

Sarah Lambert

New Historicism

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Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" as a Response to the Hypocrisy of Capital Punishment in the
Late 1940's

Capital punishment has a long history not only in the United States but in much of the world. Though today there is still a debate, it is not as big of an issue as it was in the years following World War II. The horrible actions of Hitler and the Nazis brought to light how easily the world ignored the violence and cruelty to which the Jewish people were subjected. As a result, the United Nations drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This declaration laid out the basic rights that all human beings possess, most notably, the right to life. Capital punishment, the death penalty or execution, is paradoxical to the UDHR, and many people have and do advocate its abolishment, yet it still persists in much of the country. Executions have been carried out in many different ways: stoning, burned at the stake, hanging, firing squad, electrocution, cyanide gas, and, most recently, lethal injection. Many of these methods are considered barbaric, uncivilized, and inhuman by today's standards as well as in the 1940s, yet, once again, still persists. Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" was written and published in 1948 in *The New Yorker*. The story was ill received and many readers were outraged, appalled, or simply confused by the subject matter. When asked why she wrote the story, Jackson answered that she did it to shock and illustrate "the pointless violence and general inhumanity in [the readers'] own lives" (Friedman 64). "The Lottery" was Jackson's response

to the hypocrisy of capital punishment in the United States especially after the events of World War II.

Capital punishment, or the death penalty has been around for as long as the Eighteenth Century B.C., and it has been practiced in the United States since 1612 (“Part I”). Historically, the death penalty has been a relatively large part of the U.S justice system, and according to Patrick Shields, the U. S., along with Iran, China, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, is responsible for 80% of known state-sanctioned executions (417). Strangely enough, despite a statistic as high as that, only a fraction of those sentenced to death actually get executed. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to who gets chosen. A man might be executed after being on death row for two months, it might be 15 years, or the execution might never be carried out. This begs the question: who decides when and if they get executed?

In addition to those actually guilty of the crimes they were convicted of, there is always the possibility that someone may really be innocent. In the court case of *Herrera v. Collins* in 1993 this possibility was addressed and the Supreme Court claimed it would be a rare occurrence (“Part II”). However, “over 115 people in 25 states have been released from death row because of innocence since 1973” (“Part II”). And these are only the people who have been proved innocent, if they were wrongly convicted, then there must be more like them who have not been so fortunate. Most of these cases have happened because of new scientific breakthroughs that allow for better testing of the evidence from their cases. Not to mention all the other possible innocents who died before 1973. This may come from an extremely high percent of supporters of capital punishment. In 1936, before the events of World War II, 61% of Americans were in favor of the death penalty. Just 30 years later in 1966, as the U.S was getting progressively more

involved in Vietnam, support was at 42%, the all-time low (“Part II”). Interesting how the circumstances appear to shape the views of the public.

December 10th, 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR was a direct response to the horrors of World War II where “Hitler had shown that a country which violate human rights at home may eventually violate human rights overseas” (Suter). It is not that it is bad that the UN wanted to stop something like this from happening again, but it is their motives that are alarming. They were doing nothing while Hitler was still exclusively in Germany, and even in some other European countries, until they realized that he was not going to stop there which made it “necessary to nip such threats in the bud” (Suter). In the UDHR Preamble it is stated that Hitler’s “disregard and contempt for the human rights resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind” (“The Universal Declaration”). Everyone knows how Hitler used gas chambers, among other methods, to murder millions of innocent Jewish people, however, almost a decade before Hitler came to power, the state of Nevada introduced the use of cyanide gas and gas chambers as a method of execution (“Part I”). Could this be where Hitler got the idea?

With all this talk going around about the sacredness of life and that people “shall not be subjected to...cruel, inhuman or degrading...punishment” one would think that the first practice to go would be capital punishment (“The Universal Declaration” Article 5). But it remained. Brian Daniels takes an interesting approach on the UDHR, concentrating on the right to culture and the right to free assembly. Daniels believes that “[i]n human rights discourses, culture describes *specific* practices beliefs, and customs that have been marked for protection” (884). This argument has some serious implications, especially when applied to Jackson’s story.

In Daniels' way of thinking, according to the UDHR, the lottery in Jackson's story would be permissible, normal even since "in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery" and that "[s]ome places have already quit lotteries" (Jackson 246). This tells us that even though some are giving up the practice, other villages participate or used to participate in the same tradition. Old Man Warner says that there has always been a lottery, having survived 77 himself, again affirming tradition. However readers were alarmed by "the chilling callousness of this business-as-usual attitude on the part of the community and the willingness of the people to accept and dismiss torture-death as a common occurrence" (Friedman 65). Despite the right to free assembly Daniels writes about, he neglects to mention that these assemblies are supposed to be peaceful ("The Universal Declaration). There is no way this could ever happen, not when "modern man considers such practices barbaric and, therefore, alien to his civilized behavior" (Friedman 63). Even stranger when one considers that this ritual is most likely a sacrifice which is supposed to promote a healthy crop. Superstitious beliefs like this are much too primitive for today's civilized culture. Ironically, Old Man Warner's logic is that if the village discontinues the lottery that they will revert to living in caves as uncivilized beings.

Though we claim to be above such behavior and beliefs, Jackson reported that, among the confused and alarmed letters she received about her story, there were people who "wanted to know...where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch" (Friedman 64). The lottery is a normal event for the citizens of the village, and it would seem that it is something of an attraction for the modern day man.

Though the lottery happens every year and the people seem unnaturally fine about it, the complacency disappears when it is their head on the chopping block. Tessie Hutchinson is all for the lottery, completely willing to participate in the stoning... until she is the one who draws the

black spot. She is a mother, yet, in an effort to save her own skin, she not only does not worry about her young children who are still under her care, but she tries to get her married children, technically part of a new family, to be entered in the drawing to lessen her chances of being picked. When that does not work she cries “[i]t isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” (Jackson 249). And someone tells her to be a good sport (Jackson 247). Tessie is a complete hypocrite.

Mr. Adams, too, is a hypocrite. He was the one who brought up that other villages were no longer practicing the lottery. He is among the younger generation who are more apt to strive for change. Yet, when it comes time to stone Tessie, he is among the first to throw a stone. What is the most disturbing is how completely normal these people are. They are grocers, and mailmen, and mothers, and fathers, and teachers, and farmers. All of their names are common, plain names. They could be anybody, just like us, and “Jackson’s story illustrates society’s tendency toward violence and its tendency to hold onto tradition, even meaningless, base tradition” (Shields 114-5). Only, instead of a lottery, we have capital punishment, a seemingly barbaric and unnecessary tradition which is widely unsupported, yet it endures.

Like Old Man Warner,

[m]any people in contemporary society have preconceived ideas about capital punishment, why it is done, what purpose it serves, and to whom it is done. Many of us are guilty of accepting custom and tradition without questioning it. Many of us are socialized into this process from such a young age that it goes without examination (Shields 416).

Just like little Davy Hutchinson, Tessie’s son to whom someone gives a few stones so that he, too, may participate in the ritual. We are horrified at this scenario, but do not bat an eyelash at someone facing the death penalty because it is simply part of our culture.

Hypocrisy is thick today, but even more so in the years following World War II. Though the UDHR was not published until December of 1948 and “The Lottery” was published in June of 1948 the drafting had begun some two years earlier. This means that the central ideas of the UDHR had been floating around the general public for some time. Jackson wrote “The Lottery” to illustrate how hypocritical our society had become. Being horrified by the events of World War II, talking about the value of human life, yet still practicing the methods used by Hitler and basically ignoring the value of human life.

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