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Human Nature at its Worst

When Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, it struck a nerve with readers. "The story was incendiary; readers acted as if a bomb had blown up in their faces . . . Shirley struck a nerve in mid-twentieth-century America . . . She had told people a painful truth about themselves" (Oppenheimer 129). Interestingly, the story strikes that same nerve with readers today. When my English class recently viewed the video, those students who had not previously read the story reacted quite strongly to the ending. I recall this same reaction when I was in high school. Our English teacher chose to show the video before any student had read the story. Almost every student in the class reacted with horror at the ending. Why do people react so strongly when they read the story or see the video? What is it about "The Lottery" that is so disturbing? To understand, one must examine the very nature of humankind.

Man's propensity for violence has been around since Cain killed Abel. In the Old Testament, the Bible speaks frequently of wars and killing. "And it came to pass . . . that all Israel returned unto Ai, and smote it with the edge of the sword. And all that fell that day, both of men and women, were twelve thousand" (Josh. 8.24-25). The ancient Romans were known for their bloodlust. "The ancient Romans loved gladiators. They loved the men, the weapons, the fighting and the bloodshed. They also loved the death" (Baker 2). While most people today would be horrified by "what the historian Michael Grant has called 'the nastiest blood-sport ever invented' [it] was much loved in ancient Rome" (Baker 3). It is also well known that over the years, various cultures have practiced human sacrifice. "The Aztecs probably offered up more

sacrificial victims than any other people in recorded history. In this, they were enacting a Mesoamerican tradition that originated far back in the region's past" (Allan 19). Throughout more modern history, wars have been fought resulting in the deaths of millions. Murders and other violent crimes are inescapable. Throughout mankind's history, it can be shown that man's capacity for evil has no limits. But is this what troubles readers of Jackson's story?

"We cannot, in all honesty, make any serious claim that our own culture really abhors violence. . . . Modern society still feels the need to watch violent events, whether it be at a boxing match or spattered across the cinema screen" (Baker 5). Society today is bombarded with violence. There is graphic, and often gratuitous, violence in movies and video games. Most people do not give this type of violence a second thought. This may be because they know that the violence in the movies or games is not real, but "The Lottery" was just a story; it, too, was not real. So what is it about Jackson's story that hits readers so deeply? What makes "The Lottery" so disturbing?

For years, critics have been trying to answer these questions. Some have focused on the story's symbolism, while others have focused on its relationship to the horrors of World War II. Jay Yarmove writes, "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." (242) He goes on to say that

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. (Yarmove 245)

James Evans believes that

since the story was written in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the

holocaust, it raised (and can still raise) important questions concerning ‘the power of mass psychology, the possibility that blind adherence to tradition will forestall judgment, and the ease with which responsibility can be denied.’” (J. Stark qtd. in Evans 119)

Other critics simply focus on man’s inhumanity to man. Helen Nebeker notes:

Numerous critics have carefully discussed Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ . . . pointing out its obvious comment on the innate savagery of man lurking beneath his civilized trappings. Most acknowledge the power of the story, admitting that the psychological shock of the ritual murder in an atmosphere of modern, small-town normality cannot be easily forgotten. (100)

Jackson herself once said,

Explaining just 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 shock the story’s readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives. (Friedman 33-34)

While a case can be made for each of these interpretations, I believe there is more to the story.

Very subtly throughout the story, Jackson shows that the townspeople feel no individual responsibility in committing what can only be termed murder. The lottery was treated as just another social event. “The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teenage club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers” (248). As people assembled on that day, the women “greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip” while the men spoke “of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (247). As they begin the process, the people “only half listened to the directions” as they “had done it so many times” (250). Old Man Warner, the oldest man in the town, makes it clear “there’s always been a lottery” and that this is his “seventy-seventh time”

(250). It is apparent that at one time, long before the characters in the story were alive, the lottery held a deep significance to the people. According to Old Man Warner, there “used to be a saying that ‘Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon’” (250), intimating that the ritual was born out of a desire to ensure prosperity for the town. Over the years, however, “much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded” (248) indicating that the current townspeople really had no idea why they continued to conduct the lottery.

It is obvious at times that some of the villagers are uncomfortable with the whole process, but no one ever overtly criticizes or speaks out against the lottery. Mr. Adams tells Old Man Warner “that over in the north village they’re talking of giving up the lottery,” and Mrs. Adams adds that “some places have already quit lotteries” (250). Yet, neither of these two individuals had the courage to stand up and say, “Why are we still doing this? Perhaps we should stop, too.” Many of the townspeople were obviously nervous during the process, fully comprehending what the end would bring. As Mr. Delacroix went to get his slip, Mrs. Delacroix “held her breath” and the men who had already selected their slips stood in the “crowd . . . holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously” (250). Yet again, no one dared to question, or better still, condemn the process. Even Tessie Hutchinson, after her husband drew the deadly slip of paper, did not condemn the lottery itself. She simply stated, “It wasn’t fair. . . . I think we should start over” (251). She apparently had no issue with the lottery, just that her family was selected. This conjures up images of the German people during World War II or the 38 people who did nothing as they watched their neighbor, Kitty Genovese, brutally murdered (Darley 417). Readers are troubled by the fact that no one in the village had the courage to take a stand against the lottery. Readers believe that had they been in the village, they would have been willing to speak up. This begs the question as to whether or not readers today would have behaved any differently than the villages of the story.

Many psychologists have studied the effects of crowds, or mobs, on individuals. The fact that the entire town participates in the ritualistic murder allows individuals to abdicate their own responsibility. “Diffusion of responsibility . . . explain[s] that being in a group leads one to feel as if one is less responsible” (Garcia et al. 845). Graham Tyson, a South African psychologist, described the phenomenon of deindividuation (sic) and concluded . . . on the basis of [his] assessment of the psychological literature, that it is highly probable that an individual in a mob situation will experience deindividuation and that this . . . will lead to diminished responsibility. . . . The dense crowding . . . appeared to have caused some . . . to become deindividuated and therefore less aware than they normally were of their individual identity and accountability. (Colman 1072-3).

In other words, people do not feel responsible for their actions when they are in a group. Because everyone in the town, from young children to Old Man Warner, participated, the individual citizens felt no personal responsibility. Psychologist Jerry M. Burger notes the “absence of responsibility has often been cited by psychologists as a contributing factor to aggressive and abhorrent behavior” (3-4). When an individual perceives that someone or something else is responsible for a particular action, he is capable of doing things that he otherwise would not.

Part of what disturbs readers is that fact that no one wants to believe that an otherwise normal human being could commit a reprehensible and violent act like what is depicted in “The Lottery.” Burger, in talking about Stanley Milgram’s obedience studies of the 1960s, states “most social psychologists appear to agree . . . [Milgram’s] studies are a dramatic demonstration on how individuals typically underestimate the power of situational forces when explaining another person’s behavior.” Burger goes on to say that “our culture socializes individuals to obey certain authority figures” (3). It is likely that the townspeople in “The Lottery” viewed Mr.

Summers as an authority figure. As the man who “ran the coal business” (248), Mr. Summers was probably the richest, most powerful man in the town. As such, individual townspeople would have been hesitant to speak out against the lottery as Mr. Summers, a man of authority, was in charge of it. Readers may dismiss this thought believing they would never succumb to this kind of pressure. In fact, Burger points out that there has been “a persistent question about Milgram’s research” and whether his findings could be repeated today as people are “more aware of the dangers of blindly following authority” (4). But are people today really any different? Burger recently conducted a “partial replication of Milgram’s procedure” and found that

average Americans react to this laboratory situation today much the way they did 45 years ago. Although changes in societal attitudes can affect behavior, [Burger’s] findings indicate that the same situational factors that affected obedience in Milgram’s participants still operate today. (9)

The villagers in “The Lottery” not only had Mr. Summers as an authority figure, but they had the group dynamics of having the entire town involved, effectively absolving them of their personal responsibilities.

A phenomenon known as “bystander apathy” may also help to explain the townspeople (Garcia et al. 843). There are numerous contemporary news accounts of people witnessing a brutal act, yet failing to help the victim. Most people are genuinely horrified to hear such accounts. But what is it that would make someone stand idly by and watch someone get murdered? It seems the more bystanders there are, the less likely any of them will be to act. “Even if a person defines an event as an emergency, the presence of other bystanders may still make him less likely to intervene. He feels that his responsibility is diffused and diluted” (Darley 420). This could explain why the townspeople in “The Lottery” were reluctant to speak out against the practice. Because the entire town was participating, they no longer felt any individual

responsibility for what was to occur.

The responsibility-diluting effect of other people was so strong that single individuals were more than twice as likely to report the emergency as those who thought other people also knew about it . . . [an individual's] reactions are shaped by the reactions of others.” (Darley 421)

When Mrs. Adams commented on the villages that have stopped the lottery, the only person to respond was Old Man Warner who exclaimed that those who had given up the lottery were a “pack of young fools” (250). No one else spoke in support of ending the lottery. While they did not speak up, it is quite possible that some of the townspeople, while present, did not actually participate in the stoning. This can be inferred from Mrs. Dunbar telling Mrs. Delacroix, “You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up to you” (252). Readers can choose to believe that Mrs. Dunbar had no intention of catching up. “Marked by the loss of her son [to the lottery, Mrs. Dunbar] may still be a victim but she will not be a perpetrator” (Nebeker 105). Readers can also wonder where Mrs. Adams was at the time of the stoning. Jackson makes it very clear as the stoning begins, “Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him” (252). Where was his wife? It is logical to conclude that because Mrs. Adams had commented earlier that “some places have already quit lotteries” (250), Jackson’s exclusion of her at this point in the story is intentional. It is likely that while Mrs. Adams was certainly present, she did not actually participate. This may be the only glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark and troubling tale.

What perplexes readers is, unlike most modern movies, there are no discernable good guys or bad guys in the story. The characters are regular people, just like those reading the story. Until the end, readers can picture themselves as one of the townspeople. Yet when these seemingly regular people commit a horrifying, heinous act, readers struggle to comprehend their

actions. Readers are forced to ponder whether they would have acted any differently than the townspeople. Would they have gone against Mr. Summers' authority? Would they have had the courage to tell the group what they were doing was wrong? While most readers will tell themselves that they would have intervened, sadly, as we have seen, most would not.

As long as humans exist, Jackson's story will remain relevant.

Man, [Jackson] says, is a victim of his unexamined and hence unchanged traditions . . . Until enough men are touched strongly enough by the horror of their ritualistic, irrational actions . . . man will never free himself from his primitive nature and is ultimately doomed. (Nebeker 107)

If the disturbing nature of "The Lottery" causes readers to look more closely at themselves, perhaps there will be a time when individuals will do what they know is right, regardless of who is in charge or how many people are around.

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