

In the short story "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, the author explores the dark history of humanity's tendency towards violence and cruelty. The story is set in a small American town where every year, the inhabitants hold a lottery to choose a sacrificial victim. Jackson's use of symbolism, imagery, and foreshadowing underscores the underlying themes of tradition, conformity, and the dangers of blindly following authority.

One primary source that can be used to contextualize the story is the Salem witch trials of 1692. The witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts. The trials resulted in the executions of twenty people, most of them women. The accusations and trials were fueled by mass hysteria, religious fanaticism, and a lack of due process. Jackson draws on the legacy of the Salem witch trials to critique the dangers of blind adherence to tradition and the dangerous potential of mob mentality.

In "The Lottery," the villagers gather around the town square on the morning of June 27th, waiting for the lottery to begin. As they wait, they engage in small talk and idle chatter, giving the impression that this is just another ordinary day in the village. However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the lottery is not a benign event. Jackson uses the details of the setting and the characters' actions to create a sense of unease and foreshadow the horrific ending.

One of the most striking elements of the story is the use of symbolism. The black box that contains the slips of paper with the villagers' names represents the dark history of the lottery. The box is said to have been made from pieces of another box that had been used in the past, underscoring the cyclical nature of violence and the perpetuation of tradition. Similarly, the stones that the villagers use to stone the victim represent the collective guilt and responsibility of the community. The stones are a manifestation of the villagers' complicity in the violence, a physical representation of the weight of their actions.

The symbolism in the story is reminiscent of the symbols used in the Salem witch trials. The accusers in the trials often claimed to have seen "spectral evidence," or visions of the accused in the form of animals or other symbols. Similarly, the black box and the stones in "The Lottery" are symbols of the villagers' complicity in the violence. The symbols are used to create a sense of dread and unease in the reader, a feeling that is echoed in the accounts of the witch trials.

Another way that Jackson draws on the legacy of the witch trials is through the theme of conformity. In the story, the villagers all participate in the lottery, even though they know it will result in the death of one of their own. The fear of being ostracized or labeled as a dissenter compels them to go along with the tradition. Jackson highlights the dangers of conformity by showing the devastating consequences of blindly following authority.

The theme of conformity is also present in the Salem witch trials. The trials were fueled in part by the fear of being labeled a witch or a witch sympathizer. Those who spoke out against the trials risked being accused themselves. This fear of being labeled a dissenter was a powerful tool of social control, one that was exploited by the authorities in the trials.

Finally, Jackson uses foreshadowing to create a sense of inevitability in the story. From the beginning, the reader knows that something terrible is going to happen, but the details are not revealed until the end. The tension builds as the villagers draw their slips of paper from the box, and the reader is left to imagine the horror that will follow.

Foreshadowing is a technique that was used in the witch trials as well. The accusations and trials were often based on flimsy evidence or no evidence at all, but the accused were often found guilty regardless. The verdicts were predetermined, and the trials were just a formality. In this way, the outcome of the trials was foreshadowed from the beginning, just as the outcome of the lottery is foreshadowed in "The Lottery."

Moreover, the witch trials were also characterized by a lack of due process and a disregard for individual rights. Accused witches were often subjected to inhumane treatment, including torture, in order to extract confessions. Those who refused to confess were often executed anyway. The trials were marked by a complete disregard for the rights of the accused, and a willingness to sacrifice individuals for the supposed greater good of the community.

This disregard for individual rights is also evident in "The Lottery." The victim of the lottery is selected at random, regardless of their individual worth or value to the community. The villagers are willing to sacrifice an innocent person for the sake of tradition and conformity, demonstrating a complete disregard for the rights of the individual.

In conclusion, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is a powerful critique of humanity's tendency towards violence and cruelty. By drawing on the legacy of the Salem witch trials, Jackson underscores the dangers of blind adherence to tradition, the perils of conformity, and the need to protect individual rights. The story is a warning against the dangers of mob mentality and the potential for even seemingly ordinary people to commit terrible acts of violence. As we look back on the history of humanity, we must remain vigilant against the forces that drive us towards violence and cruelty, and work to protect the rights and dignity of all individuals.