The Lottery Essay, Research Paper

The Lottery: Symbolism

Essay submitted by

In “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson uses symbolism to make us aware of the pointless nature of

humanity regarding tradition and violence. The story starts off on a beautiful summer day in a small

town. The author describes the day as very euphoric but strikes a contrast between the atmosphere

of the town and the atmosphere of the people gathered in the square. The atmosphere is subdued,

where the children are “gathered around quietly.”

The black box is the central theme or idea in the story. It symbolizes at first some type of mystery,

but as we read the ending we realize that it is synonymous with doom. Someone’s fate lies in an

inanimate object, the black box. We do not always enjoy change, even if it might prove beneficial to

us. The box is symbolic of our loathing of change; it is old and splintered showing that we cling to

what is familiar rather than change and it also symbolizes the traditions of the community. No one in

the little town questions the origin of the black box, but accept it as an intrical part of their lives.

The lottery itself is symbolic of the paradox of the human psyche between compassion on one hand

and the thirst for violence and cruelty on the other. An example of this is when the children are

enjoying a break from school, playing and being children, and suddenly they are being joined by

“rational” adults in stoning a mother to death. It appears that tradition has blinded these people in an

irrational way, making them unable to think of a reason why this possibly should not be happening.

When forced with the possibility of death, human nature in all its complexity, comes down to one

instinctive urge, that of survival. When Tessie was in no danger she was gossiping with the other

ladies and even encouraged her husband to go and pick a piece of paper. When Tessie wins the

lottery; she pleads for another chance and screams for mercy. She demands that her daughters take

their chances as well, which is indicative of regression toward our basic instinct of survival.

The pieces of paper that are lifted away by the breeze is not only symbolic of the ease with which life

can be taken but is also symbolic of vast civilizations that were doomed to eventual failure for

believing in and acting on tradition and not living according to the word of God. We see that even as

Tessie is being stoned to death does she not question the reasoning behind the lottery, but why it

should be her that has to die.