

“The Lottery,” by Shirley Jackson

A Radical Introduction

Jackson’s “The Lottery” is common fare in high school classrooms. Its humorless, drama-less, turgid, bland and frankly suffocating depiction of a dystopian world puts some students to sleep and leaves the rest scratching their heads. What is the point of this story? The story is deliberately obscure. Yes, it argues that cultures are evolving, becoming less barbaric and moving towards the abolition of blind justice and irrational behavior ... but who will connect this judgement of the world depicted in “The Lottery” to the world we live in? Jackson’s fictional world bears, in its specifics, no resemblance to our world, so how should students make it relevant and meaningful?

The closest parallels I know to the ritual described in “The Lottery” are military conscription and the Christian myth that God sacrificed his son Jesus, but these parallels are weak. I certainly do not expect most readers to find them and be inspired by them to think critically of war and religion.

Jackson’s “The Lottery” is evidence that western authors of the 20th century began writing increasingly abstract works of literature, works that bear no resemblance to the world we live in. Even our writers of historical fiction and satire are drifting away from the high standard of honesty found in a book like Voltaire’s *Candide* and Twain’s *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*.