the story was initially met with anger and even a fair amount of hate mail from readers, with many cancelling their subscriptions. What was it within the story that touched a collective nerve? 'The Lottery' is often analysed as a story about mob mentality and blind tradition, where people perform seemingly irrational rituals simply because 'they've always done so' for as long as they can remember. Old Man Warner, the old man of the village, quotes an old saying, 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon', indicating that the annual lottery is thought to bring about favourable crops and a good harvest. We may scoff at the Carthaginians sacrificing their children to the gods or the Aztecs doing similar, but Jackson's point is that every age and every culture has its own illogical and even harmful traditions, which are obeyed in the name of 'tradition' and in the superstitious belief that they have a beneficial effect. To give up the lottery would, in the words of Old Man Warner, be the behaviour of 'crazy fools', because he is convinced that the lottery is not only beneficial but essential to the success of the village's crops. People will die if the lottery is not drawn, because the crops will fail and people will starve as a result. It's much better to people like Old Man Warner that one person be chosen at random (so the process is 'fair') and sacrificed for the collective health of the community. There are obviously many parallels with other stories here, as well as various ethical thought experiments in moral philosophy. The trolley problem is one. A few years after Jackson's 'The Lottery' was published, Ray Bradbury wrote a story, 'The Flying Machine', in which a Chinese emperor decides it is better that one man be killed (in order to keep the secret of the flying machine concealed from China's enemies) than that the man be spared and his invention fall into the wrong hands and a million people be killed in an enemy invasion. But what makes the lottery in Jackson's story even more problematic is that there is no evidence that the stoning of one villager does affect the performance of the village crops. Such magical thinking obviously belongs to religious superstition and a belief in an intervening God who demands a sacrifice in recognition of his greatness before he will allow the crops to flourish and people to thrive. Indeed, in the realms of American literature, such superstition is likely to put us in mind of a writer from the previous century, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose tales (see 'The Minister's Black Veil' for one notable example) often tap into collective superstitions and beliefs among small religious communities in America's Puritan past. But even more than Hawthorne, we might compare Jackson's 'The Lottery' with a couple of other twentieth-century stories. The first is another 'lottery' story and perhaps the most notable precursor to Jackson's: Jorge Luis Borges' 1941 story 'The Lottery in Babylon', which describes a lottery which began centuries ago and has been going on ever since. Although this lottery initially began as a way of giving away prizes, it eventually developed so that fines would be given out as well as rewards. In time, participation in the lottery became not optional but compulsory. The extremes between nice prizes and nasty surprises, as it were, became more pronounced: at one end, a lucky winner might be promoted to a high office in Babylon, while at the other end, they might be killed. Borges' story is widely regarded as an allegory for totalitarianism, and it's worth bearing in mind that it was published during the Second World War. Jackson's lottery story, of course, was published just three years after the end of the war, when news about the full horrors of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust were only beginning to emerge in full. Hannah Arendt, whose 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' was published three years after 'The Lottery', would later coin the phrase 'banality of evil' to describe figures like Adolf Eichmann who had presided over the Nazi regime. Such men were not inherently evil, but were aimless and thoroughly ordinary individuals who drifted towards tyranny because they sought power and direction in their lives. What is Jackson's story if not the tale of decent and ordinary people collectively taking part in a horrific act, the scapegoating of an individual? Jackson's greatest masterstroke in 'The Lottery' is the sketching in of the everyday details, as though we're eavesdropping on the inhabitants of a Brueghel painting, so that the villagers strike us as both down-to-earth, ordinary people and yet, at the same time, people we believe would be capable of murder simply because they didn't view it as such. These are people who clearly know each other well, families whose children have grown up together, yet they are prepared to turn on one of their neighbours simply because the lottery decrees it. And the villagers may breathe a collective sigh of relief when little Dave, the youngest of the Hutchinson children, reveals his slip of paper to be blank, but Jackson leaves us in no doubt that they would have stoned him if he had been the unlucky victim. And the other story with which a comparative analysis of 'The Lottery' might be undertaken is another tale about the idea of the scapegoat: Ursula K. Le Guin's 1973 story, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'. In Le Guin's story, the inhabitants of a fictional city, Omelas, enjoy happy and prosperous lives, but only because a child is kept in a state of perpetual suffering somewhere in the city. This miserable child is imprisoned and barely kept alive: the price the inhabitants of Omelas willingly pay for their own bliss. Or is it? One of the intriguing details of Le Guin's story is whether we are truly in a magical realm where this one child's suffering makes everyone else's joy possible, or whether this is merely – as in Jackson's 'The Lottery' – what the townspeople tell themselves. Just as men like Old Warner cannot even countenance the idea of abandoning the lottery (imagine if the crops failed!), the people of Omelas cannot even entertain the notion that their belief in their scapegoat may be founded on baseless superstition. They're making the child suffer, in other words, for nothing, just as Tessie Hutchinson is sacrificed for nothing: the crops will fail or flourish regardless. There are no winners in Jackson's lottery: just three hundred losers.



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