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Comp II

Literary Essay Final Drafts

The Lottery and American Christianity

Religious perversion and cultish sacrifices are not exactly the first thoughts that arise when I think of small town, USA, but within the pages of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," the archaic rites of seemingly banal townspeople supersede Sunday School and Easter egg hunts. Shirley Jackson's paramount work, "The Lottery," provides a shockingly morbid realization, steamy symbolism, feminine commentary, and an allegorical view of Christianity in America's small towns. Jackson's figurative town employs a longstanding sacrificial stoning to provide the backbone for a minuscule American community; this ritual seems to provide the town with the same unification, fellowship, and authority as an active Christian church does within existent American townships. Through researching: the names of main characters, the plot's symbolic objects, the superstitious rituals, the cultural ambiance at the time of the story's publishing date, and the biography of Mrs. Jackson herself, I have come to, what I believe, was Shirley Jackson's radical theme. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is an allegory depicting the role of Christianity in American society as a spiritually murderous, unenlightened means of social control through archaic and malignant rituals.

Through dissecting Shirley Jackson's biography, I have found many reasons to explain why she would craft such an anti-religious, anti-establishment piece. Jackson was

originally born in San Francisco, California but shortly lived in New York City's Greenwich Village and later settled down in North Bennington, New Hampshire (Allen). At a young age, Jackson began a challenge to write daily, creating poetry and studying the psychology of the people around her, and while growing up, the human influence in her life was somewhat unique. Jackson's mother, Geraldine, "told fortunes, read tea leaves, and showed Jackson how to use an Ouija Board" (Hattenhauer). Also, Jackson's grandmother took religious superstition to an extreme level, as she "was a Christian Scientist who introduced Geraldine to faith healing. As a child when [Shirley] Jackson was sick, this grandmother (who lived with Jackson's family) would sneak into Jackson's room at night and whisper in her ear for hours that her fevered mind would make her well" (Hattenhauer). Jackson saw her grandmother as a deranged madwoman, and the grandmother's early role of in Jackson's life spawned her interpretation of American Christianity to be akin to the confusing and savage rituals of her crazed role models. After high school Jackson went on to study her craft at Rochester University in Rochester, New York. After her second year of enrollment, Jackson abruptly quit her schooling due to paralyzing depression; Jackson had frequent struggles with depression throughout her life (Allen). Later in her future, just before Jackson wrote "The Lottery," she and her Jewish husband Stanley Edgar Hyman relocated to the quaint town of North Bennington, New Hampshire. Life in North Bennington was as Jackson had hoped, save the anxiety inducing "small-minded" populace, who would terrorize Jackson's family with anti-Semitic activity. "Shirley's children recall a drumbeat of anti-Semitic comments directed at their father, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Ralph Ellison, a regular visitor to the Hyman household in the 1950s, described tense moments of interaction like those would be for a black man in a wholly white village. The Hymans engaged in the rituals of Little

League yet endured swastikas soaped on their windows” (Oppenheimer). Jackson’s same biographer reported that “[the] Jackson's experience with anti-Semitism probably played a role in [‘The Lottery’s’] genesis; the setting of the story during the postwar years in the shadows of the recent Holocaust only increases this likelihood. In fact Jackson is known to have admitted to a friend that ‘The Lottery’ was specifically ‘based on anti-Semitism and grew out of her encounters with one particularly prejudiced shopkeeper’ in North Bennington.” Religion, specifically Christianity, did not play a positive role in Shirley Jackson’s life, and I believe that her exposure to the rare extremes of American Christianity and its links to superstitions, bigotry, and depression that left her with eroded sympathy toward Christianity.

Jackson’s roller coaster of a personal life certainly aided her to produce the anti-religiously charged short story, but also a revolution of religious views occurring in the U.S. and throughout the world, during her prolific life, certainly catalyzed “The Lottery’s” stance on religion in small town, USA. “The Lottery” was published on June 26, 1948, and the decade leading up to the short story’s conception certainly offered anti-Christian inspiration. From 1939 to 1945, World War II raged on, taunting the ethical urge of Americans to fight for those who were suffering. Being married to a Jewish man, Jackson could easily empathize with the Jews of Europe who were ruthlessly imprisoned and slaughtered under Hitler’s regime. The fact that Hitler was a Christian certainly doesn’t warm her up to the Christian faith. Jackson’s own bouts with community anti-Semitism would have easily paralleled with the genocidal actions of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi followers. I find it plausible that Hitler’s coltish Third Reich and his Christian roots could coincide with the past experiences of Christianity that Jackson endured. After the atrocities of World War II, religion reform in the United States began to draw legal

lines between the public and private practices of Christianity. In early March 1948, the Supreme Court tried the case of *McCullum v Board of Education*. In their decision, the court banned the faculty-enforced practice of religion in public schools, vastly changing the way American children would grow up with Christianity (*McCullum*). Possibly, Jackson saw this change in the practice of American Christianity as a harbinger to write “The Lottery”. The year of 1948 was also the birthdate of modern day Israel; on May 14 the Jewish population received a sovereign state as a safe haven from anti-Semitic extremists. The magnitude of the turmoil caused solely by religious differences in Jackson’s time is astounding, and by no means did the events leading up to the publication of “The Lottery” bring Jackson to be optimistic toward American Christianity. I believe the religiously caustic global culture of the time leading up to the publication of “The Lottery” enflamed Jackson’s personal dissention with Christianity.

Shirley Jackson has a background that evades and criticizes American Christianity, but “The Lottery’s” use of faith-defying symbolism helps to illuminate the short story’s honest intent. Although there are many symbols in “The Lottery,” the foremost connections can be drawn from the names of the community’s townspeople. In the beginning of the allegory, eager boys like Bobby Martin are gathering stones; Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix gather a large pile of the roundest and smoothest stones. The meaning of Bobby’s surname lies within its origins; “Martin is a patronymic surname taken from the ancient Latin given name Martinus, derived from Mars, the Roman god of war”(Powell). The symbolism within Harry Jones’s name is minimal; his common name aids the story’s “anywhere in America” premise. Dickie Delacroix’s symbolic importance is much more religiously vivid. Delacroix literally translates to, “of-the-cross,” but the villagers pronounce Dickie’s name

“Dellacroy” insinuating the perversion of an ancient Christian event. (Nebeker). The representative juxtaposition of the god of war, a vulgarized Christian, and a run-of-the-mill American accurately foreshadow the terrible events to come in the Lottery, and comply with Jackson’s condemnation of American Christianity. Another early voice in “The Lottery” is the Adams family; their name draws a direct connection to the very first human created in the Christian religion. Adam is ancient, and the Adams family’s involvement in the lottery symbolizes the sheer age of the ritual.

Tessie Hutchinson, “The Lottery’s” newest chosen one, wields a name that holds very strong symbolism. Jackson gave Tessie the same surname as the famous Puritan founder of the colony of Rhode Island, Anne Hutchinson. Anne’s spiritual views differed from those of her ministers, and because of her beliefs, she was punished. “After a local trial banished her [Anne], she was tried before the Boston Church and formally excommunicated. The parallel between her story and Tessie’s is clear: to her, excommunication meant spiritual death just as to Tessie being cast out from the group implies death” (Schaub). Anne was a victim of the church to which she was devout, and Tessie was a victim of the ritual in which she participated. This connection illuminates, through the parallelism of American religious history, “The Lottery’s” anti-Christian viewpoint.

Jackson’s complex literary skill certainly imbued allegoric detail into “The Lottery” through the loaded monikers of villagers, but another unmistakable symbolic contribution to the subliminal anti-Christian work comes from the mysterious objects used in the story’s plot. The winner of the lottery is met with a morbidly painful fate, execution by means of stoning. Why would a modern (at the time of publication) execution use the ancient and

inhumane means of stoning rather than a firing squad, lethal injection, electric chair, or hanging? The answer is simple: What is happening to Tessie isn't an execution; it is a religious sacrifice, and stoning is used in biblical times to kill or sacrifice a person without placing the burden of murder on one single person. The stones symbolize the archaic, vulgar, and long-standing ritualistic ways of the villagers and also they speak to Jackson's belief in the intimidatory purpose of Christianity in American society.

The black box that contains the ballots and the three-legged stool it sits upon also allude to the origins of "The Lottery's" purpose. Mr. Summers, the man in charge of organizing the lottery and periodically safeguarding the black box, plays an ironically dark role. His coal mines connect him to the depths of hell, from which the black mark on the winner's slip of paper is derived. The old, black, and wooden box acts as a trifecta of symbolism: its age and poor condition show the vast history of the ritual, its black color screams its deadly purpose, and its wooden build illustrates its fundamental purpose. Aged, dire, and deadly, the black box is the physical incarnation of the lottery's vices, yet this condemned cube acts as the town's alter. This evil container rests upon a stool with three legs. The stool is a symbol of support of, or strength in, the lottery, and the three legs that compose the stool outline a very symbolic Christian grounding. The holy trinity, the very powers of the Christian religion, is supporting the black box. Jackson symbolically, yet intentionally, says the Christian faith is holding up this town's celebration of martyrdom, the church is the gallows. Jackson comes to a grim conclusion: She is unmistakably degrading the practices and foundation of American Christianity.

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is an allegory depicting the role of Christianity in American society as a spiritually murderous, unenlightened means of social

control through archaic and malignant rituals. Jackson's biography and cultural atmosphere cooperatively shaped her view of Christianity. The consistent employment of religious and biblical symbolism, as it is compared to a sacrificial stoning in an average small town, illustrates Jackson's major premise in "The Lottery." In the last moments of Tessie's life, her neighbors, her friends, her husband, and even her youngest child willingly accept their annual responsibility, even though it entails pelting a woman, a neighbor, a friend, a wife, and a mother with the crimson-stained stones of martyrdom. This crucifixion is the omnipotent and final connection of Jackson's anti-Christian theme; Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," is her criticism on, what she believes, is the logically dry, zealous following of the timeworn and asinine superstitions which constitute American Christianity.

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