

# The Lottery

by Shirley Jackson

## Content Synopsis

On the morning of June 27, villagers gather at the village square of what seems to be a typical American town for an annual event called the lottery, a tradition that has taken place since the settling of the village. School has recently let out for the summer and children run about shouting to each other. They gather stones in their pockets and create a large pile in the corner of the square. Among the adults who assemble are Mr. Summers, a local businessman who runs the lottery and other events like square dances; Mr. Graves, the postmaster; and Old Man Warner, the oldest man in the village.

Summers has brought with him a black box, which he places on a stool at the center of the square. The villagers have discussed replacing the shabby old box, but they are hesitant to do so. While many parts of the traditions around the lottery have been forgotten—including some kind of chant and a ritual salute—the villagers approach any changes to the ritual with caution. Even though the original box was lost long ago, the villagers believe the current black box is made from pieces of the original box.

One villager, Tessie Hutchinson, is late to the event, but manages to arrive just before the drawing begins. She talks nervously with a friend as Mr. Summers takes attendance, making sure every family in the village is represented. The drawing begins, with Mr. Summers reading each family name in alphabetical order. The man of the family—the father or the oldest son—draws a folded slip of paper from the box when his family's name is called. In one or two cases where a man has died or is home with a broken leg, a woman must draw for the family in his place. As the lottery proceeds, the villagers mention that some neighboring towns have stopped holding the lottery altogether. Old Man Warner speaks up, calling them a “pack of crazy fools” and stating, “There’s *always* been a lottery.”

After a representative from every family has drawn a slip of paper, they open them. Most are blank, but Bill Hutchinson's paper bears a black mark. Tessie becomes defensive, arguing that it is unfair and that her husband was rushed to draw his paper. The tradition continues, however, despite Tessie's objections. Five slips of paper, including the one with the black mark, are returned to the black box. The members of the Hutchinson family—Bill, Tessie, and their three children—are called forward to draw again. Each family member now takes their own slip, including little Davy, a toddler who must be helped to draw one from the box. One by one they unfold their slips of paper. Davy's slip and those

of his siblings are blank. Bill opens his and reveals that it, too, is blank. Tessie is still clutching her folded slip. Her husband takes it from her and opens it up, revealing the black mark.

The crowd moves in, with the villagers picking up the stones from the previously made pile and circling her. After the first stone strikes Tessie, the story concludes with a line that makes clear her fate: “‘It isn't fair, it isn't right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.”

## Symbols & Motifs

In “The Lottery,” the black box used to hold the slips of paper serves as a powerful symbol of ritual, tradition, and superstition. The villagers believe the current box has been built out of a shard of the former box, indicating that it is not merely a useful tool, but an item charged with religious and symbolic resonance. Despite the fact that it is not the original box, the villagers view it as the physical embodiment of the long-standing tradition. It also serves to remind them of the importance of tradition, even though they no longer remember the reasons behind, or the specifics of, the lottery.

Stoning is an ancient form of punishment and execution, one that figures prominently in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Bible and was used as a form of execution of so-called witches during the seventeenth century. Stoning often symbolizes the death of an innocent, connecting to various Biblical passages, including Jesus Christ's admonition that “he who is without sin should cast the first stone. In addition, the stones used to kill Tessie serve as a symbol of the violence humans are capable. While the villagers do not remember many aspects of the lottery, they remember to use the stones, symbolizing the innate violence of human nature, the connection between the villagers, and the instinct to follow the majority.

## Historical Context

Jackson published “The Lottery” in *The New Yorker* in 1948, on the heels of World War II. Although set in nameless American town, the story can be read as a post-war indictment of fascism and of humanity's capacity for evil. Just a few years before, ordinary people like Jackson's villagers had either actively or tacitly supported Nazism and fascism. The horrors of the Holocaust were perpetrated not only by the Nazi officers who gave orders, but by the many soldiers and citizens who carried out those orders or who did nothing to stop them. Because murder was state-sanctioned, many German people abnegated their own

capacity for moral reasoning and allowed the killing of their neighbors. Like the villagers, they followed social conventions and did what was expected of them.

By setting her story in a timeless yet quintessentially-American town, Jackson creates a sense of dislocation and mounting horror in her reader. The familiarity of the society makes the ease with which the villagers participate in the barbaric ritual jarring. As in many of her other stories and novels, Jackson uses this nightmarish juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange to great effect, producing a story that is at once an unsettling tale of horror and an incisive piece of social criticism. Appearing shortly after World War II, “The Lottery” can be seen as a comment on how the normalization of violence can happen within a society while provoking disgust in onlookers.

## Societal Context

“The Lottery” has become one of the most anthologized short stories in history, perhaps because it is at once so distinctly realized and so universal in its message. Jackson abhorred racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice. However, at the time of publication, the United States was still consumed by such prejudices. While townspeople were not ritually stoned to death, African Americans were routinely lynched in the South. People who thought of themselves as hardworking and upright citizens participated in such mob killings. Indeed, this form of violence was so socially accepted that photographs of a mob gathered around a lynched man’s body were sometimes seen on postcards.

“The Lottery” serves as modern parable that stands for the many ways in which neighbors can turn on each other. When the story ran for the first time in 1948, *The New Yorker* and Jackson herself received a record number of letters in response. Many readers expressed their dismay at the story’s violent ending and questioned where in the US such stonings happened. One might wonder how many of these concerned readers were aware of and concerned with the comparable violence occurring within the US and elsewhere.

Jackson’s story also comments on issues of patriarchy and women’s rights of the time. Mirroring the longstanding traditional family structure in Western society, men in “The Lottery” are the heads of households and participate in the drawing. Women only participate if the men are unable. Once a specific family has drawn the marked lot, each member of that family then draws to see which of them will be sacrificed. This system would naturally encourage families to have as many children as they could. A family’s collective chance of survival increases with every additional child. A woman’s role is therefore inherently tied to being a mother and to raising a large family. Conversely, a single man or woman is at far greater risk, statistically, than is a member of a big nuclear family.

Tessie has done her duty by raising a family. Despite fulfilling her societal role, however, the society still turns against her. In this sense, Tessie becomes one of Jackson’s many female protagonists who suffers or dies at the hands of a patriarchal society.

## Religious Context

At the time Jackson wrote “The Lottery,” she lived in a predominantly white Christian town in New England. She and her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was Jewish, were somewhat ostracized from the community. Her neighbors would make occasionally make anti-Semitic comments or draw swastikas on their windows. Jackson drew on these experiences with religion for “The Lottery,” noting the importance of following traditions within religions and the ability of communities to use religion to turn against those with different traditions.

The ritual that Jackson sets in a contemporary New England town is fundamentally religious in nature. Old Man Warner has appointed himself a sort of prophet, calling on his people to honor their ancient religion and condemning the other villages that no longer do. The villagers have forgotten much of the ceremony itself, but remember the core of the tradition: the killing. The use of stoning as the execution draws parallels to the Catholic Bible, specifically the story in the Gospel of John in which the Pharisees asks Jesus if a woman who has been accused of adultery should be stoned to death. He answers by saying, “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.” The stoning in “The Lottery,” however, is the tradition rather than the punishment, with the completion of the act solidifying the connection between the villagers.

Jackson’s story also invokes another religious phenomenon: the persecution and killing of women accused of witchcraft. In promotional materials associated with her books, Jackson described herself as a practitioner of witchcraft, and the epigraph to the short story collection *The Lottery, or The Adventures of James Harris* is a quotation from a seventeenth century treatise on witchcraft and black magic. The witch hunts and trials that periodically swept through Europe and colonial North America, such as the Salem witch trials, overwhelmingly victimized women. There was no good defense for a woman accused of witchcraft—simply to be named a witch by one’s neighbors was often evidence enough to lead to death, much like the drawing of the black dot. In this regard, the ritual violence at the conclusion of “The Lottery” is not purely the stuff of fantasy: sedate American towns like Salem have a history of singling out and murdering members of their own community.

## Scientific and Technological Context

The 1940s saw scientific, industrial, and technological advancements used for violent purposes, from the concentration camp to the atom bomb. The Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century movement that underscored the primacy of reason and progress, had taught that technological, industrial, scientific, and economic progress would work toward the betterment of humanity. Yet many advancements in the first half of the twentieth-century were instead used to progress war, showcasing the destructive instincts of humanity.

Jackson sets her story in a town that would look familiar to any American reading “The Lottery” when it was published in 1948. The villagers are, in many respects, living modern lives:

waiting for the lottery to begin, the farmers talk of “tractors and taxes.” The town has all of the marks of a modern civil society, such as a post office, a school, and a bank. The names of the villagers suggest that it is an American town whose people descend from waves of immigrants and live together as a single, forward-looking community. In addition, the townspeople are not averse to progress; Ms. Summers, for example, has gotten everyone to replace the chips of wood that were originally used in the lottery with slips of paper. Jackson therefore does not present the savagery of the lottery as being at odds with scientific and technological progress. Jackson’s story argues that scientific or technological progress do not prevent or suppress the darkest aspects of humanity.

## Biographical Context

Born in 1916 in California, Shirley Jackson graduated from Syracuse University in 1940. The same year she married Hyman, a literary critic and professor. Shortly after, she began writing short stories for publications like the *New Yorker*. In 1945, Jackson and her husband moved to the village of North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson worked as a writer and Hyman as a professor at Bennington College. Jackson published her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall*, in 1948, the same year she first published “The Lottery.”

Jackson was dismayed by the provincialism and bigotry that she encountered in North Bennington. She found herself clashing with her neighbors over various issues, including the town’s theater staging of a play in blackface. Although she lived in the village for decades, Jackson felt like an outsider. Jackson was a professional writer and a self-avowed communist, her husband was a Jewish intellectual, and her diverse group of friends and houseguests included writers like Ralph Ellison. Her neighbors occasionally made their own displeasure clear: at one point someone scrawled swastikas on the windows of Jackson’s house. Jackson set many several of her stories, including “The Lottery” in a fictional version of North Bennington, expanding on the prejudices that she saw as lying just below North Bennington’s sedate surface.

Although often controversial, Jackson also found a wide audience as an author. “The Lottery” generated the most mail ever received by the *New Yorker*, for example. Jackson published several popular novels, including *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), which is also set in a fictional North Bennington, before her death in 1965.

## Complementary Works

- **The Secret History by Donna Tartt.** This debut novel is set at a fictional version of Bennington College, where Jackson’s husband taught. It is a tale of conspiracy and murder involving a group of intellectually precocious young people. Tartt was inspired by the real-life story of a Bennington College student who disappeared in the woods in 1946.

- **The Illustrated Man by Ray Bradbury.** This short story collection includes a variety of science fiction stories that contemplate highs and lows of human nature. One of the preeminent science-fiction writers of the 1950s, Bradbury does with the genre of science fiction what Jackson does with gothic horror: elevate a popular form as a vehicle for criticizing one’s own society.
- **The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.** This work of feminist literary criticism offers the reader a means of reevaluating the classic novels and poems of authors like Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontë’s, and others. With its specific focus on how women represented other women, *The Madwoman in the Attic* could be a powerful lens on Shirley Jackson’s work.
- **The Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson.** This classic gothic ghost story *The Haunting of Hill House*, like many of Jackson’s stories, uses the conventions of the horror novel to explore psychological and philosophical issues that lie at the center of American life.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the effect of Jackson setting “The Lottery” in an American town which is, in every other way, so familiar?
2. Jackson has picked her characters’ names carefully. Discuss the symbolism or resonances of any of these characters’ names, particularly Mr. Summers, Mr. Graves, and Old Man Warner.
3. How does Jackson use literary devices like foreshadowing to prepare the reader for her story’s dramatic ending?
4. What do you think was the original purpose of the lottery? How does this connect to the expression that Old Man Warner repeats, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon”?
5. What are some of the traditions that the narrator tells us have been lost over time? What do you think these originally entailed and in what ways do these suggest that the lottery was originally an overtly religious ritual?
6. Genres such as horror and science fiction are often used as a vehicle for criticizing the author’s own society. What kind of behavior, practices, traditions, or beliefs might Jackson be criticizing through “The Lottery”?
7. What are some contemporary events or practices in our own society and culture that you see as evincing the form of mob mentality that Jackson explores “The Lottery”?

8. In what ways is the lottery structured around sexist and patriarchal assumptions? What kinds of individuals or families would be at more risk than others in this system?
9. How fair are the actual mechanics of the lottery? Does every towns person have the same chance of his or her name being drawn?
10. Tessie argues, once her family has drawn the marked slip, that the lottery has not been conducted fairly. How is Tessie's objection ironic, and how does this irony relate to the larger issues that Jackson is exploring?

## Essay Ideas

1. Examine "The Lottery" as a critique of fascism or of some other social, political, or religious issue.
2. Based on evidence in the text, reconstruct the original nature and purpose of the lottery. What does it say about this society, and our own, that the villagers continue to hold a lottery despite so much of the original ritual having fallen away?
3. Read another of Jackson's short stories. Compare and contrast the two stories in order to better understand Jackson's recurring themes and preoccupations. The story "The Flower Garden," published along with "The Lottery" in the collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1949), makes a particularly good point of comparison.
4. Jackson had documented interest in witchcraft. Discuss how "The Lottery" relates to the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century.

## Works Cited

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