



Ironies in *The Lottery*

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Abstract

Shirley Jackson is a prestigious writer in the twentieth century. Different from other female writers who are romantic and tender, and who tend to convince readers with soft words and mild tones, she writes stories which are often violent and bloody. She is willing to shock readers with impressive and unforgettable scenes, and she likes to use ironic pictures to insinuate her criticisms. The short story, "The Lottery" is a typical example of her use of irony. Previous researches on the story have mainly focused on people in the village who are bound by tradition or on the analysis of South America in the light of cultural study. This paper intends to analyze the story from the angle of the use of irony in the story, through which the author artfully punches on the indifferent people, capitalism, and religion.

Key words: Shirley Jackson; The lottery; Ironies and ironic figures

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Shirley Jackson (December 14, 1916 – August 8, 1965), a famous American writer in her time, is well-known for a number of wonderful stories including "The Road through the Wall", "Hangsamen", "The Bird's Nest" and so on. "The Lottery", the title story of the anthology *The Lottery and Other Stories*, is the most eminent. This story was first published on June 26th, 1948 in *New Yorker*. At the beginning, readers' first responses to the story were negative to the degree that many subscribers

even canceled their subscription of the magazine. In her biography of Jackson, Lenemaja Friedman reports that when the story is published "no New Yorker story had ever received" a similar response by readers, hundreds of whom send letters that are marred by "bewilderment, speculation, and old-fashioned abuse" (Friedman, p. 63). Kyla Ward also notes that "The New Yorker was besieged with letters" for weeks afterwards, some protesting about the "violent and pointless story, some praising the brilliant moral allegory, but most demanding to know what it meant" (Ward). The story is even banned in the Union of South Africa, a fact which made Jackson proud instead of discouraged, because she was happy to know people there had grasped the essence of the story. With the elapse of the time, the story finally was recognized as a classic of American short fiction, attracting many critics and even producers who adapted it into films. It has also been taught in middle schools and high schools for decades.

Most of Jackson's works are set in a small town in South America. In the guise of a pastoral beginning, her stories usually end in vicious scenes. According to Stanley Edgar Hyman, "the darker aspects of Jackson's works were not, as some critics claimed, the product of 'personal, even neurotic, fantasies', but that Jackson intended, as 'a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the Bomb', to mirror humanity's Cold War-era fears." Like many writers, Jackson uses many figures of speech including symbolism, parody, and allusion and so on. Irony, in particular, is an indispensable part of her work. She uses ironies and ironic figures in many works, not just for enhancing pleasure, but rather for higher artistic purposes. While delighting readers, they force them to probe the profound, often unpleasant truth in comic scenes, situations marked by mock seriousness.

"The lottery" is set in a small town, where people enjoy a peaceful life all the year except one day, the twenty-seventh, when the villagers assemble to perform

a rite which has a long history. The outcome of the rite is to decide who will be stoned to death by the people in village; a horrible result which does not appear until you finish the story. The author skillfully holds your attention, and builds up suspense, using irony when she has a chance. The ironies and ironic figures in the work help the author to weave the story and sustain the readers' attraction as well as convey her sharp criticisms.

By careful reading one may identify five cases of ironies and four ironic figures, each of them playing a positive role in animating the work and bearing the author's criticism. The five ironic cases are the irony about the title, the irony about the weather, the irony about the lunch, the irony about the fairness, and the irony about the stone. The four ironic figures are Mrs. Hutchinson, Mrs. Delacroix Mr. Summers and Mr. Adams. They are ironic in various ways and to diverse effects.

1. FIVE CASES OF IRONIES

There are five cases of ironies in the paper, which play a vital role in delivering author's sarcasm. What's more, by the comparison between our presupposed ideas of the images and their meanings in the work, the author succeeds in creating a sharp contrast helping her to shock readers and making them to meditate over the reality.

1.1 The Title

We know the lottery is about winning money. Stories abound in newspapers and on TV about windfalls from lottery: a citizen in Huston wins five million dollars; a peasant in Anhui gets one hundred thousand dollars after having bought the same number for ten years. Such news keeps impinging on our ears that we begin to think that you may be such a lucky dog for all you know -- this is what comes to our mind when we read the title. However, as we read on, we become confused. The story evolves in a way totally different from our perception: the lottery here is not about millions of money; it is about death. The winner of the lottery actually is the most pitiful loser. Instead of winning countless money, she loses sympathy of friends and family members. Instead of ameliorating life quality, she loses her valuable life. By using the auspicious title, the author succeeds in creating suspense and catching the readers' attention. What is more, by creating a contrast between the readers' anticipation and the outcome of the story, the author gives artistic appeal to the work. That is the effect of the sharp irony between propitious lottery and dark death.

1.2 The Weather

At the very beginning of the story, there is the sentence "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." (Jackson, p. 34). Obviously, it is very agreeable weather.

On a day like this, we can bathe in the warm sunshine; we can smell the fragrance of blooming flowers; we can go picnicking and so on and so forth. The pastoral atmosphere rouses many delightful associations save the sinister lynch. However, what you do not expect is exactly what happens before your eyes. Can you ever imagine what the people in the village execute on this day? They perform a traditional ritual which is acceptable on the condition that the ritual is propitious. But it is so? Certainly not, they implement the most horrible and cruel lynch. They stone someone to death in this wonderful weather. From the villatic beginning to the cruel ending, there is an evident irony.

1.3 The Lunch

The last sentence of the first paragraph tells us, in a cool matter-of-fact tone, that "the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner." (Jackson, p. 34). This shows that people in the town are nonchalant to what happens during the ritual. They regard the killing as a small incident which cannot delay their lunch or disturb their daily activities. Can they enjoy lunch when they have just killed some innocent fellow villager? How can people eat with bloody hands? The only plausible explanation is that people are accustomed to this routine. Their hearts are crusted. They are indifferent, or even worse, they are mechanized by the antique tradition. They live by an inhuman formula: we cannot have lunch until we kill someone on that particular day. Moreover, in order to complete the lottery in time, countless villagers hope to accelerate the progress. Mrs. Dunbar said "I wish they'd hurry." Mr. Summers said, "Let's finish quickly" Mrs. Delacroix said "hurry up" (Jackson, pp. 37, 39) Food, according to its nature, is the provider of our energy and saver of our life, but in the story the food turns into the catalyst of slaying.

1.4 Fairness

People usually think drawing lots is a fair way to deal with inconclusive matters. But why does Mrs. Hutchinson shout "it isn't fair?" (Jackson, p. 40). Simply because "Mr. Summers did not give him sufficient time to take the paper he wanted"? (Jackson, p. 38). Definitely not. Now, let us do a simple arithmetic. From the article, we know there are at least 300 people in the village, so there are 300 pieces of paper with only one marked. So for the first villager to draw lots, the rate of getting this marked paper is 1/300. But with more and more people taking their chance and the number of papers decreasing, the rate of getting the marked one proportionally increases. So, according to this law, the first one to draw lots is the luckiest. As they arrange the sequence in alphabetical order, Adams is the most favored one, while for people whose initial letter ranks at the back, this process is unfair. However, in the process, none knows who has got the

damned paper, for none is permitted to open the paper during the procedure. So the mental stress for everyone is equal. What's more, the ballot is held in the open and witnessed by all the villagers. No one gets partial treatment. In short, the whole process seems fair and just. Then why does Mrs. Hutchinson shout hysterically at the last moment? Because she finally grasps the essence of the rite: it is not a matter of fairness, but a matter of right. The process is fair, but not right. How can they kill an innocent neighbor without justice? How can they treat a life in such a cursory way? How can they abide by a ridiculous tradition with heart and soul? Ironically, although Mrs. Hutchinson sees the nature of the whole thing, for lack of an ability to tell fairness for justice, she uses a wrong word "fair" to express her right understanding.

1.5 The Unforgettable Use of Stones

"Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones." (Jackson, p. 39). The sentence demonstrates that people in the town do not care about the ritual, nor do they care about the box, but they do attach great importance to the tool of killing. In other words, they may forget everything except the function of stones. We know the people in the town are traditional. How could traditional men forget tradition? In my opinion, the author wants to say that now people value pleasure more than tradition. The stones can bring them fun and excitement, but the ritual is long and tedious which makes them bored. The deadly irony of traditional people ignoring, by their intuitive choice, part of the tradition is scathing criticism of human nature.

2. IRONIC FIGURES

Then, there are the four negative figures which embody the author's criticism of the apathetic masses, capitalism, and religion.

2.1 Mrs. Hutchinson

In my view, Mrs. Hutchinson is the most lamentable figure in the story. Notice her first appearance in the story: "Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders." (Jackson, pp. 35-6). The words "hurriedly" and "sweater thrown over her shoulders" demonstrate that she is hastening to the place where the horrible ritual is proceeding. She walks so fast that she breaks out sweats. That is why she throws sweater over her shoulders. What she says in the following lines prove this opinion. "Then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running." (Jackson, p. 36). What is more, "she dried her hands on her apron" (Jackson, p. 36) upon arriving. We are told later that she is washing dishes when she realizes the date and runs to the place. On the way, she does not want to spare even one second to dry her hands. She sets all her mind on

reaching the place of the ritual on time. If we don't know what the real meaning of the ritual is, we may think she is a pious woman, because she tries her best to attend the ritual. Finally, she reaches the square in time. So she is in a good mood and she chats with people around as well as plays jokes with Mr. Summers. "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?'" (Jackson, p. 36). All these descriptions show that Mrs. Hutchinson is eager to be there and is happy there.

Then the lottery begins. The head of each family draws his paper quietly and the crowd is silent except Mrs. Hutchinson. When her husband goes forward to draw, she roots for him. "Get up there, Bill." (Jackson, p. 37). Her encouragement rouses laughter. The author uses concise language to depict a vivid image of Mrs. Hutchinson, who is particularly protrusive among the quiet rest. From the picture, we know that Mrs. Hutchinson really likes the ritual. She enjoys herself there. However, what is the outcome? It is she who will be stoned to death. When the result of the lottery is announced, her earlier easiness and peacefulness passes away. She shouts to Mr. Summers. She loses her mind to the degree that she even wants to pull her daughters down in the second round of the lot which can amplify the rate of her survival. "There is Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled, "Make them take their chance!" (Jackson, p. 38). As a result, it is not surprise to read that when her children are safe, they are "both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads." (Jackson, p. 39). At that time, it does not occur to them that if they are safe, their mother is definitely in danger. But since she is a selfish mother, how can we expect her children to be unselfish? From her previous comfortable and enjoyable attitude to her later restlessness and phobia, what a bitter irony is implied. At first, she wants to be a bystander to gloat over the cruel show, but she turns out to be its unfortunate protagonist. When we connect her preceding hurry with the final consequence, can we not say that Mrs. Hutchinson hurried to her death? In addition, the author insinuates Mrs. Hutchinson's doom at the very beginning. "she tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way....." (Jackson, p. 36). By depicting this ironic figure, the author seems to give a resonant warning to the one, who wants to derive pleasure from others' sadness; who wants to be a bystander enjoying an uninterested performance; who keeps hands away from unfortunate people. Thus her lugubrious outcome seems retribution.

2.2 Mrs. Delacroix

There is nothing wrong about this figure in the former part of the story. She has a good relationship with Mrs. Hutchinson. "They both laughed softly." (Jackson, p. 36).

"She held her breath while her husband went forward to draw." (Jackson, p. 37). This shows that she is very nervous and cares about her husband and her family. But when the news that Mrs. Hutchinson is going to be stoned to death is announced, her dark side emerges. "She selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. 'Come on,' she said. 'Hurry up'." (Jackson, p. 39). What is worse, she is not satisfied with her own cruel act; she even urges others to hurry to be her accomplices. This figure exposes the human evil. Having been debunked the hypocritical mask, man is nonchalant to his fellow creature's suffering and death.

2.3 Mr. Summers

Mr. Summers, appears 53 times in the story. Mr. Summers seems to us a man of importance. He conducts square dances, the teenage club, and the Halloween program, as well as the lottery. The night before the lottery, it is Mr. Summers who makes up the slips of paper and puts them in the box, and it is taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until he is ready to take it to the square. It is Mr. Summers who stirs up the papers inside it and declares the lottery open. No one dares to open the paper until Mr. Summers permits, etc.. By all these description, one may conclude that the author puts this figure in the limelight. But we also find the author depicts this figure in many ways to show her contempt instead of respect. To me, Mr. Summers is incarnation of capitalism and he is a twisted man. It is true that Mr. Summers enjoys a high status in the village. He runs a coal business, and is rich. He is the representative of aggressive capitalism in the village. He is a jovial man who wears a clean white shirt and blue jeans, while the villagers put on faded house dresses and sweaters. As an embodiment of the rising class, he inevitably has conflicts with the backward villagers. He fights alone against tradition. Sometimes he succeeds, sometimes fails. He manages to make villagers to use paper, but fails to replace the old box. "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." (Jackson, p. 35). However, it is capitalism that deprives him of human feelings and makes him a target of ridicule by the author. Rapidity and efficiency are his beliefs. For example, during the lottery, he cannot help asking people to be quick. And then Mr. Summers said "Guess we better get started, get this over with, so we can go back to work." (Jackson, p. 36). "That was done pretty fast, and now we have got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." (Jackson, p. 38). "Let us finish quickly." (Jackson, p. 39). During the lot casting, he does not care about people's uneasiness, nor does he mind who will be stoned to death. The only thing that lingers on in his mind is work and punctuality. In order to make the process of lottery more

efficient, he succeeds in persuading the villagers to use paper instead of wood. All these cast in bold relief a cold man who is totally commercialized, one who has abundant money, but is impoverished in spirit. The author's words can vindicate this view: "people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold" (Jackson, p. 34). With no children and a termagant wife, Mr. Summers lives in an oasis of money but a desert of human emotion. He is a grotesque who never knows the feeling of loving and being loved. When he lacks of spiritual happiness, he has no choice but to indulge in mundane pleasures even though they are evil. During the process, he makes fun of Mrs. Hutchinson and others to the extent that old Warner cannot bear it any more, saying "bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody" (Jackson, p. 37). Mr. Summers is like a robot who improves the productivity, abides by the disciplines, owns great power, but is made of cold iron and steel instead of warm flesh and blood.

2.4 Mr. Adams

The name reminds of the one who is dispelled by God from the Garden of Eden. Obviously, the author deliberately chooses the name. Adam is the first man in the world and the ancestor of human beings. In the story, Adams is the first one to draw. In my impression, father is kind to his children. Paternal love knows no bounds. Mr. Adams appears to be so. It is he who firstly speaks of someplace that has abandoned the horrid practice. During the process of the lottery, he has a hot discussion with Old Man Warner. "They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery." (Jackson, p. 37). It is some relief that finally there is a positive figure in the story. Like Adam who in pursuit of knowledge will spurn the comfortable Eden, he in pursuit of justice will desert the inhumane practice. He dislikes the bloody rite and tries to dissuade the oldest man Warner in the town, who is the symbol of tradition. If he succeeds in his attempt, the root of evil will be shaken. As his name suggests it seems he is the right person to do so. However, when the lottery is over and he realizes that he has passed the torture safely, his real temperament emerges which is unpleasant to look at. He does not care about whether they should get rid of the lottery any more. He no longer discusses it with the Older Man. On the contrary, he "was in the front of the crowd of villagers." (Jackson, p. 39). Matching his turn to draw lots, Adams is the first one in the queue to throw stones. Ironically, if the original Adam leads his followers to hew out a brand-new world at the sacrifice of carefree life – in order to fulfill his mission he are audacious enough to defy authority, while his counterfeit in the story obeying cowardly the sinister law guides his people to commit terrible sin.

CONCLUSION

Although Jackson is inflicted by readers' doubts and misunderstandings, even her own mother scolded her, "Dad and I did not care at all for your story in *The New Yorker*," she wrote sternly; "it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up", she is not destroyed. Sensitive to the realistic problems, she shoulders the responsibility to awaken the masses with an aid of artistic techniques. Her mastery of irony enables her to criticize the targets without open confrontation. Her use of irony, besides the improvement of delight, can create tantalizing suspense and sharp contrasts. The tantalizing suspense tempts reader to peruse, to dig out implied details and allusions. The sharp contrasts comminute reader's previous expectations and amplify the strength of the unexpected outcome, which rouse readers' further reflections. What is more, by depicting the four ironic figures, Jackson completes her criticisms, on indifferent mankind, on capitalism and on religion. Mrs. Hutchinson and Mrs. Delacroix are representatives of nonchalant masses. To this kind of people, Jackson gives them an unforgettable scene: the death of Mrs. Hutchinson. Through this bloody scene, Jackson wishes to awake those who are callous to other's tragedy. If you want to derive happiness from other's affliction; if you lost your sense of sympathy, you are not entitled to live in the world. In her response to readers' queries, Shirley Jackson wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (July 22, 1948): "explaining just what I had hoped the story to say is very difficult. I suppose[d] I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives." Mr. Summers is a typical entrepreneur who advocates efficiency and values celerity. To this sort of commercialized men, Jackson pities rather than envies. Although they are rich in material, they are terribly in want of spiritual happiness. Only depending on wealth, none can lead an enviable life. Mutual love and mutual communication are indispensable

part of life. If you are lack of them, people feel sorry for you instead of being jealousy of you. To those who want to make a dust in the world; who are eager to engrave their name on history books; who are immersed in building an empire, Jackson throws a cold water on them by this figure. Last but not least, perhaps, in the story, we cannot make conclusion that author criticizes religion. But there are some trails. Adam, the father of human being, is also the leader in killing. This is not a coincidence. Jackson is conscious of arranging this plot. Born in South America, Jackson is very conservative. However, what she experiences and what she believes are on the contrary. At that time, concentration camp in Germany; atomic bomb in Japan; the first afterwar economy crisis in American, all of these social issues force Jackson to ponder over where the virtues hide? Being pessimistic about human's atonement, she portrays Adams, the incarnation of our father, who should have led us forward, continues guiding us backward.

NOTES

All quotations from the story are from *Selected Readings in American Literature* which is an exclusive reading material. Readers who have interest in the story can buy *The Lottery and Other Stories* written by Shirley Jackson.

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