

## "The Lottery" Marxist Criticism

As a tyrannical government is allowed to rule freely over the ignorant masses, yearly tradition becomes etched into the minds of the working class, as the old wonder with a pessimistic eye where society is going, and reminisce about lost days of youth spent hurling stones at their society's helpless sacrifice. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is a horrifying example of what happens when society can only distinguish two classes, specifically the downtrodden working class and the wealthy leader class. This is made clear through the characterization of the higher class, as well as the lower class, and the effects on social change due to the class differences.

In this story, two main characters make up the leader class: Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves. As part of the upper class, they control all that surrounds them, including the minds of the working class. Mr. Summers is the more obvious example: "The lottery was conducted – as were the square dances, the teen club, the Halloween program – by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities" (1). In stating that only Mr. Summers has the time and energy for these activities, Jackson insinuates that he is not part of the proletariat; like most dictators, he is extremely wealthy and has probably never worked a day in his life, making him unable to relate to the people's needs and struggles. Despite his lack of empathy, he is given absolute power over the working class, controlling all community activities, and, in effect, their minds. Though not as outwardly controlling as Mr. Summers, Mr. Graves is entrusted with several powers over the lives of the proletariat. He is Mr. Summers's second in command: "Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper..." (2). With this, he is essentially given power over life and death. Furthermore, as postmaster, he controls all mail in and out of the village; with control over communication, Mr. Graves also holds control over the minds and free

expression of the villagers. Over all, the upper class establishes control through fear, this being the entire point of the lottery.

The lower class, on the other hand, is composed of downtrodden workers who are not allowed to think for sheer lack of time and energy. It is clear that some in this working class wish to rebel, to give up old rituals and loyalties, and overthrow their oppressors. Mrs. Hutchinson is the first example of this: “Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd” (2). In being late to the lottery, Mrs. Hutchinson subconsciously communicates her distaste for the community leadership and the lottery. She “slides into place” just as Mr. Summers has finished speaking, showing her disrespect for his words and ideas. Those who do not rebel against the lottery share a silent fear of it: “A sudden hush fell through the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list” (3). Though not explicitly stated, it is clear from the actions of the villagers that they fear the lottery, and rightly so: they fear for their lives. Kept tired and ignorant by their leaders, they do not realize the true source of their problems, and do not push for rebellion.

Because of this large difference between the classes, social change is made extremely difficult. This is expressed mainly through subtle symbolism; first, Mr. Summers’s insistence that the box be changed: “Every year after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything’s being done” (2). In this case, the black box represents the old, decadent society, while the lottery represents a sort of election. Every year after his “election,” Mr. Summers insists for the people’s sake that “society” must be changed; however, once he is secure in his position, he is free to do nothing. The masses, kept ignorant and downtrodden by their work, simply let go of this social change,

unable to see how it could benefit them. As the box deteriorates, so does their society. Another subtle hint is shown through Mrs. Hutchinson's reaction to the results of the lottery: "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!" (5). Mrs. Hutchinson is essentially stating that Mr. Summers kept her husband busy and hurried in a ploy to prevent him from thinking. This is a strong theme in a society where the wealthy lord over the proletariat; without the ignorant masses, the wealthy could not rule, and so Mr. Summers must keep them unaware of the true workings of the lottery.

As a whole, this story was a great example of what happens when society is radically divided between two classes. When the wealthy are given absolute power, their nature is to lord over the proletariat using tactics of fear and manipulation. The proletariat is then left unable to think for itself, mindlessly carrying on with its assigned duties. Through characterizing the upper and lower classes as she did, as well as showing the extreme difficulties faced in pursuing social change, Jackson has perfectly conveyed this idea.