

The Lottery



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

Shirley Jackson was born in San Francisco to affluent, middle-class parents, and she grew up in a suburb. This setting would feature in her first novel, *The Road Through the Wall*, which was published when Jackson was 32 years old. Jackson's family then moved to Rochester, New York, where she attended high school and later college at the University of Rochester, although she ultimately completed her degree in 1940 at Syracuse University. As a student, Jackson worked for the campus literary magazine, where she met her future husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Hyman was also a lover of literature and would go on to become a successful critic. After Hyman and Jackson married, the pair moved to and spent the remainder of Jackson's life in North Bennington, Vermont. Hyman worked as a professor at Bennington College, and Jackson spent her time writing. Both husband and wife enjoyed socializing and hosting events, and they had a wide circle of literary friends, which included Ralph Ellison. Jackson is best known for her short story "The Lottery" (1948), and for her ghost story "The Haunting of Hill House" (1959). Jackson died in her sleep due to heart failure in 1965. She was only 48 years old, although her health had declined in the years prior due to her diet and smoking habit, as well as her use of various drugs to combat lifelong neurosis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Lottery" appeared in print a few years after the end of World War II. By her admission, Jackson intended the story to point out the human capacity for violence. WWII exposed people all over the world to a new extent of human cruelty and violence, as accounts of the deeds of the Nazis and the horrors taking place in concentration camps slowly came to light. "The Lottery" may have been put in motion by hearing of these atrocities, but there are universal and timeless aspects to her story as well. The primitive nature of the farming village is emphasized with the ancient weapon of stones, connecting Jackson's story to more ancient events, primarily the practice of ritual sacrifice and stoning as a Biblical punishment. Other critics have placed Jackson's work in conversation with Puritan traditions and characters, pointing out the family structure of the village and the Puritan values of hard work, tradition, and strict adherence to rules. The name Tessie Hutchinson may be an intentional allusion to Anne Hutchinson, a 17th century historical figure in Rhode Island who was declared heretical by the Puritan religious powers of the time and who was banished from her village. Like Anne, Tessie presents a figure who speaks

out against the structure of the lottery and the village and is sacrificed by her fellow villagers.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Lottery" holds a unique place in American literature due to its wide recognition. It is included in numerous anthologies and often assigned to students, despite its initial chilly reception. With its critique of human nature and society through its depiction of a community pushed to an extreme place of violence, "The Lottery" joins the ranks of other dystopian portraits of society such as Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). "The Lottery's" feminist overtones, although subtle, are also noteworthy. Tessie Hutchinson presents a strong female protagonist who is outspoken and who speaks up against the society's tradition of the lottery. The village in "The Lottery" is organized around family units that emphasize male dominance, and Tessie also presents a counterpoint to this structure. For its feminist dystopian ideas, "The Lottery" might be compared to the later novel by Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Lottery
- **Where Written:** North Bennington, Vermont
- **When Published:** June 26, 1948
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction; Dystopian Literature
- **Setting:** A rural small town, mid-twentieth century
- **Climax:** Tessie Hutchinson is stoned to death by her neighbors, which reveals the purpose of the mysterious annual lottery.
- **Antagonist:** The tradition of the lottery, the human inclination toward violence
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Readers' Responses. When the *New Yorker* published "The Lottery" in June of 1948, the magazine received hundreds of written responses to the piece, which were characterized, according to Jackson, with "bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse." Many readers went so far as to cancel their subscriptions to the *New Yorker* due to its publication of the story. The reaction to the story was so dramatic that Jackson issued a statement about it in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, explaining her purpose in crafting the story as an attempt to

“shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives.”

Banned in the Union of South Africa. The story was banned in South Africa, a fact which (as Jackson's husband later reported) pleased Jackson. He wrote that she “was always proud that the Union of South Africa banned ‘The Lottery,’ and she felt that they at least understood the story.”



PLOT SUMMARY

It is June 27th, and a beautiful summer morning, and villagers begin to gather in their town square (the town is unnamed) for the annual “lottery.” This village has only three hundred people, and so the lottery can be completed easily in a single day, and leave time for noon dinner.

The children are enjoying their summer vacation. Bobby Martin, Harry Jones, and Dickie Delacroix gather a large pile of **stones** and defend them from the other boys. Adults arrive and stand around talking: the men speak of farming and the weather, and the women greeting each other and gossiping. Eventually the women join their husbands and call to their children, so families are standing together as units.

Mr. Joe Summers arrives. Mr. Summers conducts the lottery, as well as the square dances, the teen club, and the Halloween Program. This civic engagement stems from his free time: his wife is a scold and he is childless, so the other villagers pity him. He arrives in the square carrying **the black box**, followed by the postmaster, Mr. Graves, who is carrying a stool. Mr. Summers appeals to the crowd for help, and Mr. Martin and his oldest son Baxter come forward to hold the black box on the stool at the center of the square.

The original black box for the lottery has long since been lost, and the current box is well worn, but the villagers don't like to upset tradition by replacing the box. Other aspects of the ritual of the lottery have also been lost or forgotten. Slips of paper, which were made up by Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves, have replaced the chips of wood in the box. Lists are made of the households and the heads of each household, and Mr. Summers is sworn in as officiator of the lottery.

Just as the drawing is about to begin, Mrs. Tessie Hutchinson arrives. She tells Mrs. Delacroix that she forgot what day it was. Tessie joins her husband Bill and Mr. Summers greets her cheerfully. Tessie makes a joke, and the villagers chuckle.

Mr. Summers points out that Clyde Dunbar is absent due to a broken leg, and his wife, Janey Dunbar, speaks up, saying, “wife draws for her husband.” Mr. Summers asks if she doesn't have a grown son who could draw for their family, but Janey replies that Horace is only sixteen. Jack Watson, on the other hand, is old enough this year to draw on behalf of himself and his mother.

Mr. Summers reads the names and the men come forward when their names are called to draw a slip of paper from the box. Everyone holds his paper without looking at it. As the drawing progresses, Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves comment to each other that it seems as if no time has passed since the previous year's lottery. The women watch as their husbands draw from the black box, and when Janey Dunbar steps forward for her turn, they encourage her.

Mr. Adams strikes up a conversation with Old Man Warner about the north village, which is talking of giving up the lottery. Old Man Warner proclaims this to be “foolishness.” He says that giving up the lottery is akin to going back to living in caves, or to nobody working any more. He says that “there's always been a lottery” and that it's “bad enough” to see the light-hearted tone Joe Summers takes as he runs the ritual. As Old Man Warner's name is called, he reminds the crowd that it's the seventy-seventh year he has been in the lottery.

Once every man has drawn, the slips of paper are unfolded simultaneously and every one begins to ask, “who is it?” The word spreads through the crowd that Bill Hutchinson has **the marked slip of paper**.

Tessie Hutchinson suddenly shouts at Mr. Summers, “you didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted,” and, “it wasn't fair!” Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves remind her to “be a good sport” and that they “all took the same chance.” Bill Hutchinson says, “shut up, Tessie.”

Mr. Summers asks if there are any other households included with the Hutchinsons, and Tessie points out her daughter Eva and Eva's husband Don, saying they ought to take their chance with everyone else. But Mr. Summers reminds Tessie that daughters draw with their husband's family.

The Hutchinsons have three children: Bill Jr., Nancy, and little Davy. The children, Bill, and Tessie each draw another slip of paper from the black box. Mr. Graves helps little Davy draw and holds his paper for him. Nancy's school friends watch as she goes forward to draw from the box. Tessie appeals to the people around her and looks around defiantly, but draws a slip of paper.

When Mr. Graves opens Davy's paper and reveals that it is blank, the crowd sighs in relief. Bill Jr. and Nancy open theirs and, laughing, happily hold them up to the crowd. Bill's slip of paper is blank as well. He goes over to his wife and forces the paper from her hand. It's the marked slip, with a dot in pencil Mr. Summer drew the night before.

Mr. Summers says, “let's finish quickly.” The villagers have forgotten much of the original ritual, but they remember to use stones, which they gather up as they run at Tessie. Someone gives little Davy a few pebbles. Old Man Warner urges the crowd onward. Tessie cries, “it isn't fair, it isn't right,” before she is overwhelmed by the villagers and stoned to death.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Tessie Hutchinson – The woman selected by the lottery to be sacrificed, she is stoned to death by the villagers at the very end of the story. Tessie arrives late at the lottery, saying she forgot the day. Her casual attitude as she jokes with her neighbors changes dramatically when the Hutchinson family is selected in the lottery. She attempts to claim that the drawing wasn't fair, appealing, unsuccessfully, to her neighbors and friends with whom she had chatted amiably just before.

Davy Hutchinson – The youngest Hutchinson child, Davy, is too young to understand the proceedings of the lottery. But his innocence is contaminated by the lottery as he is handed **pebbles** to throw at his mother at the end of the story. The villagers are sympathetic with his youth and breath a sigh of relief when his paper is revealed to be unmarked. That he is not exempt from the lottery proceedings further reveals the cruelty and pointlessness of the tradition.

Mr. Joe Summers – The unofficial leader of the village and overseer of the lottery. Mr. Summers volunteers frequently in civic roles, organizing square dances, teen club, and the Halloween party. The other villagers pity him for having no children and an unkind wife. Throughout the lottery's proceedings he coaxes others to complete the process efficiently.

Old Man Warner – The oldest man in the village, Old Man Warner presents the voice of tradition among the villagers. He speaks strongly in favor of continuing the lottery, because he claims that to end it would be to return society to a primitive state, permitting all sorts of other problems to arise.

Mrs. Janey Dunbar – Clyde Dunbar's wife and the only woman to draw in the lottery. Husbands, as the heads of households, draw for their families. A grown son might also take on this role, but the Dunbars' children are too young. Mrs. Dunbar seems to subtly resist the proceedings of the lottery. When the killing is about to start, she tells her son to run and tell his father who was chosen—perhaps saving the boy from witnessing the experience that year. Mrs. Dunbar also tells Mrs. Delacroix to run ahead of her as the crowd pursues Tessie—perhaps trying to avoid taking part in the murder.

Jack Watson – A youth who is old enough this year to draw in the lottery on behalf of himself and his mother. For this, he receives supportive words from the other villagers, who tell him he is a “good fellow” and that they're “glad to see” his mother has a man to draw for the family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bill Hutchinson – Tessie's husband who draws **the marked slip of paper** for his family. He exhibits little distinct character,

although he does forcefully remove the marked paper from his wife's hand and tells her to “shut up” as she protests.

Nancy Hutchinson – The twelve-year-old daughter of the Hutchinsons. She is popular, and her friends wait with bated breath as she draws her slip of paper from the Hutchinsons' pool.

Bill Jr. Hutchinson – The Hutchinsons' son. He and Nancy joyfully show their blank slips to the crowd when they draw them. They don't appear to show anxiety or remorse at their mother's fate.

Eva – Another child of the Hutchinsons, she is no longer considered part of their family for the purpose of the lottery because she is married. Tessie is reminded of this when she attempts to have Eva and her husband Don take their chance with the rest of the Hutchinsons.

Don – Eva's husband.

Mr. Harry Graves – Mr. Graves is the village postmaster and Mr. Summer's assistant in the proceedings of the lottery.

Mrs. Graves – A villager who reminds Tessie that they all take the same chance by entering the lottery. Mrs. Graves is at the front of the crowd with Steve Adams as the villagers overwhelm Tessie.

Mr. Delacroix – A villager.

Mrs. Delacroix – A villager. She coaxes Mrs. Dunbar to hurry up as the killing begins.

Dickie Delacroix – The child of Mr. and Mrs. Delacroix, Dickie works with the other boys at the beginning of the story to collect piles of **stones**.

Clyde Dunbar – The only villager not in attendance at the lottery. He has been excused because he has a broken leg. As a result, his wife must draw for herself and their sons.

Horace Dunbar – The Dunbars' eldest son who, at sixteen, is still too young to draw in his mother's stead for their family. As instructed by his mother, Horace runs to tell his father which villager was chosen by the lottery.

Mr. Martin – A villager who, with his son Baxter, holds **the black box** during the ritual of the lottery.

Baxter Martin – Mr. Martin's oldest son who holds **the black box** with his father as slips of paper are drawn.

Bobby Martin – A young son of Mr. Martin's, Bobby fills his pockets with **stones** at the beginning of the story.

Harry Jones – A village boy who works on collecting piles of **stones** at the beginning of the story.

Steve Adams – The first villager to draw his family's slip of paper from the black box. He talks with Old Man Warner about neighboring places that have quit doing the lottery, and is at the front of the crowd as it overwhelms Tessie.

Mrs. Adams – Steve Adam's wife, who joins him in conversation

with Old Man Warner about the possibility of giving up the lottery.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE JUXTAPOSITION OF PEACE AND VIOLENCE

“The Lottery” begins with a description of a particular day, the 27th of June, which is marked by beautiful details and a warm tone that strongly contrast with the violent and dark ending of the story. The narrator describes flowers blossoming and children playing, but the details also include foreshadowing of the story’s resolution, as the children are collecting **stones** and three boys guard their pile against the “raids of the other boys.” These details introduce the language of warfare and violence into the otherwise idyllic scene. This technique models a theme that will be used throughout the story: the juxtaposition of peace and violence, contrasting ordinary life with the unusual and cruel tradition of the lottery.

In the first part of the story, Jackson shows that the villagers seem to be reasonable, regular people concerned with the everyday necessities of life: the weather, farming, and taxes. These characteristics then contrast sharply with the violence these same ordinary men and women are capable of at the end of the story. This juxtaposition shows the complexity of human nature, which can be both kind and cruel—and perhaps Jackson is also implying that “ordinary” behavior and murderous behavior are not inherently in contrast. Almost anything can be normalized by society, provided that no one speaks out against it. The events of “The Lottery” were partly inspired by the Holocaust, which was a real-life example of this juxtaposition—there are accounts of Nazi officers weeping over a symphony and then committing mass murder without a second thought. In “The Lottery,” the characters are able to excuse and normalize their violence by restricting it to the context of the lottery, and by explaining the lottery as an ordinary, necessary tradition. Through the chilling juxtaposition of peace and violence, Jackson reminds us that evil is not necessarily an outside force—it is a part of human nature, and the potential for violence lurks beneath even the most normal, seemingly harmless behavior.



HUMAN NATURE

Jackson examines the basics of human nature in “The Lottery,” asking whether or not all humans are capable of violence and cruelty, and exploring how those natural inclinations can be masked, directed, or emphasized by the structure of society. Philosophers throughout the ages have similarly questioned the basic structure of human character: are humans fundamentally good or evil? Without rules and laws, how would we behave towards one another? Are we similar to animals in our basic selfish needs, or do we possess unusual rationality, or unusual cruelty, that sets us apart from the rest of the natural world?

“The Lottery” asks these same questions through its depiction of an ordinary town that is capable of unusual violence. Numerous details in the text establish the fundamental normality of this unnamed town, which is intentionally designed to seem timeless and universal. Because this town could exist in so many different places and time periods, Jackson is drawing the reader’s attention to the universality of the ideas she examines. If this type of violence could happen anywhere—as Jackson suggests—then it must be due to some innate aspect of human character.

With the brutal ending of her story, Jackson argues that humans are self-serving and capable of great cruelty—as long as they think their actions won’t have repercussions that harm them directly. In the town, no one speaks out against the lottery before a name is drawn. Tessie Hutchinson finally protests when she is singled out, saying “it isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” but this objection is raised too late. The other villagers are clearly relieved not have been selected, and they speak from a position of security, reminding Tessie that “all of us took the same chance.” Though the villagers have lost or discarded certain aspects of the ritual of the lottery over time, “they still remembered to use **stones**”—implying that the central, murderous act of the lottery is an unforgettable human “tradition.” Even Davy Hutchinson, a child, is given stones to throw at his mother, and other young children gather the stones for the ritual. The prevalence of violence in children, Jackson suggests, is even more conclusive proof that violence and cruelty is an inherent part of human nature.



FAMILY STRUCTURE AND GENDER ROLES

The ritual of the lottery itself is organized around the family unit, as, in the first round, one member of a family selects a folded square of paper. The members of the family with **the marked slip of paper** must then each select another piece of paper to see the individual singled out within that family. This process reinforces the importance of the family structure within the town, and at the same time creates a hierarchy within that structure—one that emphasizes the

importance of gender roles.

The father is typically the one to draw the slip of paper on behalf of the rest of the family. This reinforces the idea that he is both the leader and the representative of his family unit—the “head of household.” This idea is further emphasized by the discussion that occurs after Clyde Dunbar’s absence is noticed. Mrs. Dunbar asserts that a “wife draws for her husband,” but Mr. Summers, who runs the lottery proceedings, asks whether Mrs. Dunbar has a grown son who could draw for her. Women are seen as more important or responsible than children, but as less important than men—even than male children who are barely old enough to accept the adult responsibility of drawing in the lottery. The dominance of men is again emphasized by the fact that daughters draw with their husbands’ families, not their parents’ families—women’s social identities in the story are defined by the men they marry.

By connecting this male-dominated social structure so closely with the basic operation of the lottery, Jackson subtly critiques it. She shows, on the one hand, how such a social structure leaves no room for anything but the “normal,” socially-approved family. It has no space for a non-traditional family, a single person, or a woman in a position of leadership. Jackson also critiques such a homogenous social structure through Tessie’s fate. Tessie is the prominent figure in the story, and her popularity and self-confidence are clear from the start. She makes others laugh and speaks up more often than any other member of her family—yet *she* is the one destroyed by the lottery. Tessie is a confident woman who speaks out vehemently against the lottery, so this makes her a threat to the status quo, and the ideally symbolic victim of the lottery.



THE POWER OF TRADITION

The villagers in the story perform the lottery every year primarily because they always have—it’s just the way things are done. The discussion of this traditional practice, and the suggestion in the story that other villages are breaking from it by disbanding the lottery, demonstrates the persuasive power of ritual and tradition for humans. The lottery, in itself, is clearly pointless: an individual is killed after being randomly selected. Even the original ritual has been forgotten, and the first **black box** is long gone, so the lottery no longer seems like a religious ceremony made significant by sacred objects. Now that these significant objects have vanished, the lottery is upheld simply because of the villagers’ belief in tradition—not a belief in any higher power. The villagers do not appear to believe that the choice of **the marked slip of paper** is fated, ordained, or spiritual in any way. No benefit of the lottery is described. Does it keep order? Maintain the social structure? Encourage villagers to behave a certain way? The only clear statement in favor of continuing the lottery is Old Man Warner’s insistence that ending the lottery would bring “nothing but trouble.” He equates removing the

lottery with society regressing, “going back to live in caves” and “nobody working anymore.” Yet Old Man Warner’s support of the lottery has no explanation other than the importance of tradition. In this way, the story captures the circular logic that gives tradition its strength.

As with several other themes in this short story, Jackson uses a single concept to point to a universal idea about human beings. In this case, Jackson shows how traditions hold power over human beings simply by continuing to exist, and how these traditions resist critical thought or attempts at change. This is not an attack on all traditions, or an argument that all traditions should be given up, but rather a reminder of the dangers of blindly following tradition simply because it is tradition—of letting a tradition guide one’s actions regardless of its morality or usefulness.



DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY AND CONFORMITY

Jackson’s “The Lottery” was published in the years following World War II, when the world was presented with the full truth about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In creating the dystopian society of her story, Jackson was clearly responding to the fact that “dystopia” is not only something of the imagination—it can exist in the real world as well. Jackson thus meditates on human cruelty—especially when it is institutionalized, as in a dystopian society—and the societal structures that feed and direct this cruelty.

One such structure—and the primary one examined in “The Lottery”—is the advantage of the many against the few. A major focus of Nazi ideology was the extermination of certain minorities in favor of the majority’s best interests. Likewise, “The Lottery” shows the villagers assume a mob-like mentality as they attack Tessie Hutchinson, the minute she has been “marked” as different. Would any one of them alone have attacked her? Some among the group certainly would not, but together they feel secure and justified, not just physically but also morally. This is especially evident in the moment when someone in the crowd hands little Davy Hutchinson some **stones**. Davy is too young to understand the proceedings, but he is encouraged by others to participate—even in the murder of his own mother. Mrs. Delacroix tells Mrs. Dunbar to “hurry up,” and Old Man Warner urges the other villagers on, saying, “come on, come on, everyone.” The villagers commit this violent act with the encouragement and reinforcement of others, and so the desire to conform to the status quo is part of what keeps the villagers participating in the lottery. No one wants to refuse to participate, thus standing alone and potentially being rejected by society. Ultimately Jackson warns us that we should be skeptical of all events and traditions that only continue because everyone is afraid of standing up against the majority. Fear of non-conformity often forces people to do things they would otherwise consider immoral, and when immoral acts are

institutionalized as societal norms, they can lead to a dystopian society like that in “The Lottery.”

before the lottery, and it is only this mark, casually made by another human, that determines the fate of a person. The commonness of the object reminds us that the marked slip of paper holds no power in itself, other than the power that the villagers give it by adhering to the tradition of the lottery.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



STONES

The stones that the villagers use to kill the victim selected by the lottery are mentioned periodically throughout the story. This repetition develops the stones as a symbol of the violence that humans are seemingly always prepared to commit. Young children gather the stones into piles at the beginning of the short story, and at the end the villagers take up these stones to hurl them at Tessie Hutchinson. Even Tessie’s son, little Davy Hutchinson, is offered stones to throw. These weapons are primitive, and in the hands of children they demonstrate the human instinct for violence. This symbolism is reinforced by the statement at the end of the story—that even though the villagers had forgotten the rituals associated with the lottery, “they still remembered to use stones” for the killing. This shows Jackson’s view that violence is fundamental to human nature, something that cannot be forgotten.



THE BLACK BOX

The black box is the container from which the villagers draw the slips of paper for the lottery, and as part of this tradition, it has special meaning for the villagers. The box is worn and old, but the villagers do not want to “upset tradition” by replacing it, even though it is not even the original box used for the ritual. The black box is an artifact, and, like all artifacts, is culturally and historically important to its people. The black box is a symbol to the villagers of the longevity of their tradition and the fact that many people before them have upheld the practice of the lottery. The black box lends confidence to the villagers because it reminds them to trust in the tradition of their forefathers—never considering that those traditions might be immoral.



THE MARKED SLIP OF PAPER

The slip of paper that denotes the annual victim of the lottery is marked only by a single dark dot. This mark looks like a spot, a blemish on the blank page. Spots and blemishes are frequently associated with disease, and so the appearance of the dot symbolizes the marking of a person for destruction, as if he or she were diseased and unsafe to others. The marked slip of paper also shows the pointlessness of the lottery itself. It is created by Joe Summers with pencil the night



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *The Lottery and Other Stories* published in 2005.

The Lottery Quotes

☞ The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green.

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 291



Explanation and Analysis


The story opens with a luscious description of the setting, which is a summer day in a small and rural village. The details from the quote collectively establish the tone and mood of the story. Word choices like “clear,” “sunny,” “fresh,” and “warmth” all have positive connotations, meaning they are associated with good memories and happiness. Not only does this language establish a positive setting, but it also includes words that capture the excessive beauty of the scene. The flowers are blooming “profusely” and the grass is “richly” green. This language seems like overstatement, as if this idyllic setting is too good to be true.

This quote takes on greater meaning within the larger context of the story. The violence that unfolds in this setting seems starkly different than the peace and beauty of the opening paragraph. These first lines may be giving the reader a false sense of security, so that the ending of the story is all the more shocking. Throughout *The Lottery*, the mundane or familiar aspects of human life are placed in contrast with extreme violence. This lovely beginning may be partially for dramatic effect and partially to show that appearances can be deceiving. Even in such an idyllic setting with “regular” people, violence can and does occur.

●● Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix—the villagers pronounced this name “Dellacroy”—eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys.

Related Characters: Dickie Delacroix, Harry Jones, Bobby Martin

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 291


Explanation and Analysis


The exposition at the beginning of the story includes some details that are not fully explained, primarily the boys' project of collecting stones and piling them in the village square. At this point these activities seem harmless, like the familiar play of children, and the language of this passage contributes to the portrayal of this activity as innocent. Bobby, Harry, and Dickie guard their stones against the “raids” of the other children, and this detail shows that the children are collecting stones and stealing them from each other as a game. The inventive play of children, often featuring guarding and stealing, as in a game like “capture the flag,” is automatically associated with innocence, youth, and laughter. Although these boys aren't described as laughing and happy, the reader assumes that they are enjoying their game.

The ending of the story and the usage of the stones fully explains the activity of the boys in this early passage—but from this innocent scene, the reader would not expect the outcome of the story. However, once the ending is known, this scene suddenly seems ominous: even the children's games feature violence, including “raids,” chasing, and stealing from each other. Violence in this story is not restricted to some people or some ages—everyone is influenced by violence, which is shown to be an inevitable part of human nature.

●● The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and 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. 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.

Related Characters: Mr. Joe Summers, Old Man Warner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

As the villages begin preparing for the annual lottery, the story presents the objects and rituals involved in the lottery. One of these is a black box from which the villagers draw pieces of paper according to their family groups. This passage describes the authority the box itself has in the lottery, and how objects can take on a mysterious power when they have been used as part of a tradition for a long time. Every world religion has significant objects and artifacts, as do many secular traditions, and this passage references this universal idea: humans value traditions and the objects that are associated with them, often for no other reason than *because* they are old and associated with tradition.

This quote also shows the villagers operating as a collective whole. An individual, such as Mr. Summers, who has a different idea of what to do (in this case, change the black box) doesn't persist against the popular opinion that the box shouldn't change. This shows the willingness of individuals to conform to the popular opinions of society, and how such group conformity can even lead to monstrous traditions like the lottery itself.

...at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 294



Explanation and Analysis

As the villagers prepare for the lottery, some of the changes in the tradition over time are discussed. The villagers are not able to agree on what were the original rituals associated with the lottery. The rituals are not fully forgotten, but have evolved, or diverged into different possibilities. This is an excellent example of one problem with prioritizing traditions—sometimes traditions change naturally. The villagers are dedicated to preserving the black box, while at the same time readily acknowledging that other things about the lottery have changed. This shows hypocrisy in the villagers' thinking, as they cling to traditions that are shifting over time. If the ritual of the lottery has changed or been lost with time, the reader must question whether the lottery itself is still relevant. The reader learns that other towns have ended the lottery entirely. Is it time for this town to change too?

Despite the different theories about the original rituals, one common thread is the pageantry of these rituals. A recital, a chant, a procession—all these rituals are publicly enacted and give a solemn tone or a celebratory tone to proceedings. These are familiar acts, of the kind that mark funerals and weddings, holidays, and protests. Humans universally use pageantry to mark significant days and events. In this way, this passage shows the universal and familiar qualities of the lottery, to chilling effect.

Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, “thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie.” Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, “Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?” And soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson's arrival.

Related Characters: Mr. Joe Summers (speaker), Tessie Hutchinson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Just as the lottery is about to begin, a nearly tardy villager arrives: Tessie Hutchinson. Tessie's arrival immediately sets her apart from the crowd of villagers, as her late appearance suggests a casual attitude about the proceedings of the lottery. She also makes a joke and gets a positive response, which suggests her relaxed personality and shows how well-liked she is among the villagers.

At this point in the story, the reader is unaware of the grim truth about the lottery, but in retrospect the levity of this passage shows the lightheartedness with which these people treat violence. Both Tessie and Mr. Summers are cheerful, as if at a fun social gathering. Tessie changes when she is singled out by the lottery, but this passage raises the question: would Tessie have continued to be cheerful if she wasn't the victim of the lottery?

This scene also shows the traditional gender roles of this village. Tessie is washing her dishes, and she jokes to Mr. Summers about whether she should have left them undone. This implies that a husband would chuckle appreciatively at a wife who was dedicated to her work. It is clear from this joke that Tessie doesn't expect Mr. Summers or her husband to be doing the dishes—such domestic work is reserved exclusively for women.

“Me, I guess,” a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. “Wife draws for her husband.” Mr. Summers said. “Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?” “Horace's not but sixteen yet,” Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. “Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year.”

Related Characters: Mr. Joe Summers, Mrs. Janey Dunbar (speaker), Horace Dunbar, Clyde Dunbar

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

The first stage of the lottery requires the head of each household to draw a slip of paper from the black box on behalf of his household. This task is always completed by

the men of each family, with one exception this year: Mrs. Dunbar must draw for her incapacitated husband, who cannot attend the lottery. The discussion around this event shows the sexist assumptions behind the system of the lottery itself. The "head of household" is always assumed to be a man, meaning that a grown son will draw for his mother, as Mr. Summers wonders about in this passage.

The women accept this hierarchy—that only men can handle the responsibility of drawing for the lottery—as Mrs. Dunbar's statement and tone shows. She takes on the role of head of her household only "regretfully." This is one of several passages that show the importance of the structure of the traditional family and the dynamic between men and women to the proceedings of the lottery. The formal proceedings of the lottery highlight the importance the village places on a patriarchal family hierarchy.

☝ A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. "Here," he said. "I'm drawing for my mother and me." He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the crowd said things like "Good fellow, Jack," and "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it."

Related Characters: Jack Watson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

The first stage of the lottery features the head of each household drawing a piece of paper from the black box, and, in this case, the head of the Watson household is the son, a young man named Jack. This quote implies that Jack's father is dead, as he is not present to represent his family as the other men do. Gender is prioritized over age, clearly, as Jack assumes responsibility for his mother because she is a woman, even though she is older. Jack's youth is clear from this passage, as he is described as a "boy" and he blinks "nervously" as he comes forward. Jack is encouraged by being called a "good fellow" and "a man," clearly showing that manliness and good character are associated with leading a household. Women are not treated as leaders in the lottery.

The reaction of the villagers to Jack's involvement highlights the traditional gender roles in this village: men lead and women follow. The support of the villagers encourages other young men to value the ability to lead, to

take care of women (including their mothers), and to uphold tradition in the village.

☝ Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for them. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's always been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody." "Some places have already quit lotteries," Mrs. Adams said. "Nothing but trouble in that," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

Related Characters: Mrs. Adams, Old Man Warner (speaker), Mr. Joe Summers

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

As the lottery continues, Old Man Warner and Mr. and Mrs. Adams discuss the possibility that the lottery could end in their village, as it has already been dispensed with in other places. Old Man Warner speaks out vehemently against the termination of the lottery. Old Man Warner is a persuasive, if irrational, speaker. He doesn't argue for the value of the lottery, but instead just belittles those who advocate for its removal, undermining their ideas by calling them "crazy" and "fools." He also defends the lottery by saying that it is part of the forward progress of society and civilization. He makes this argument by associating the end of the lottery with other regressions, like living in caves, not working, eating primitive food—which are presented as obvious mistakes to the average listener or reader. Old Man Warner places giving up on the lottery in the same foolish category in order to persuade his listeners.

Despite his persuasive speech, Old Man Warner believes in the lottery solely because it is a tradition. He points out that "there's always been a lottery," which, in his mind, is a reason to continue it. He has no logical reason for continuing the tradition, except that it is old—just like himself.

“Be a good sport, Tessie,” Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, “All of us took the same chance.”
“Shut up, Tessie,” Bill Hutchinson said.

Related Characters: Bill Hutchinson, Mrs. Graves, Mrs. Delacroix (speaker), Tessie Hutchinson

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 298-299

Explanation and Analysis

When Bill Hutchinson draws the marked slip of paper from the black box, his wife protests against the proceedings of the lottery. Tessie’s tone changes dramatically from her original cheerfulness and humor, and despite her protests, the villagers are not sympathetic. This quote shows the readiness of these villagers to turn against each other when the stakes are high. Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves, who are friends and neighbors of Tessie’s, do not listen to her complaints, as they are most likely relieved to not have been chosen themselves.

Bill Hutchinson’s reaction to his wife’s protests is more dramatic, as he overrides and silences her. This shows that he sees himself as the head of his household, and, according to the villagers’ gender roles, able to tell his wife what to do. He belittles her, perhaps out of embarrassment that she would publicly complain about the proceedings of the lottery. It seems from the villagers’ reactions that Tessie has stepped out of line—by protesting, she hasn’t acted as she is expected to as a woman, wife, and villager.

“There’s Don and Eva,” Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. “Make them take their chance!”

“Daughters draw with their husbands’ families, Tessie,” Mr. Summers said gently. “You know that as well as anyone else.”

Related Characters: Tessie Hutchinson (speaker), Eva, Don, Mr. Joe Summers

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

Tessie continues to protest about the proceedings of the lottery, despite the fact that the villagers and her husband try to silence her. Tessie’s complaints include her asking that Don and Eva also “take a chance” along with the rest of the family. Although the outcome of the lottery is still unclear to

the reader at this point, Tessie’s strong reaction shows that it is not a desirable thing to be the person who picks the marked slip of paper. Although the exact identities of Don and Eva are not explained, this quote describes Eva as a daughter who is participating in the lottery with the family of her husband, Don. This implies that Eva was once a member of the Hutchinson household—probably Tessie’s daughter. Tessie knows the outcome of the lottery, yet she wants to force Don and Eva to also draw in the lottery with her family, presumably because this will increase the number of people participating in stage two of the draw, which only features the Hutchinson family. If more people draw, Tessie herself will be less likely to draw the marked slip of paper.

This quote shows a universal human need for survival and self-protection. Tessie is willing to risk her daughter and her daughter’s husband in order to increase the chances of her own survival. Tessie is not a hero, despite her initial self-confidence and protestations against the barbaric lottery. Furthermore, the tradition of a daughter joining her husband to participate in the lottery shows again that women are treated as secondary to men in this village. According to traditional gender roles, a woman marries into her husband’s family, and not the reverse.

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal company office.

Related Characters: Mr. Joe Summers, Tessie Hutchinson, Bill Hutchinson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

Once the members of the Hutchinson family each draw a slip of paper in stage two of the lottery, the children open theirs and are relieved that their slips of paper are blank. Tessie doesn’t unfold hers until her husband forces her hand open, revealing that she has been chosen by the lottery. This act shows Bill Hutchinson’s dominance over Tessie. When she first appears in the story, Tessie is self-confident and funny, but her husband draws for their family in the lottery, tells her to shut up when she complains, and reveals that


she is the victim of the lottery in this scene. All of these actions show Bill Hutchinson following the traditions of the village and the proceedings of the lottery rather than listening to his wife or trying to protect her from the lottery. It is clear that his love for her (if he does love her) is outweighed by his devotion to the tradition of the lottery.

The slip of paper in Tessie's hand was marked by Mr. Summers with a pencil the night before. This detail shows the contrast between the object of the marked slip of paper and the importance the villagers place on it. The process of making the slip of paper is as mundane and unimportant as it could be. But at the same time, the marked paper decides the very life or death of a person. This reinforces the ridiculousness of the lottery, and how the villagers adhere to it despite many indications that it is insignificant and pointless, in addition to being cruel and harmful. It is only tradition and a fear of change that keeps the village entrenched in this monstrous practice.

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box...

Related Characters: Tessie Hutchinson

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

Once Tessie has been selected as the victim of the lottery, the truth of the tradition is revealed as the villagers pick up stones. This quote describing the villagers' act of arming themselves with stones reminds the reader of several key ideas already established in the story. First, this passage points out the aspects of the lottery that have been lost, but they are set up as different than the use of stones, which has been consistent throughout the years that the lottery has been in existence. Therefore, the villagers don't forget to use stones, which shows that violence (unlike other details of ritual) is unforgettable. Using a stone as a weapon is part of human psychology, a primitive means of attack or self-defense.

This quote also references the beginning of the story, where

the young boys were collecting stones. This early passage is recast in a grim light as these stones, which the reader once assumed to be playthings, are transformed into murder weapons. Even the young children are involved in this violence, which further shows that violence is instinctual. Innocent activities, such as children playing or the everyday life in this village, do not exclude the possibility of violence, which can occur anywhere.

Although the children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Related Characters: Davy Hutchinson, Tessie Hutchinson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis


The villagers pick up stones to use them as weapons, but the children have already armed themselves. Little Davy Hutchinson, Tessie's son, is too young to understand the proceedings, but someone older gives him some stones. This quote shows that even the children are enthusiastic about the proceedings of the lottery when they get swept up in the crowd—illustrating how violence is part of human nature, as this story repeatedly emphasizes. But, at the same time, this quote also shows that violence can be a learned behavior. Because Davy Hutchinson is given stones by someone older than himself, he is being taught to participate in violence.

Therefore, in this story, violence arises from both nature and nurture. In a village where conformity and tradition are highly valued, the next generation is taught to follow the actions of an older generation. This also shows how traditions are continued and maintained: they are learned from an older generation. Despite the discussion in this story of an end to the lottery in this village, it seems clear that the next generation is already learning to carry on this violent tradition.

●● Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head. Old Man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on, everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him. "It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

Related Characters: Old Man Warner, Tessie Hutchinson (speaker), Mrs. Graves, Steve Adams

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

The story ends with the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson. She stands alone in a cleared space as the villagers approach, armed with stones. This outcome of events unfolds in the last several few lines, making the "twist" particularly

shocking, partly because of the effort early in the story to establish that this is an average, nice village. The cruelty of the villagers and their collective thinking is apparent in this final passage, especially in the last words "and then they were upon her"—language that evokes the brutality of a pack of dogs, not humans. Old Man Warner is egging the villagers on as they attack, encouraging them, showing that the villagers are working as a unit. Despite the mob mentality of the villagers, specific individuals are mentioned in the crowd. Steve Adams and Mrs. Graves have already been established in the story as regular people, yet they appear eager for violence in this passage.

Tessie stands alone, her physical isolation showing that she has been isolated as a solitary voice standing up against the crowd. She tries to protest, shifting from "it isn't fair" to "it isn't right"—the last words the reader hears from her. She is the only voice of reason in a group that has gone insane. The *fairness* of the lottery has been emphasized to Tessie—as the other villagers reminded her that everyone took a fair chance at being chosen. However, it is clear Tessie's death is pointless and not *right*.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LOTTERY

The morning of June 27th is a sunny, summer day with blooming flowers and green grass. In an unnamed village, the inhabitants gather in the town square at ten o'clock for an event called "the lottery." In other towns there are so many people that the lottery must be conducted over two days, but in this village there are only three hundred people, so the lottery will be completed in time for the villagers to return home for noon dinner.

The children arrive in the village square first, enjoying their summer leisure time. Bobby Martin fills his pockets with **stones**, and other boys do the same. Bobby helps Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix build a giant pile of stones and protect it from "raids" by other children. The girls stand talking in groups. Then adults arrive and watch their children's activities. The men speak of farming, the weather, and taxes. They smile, but do not laugh. The women arrive, wearing old dresses and sweaters, and gossip amongst themselves. Then the women call for their children, but the excited children have to be called repeatedly. Bobby Martin runs back to the pile of stones before his father reprimands him and he quietly takes his place with his family.

Mr. Summers, the man who conducts the lottery, arrives. He also organizes the square dances, the teen club, and the Halloween program, because he has time to devote to volunteering. He runs the coal business in town, but his neighbors pity him because his wife is unkind and the couple has no children. Mr. Summers arrives bearing a **black box**. He is followed by the postmaster, Mr. Graves, who carries a stool.

Mr. Graves sets the stool in the center of the square and **the black box** is placed upon it. Mr. Summers asks for help as he stirs the slips of paper in the box. The people in the crowd hesitate, but after a moment Mr. Martin and his oldest son Baxter step forward to hold the box and stool. The original black box from the original lotteries has been lost, but this current box still predates the memory of any of the villagers. Mr. Summers wishes to make a new box, but the villagers don't want to "upset tradition" by doing so. Rumor has it that this box contains pieces of the original black box from when the village was first settled. The box is faded and stained with age.

This seemingly idyllic beginning establishes a setting at odds with the violent resolution of the story. Early details, such as sun and flowers, all have positive connotations, and establish the theme of the juxtaposition of peace and violence. The lottery is mentioned in the first paragraph, but not explained until the last lines.



The children's activities—gathering stones—have a false innocence about them. Because this resembles the regular play of children, the reader may not assume gathering stones is intended for anything violent. The word "raids," however, introduces a telling element of violence and warfare into the children's innocent games. Similarly, the reader is lulled into a false sense of security by the calm and innocuous activities and topics of conversation among the adult villagers. We see the villagers strictly divided along gendered lines, even as children.



Because of the innocuous nature of Mr. Summers' other community activities, the lottery is assumed to be something in a similar vein. He is a successful businessman, but pitied because he can have no children—clearly this is a very family-oriented society.



The details of the lottery's proceedings seem mundane, but the crowd's hesitation to get involved is a first hint that the lottery is not necessarily a positive experience for the villagers. It is also clear that the lottery is a tradition, and that the villagers believe very strongly in conforming to tradition—they are unwilling to change even something as small as the black box used in the proceedings.



Much of the original ritual of the lottery has been forgotten, and one change that was made was Mr. Summers's choice to replace the original pieces of wood with slips of paper, which fit more easily in **the black box** now that the population of the village has grown to three hundred. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves always prepare the slips of paper, and then the box is kept overnight in the safe of the coal company. For the rest of the year, the box is stored in Mr. Graves's barn, the post office, or the Martins' grocery store.

In preparation for the lottery, Mr. Summers creates lists of the heads of families, heads of households in each family, and members of each household in each family. Mr. Graves properly swears in Mr. Summers as the officiator of the lottery. Some villagers recall that there used to be a recital to accompany the swearing in, complete with a chant by the officiator. Others remembered that the officiator was required to stand in a certain way when he performed the chant, or that he was required to walk among the crowd. A ritual salute had also been used, but now Mr. Summers is only required to address each person as he comes forward to draw from **the black box**. Mr. Summers is dressed cleanly and seems proper and important as he chats with Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers stops chanting in order to start the lottery, Mrs. Tessie Hutchinson arrives in the square. She tells Mrs. Delacroix that she "clean forgot what day it was." She says she realized it was the 27th and came running to the square. She dries her hands on her apron. Mrs. Delacroix reassures her that Mr. Summers and the others are still talking and she hasn't missed anything.

Mrs. Hutchinson looks through the crowd for her husband and children. The crowd parts for her as she joins them at the front, and some point out her arrival to her husband. Mr. Summers cheerfully says that he'd thought they'd have to start without Tessie. Tessie jokes back that Mr. Summers wouldn't have her leave her dirty dishes in the sink, would he? The crowd laughs.

Mr. Summers says that they had better get started and get this over with so that everyone can go back to work. He asks if anyone is missing and, consulting his list, points out that Clyde Dunbar is absent with a broken leg. He asks who will be drawing on his behalf. His wife steps forward, saying, "wife draws for her husband." Mr. Summers asks—although he knows the answer, but he poses the question formally—whether or not she has a grown son to draw for her. Mrs. Dunbar says that her son Horace is only sixteen, so she will draw on behalf of her family this year.

Even though the villagers value tradition, many of the specific parts of their traditions have been lost with time. This suggests that the original purpose of the lottery has also been forgotten, and the lottery is now an empty ritual, one enacted simply because it always has been. When we later learn the significance of the slips of paper, it seems horribly arbitrary that they are simply made by a person the night before.



The lottery involves organizing the village by household, which reinforces the importance of family structures here. This structure relies heavily on gender roles for men and women, where men are the heads of households, and women are delegated to a secondary role and considered incapable of assuming responsibility or leadership roles. Even though the setting of this story is a single town, it is generic enough that it might be almost anywhere. In doing this, Jackson essentially makes the story a fable—the ideas explored here are universal.



Tessie Hutchinson's late arrival establishes her character in a few sentences: she cares little about the lottery and the pomp and circumstance of the ritual. She is different from the other villagers, and thus a potential rebel against the structure of the village and the lottery.



Tessie joins her family in the crowd, as all the villagers stand with their households, but her sense of humor sets her apart from the rest. She is clearly well-liked and appreciated by the villagers, which makes her eventual fate all the more surprising and disturbing.



Mrs. Dunbar is the only woman to draw in the lottery, and the discussion of her role in the ritual proceedings emphasizes the theme of family structure and gender roles. Women are considered so inferior that even a teenaged son would replace a mother as the "head of household." The formality surrounding these proceedings shows Mrs. Dunbar's involvement to be an anomaly for the village.



Mr. Summers asks if the Watson boy is drawing this year. Jack Watson raises his hand and nervously announces that he is drawing for his mother and himself. Other villagers call him a “good fellow” and state that they’re glad to see his mother has “got a man to do it.” Mr. Summers finishes up his questions by asking if Old Man Warner has made it. The old man declares “here” from the crowd.

Jack Watson's role continues the examination of family structures and gender roles. Jack earns respect and identity as a man among the villagers by drawing in the lottery. He is referred to as a “good fellow” and “a man” who is looking after his “helpless” mother.



A hush falls over the crowd as Mr. Summers states that he’ll read the names aloud and the heads of families should come forward and draw a slip of paper from the box. Everyone should hold his paper without opening it until all the slips have been drawn. The crowd is familiar with the ritual, and only half-listens to these directions. Mr. Summers first calls “Adams,” and Steve Adams approaches, draws his slip of paper, and returns to his family, standing a little apart and not looking down at the paper.

The description of the lottery's formalities builds the reader's anticipation, as the many seemingly mundane rituals all lead up to a mysterious, ominous outcome. The arc of the story depends on the question of just what will happen to the “winner” of the lottery.



As the reading of names continues, Mrs. Delacroix says to Mrs. Graves that it seems like no time passes between lotteries these days. It seems like they only had the last one a week ago, she continues, even though a year has passed. Mrs. Graves agrees that time flies. Mr. Delacroix is called forward, and Mrs. Delacroix holds her breath. “Dunbar” is called, and as Janey Dunbar walks steadily forward the women say, “go on, Janey,” and “there she goes.”

Snap shots of village life, like the conversation between Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Graves, develop the humanity of the characters and makes this seem just like any other small town where everyone knows each other. The small talk juxtaposed against murder is what makes the story so powerful. Janey is taking on a “man’s role,” so she is assumed to need encouragement and support.



Mrs. Graves watches Mr. Graves draw their family’s slip of paper. Throughout the crowd, men are holding slips of paper, nervously playing with them in their hands. “Hutchinson” is called, and Tessie tells her husband to “get up there,” drawing laughs from her neighbors.

The men's nervousness foreshadows the lottery's grim outcome. Tessie acts at odds with the pervasive mood, drawing laughs from the crowd. Tessie does not question the lottery at this point, and treats the proceedings lightheartedly—from a position of safety.



In the crowd, Mr. Adams turns to Old Man Warner and says that apparently the north village is considering giving up the lottery. Old Man Warner snorts and dismisses this as foolish. He says that next the young folks will want everyone to live in caves or nobody to work. He references the old saying, “lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” He reminds Mr. Adams that there has always been a lottery, and that it’s bad enough to see Mr. Summers leading the proceedings while joking with everybody. Mrs. Adams intercedes with the information that some places have already stopped the lotteries. Old Man Warner feels there’s “nothing but trouble in that.”

The conversation between Mr. Adams and Old Man Warner establishes why the lottery is continued in this village, while it has been ended in others: the power of tradition. As the oldest man in the village, Old Man Warner links the lottery to traditional civilization, equating its removal to a breakdown of society and a return to a primitive state. For the villagers, the lottery demonstrates the organization and power of society—that is, a group of people submitting to shared rules in exchange for protection and support. But we see that the lottery also shows the arbitrariness and corruption of many of these social rules.



Mrs. Dunbar says to her oldest son that she wishes everyone would hurry up, and Horace replies that they're almost through the list of names. Mrs. Dunbar instructs him to run and tell his father once they're done. When Old Man Warner is called to select his slip of paper, he says that this is his seventy-seventh lottery. When Jack Watson steps forward, he receives several comments from the crowd reminding him to not be nervous and to take his time.

Finally, the last man has drawn. Mr. Summers says, "all right, fellows," and, after a moment of stillness, all the papers are opened. The crowd begins to ask who has it. Some begin to say that it's Bill Hutchinson. Mrs. Dunbar tells her son to go tell his father who was chosen, and Horace leaves. Bill Hutchinson is quietly staring down at his piece of paper, but suddenly Tessie yells at Mr. Summers that he didn't give her husband enough time to choose, and it wasn't fair.

Mrs. Delacroix tells Tessie to "be a good sport," and Mrs. Graves reminds her "all of us took the same chance." Bill Hutchinson tells his wife to "shut up." Mr. Summers says they've got to hurry to get done in time, and he asks Bill if he has any other households in the Hutchinsons' family. Tessie yells that there's her daughter Eva and Eva's husband Don, and says that they should be made to take their chance, too. Mr. Summers reminds her that, as she knows, daughters draw with their husband's family. "It wasn't fair," Tessie says again.

Bill Hutchinson regretfully agrees with Mr. Summers, and says that his only other family is "the kids." Mr. Summers formally asks how many kids there are, and Bill responds that there are three: Bill Jr., Nancy, and little Davy. Mr. Graves takes the slips of paper back and puts five, including **the marked slip of paper**, in **the black box**. The others he drops on the ground, where a breeze catches them. Mrs. Hutchinson says that she thinks the ritual should be started over—it wasn't fair, as Bill didn't have enough time to choose his slip.

Mr. Summers asks if Bill Hutchinson is ready, and, with a glance at his family, Bill nods. Mr. Summers reminds the Hutchinsons that they should keep their slips folded until each person has one. He instructs Mr. Graves to help little Davy. Mr. Graves takes the boy's hand and walks with him up to **the black box**. Davy laughs as he reaches into the box. Mr. Summers tells him to take just one paper, and then asks Mr. Graves to hold it for him.

Mrs. Dunbar's impatience, Old Man Warner's pride, and Jack Watson's coming-of-age moment show how integrated the lottery is into this society. No one questions the practice, and they all arrange their lives around it. Jackson shows how difficult it is to give up a tradition when everyone else conforms to it.



Mr. Summer's casual language and camaraderie with the villagers contrast with what is at stake. Tessie's reaction is the first explicit sign of something horrifying at the heart of the lottery. She is outspoken in her anger as she was in her humor—although rather too late, and it's assumed she wouldn't argue if someone else had been chosen. Bill resignedly accepts the power of the tradition.



This passage shows the self-serving survival instinct of humans very clearly. Each person who speaks up is protecting his or her own skin, a survival instinct that Jackson shows to be natural to all the villagers, and by extension all humans. Tessie is willing to throw her daughter and son-in-law into harm's way to have a better chance of saving herself. The other women are relieved to have not been chosen—no one speaks up against the lottery until they themselves are in danger.



Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves's calm continuation of the lottery's ritual shows that they are numb to the cruelty of the proceedings. Tessie's protests imply that she doesn't see the choice of the marked slip of paper as fate or some kind of divine decree, but rather as a human failing. Perhaps she sees, too late, that the lottery is only an arbitrary ritual that continues simply because a group of people have unthinkingly decided to maintain it.



Tessie's protests have shown the reader that the outcome of the lottery will not be good. Little Davy's inclusion reinforces the cruelty of the proceedings and the coldness of its participants. Little Davy is put at risk even when he is unable to understand the rituals or to physically follow the instructions.



Nancy Hutchinson is called forward next, and her school friends watch anxiously. Bill Jr. is called, and he slips clumsily, nearly knocking over the box. Tessie gazes around angrily before snatching a slip of paper from the box. Bill selects the final slip. The crowd is silent, except for a girl who is overheard whispering that she hopes it's not Nancy. Then Old Man Warner says that the lottery isn't the way it used to be, and that people have changed.

Mr. Summers instructs the Hutchinsons to open the papers. Mr. Graves opens little Davy's and holds it up, and the crowd sighs when it is clearly blank. Nancy and Bill Jr. open theirs together and both laugh happily, as they hold up the blank slips above their heads. Mr. Summers looks at Bill, who unfolds his paper to show that it is blank. "Tessie," Mr. Summers says. Bill walks over to his wife and forces the slip of paper from her hand. It is **the marked slip of paper** with the pencil dot Mr. Summers made the night before.

Mr. Summers tells the crowd, "let's finish quickly." The villagers have forgotten several aspects of the lottery's original ritual, but they remember to use **stones** for performing the final act. There are stones in the boys' piles and some others on the ground. Mrs. Delacroix selects a large stone she can barely lift. "Hurry up," she says to Mrs. Dunbar beside her. Mrs. Dunbar gasps for breath and says that she can't run. Go ahead, she urges, "I'll catch up."

Even a dystopian society like this one doesn't exclude other aspects of human nature like youth, popularity, friendship, and selfishness. Nancy's behavior resembles that of many popular teen girls—again emphasizing the universal nature of Jackson's story. We get the sense that Old Man Warner is perpetually displeased with any kind of change to tradition—even though the omniscient narrator tells us that the "tradition" Warner is used to is very different from the original lottery.



The inhumanity of the villagers, which has been developed by repeated exposure to the lottery and the power of adhering to tradition, still has some arbitrary limits—they are at least relieved that a young child isn't the one chosen. They show no remorse for Tessie, however, no matter how well-liked she might be. Even Tessie's own children are happy to have been spared, and relieved despite their mother's fate. Jackson builds the sense of looming horror as the story approaches its close.



Mrs. Dunbar already sent her son away, perhaps to spare him having to participate in murder this year, and now she herself seems to try and avoid taking part in the lottery as well. The line about the stones makes an important point—most of the external trappings of the lottery have been lost or forgotten, but the terrible act at its heart remains. There is no real religious or practical justification for the lottery anymore—it's just a primitive murder for the sake of tradition. The use of stones also connects the ritual to Biblical punishments of "stoning" people for various sins, which then brings up the idea of the lottery's victim as a sacrifice. The idea behind most primitive human sacrifices was that something (or someone) must die in order for the crops to grow that year. This village has been established as a farming community, so it seems likely that this was the origin of the lottery. The horrifying part of the story is that the murderous tradition continues even in a seemingly modern, "normal" society.



The children pick up **stones**, and Davy Hutchinson is handed a few pebbles. Tessie Hutchinson holds out her arms desperately, saying, “it isn’t fair,” as the crowd advances toward her. A flying stone hits her on the side of her head. Old Man Warner urges everyone forward, and Steve Adams and Mrs. Graves are at the front of the crowd. “It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Tessie screams, and then the villagers overwhelm her.

By having children (even Tessie’s own son) involved in stoning Tessie, Jackson aims to show that cruelty and violence are primitive and inherent aspects of human nature—not something taught by society. Tessie’s attempts to protest until the end show the futility of a single voice standing up against the power of tradition and a majority afraid of nonconformists. Jackson ends her story with the revelation of what actually happens as a result of the lottery, and so closes on a note of both surprise and horror. The seemingly innocuous, ordinary villagers suddenly turn violent and bestial, forming a mob that kills one of their own with the most primitive weapons possible—and then seemingly going home to supper.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Champlin, Nikola. "The Lottery." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Dec 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Champlin, Nikola. "The Lottery." LitCharts LLC, December 2, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-lottery>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Lottery* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Jackson, Shirley. *The Lottery*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2005.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Jackson, Shirley. *The Lottery*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2005.