The Lottery: Analysis Of Human Nature

Shirley Jackson’s short story The Lottery examines the inconsistent nature of human reaction and reasoning, and how it is used to justify and even incite immoral intent and actions against the ‘other’. Jackson’s representation of tradition as a means to normalise and instigate violence, criticises the human capacity for the inhumane when it is permitted by unjustified tradition and endorsed by the pack mentality which eliminates individual accountability. Through the text, Jackson condemns the illogical reasoning of violence and war, and simultaneously indicts the paradoxical process which removes oneself from blame through aligning with the majority.

The Lottery is an exploration of the separation and juxtaposition of morality and the unwritten law practiced and upheld by society, specifically in this case, tradition. Jackson’s idyllic setting of a small rural village engaging in the communal experience of gathering for an annual lottery doesn’t send any obvious red flags to the reader. Even as the narrator explains that the participants of the lottery have long forgotten most of the original customs, and are unaware of the original purpose of the event, it still seems like a plausible occurrence. Jackson then clues the reader into the true nature of the event and instils a sense of unease through dissonant lines of foreshadowing such as the villagers keeping a distance and hesitating to approach the box, as well as drawing their slips ‘humorously and nervously’. This juxtaposes the expected behaviour of an excited crowd, and builds tension up to the last few lines, wherein the secret is revealed and a seemingly serene, pleasant story turns dark and violent. Through this twist, Jackson condemns the justification of practices solely through the name of tradition. Interestingly, there exists the philosophical idea of the principle of sufficient reasoning, which states that nothing can occur, or can be allowed to occur without sufficient reasoning. This creates a paradox within the human condition, as such practices and traditions, a few of which include misogyny, racism and homophobia, have simply no reasoning behind their continued existence in the modern society, other than that they have simply once been regarded as truth, which surely cannot stand as sufficient reasoning to engage in immoral acts. Within Jackson’s diegetic world, the villagers seemingly ignore this principle, conducting the tradition without much reason other than that it is tradition, however fail to embody the intrinsic nature of human curiosity and question it when Tessie, the unlucky victim, argues her case. The Lottery therefore comments on the complex nature of human reasoning towards immoral practices justified paradoxically, by the means of tradition through the grisly tale of the public stoning of an innocent woman, who spoke out against such an inhumane practice.

Jackson further criticises humanity’s fickle nature when it comes to committing and justifying acts of violence through the mob mentality. Tessie is portrayed as the ‘other’ party, one of first indifference to the practice, then of disapproval. Her late arrival to such a seemingly important event, and further protests set her out from the crowd both metaphorically, and literally. Though she is greeted as a friend by the other villagers, and even has kids and a husband amongst them, all of them are incredibly quick to turn on her when the lottery is drawn. Jackson states that “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones.' The only thing that has remained consistent to this tradition is the violence, which perhaps, gives us some indication of the villagers' priorities, and humanity’s intrinsic nature. The Lottery was written and published in 1948, and thus is often taken as a

comment on the nature of war, specifically ww2, and how humanity justifies such mass destruction through the simple reason of ‘others are doing it so we get to do it’. Jackson’s work examines the human capacity for violence when justified by the majority. Perhaps if one individual person had committed such a murder, in the same way in which the lottery was performed, they would’ve been branded a criminal, and the blame would rest solely on their shoulders. However, as Tessie stands as the individual against the vast majority, and thus, as no one individual is responsible, the blame of her crime is pretty much absolved immediately. This pack mentality dangerously feeds the so called Freudian ‘death instinct’, which states that a fundamental part of human nature is the desire to behave in a violent and often self-destructive manner. Individually, in most cases, avoidance of guilt would be far stronger than this instinct, however within a mob mentality, one’s sense of justice becomes warped. The immoral becomes justifiable, if not encouraged, simply because everyone else is participating in it. Thus the blame does not rest on any individual, but the crowd as a whole, but every individual within the crowd is absolved of the guilt. This is reinforced by 'A stone hit her on the side of the head.' Which is structured so that no individual is named in throwing the first stone, and therefore no individual is to be blamed. Through this paradoxical idea, the Lottery can be seen as a comment on the nature of war, humanity’s violent tendency towards the death instinct, and the process in which we absolve blame for such mass destruction.

Shirley Jackson’s the Lottery is a deceptively simple, but twisted tale of how complex yet paradoxical and inconsistent the human process of reasoning is, and how dangerous such behaviours can be. Ultimately this tale is a warning for humanity to question our motives, our traditions, and our actions, as taking comfort in what always was, should not override what is right, and what is wrong in our world.