Feminism in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”

Gender roles play a large part in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” The lack of dominant female characters illustrates the arguable assumption in the story that women are often seen as inferior to men in societal groups, such as in the assembly before the stoning. Many different literary devices are used to make this point, including interesting developments of the plot, a prevalent theme, and clever uses of symbols. These devices make it obvious to the reader how the roles of women are portrayed in the story as well as creating a kind of social criticism from the interpretation of Jackson’s tone. Also, the use of such things as stereotypes, a patriarchal society within the village, and the obvious aggressiveness of the men shed light on how women’s lives are portrayed, how the conflicts between men and women are resolved, and how the traditional ideas concerning these relationships are challenged.

The premise of the story is quite simple, yet intriguing nonetheless. In the beginning, the townspeople are setting up the town square for a some kind of mysterious lottery, which has been a tradition in the town for a very long time, so long that the people don’t seem to even remember why it was performed in the first place, or how exactly it is supposed to be carried out presently. The townspeople gather together in the town square and draw pieces of paper. The pieces of paper are all blank except for one, which has a black circle on it. The men of the family all pick pieces of paper, and a man named Bill Hutchinson pulls out the one with the circle. His whole family then must draw to determine who wins the lottery. Bill Hutchinson’s wife, Tessie, picks the circle and as she screams that the lottery is not fair, she is stoned to death, even by members of her own family. “The penalties inflicted on the victims of prejudice, another symptom of lack of imagination, are often subtler than
stoning, but they can be just as effective” (Cleveland). The real crime here is not the killing of a person, but symbolically the killing of women’s civil rights, as will be explained later.

The overall meaning of this story is portrayed through the use of literary devices which influence its feminist theme. The characters in the story are ones who are seemingly driven by tradition and not common sense. “The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teenage club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities” (222). He and the other townspeople do not question the tradition of the lottery, and it makes it seem like the lottery is simply a blind tradition that has no other meaning than it simply being tradition. The women, however, are the ones who mention that other towns have done away with the tradition of the lottery. They are quickly silenced, though, by the men who are present, including Old Man Warner, who had drawn from the lottery 77 times. The women in this village are seen as voiceless and through the characters of the women in the story, the reader can see how women’s roles are portrayed so as to exemplify a certain symbolism of the rights of women and the way they act in the story in order to show Jackson’s point of view of how women should not simply accept the norms of society, but to challenge them.

The setting of the story, that of a small town, makes the position of the author more palpable. Small towns usually have the ability to spread gossip and retain a certain conservative nature, which keeps the ideas in the town from becoming too progressive, such as giving women more rights or stopping the lottery. This small town ideology gives the reader the idea that women’s rights are trampled and not only because of their uneasiness to perform the lottery, because it is only the women who bring up the rumor that the lottery is not performed everywhere anymore. In the story, it was a woman, Mrs. Adams, who mentioned the fact, and she was told by Old Man Warner that the people
who don’t do the lottery anymore were a “pack of young fools” (225). Old Man Warner’s use of the words “young fools” can be interpreted as “progressive young people” in the sense that they are not following the old social norms but making new ones to the obvious disapproval of people like Old Man Warner. Another example of women’s opinions being ignored was when Mrs. Hutchinson drew the ticket with the black circle on it and complained that it wasn’t fair that she was picked. Her husband’s exact words when replying to her complaints were “Shut up, Tessie” (226). This is a good example of the way women were treated, and it is arguable that Jackson chose to write about such a weak, cowardly protagonist in order to show readers what eventual societal rivers must be crossed, such as granting women the ability to speak up with force and passion and not be trampled by their husbands or be viewed as cowardly like Tessie. The society within the small town gives life to the idea that the townspeople are stuck with this conservative ideology, and therefore they will probably retain the lottery until more progressive thinkers are allowed to inhabit positions of social sway.

There are many symbols in the short story which relate to the meaning of this interpretation of the story. For example, the idea of the primitiveness of the townspeople is exemplified by the use of their killing tools, stones. The bludgeoning of people with stones is a very old, archaic technique and really shows how the lottery is very out of date. The character of Mr. and Mrs. Adams is symbolic too, because they represent Adam from the Bible. They seem to want to breathe new life into the town by mentioning that the lottery doesn’t have to take place, since it is not done in some other towns. “That Jackson wants us to read Mrs. Adams’s statement as a gesture of resistance is reinforced by what she does with the Adamses at the end of the story. Mr. Adams is at the front of the crowd of villagers as they are set upon Tessie Hutchinson. No mention, however, is made of Mrs. Adams’s being involved in the stoning” (Oehlschlaeger). This can represent a new beginning, because
in the Bible Adam represented the beginning of mankind. Mr. and Mrs. Adams mention doing away with the lottery and therefore would be changing their tiny society and giving it a new beginning as well. It is significant to mention the sentence near the end of the story: “Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers” (228) because it shows the failure of this new beginning. Another interesting relationship was that of Mr. Summers, who was in the coal business. The fact that he is in the coal business is very symbolic. He is also the person who organizes the lottery each year, and since the lottery is such a horrendous ritual it makes perfect sense for someone who works with such dirty, archaic material to be in part responsible for the sadism of the lottery.

This symbolism also extends to a reasonable way of performing a feminist analysis on Jackson’s story. If “The Lottery” is viewed as more than just a horrifying tale about a town who performs a terrible ritual every year, and looked at as more than a commentary on the flaws of a ritualistic society, the story can be seen as a feminist call to arms, a seemingly male-dominated story which demands the need for more of a gender balance in society. There are many occasions in “The Lottery” where men are seen as more aggressive than women. In the beginning of the story, Jackson mentions how the boys “made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys” while the girls seem more peaceful, simply “talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys” (222). Another example if when Mr. and Mrs. Adams mention that some towns don’t have a lottery. The aggressive man in this case is Old Man Warner, who responds to their statement, as was mentioned before, with scorn. Mrs. Hutchinson is not respected very much either in the end of the story, as she is met with aggression by her husband who pretty much lets her know that the lottery is fair and she should not complain about it, just accept her death as an inevitability. While women do not always remain without aggression in the story, the only
positive part of “The Lottery” is about Mrs. Dunbar, who presumably lost her son in the last year’s lottery. As Helen Nebeker says in her criticism, “Significantly, the name Dunbar in itself suggest that thin gray line which separates those who have been personally marked by the horror of the lottery from those who have not. If this seems to be flagrant symbol hunting, we might remember that it is Mrs. Dunbar who, at the time of the stoning, holds back as Mrs. Delacroix urges her to action. Mrs. Dunbar, with only small stones in her hands, gasping for breath, says, ‘I can’t run at all. You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up.’ 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” (Nebeker).

To take the symbolism further, the entire story can be seen as a symbol for an entire movement of women. The lottery stands for the traditional enforcement of the “women are inferior” stereotype that has become a staple of modern society, at least during Jackson’s life. Through Mrs. Hutchinson, we see a woman who represents the struggle that women endure in order to “beat the odds,” so to speak, and overcome the oppressiveness and aggressiveness of men. The men in the story obviously represent the hurdles that women must clear in order to be free of this oppression. As was mentioned earlier, the stones that the villagers throw are the “most ancient of sacrificial weapons” (Nebeker). The stones, as well as the forgotten details of the lottery itself, mean that these strangleholds on women’s rights are ancient and a newer, progressive ideal should begin to take place.

“The Lottery” illustrates many interesting ideas about gender roles in the small village where it takes place, and also symbolically in the society in which we live in. Through its uses of literary devices, “The Lottery” tells a suspenseful story that can be interpreted to mean many things. Among
those things is the idea that the traditional patriarchal order of society is as old and pointless as the lottery.

Works Cited


