

Original Paper

Between Good and Evil: A Study of Dual Narrative

Progressions in *The Lottery*

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Abstract

The Lottery is the masterpiece of Shirley Jackson, a modern American writer. In the story, through the tragic death of Mrs. Hutchinson, the evil of human nature is revealed, including violence, ignorance, blind obedience, selfishness, hypocrisy, and indifference. In addition to the overt narrative progression that exposes the evil of human nature, there is also a covert narrative progression that implies the importance of human goodness and hope for this goodness. While describing the various evils of human nature, the appeal for goodness is also throughout the text. The interweaving dual narrative progressions enrich the main connotation of the story as well as enhance the reading experience of readers.

Keywords

The Lottery, dual narrative progressions, covert narrative progression, overt narrative progression

1. Introduction

Shirley Jackson, a modern American female writer, is celebrated for her mastery of Gothic horror fiction. Her works often delve into the dark side of human nature, which is deeply intertwined with her personal life experiences. At home, the combined burdens imposed by her mother, husband, children, and household chores make writing a way to release her pressure. During her brief lifetime, she published seven novels, one play, a poetry collection, fifty-five short stories, and numerous essays, making her a truly prolific writer (Pan, 2007). Her short stories earned her the O. Henry Award and the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story and were frequently included in the annual “Best American Short Stories” anthology (Ling, 2021).

The Lottery is Shirley Jackson’s most renowned work. Since its publication in the *New Yorker* in 1948, it has remained the required reading of American high school English classes (Ling, 2021). Written in

plain language, *The Lottery* tells a story of an unknown small village with around three hundred residents. Every summer, the villagers hold a long-standing lottery tradition, which they had accustomed to. The event was presided over by Mr. Summers, a local coal merchant. To ensure fairness, the process involved three rounds of drawing and the “winner” was determined by selecting a slip of paper marked with a black spot. In the end, Mrs. Hutchinson drew the marked one. Amid her desperate and hopeless protests, the villagers stoned her to death. Until reading the end of the story, the result of the event is revealed. Readers realize the “winner’s prize” is death, which is unexpected and chilling, making them deeply shocked and unsettled.

Previous research has analyzed the story through character images and feminist perspectives, emphasizing its critical and satirical nature and exposing the distorted and dark aspects of humanity. However, under human evil, the story also contains a narrative undercurrent that maintains faith in humanity and appeals to readers to find lost kindness. This narrative undercurrent is termed “covert progression” by Professor Shen Dan in her narrative studies since 2012. Based on her research, the covert progression can be classified as a relationship of complement or subversion. Furthermore, the relationship of complement is divided into eight types and *The Lottery* represents the type of the coexistence of critique and affirmation. As an innovative development beyond traditional single-narrative analysis, covert progression significantly enriches narrative theory. Applying the dual narrative progressions to *The Lottery* serves both as an essential way to combine theory with practice and as a crucial method for deepening the interpretation of this story.

2. Overt Narrative Progression—the Existence of Evil

Soon after its publication in the *New Yorker*, *The Lottery* made the editorial office receive lots of letters. The responses were generally divided into three categories: inquiries about the lottery event, speculations about the intent of the author, and the direct condemnation and abuse of the work (Xie, 2018). Whether driven by curiosity, support, or resistance, readers widely debated and reflected through the depiction of the inhumane event and inherent evil in human nature shown by the story. This unsettling work described evil so authentic that it revealed the dark side of humanity, making readers fear and resist this reality.

2.1 Violence and Ignorance

First of all, the activity depicted in *The Lottery* is inherently violent. The fact that an innocent person is stoned to death by other villagers simply for drawing the black dot slip shows the brutal and bloody nature of this ritual. As the text states: “Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones” (Jackson, 1991, p. 301). This line highlights how deeply ingrained the act of stoning is in the minds of villagers. Among all traditions associated with the lottery, other ceremonial elements have faded or changed over time, but the climactic act of killing the “winner” remains central, which adequately represents the tendency of violence in humanity.

Moreover, the villagers show no trace of compassion toward the “winner”. The final sentence writes: “Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (p. 302). Villagers hit a neighbor whom they are familiar with as if carrying out an ordinary task, which manifests inner evil and force of human nature.

Meanwhile, ignorance of the people is also represented, particularly through the character Old Man Warner. In the story, when Old Man Warner hears that other villages are considering abandoning the lottery, he expresses “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” and “There’s always been a lottery” (p. 297). As the oldest villager, Old Man Warner has participated in the lottery every year since his birth. To him, this violent and bloody tradition has become an unquestionable necessity and is related to a good harvest of crops. However, it is apparent that the lottery has no connection with plants growing, which is completely superstitious. Unable to justify the rationality of the lottery, Old Man Warner blindly clings to this meaningless tradition, embodying the stubborn ignorance of him.

2.2 Blind Obedience and Selfishness

The story writes: “the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born” (p. 292), demonstrating that the lottery has lasted for a long time. Although this event utterly disregards human life, it faces no opposition. The villagers, whether adults or children, all gather in the square to join in the event, showing their blind obedience.

Even when knowing the news that other villages are considering abandoning the lottery, the villagers still stubbornly cling to tradition. For instance, Adams tells Old Man Warner standing beside him: “over in the north village they’re talking of giving up the lottery” (p. 297). But later, when the villagers stone Mrs. Hutchinson to death, the story writes: “Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers” (p. 302). This reveals that despite knowing opposing news, Adams still insists on his ingrained belief. He stands at the head of the line when stoning the “winner”, representing his blind obedience.

Selfishness is also completely portrayed in the story, both through the “winner” Mrs. Hutchinson and other villagers. When Mr. Hutchinson initially draws the marked slip, Mr. Summers asks: “you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?” (p. 299). Mrs. Hutchinson immediately yelled: “There’s Don and Eva”; “Make them take their chance” (p. 299). However, married daughters should participate with their husbands’ families and villagers all know it. In order to reduce her odds of being selected in the second round, Mrs. Hutchinson wants to get her married daughters involved, which shows her selfishness.

Moreover, the villagers’ attitude toward the lottery also exposes their collective selfishness. After all slips are drawn, the text describes: “Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying, ‘Who is it?’ ‘Who’s got it?’ ‘Is it the Dunbars?’ ‘Is it the Watsons?’” (p. 298). Villagers immediately assume that the “winner” must be from families without males to draw, revealing the selfishness that they pursue their own personal benefits at the cost of others.

2.3. Hypocrisy and Indifference

The story further exposes the hypocrisy in human nature, which is vividly illustrated through the character Mrs. Delacroix. When describing Mrs. Hutchinson talking to others, the story writes: “she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly” (p. 294). However, when Mrs. Hutchinson draws the marked slip and protests the unfairness, Mrs. Delacroix calls: “Be a good sport, Tessie” (p. 298). At last, when villagers prepare to stone Mrs. Hutchinson, the description is: “Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (p. 301). From a friendly greeting to extreme cruelty, Mrs. Delacroix shows her duplicity. Her superficial friendliness is eventually revealed by essential hypocrisy.

Indifference manifests mostly in the family of Mrs. Hutchinson. When Mrs. Hutchinson protests the fairness of the lottery, her husband says: “Shut up, Tessie” (p. 299). Tessie thinks to protect her family and does not want her or her family to draw the dot slip, while her husband is not on her side and scolds her. He seems to obey the rule of the lottery on the surface, in fact, his actions reveal his indifference. Besides, when Tessie hesitates to reveal her marked slip, her husband “went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand” (p. 301). The violent verb “forced” shows her husband to her tragedy with apparent unconcern. On the last round of the lottery, the description of Mrs. Hutchinson’s children is: “Nancy and Bill Jr. opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads” (p. 301). These lines make readers feel thrilled rather than relaxed. Slips of children are white means one of their parents will be the “winner”. They feel happy about their luck, but they do not feel worried about their parents. For Mrs. Hutchinson, her family treats her so indifferently, not to mention other villagers.

3. Covert Narrative Progression—the Expectation of Good

3.1 Covert Narrative Progression before the Lottery

In the beginning, the story paints a warm and vibrant summer scene with descriptions such as “clear and sunny”, “flowers were blossoming profusely”, and “the grass was richly green” (p. 291), which creates a positive reading experience for readers. Different from the following brutal ritual, the idyllic imagery not only causes irony and contrast but also conveys the hope of good in humanity.

Next, the villagers gradually make their way to the gathering place, assembling in the square. The children are the first to gather, as they are on the summer vacation. Two details in the story need to be noticed, one is “the feeling of liberty set uneasily on most of them, and the other is “they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play” (p. 291). These descriptions suggest that the education that children receive in school is restrictive and rather severe. Under such discipline, children represent the hope of the future. Therefore, the author implies the expectation of good humanity or at least a sense of optimism for the next generation.

However, not all children retain their innate goodness. The story mentions “Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones”, and then other boys “followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones” (p. 291). If readers stop here, they might regard these stones as children’s play, showing no particular interest in it. In fact, from the following story, it can be learned that stones will be used to kill the “winner” of the lottery, which is quite thrilling. Children have carefully chosen their stones not for play, but for violence. It does not mean that children are inherently evil. The above-quoted line “followed his example” makes it clear that their cruelty is learned and imitated. Thus, the story suggests that innate goodness still exists and emphasizes the importance of cherishing and maintaining it, otherwise, malice will corrupt it.

Later, the men and women also gather together, chatting and gossiping. This scene seems quite warm and close to daily life. At this point in the narrative, the whole scene before the lottery is described. It brings readers a sense of comfort and joy, which contrasts with the tragedy and horror that follow. It is this strong contrast that implies a deeper message: true happiness comes from genuine kindness, while the evil behind hypocrisy ultimately harms both others and oneself.

3.2 Covert Narrative Progression during the Lottery

The lottery is presided over by Mr. Summers. When placing the lottery box, he asks: “Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?” (p. 292). After a while, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, assist Mr. Summers, which shows the kind side of humanity, namely, helping others. The lottery box has been used for many years, so Mr. Summers suggests “making a new box”, but “no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box” (p. 293). This plot reflects the importance of tradition to villages. Most of them cling to the lottery tradition and long-standing customs, so this horrible activity can persist year after year. This also echoes the earlier scene that children imitate others gathering stones, emphasizing how kindness and cruelty can be influenced through imitation and tradition. Therefore, the narrative here implies that goodness will endure like the tradition if people choose to keep it.

After describing the lottery event itself, Mrs. Hutchinson makes her appearance. “‘Clean forgot what day it was,’ she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly.” (p. 294). This line still conveys a light-hearted and cheerful atmosphere, as if the lottery were not a significant matter, which contradicts the earlier large descriptions about the importance of the long-standing lottery. Meanwhile, the plot that Mrs. Hutchinson is late for the lottery implies that this event is not important in her mind. Because she has this unconventional attitude, it foreshadows her later sacrifice. Mrs. Hutchinson embodies a force resisting the vice. Only if more people follow her example can the village restore its peace and harmony. The story implies the hope for the future where people no longer turn against each other and can embrace kindness.

After the first round, Mrs. Hutchinson’s husband draws the marked slip, so she protests to Mr. Summers, “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted” and “It wasn’t fair” (p. 298).

This furious reaction stems from not only Mrs. Hutchinson's discontentment, worry, and fear about her family being chosen but also her doubt about the fairness of the lottery after she has been in danger. However, with cold villagers and silent families, nobody supports her protest. This suggests that the doubt and defiance of the few cannot overcome the silence and blind obedience of the many. In their pursuit of self-interest, the villagers forget their compassion, leaving Mrs. Hutchinson to desperately struggle and resist.

When the last round starts, members of the Hutchinsons draw slips in turn, showing no sign of dissatisfaction with the event. When it is Mrs. Hutchinson's turn to draw, a series of action descriptions such as "she hesitated for a minute", "looking around defiantly", "set her lips", and "snatched a paper out" (p. 300) reveal her silent rebellion. She might have foreseen the outcome, but she is incapable of retrieving the situation.

When the Hutchinsons are chosen, the atmosphere of the story shifts dramatically, with tension and horror appearing and kindness vanishing. After the lottery, a girl among the quiet crowd whispers, "I hope it's not Nancy" and "the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd" (p. 300). This is a little kindness in this evil event. The girl's worry about her friend reveals her remaining goodness, which echoes the earlier hope for the inherently good children. Though the voice of the girl is small, it spreads through the crowd, implying an appeal to retrieve the lost kindness.

The lottery concludes with Mrs. Hutchinson as the final "winner", which means she will be stoned by others. In her despair, she screams: "It isn't fair, it isn't right" (p. 302). When Mrs. Hutchinson will be sacrificed, she realizes the lottery is wrong, which is too late. It's only at this climactic ending that readers know the ending of the "winner" is death. The lottery represents not merely indifference to human life but also the complete erosion of humanity. While portraying the dark aspects of human nature, the story simultaneously maintains an appeal for goodness.

4. Conclusion

Under the intertwining of dual narrative progressions, *The Lottery* enriches the depth of its theme as well as enhances the reading experience. In terms of the theme, the overt narrative progression mainly depicts the complete process of the lottery. During the event, the evil of humanity gradually emerges, including violence, ignorance, blind obedience, selfishness, hypocrisy, and indifference. Meanwhile, the covert narrative progression suggests the importance of good, hoping and appealing for the kindness of humanity. Under the dual narrative progressions, the story reveals that those who are not selected as the "winner" will never realize the cruelty of the lottery and even become accomplices in this murderous ritual. Meanwhile, the original good also turns into evil, highlighting the complexity of humanity. For the reading experience, before uncovering the covert narrative progression, the focus remains on the shock of the unexpected ending and the horror toward the depiction of evil. However, the core of the story is apparently beyond this. By delving into the covert narrative progression of the

story, a hidden hope for human goodness can be discovered. The intertwined dual narrative progressions deepen the reading experience of readers, allowing them to simultaneously know the terror of evil and the beauty of good.

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