

## The Evil of System: Behind the Horror of “The Lottery”

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### Abstract

**This paper examines Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” from a moral-political perspective, analyzing the juxtaposition of horror and the ordinariness of everyday life, as well as discussing the two-layer reasons behind it: the unwitting obedience to the unexamined tradition as well as the ritualized system. It turns out that the tale’s annual lottery tradition is a carefully-woven allusion, allegorizing the procedure of established systems throughout human society, in which the banality of evil is revealed.**

### Keywords

**Shirley Jackson; The Lottery; Horror and Evil; System.**

### 1. Introduction

First published in *The New Yorker* on June 26th 1948, Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” has received numerous readers’ responses, most of which are furious at its “bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse”, as Jackson herself confesses. While only a few believe in its moral indications and other positive enlightenment. In terms of critical attitude, from the anthropological aspect, Seymour Lainoff claims that the tale is “of the primitive scapegoat rite” (1), in Brooks and Warren’s words, “human tendency to seize upon a scapegoat” (2), also pointing out the evil aspect of humans. In view of political science, it is regarded as an allegory of Islam Holocaust or Stalinism (3). Besides, feminists pay special attention the victim’s gender identity. While this paper intends to examine the horror permeates in the story and the two-fold reasons that chalk up to it, scrutinizing the evil behind the lottery system and its allegory.

### 2. Horry Effect and the Ritualized “Lottery”

The story sets in a village consists of about three hundred inhabitants, where a unanimous human-sacrifice ritual has been conducted annually. Under the cover of the seemingly benevolent and impartial “lottery”, each year after openly drawing lots, a “winner”, namely, the essentially sacrificial offering will be stoned to death by the rest of the voters in the name of the common welfare of the whole community. Arguably, the horror of the story goes beyond the blind obedience to ancient traditions, but lies in the institutionalized system of evil which still exists and prevails in the modern society.

Although the story’s initial tone is pastoral-like: the peaceful setting together with friendly neighbors and innocent kids, several ominous symbols beneath the serenity have foreshadowed the striking outcome. Some former critics claimed that such harmonious atmosphere demonstrated at the very beginning was in vivid contrast to the tragical ending, which helps to maintain certain literary effect. However, it can be argued that the mundane setting of the lottery and the fate of its “winner” should not be on the opposing sides. Instead, they intermingle with each other, making up the sum of everyday life, thus the ending does not conform to the unexpected O’ Henry’s style. It can be told by villagers’ casual, amiable attitudes and even by Mrs. Hutchinson’s insouciant excuse for being late that the lottery is no more important than her everyday household chores: “wouldn’t have me leave m’ dishes in the sink” (4). Throughout the passage, the ritualized lottery has penetrated into every corner of life,

appearing as something common, not worth wholehearted or pious participation and serious treatment. Thus its horror does not lie in its opposition or confrontation to life. On the contrary, the horror even becomes an invisible part of life itself. As a little-changed routine throughout the history, killing the winner by stoning has been enacted as a system, penetrating into villagers' daily practice and consciousness of life.

What's more, unlike traditional gothic stories which create horrifying atmosphere through the surrealistic interaction of the space and the time as well as designing apparent terror or supernatural events. In contrast with commonplace, Jackson's assignment of horror makes the readers be unaware of such intentional juxtaposition, but passively and unconsciously wait for the moment when what lurking below life's iceberg is revealed. For people are unavoidably too familiar to recognize the hideous crimes and gratuitous violence beneath the peaceful landscape, even in front of the darkest truth, they are accustomed to remain unmoved.

### 3. Behind the Horror of Everyday Life

Then, what causes the horror of ordinary life? There are at least two layers of reasons which contribute to it.

First is the villagers' unquestioning obedience to tradition. Though the lottery's origin had been forgotten, villagers retained the unexamined tradition, merely out of habit or out of certain superstitious belief rooted generations ago, which has been kept for a better agricultural harvest, for "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (4). At present, men and women, old and young, are still willing to obey it, and collocate it with other traditions: "the men gather, talking of the planting and rain, tractors and taxes"(4), showing their confirmed concerns from ancient agricultural issues to modern concepts; and those who are qualified to officiate the ceremony are people of authority, making sure the hierarchical social order is perpetuated; while the women stand by their husbands' side, firmly obeying the patriarchal disciplines...which also shows the continuity of a well-regulated community.

In this way, however, the unanimity can lead to uncontrollable outcome once the tradition is nothing but evil. Though its original intention was applicable in ancient time, it cannot be equally applied to modern society. What's more, whether it is feasible to sacrifice the few on the altar of the majority, the issue itself remains a puzzle in political philosophy, as is discussed in *Michael Sandel's Justice: what's the right thing to do* (5). While the above utilitarian concern is well demonstrated in the conduction of lottery; the reason why such horror is always well executed is also arguable. Based on the fact that each individual has the same chance of being selected and the lottery has been conducted for at least dozens of years (the latter can be deduced from the oldest man Warner's comments), it is highly possible that most families has had its members chosen as the "winner" and few households can escape from the fatal destiny.

### 4. The Silenced Conformists and The Banality of Evil

With such a doomed misfortune annually befallen around the village, how can people willingly hand down the tradition?

The answer is, according to the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "Spiral of Silence" theory, those who hold views contrary to the dominant ideas tend to keep their dissent or suspicion to themselves for fear of rejection by the public. Moreover, individuals can instinctively sense the opinions of those around them, and "shape their behavior to prevailing attitudes about what is acceptable" (6). Under the control of public opinion, people become the silent majority and dare not to speak out disapprovals. That's the very reason why Mrs. Hutchinson's objection towards the outcome is refused and her acquaintances show indifference or even excitement to her forthcoming sufferings. For the sake of the general

interests and the benefits of the majority, for the welfare of the community, the nonconformists' voice must be suffocated. Under such a circumstance, the neighborhood association and even the family affection are lost, and all the survivors are willing to identify and execute the selected one, as a way of showing their impartiality and consensus to the lottery.

It is also worth noting that, the Adams are the only persons who has questioned the lottery, apart from the victim herself. Obviously, the name "Adam" symbolizes the first person of the human race, who is created with virtues but doomed to degenerate. No wonder that his descendants with original sin will stand at the head of the line, turning into executioners without hesitation. The act of questioning itself becomes an unimportant but essential routine which ensures a seemingly fair procedure by making it open and transparent. Once objected, the dissenter has fulfilled his task of proposing a different idea. Then it is quite acceptable that the former dissenter becomes an accomplice, an executioner, or merely a weapon within public opinion's silent spiral. Once the routine has been programmed, it must have output; people within the program just need to do what is assigned. So that the predetermined system goes ahead of man's virtues. No one should be blamed, and the system ends most satisfactorily, breaking people out of the guilt, out of self-reflection upon good and evil. At the end of the story, except for the victim, everybody was happy.

That's exactly the danger of average people's blindly obeying not only the tradition, but also the established system, as is prescribed by Hannah Arendt's "The Banality of Evil", how easily for good persons to turn into unwitting mobs.

And it is essentially under the lottery of random selection and in such a civilization of paradoxical justice, all people are persecutors and victims at the same time, being haunted by hidden sins and death threats. The horror, in consequence, goes beyond the individual level, but is shared by the whole society. It's not entirely the tradition's fault, but the evil of the system. Jackson's story echo with The Salem witch hunts reflected in Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, or any other large-scale violence like genocide or racism. Therefore, the most horrible aspect of the tale is far more beyond the bloody tradition behind lottery, but people's consensus on the confusion of murder with everyday life, especially when the murdering practice, when the evil has been legitimized by different systems, of which the most obvious one is, assumably, democracy.

Elaborately wrapped with lies, the so-called bottle-up, power-sharing fairness is in essence a rationalized, top-down fraud. There is no way for lottery to realize general justice, though it has been practicing in democratic society, as well as in utopian fantasy. Like St. Thomas More's blueprint for housing lottery, which remains in fantasy; or banishing citizens by ostracism, sentencing Socrates to death, as in ancient Greece. Moreover, much the same with the lottery system in the tale: the obvious patriarchal order and hierarchical differences among candidates, as early as ancient western civilization, in Athens, people had selected officials from those eligible adult male citizens by lot; let alone variety of lottery systems in modern society, from license plate, housing, medical care to jury system. Some are reasonable, while some are completely epitomized as collective tyrannies.

That is the greatest imaginable horror of Jackson's story; That is the banality of evil within the omnipresent system around human beings.

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