

Subservient or Stoned: The Role of Women in “The Lottery”

Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” is an examination of a society’s capability for casual, unexamined violence, and the underlying machinations that allow that kind of callousness to exist. On the surface, “The Lottery” is about a yearly event that occurs on the 27th of June across several communities of varying size, during which one member of society is chosen at random to be sacrificed – stoned to death by the rest of the community. Embedded within this society are deeply patriarchal values, the system upon which the lottery was built. By examining the female characters in this story, it becomes glaringly obvious that not only are they bound by archaic traditions, but they are also bound by the system their society is built on, unable to effect change even if they wanted to.

The patriarchal values of this society are revealed as the village people gather for the lottery drawing. Beginning with the children who “assembled first, of course,” they congregate in groups according to gender: the little boys gather stones, the girls stand to the side, “talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys” (Jackson 262). Even as young children, though they are separated, the girls focus on the boys as the boys remain oblivious to them. It is important to note the nature of their roles: the boys are active while the girls are passive. This will be seen later on in the adults’ actions (or lack thereof) as well, with the boys taking an active role in carrying out the lottery, whereas the girls stand to the side, present and witnessing but only actually participating after the decision has been made by the males.

When the adults start to arrive, it is clear that the children have learned their respective roles from their parents and other authority figures. The adults gather in the same way, first the men, and then the women, “wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk” (262). The modifier “house” in conjunction with their clothing is important to note,

relegating the women to spending their time and working in the home. This is also contrast to the only mention of a man's clothing, Mr. Summers "in his clean white shirt and blue jeans" (264). It's a subtle point, but it shows how even the men's clothing receives more attention and care than the women's, his being crisp when the women's clothes are faded.

Their topics of conversation also reveal the deeply ingrained attitudes and expectations. The men "speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes" are presented as reserved and serious, while the women "greeted each other and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands" (262). Even the women's conversation is less substantial than the men. Like the girls, the women's conversation is presented in relation to the men, as if their orientation is always tied to their husbands. The group of girls stands near the boys and watches them, and the group of women talk briefly but only in passing on the way to their men. If not in the home, the place of the women is "after" the men, neither arriving with them or before them, but always focused on and centered around the men.

The disparity between men and women ramps up with the approach of the lottery drawing.

"Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother." (262)

It's clear that while the women are supposed to wrangle the children, in charge of them as mothers and homemakers, it is the men who hold the real power, only having to call once to elicit obedience. A man's voice, therefore, holds much more sway in this society, a woman's

only has 25% of that authority at best. The men who talk of business *mean* business, and the children know better than to ignore them.

The proceedings of the lottery take this power discrepancy a step further. First, the men draw for the families to determine which family will draw again as individuals. If a family lacks a man to draw, the responsibility goes to the oldest son if he is of age. When one boy steps forward to do so for the Watson family, “several voices in the crowd said things like ‘Good fellow, Jack,’ and ‘Glad to see your mother’s got a man to do it’” (265). If the eldest son is not of age, only then does it revert to the woman. This is the case for the Dunbar family, when Janey Dunbar (the only other woman with a known first name) draws in place of her husband, Clyde, who is home with a broken leg, and her son, Horace, who is “not but sixteen yet” (264). Even though Janey steps up to take over for her family, she does so “regretfully” (264) if not “steadily” (265), and despite the crowd’s encouragement, it seems almost a shameful thing for a woman to be participating in this part.

It has been suggested that both of these families are singled out like this because they have been victims of the lottery in past years. At the end of the story when Mrs. Delacroix is hurrying Mrs. Dunbar to get in on the actions, Mrs. Dunbar replies, “I can’t run at all. You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up with you” (268). In Helen E. Nebeker’s article, she contends, “But we may believe that she will not. Marked by the loss of her son, she may still be a victim but she will not be a perpetrator. Herein lies the only humane hope raised in the story” (105). I would like to agree with this suggestion, with the addition that while all of those who’ve lost family members are victims of the system, it is especially the women who are the victims of circumstance, bound as they are by the patriarchy. Mrs. Dunbar’s resistance to joining the ritual isn’t explicit, however, and it could just as easily be argued that because she *is* a victim of the

system, the “small stones in both [of her] hands” are pretty damning evidence that she will still be a participant (Jackson 268).

In the same vein of traditional thinking Mr. Summers reiterates, “Daughters draw with the husband’s families” (267). Even though it may seem antiquated by modern standards, there is still precedent for it. Brides are still “given away” by their fathers at weddings, and in certain religious settings, wives are expected to be submissive to the authority of their husbands. Countless sermons have been preached on these issues, and some would see wisdom in this lottery system’s dependence on men. One pastor recently railed against those that promote women’s rights, longing to return to “old fashioned” practices:

“What do you think they mean when they say women’s rights? You know what they mean? The right to divorce your husband, is what they mean . . . The right to rebel and disobey your husband, the right to divorce him, the right to go out and get a job and make your own money, the right to tell him what to do, the right to go vote for our leaders as if women should have any say in how our country is run, when the Bible says that, ‘I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence.’ I am quoting the Bible right now. But it’s ‘old-fashioned.’” (Anderson)

His misogynistic litany – though not necessarily the most common sentiment among Christian churches, it isn’t *uncommon* either – embodies exactly the patriarchal society depicted in “The Lottery”: a woman should be obedient and silent, especially when it comes to anything of substance, admitting and adhering to man’s ultimate authority over her.

While the men are still choosing papers out of the box for their families, there are quiet murmurs of the possibility of dissent. Steve Adams and his wife (whose first name is never

revealed) mention the rumors of change to Old Man Warner. It's interesting to consider the importance of Steve Adams's name, since Biblically Adam was the first man, and Stephen is considered the first martyr of the Christian faith. Steve says, "... over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery" (Jackson 266). The immediate response? "Old Man Warner snorted" (266). Warner represents the longevity of the tradition, the established community mindset, and the unwillingness to examine why (or even if) the proceedings of the day are still relevant and necessary. He bemoans the "young folks" and their ungrateful attitudes, their lack of respect for the archaic traditions. "'There's *always* been a lottery,' he added petulantly" (266). But still, Mrs. Adams presses, "Some places have already quit lotteries" (266). But Old Man Warner will not be swayed. Remarkably, when the stoning of Tessie Hutchinson begins, Steve Adams is right up in front with Mr. Graves. It seems as though he could have possibly been a voice for change, and yet he is still at the forefront of the crowd and perpetuating the ritual and the patriarchy's control. Mrs. Adams' place, tellingly, isn't mentioned. Her apparent desire to stop this is irrelevant in the face of the violence, and the men – young and old – override her without incident.

It's relatively safe to assume, however, that Mrs. Adams is indeed throwing stones with the rest of them. In one of the most shocking images of the story, Mrs. Delacroix – who was so friendly and warm to Tessie in the beginning – now chooses "a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands," and urges Mrs. Dunbar to hurry and join them (268). Even if Mrs. Adams has some reservations about the necessity of the lottery anymore, that doesn't stop her from following the rules that are so deep-rooted. After all, it has been clearly seen throughout the story that wives will follow the lead of their husbands. If Steve Adams is throwing stones, then surely his wife is throwing stones too.

Tessie Hutchinson, to a point, represents the opposite of that kind of subservience. Or maybe better yet, she is a representation of the futility of trying to oppose the patriarchal system in this story. From the time she is introduced in the story onward, Tessie doesn't quite fit the standard expected of her in that society. She rushes up to the crowd that has already gathered, confessing to Mrs. Delacroix, "Clean forgot what day it was" (264). She is hurried and disheveled, "her sweater thrown over her shoulders" and still wearing her apron (264). The crowd doesn't appear angry at her tardiness, but instead they seem to expect it. Quite possibly this is a behavior pattern for Tessie. As she moves through the crowd to her husband, several people make good-natured remarks like, "Here comes your Missus, Hutchinson," and "Bill, she made it after all" (264). When Mr. Summers notes her arrival, Tessie has the audacity to respond aloud in front of the whole crowd, "Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?" (264). It should come as no surprise that a woman who would so openly flaunt the conventions of society and cause such a disruption to the proceedings would be the one singled out for punishment – even if the lottery itself is determined randomly. Even under the pretense of fairness and chance, the system will work against those who defy it, silencing those who dare to speak out against it.

With this in mind, Tessie's fate should not come as a surprise because of the obvious allusion to Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan woman exiled for Antinomian heresy (and whose husband was named William). Anne garnered the admiration and ire of fellow members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s. Her skills as a midwife were both highly sought-after and warned against, as were the Bible studies she taught in her home each week. Originally intended for women wanting to learn more outside of the church, the intelligence and enthusiasm evident in Anne's teaching began to draw men to also attend. Edwin Austin Abby's illustration

“Trial of Mrs. Hutchinson” is an accurate representation of the men in authority that Anne stood

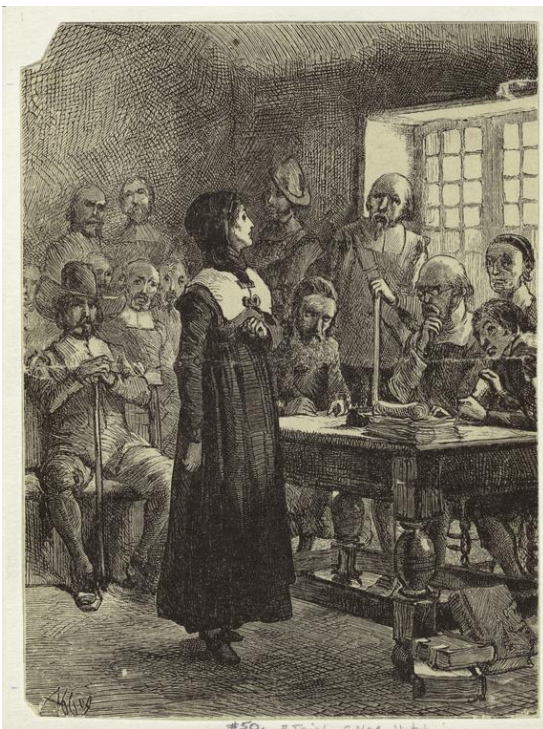


Figure 1. Illustration of Anne Hutchinson's trial by Edwin Austin Abbey, 1876-1881.

up against. The lone female in a room full of men, Anne holds herself as more upright in posture and confidence, despite their desire to beat her down into the meek woman she “ought” to have been by their standards. Lyle Koehler explains that she incurred her opponents’ wrath:

“ . . . because none of these men threatened the power and status structure of society in the concrete way that Anne Hutchinson did. Anne was clearly not, as the ministers might have wished, a submissive quiet dove, content to labor simply in the kitchen and the childbed. She was witty,

aggressive, and intellectual . . . Perceiving her as a threat to the family, the state, the religion, and the status hierarchy, the Puritan authorities directed their antagonism against Anne's character and her sex.” (78)

Since Anne did not conform to the traditions and expectations of her society, she was literally cast out by it, exiled find another place to live where she could no longer disrupt their way of life.

The fate of Tessie Hutchinson is, in some ways, much more horrific, but based in the same ignorance and desire for blind obedience over justice. The similarities between the two Hutchinson women are too glaring to be ignored. It is important to consider, however, that there is no indication that Tessie’s cries against the old-fashioned system are born out of a genuine

desire to change it. It is only after her family is chosen that she starts to dissent, wishing to push it off on someone else – even, appallingly, her own daughter with her new family. Even though Tessie is correct in questioning the validity of the ritual, she does so out of selfishness rather than righteousness. If it had been any other family to “win” the lottery, it can easily be surmised that Tessie would be following along as usual, throwing stones at the victim and following just as uncritically as the others.

“The Lottery” is a feminist text, a critique of patriarchal societies and those that encourage blind adherence. By presenting this story in such a detached, unemotional tone, the reader is able to view this society from the outside, almost like an anthropologist examining an unfamiliar culture. But while an objective anthropologist would pass no judgment on whether the actions of a culture are right or wrong, the reader must shed their objectivity and feel outrage and disgust at the injustices perpetrated by the village community so deeply imbued with patriarchal values and power structures at the heart of this story. This isn’t such a foreign culture after all, and the reader cannot ignore the similarities to modern society. Though over time there were exceptions made to the long-standing traditions in the village, like using paper slips instead of wood chips as the vehicle for determining the individual to be sacrificed, the major parts of the ritual remain unchanged and unexamined. The role of women in this society is shown through their clothing, what they say and don’t say, and what power their words hold over other people. Even though some characters’ actions might be glimpses of unrest and dissension (The Adams couple’s comments, Mrs. Dunbar’s ambiguous rock-throwing, and Tessie’s outrage), none of it is enough to make any real changes in the village. They are still completely at the mercy of the lottery and the patriarchy that perpetuates it. By understanding the underlying system in “The Lottery” and the implications of falling into the same patterns in modern society, the reader

cannot help but see that Tessie Hutchinson's screams – "It isn't fair, it isn't right!" (269) – are sobering as they are accurate.

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