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Banality of Evil and Instrumental Reason in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

Shirley Jackson'ın "The Lottery" Öyküsünde Kötülüğün Sıradanlığı ve Araçsal Akıl

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Abstract

This article offers a nuanced interpretation of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" by engaging the theoretical frameworks of Hannah Arendt and Max Horkheimer. Contrary to relatively simplistic explanations that attribute the story's horrifying quality to inherent human cruelty or blind traditionalism, the present analysis reveals a deeper critique of the banality of evil and instrumental reason, as seen in the bureaucratic and depersonalized execution of the ritual killing depicted in the story. It is argued in this study that the villagers' actions in "The Lottery" are not driven by innate wickedness but by the instrumentalization of rationality and the bureaucratization of power. This aligns with Arendt's thesis that ordinary individuals, rather than monstrous figures, commit atrocities when acting uncritically, in complete "thoughtlessness." Furthermore, the villagers' adherence to tradition is not a fetishistic reverence for the past but an acceptance of it as a governing authority. What gets to be fetishized, then, is the procedure of efficiency by which people act loyally to tradition, exemplifying Horkheimer's concept of instrumental reason. Jackson's story thus serves as a prescient warning about the dangers of unfettered instrumental reason in modern society, particularly in the post-WWII context.

Keywords: Shirley Jackson, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Totalitarianism, Banality of evil, Instrumental reason

Öz

Bu makale, Hannah Arendt ve Max Horkheimer'ın kuramsal çerçevelerini kullanarak Shirley Jackson'ın "The Lottery" başlıklı kısa öyküsünün ayrıntılı bir yorumunu sunmaktadır. Öykünün okuyucuda yarattığı dehşeti insan doğasındaki zalimliğe ya da kör gelenekçiliğe bağlayan nispeten basitleştirici açıklamaların aksine bu çalışma, öyküdeki toplu öldürme ritüelinin bürokratik ve gayrişahsi şekilde gerçekleştirilmesiyle ortaya çıkan kötülüğün sıradanlığı ve araçsal akıl kavramları üzerinden bir metin çözümlemesi sunmaktadır. Bu incelemede, "The Lottery" öyküsündeki köylülerin eylemlerinin içsel bir kötülükten değil aklın araçsallaştırılmasından ve siyasal gücün bürokratikleşmesinden kaynaklandığı savunulmaktadır. Bu durum, Arendt'in tezine uygun olarak, sıradan bireylerin eleştirel bir akıl yürütmeksiniz tamamen "düşüncesiz" bir şekilde hareket ettiklerinde vahşet dolu eylemleri hayata geçirebildiklerini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, köylülerin geleneğe bağlılığı geçmişe yönelik aşırı bir saygıdan değil onu yönetici bir otorite olarak kabul etmelerinden ileri gelmektedir. Bu durumda asıl fetişleştirilen, Horkheimer'ın araçsal akıl kavramını örnekleyen bir biçimde insanların geleneğe sadakatle uymalarını sağlayan verimlilik veya etkililik prosedürü olmaktadır. Bu açıdan Jackson'ın kısa öyküsü, özellikle II. Dünya Savaşı sonrası bağlamda, herhangi bir şekilde sınırlandırılmamış araçsal aklın modern toplumda taşıdığı tehlikeler hakkında çarpıcı bir uyarı niteliği taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Shirley Jackson, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, Totalitarizm, Kötülüğün sıradanlığı, Araçsal akıl

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Introduction

Tradition and age-old customs occupy a contentious place in the landscape of modernity, serving both as various anchors of cultural identity and as potential or actual rivals of sociopolitical change, mild or radical. In the face of the rapid and unsettling transformations and shifting social norms caused by (each era's own) modernity, these long-held practices are often revered for preserving a sense of continuity, belonging, and purpose, while they are scrutinized by some for their perceived resistance to change and their role in perpetuating outdated, and sometimes harmful, values and beliefs. This persistent tension results in the unceasing renegotiation of the relevance and utility of tradition in light of contemporary realities (of each era).

Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," first published on June 26, 1948, in *The New Yorker*, occupies a significant place in twentieth-century American literature, captivating readers with its troubling portrayal of absolute compliance with tradition and societal norms. It is "possibly the most widely known American short story," (Coulthard, 1990, p. 226) and with its shocking conclusion, it sparked immediate controversy, eliciting strong reactions from readers who flooded *The New Yorker* with more than 1,300 letters expressing indignation, uncertainty, and incredulity. Many readers were "simply confused" and lacked understanding of what the story represented, while others wondered whether it was a true event as the magazine did not specifically indicate whether the stories it published were fact or fiction (Culver, 2015, pp. 167-168).

Set in a small, seemingly idyllic town, the story begins with the locals leaving their homes, shops, farms, and playgrounds on a lovely summer day to carry out probably the most important civic event in their collective life, namely an annual lottery. They have been holding this ritual from the earliest days of their settlement in the land, identified by scholars as North Bennington, Vermont, where Jackson spent the last two decades of her life (Whittier, 1991; Shields, 2004):

> *The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner. (Jackson, 2002, p. 7)*

During the preparations, everyone appears to be in good spirits, exchanging small talk and going about their daily lives. However, a sense of unease subtly builds as the purpose of the lottery remains unclear. The lottery is run, "as [are] the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program," by Mr. Summers and his assistant Mr. Graves, who carry a black box filled with slips of paper for the occasion (p. 9). Each head of the household draws a slip, and it is announced that the family of Bill Hutchinson has drawn the marked slip. A second drawing then takes place within the Hutchinson family, and Tessie Hutchinson draws the slip with a black dot. As the story reaches its chilling climax, Tessie protests that the lottery is unfair, but her pleas are ignored even by the members of her own family. Finally, the townspeople, including the children on summer vacation, turn on her, and she is brutally stoned to death. The story ends abruptly, leaving the reader with the enormous difficulty of grappling with the horror of the town's blind compliance with the custom of lottery and the violence it perpetuates.

As mentioned before, some of the readers of "The Lottery" wondered whether Jackson's story "actually revealed that somewhere in America, small towns full of cold-hearted pagans were regularly nominating one another for ritual execution" (Culver, p. 168). Despite this initial bewildered reaction, "The Lottery" has endured as Jackson's best-known work, solidifying her reputation as a master of psychological horror and social commentary in world literature at large. This study will first overview some of the more established interpretations of the story which treat it mainly as a critique of traditional or atavistic beliefs and social practices, and of people's unproblematized attachment to them. Then, with reference to concepts such as the banality of evil introduced by political philosopher Hannah Ardent and instrumental reason by Max Horkheimer, a founder of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, the article will argue that it might be more productive to read "The Lottery" as a scathing criticism of the destructive—even barbaric—stage that modernity proved to have reached with its irrational ways of organizing and administering the lives of individuals and communities. Stated otherwise, this article aims to demonstrate that, especially when its particular historical moment is concerned, Jackson's story might not be so much about tradition and the past as it is about the ominous condition of modernity and rationality in the present.

Making Sense of "The Lottery"

At first, Shirley Jackson was reluctant to clarify why she wrote "The Lottery" or what she intended to communicate with it. She maintained that "it was just a story" that appeared to her in the middle of an everyday chore, and the writing of it was an equally mundane experience:

> *The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller—it was, as I say, a warm morning,*

and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries—and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. (cited in Gibson, 1984, pp. 193-194).

While this statement replicated the calm matter-of-factness of the story's tone, it failed to quench public curiosity, and Jackson continued to receive questions about "The Lottery." In the end, she found it necessary to write a brief reply in *San Francisco Chronicle* on July 22, 1948: "I suppose, I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives" (cited in Naidu, 2014, pp. 229-230). Nor has this explanation stopped later commentators and critics, including this study's author, from conjecturing about possible allusions and layers of signification in "The Lottery."

A series of questions can be raised, accordingly, as to the rationale for the practice of lottery itself. Why does this lottery, this annual homicide, occur in the first place? It has been argued that Jackson invented this enigmatic practice as an amalgam of all corrupt elements in capitalism (economics), communism (politics), and the Abrahamic religious tradition (Hakaria, 2019, p. 13). Or maybe Jackson's story "is a grim, even nihilistic, parable of the evil inherent in human nature," therefore it is "not that the ancient custom of human sacrifice makes the villagers behave cruelly, but that their thinly veiled cruelty keeps custom alive. Savagery fuels evil tradition, not vice versa" (Coulthard, 1990, p. 226). Besides, as the narrator states, the village's population is around 300 and it will probably keep growing. Could the lottery function as a means of population control? Since eliminating one villager per year would be ineffective, this cannot be the reason. Is amusement the goal? That is unlikely as no one seems to relish the stoning. One might wonder if the objective is exhilaration, to feel more alive after escaping being picked. But the people clearly just want to be done with the drawing of lots and the stoning of the "lucky" person, and the ritual has become rather tedious for them. Accordingly, maybe it is really the case that "there *is* no reason for the lottery, except that of tradition" (emphasis in original, Bogert, 1985, p. 46).

Indeed, "The Lottery" features quite a few textual elements—symbols, characters, dialogues—that suggest or directly refer to tradition and ritual. The most remarkable of such elements is the character named Old Man Warner, who is the oldest man in the village and acts as the voice of tradition. The name given to him by Jackson implies someone who cautions others about the dangers of abandoning, or even questioning, old customs. He is the one who most staunchly defends the lottery saying, "[t]here's *always* been a lottery," and the fact that he holds in contempt those who think of giving up this ritual becomes evident when he exclaims, "[p]ack of crazy fools (…) Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*" (emphases in original, p. 18). His fervent and intolerant character shows how deeply ingrained the lottery is in the village's culture, and how anxious some become when they speculate about its disappearance. Needless to say, the lottery itself is the central symbol of the story, signifying the ritualistic tradition that the villagers have been following without question. Yet, it is also understood that things have started to change elsewhere. Mr. Adams points out that "over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery," and "[s]ome places have already quit lotteries," Mrs. Adams adds (pp. 17-18). Old Man Warner quickly dismisses this, stating that if people stop respecting tradition, "[n]ext thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves," and there is "[n]othing but trouble in that" (pp. 17-18).

By the same token, the black box used in the lottery is a powerful symbol of custom and people's attachment to the long-established ways of maintaining communal identity in the village. It is ancient and worn out, yet the villagers are reluctant to replace it with a new box because of its cultural and historical significance. It is stated that the black box, which had begun to be used even before Old Man Warner was born, "grew shabbier each year," and whereas Mr. Summers tried frequently to convince the villagers to make a new one, "no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box"—one of the few surviving pieces from the original lottery paraphernalia (pp. 9-10). Strikingly enough, despite that even the present box was not entirely original as it "had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here," and although "so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded," the villagers "still remembered to use stones" (pp. 10, 24) to slaughter one of their fellows every year after the drawing of lots. This is arguably the most powerful indicator of the persistence of tradition despite the damage it may have received over the course of time.

If readings relying on the innate wickedness of humans and their mindless attachment to tradition use rather abstract notions lacking historical specificity, one might want to concentrate on the temporal and spatial milieu to which "The Lottery" responded. Such a reading would inevitably begin by observing that the immediate context of the story is the post-WWII period and the aftermath of the 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials, as testified by Jackson herself that "The Lottery" was set in the present and in her own town. In this connection, it might be suggested that the story not only explores the dynamics of ritualistic mass victimization similar to the one carried out by the Nazis, but it also registers the popular perception of the

Nuremberg Trials as "a legal ritualization of past severe crimes" inversely mirroring the ceremonial aspect of atrocities it dealt with (Naser-Hall, 2021, p. 113). In this particular moment, "despite assurances during the late 1940s that 'it couldn't happen here,' a microcosmal holocaust occurs in the story and, by extension, may happen anyplace in contemporary America" (Yarmove, 1994, p. 242). What provoked the readers to give "The Lottery" so befuddled a reaction might have been this felt proximity to what was done during WWII to "Europe's Jews, Gypsies, and other victims, the scapegoats for what some perceived to be the evils of Europe" (Bogert, 1985, p. 47). Furthermore, the ritual that takes place in that New England town seems to reverse the central ceremony of democracy called voting:

> *individuals draw rather than enter "ballots;" they do not choose, but are chosen; and election to high office is replaced by selection for death. The story addresses both the shock and the sense of superiority of a readership caught between recent history—the Holocaust, with its explosion of the myth of Western Civilization—and the McCarthy era with its wholesale scapegoating of "unAmericans" nearer home. (…) The first reactions to "The Lottery" set in motion the political interpretation of this ambiguous story which remains dominant even today. (Whittier, 1991, p. 354)*

The McCarthy era, which lasted between 1947 and 1959 in the opening stages of the Cold War, has always been invoked with the terms "witch-hunting" and "scapegoating" as it staged the so-called Second Red Scare targeting, criminalizing and incarcerating or deporting the perceived enemies of the American political establishment, i.e. socialists, communists, unionized workers, dissenting artists, writers, filmmakers, and the like. Apart from the Nazi backdrop, those practices of victimization carried out by the McCarthy government quickly connected in the minds of Jackson's readers with the kind of coldblooded atrocity inflicted on Tessie as the scapegoat.

It is remarkable that this sociopolitical condition strongly resonates with another atrocious event in the collective memory of American people, namely the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials that were conducted by the Puritan theocracy in New England, the setting of "The Lottery," and claimed the lives of many "young girls and lonely old women (…) for 'selling their souls' to the Devil" (High, 2000, p. 9). These fear-driven rituals picked out certain women "to be executed as scapegoats for the good of the community," and they were conducted on the basis of notions such as "ritual pollution and ritual purification" (Shield, 2004, p. 413). Additionally, "Tessie's surname and the New England locale of the story associate her with Anne Hutchinson, who was excommunicated from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for misbehaviour, for preaching (as a woman) without permission" (Whittier, 1991, p. 361). Viewed from this angle, the story lends itself to a feminist reading too that interprets Tessie's fate as a case of ritualistic elimination of "untoward and vocal females" in patriarchal social systems (Whittier, 1991, p. 355).

Situated in its immediate or distant historical context, then, Jackson's short story reads "as a psychological allegory of scapegoating or as a cautionary political fable" (Whittier, 1991, p. 353). But what lies at the root of the scapegoating ritual that "The Lottery" so heavily relies on? To answer this question, Amy A. Griffin (1999) underscores the critical importance of a successful harvest in the survival of civilizations, emphasizing that once seeds are planted, farmers must rely on a balanced combination of rain and sunlight to achieve a good harvest. This anticipation, Griffin notes, gave rise to rituals rooted in ancient cultures' beliefs about the life cycle, which they saw mirrored in the process of growing crops. Seeds buried in the earth represented death, but with the nourishing forces of water and sunlight, they would sprout and flourish, symbolizing rebirth. This cyclical understanding of life and death served as a model for ancient cultures to create sacrificial rites that represented resurrection. These rituals evolved throughout history, from basic vegetation ceremonies to more sophisticated acts of communal purification. By projecting their sins onto animals or people and then sacrificing them, these societies believed that they might purify themselves of wrongdoing—a concept known as the "scapegoat" archetype. Griffin maintains that Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" employs this archetype to explore humanity's intrinsic communal need for such ritualistic practices (p. 44).

Strikingly enough, when Old Man Warner rebuffs the idea of giving up the lottery ritual, he points to its agricultural roots: "Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon'" (p. 18). Also, the date of the annual lottery (June 27th) expressed in the first sentence of the story is quite telling in that it evokes the season of the summer solstice (June 21st) and all the ancient sacrificial rituals that are associated with it. Helen Nebeker (1974) contends that Jackson does not criticize or condemn ritual per se. Instead, she is aware that ritual in its origin is embedded in humans' understanding of the universe, and that it derives from their need to make sense of, if not to control, the forces that surround them. "Thus, at one time the ritual [was] executed precisely, with deep symbolic meaning. Those chosen for sacrifice were not victims but saviors who would propitiate the gods, enticing them to bring rebirth, renewal, and thanking them with their blood" (p. 104). So, what we witness in "The Lottery" should be a beneficial fertility ritual that goes awry and eventually turns into perversity; it becomes the empty husk, as it were, of the fulness of meaning that it used to possess. The lottery ritual in its original form is described in the story, but it is also emphasized by the narrator that these days are long gone:

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up—of heads of families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. (pp. 11-12)

In its present form, the lottery is just a ritual devoid of substance that the villagers try to carry out smoothly and flawlessly, almost in an automatic way. What matters, in this regard, seems to be the ritual's form rather than its content. While practices such as chanting and ritual saluting remind one of the mass gatherings and parades organized by fascist regimes, the strict systematization and meticulousness of the preparations for the lottery suggest the bureaucratization of societies in modernity, a phenomenon taken to its extreme by authoritarian regimes. Although "The Lottery" is set in New England with its violent Puritan history, Terence Bowers (2022) maintains that the mechanisms of ritual and violence depicted in the story are also reminiscent of the racist social structure sustained by the ritual of lynching in the Southern states during the Jim Crow era. Referencing Émile Durkheim's ideas on the dark underside of culture, Bowers writes that "much human violence is caused not, as some critics of 'The Lottery' insist, by some innate evil or brutish instinct in human nature, but is 'the product of a well-defined moral culture'" (p. 14). This observation arguably locates "The Lottery" even closer to the post-WWII works of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School thinkers, especially Max Horkheimer, and to such critical concepts as the banality of evil and instrumental reason that they introduced to analyze the workings of fascism and the state of reason in late modernity.

A Parable About the Banality of Evil and the Eclipse of Reason

The chilling quality of "The Lottery" results for the most part from its masterful crystallization of Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" developed in her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which is the extended version of the reports that she wrote for *The New Yorker* about the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the key figures in the Holocaust. Arendt's work provides a compelling framework for understanding evil, particularly as it gets manifested through ordinary individuals' complicity in horrendous acts such as the ritual stoning carried out by everyone in "The Lottery," including children and Tessie Hutchinson's own family members. Arendt's observations during Eichmann's trial exposed that this Nazi officer was not a wicked monster but a mundane, bureaucratic figure who committed atrocities due to his mindless submission to orders and a desire to have a good career in the ranks of the S.S. force (2006, p. 287). "The deeds were monstrous," Arendt remarks elsewhere, "but the doer (…) was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (1978, p. 4). Upon seeing Eichmann for the first time in the courtroom inside his bulletproof glass booth, Arendt even reports to have thought that the man was "*nicht einmal unheimlich*—not even sinister" (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982, p. 329).

Contrary to well-known arguments for some alleged radical evil rooted in the Nazi personality or human nature in general (several of which were cited above), Arendt claims that Eichmann's evil stemmed neither from a kind of profound hatred nor an ingrained wickedness, but from his failure to critically reflect on the moral status and consequences of his actions. This non-questioning attitude allowed Eichmann to participate in revolting atrocities without grasping their ethical magnitude and implications. It is this absolute lack of critical, reflective, and moral substance in Eichmann's conduct that makes it both evil and utterly banal. As Arendt writes,

When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain." Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. (…) It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is "banal" and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. (emphasis in original, 2006, pp. 287-288).

Although banal and mindless, Eichmann's full and continuous involvement in the logistics of the Holocaust demonstrates

the crucial role played by bureaucratic structures in the planning and the execution of genocide as "such a crime could be committed only by a giant bureaucracy using the resources of government" (p. 289). The essence of totalitarian rule, and possibly the nature of all bureaucracies, Arendt suggests, is to objectify people by turning them into simple functionaries and cogs in the administrative machine. And since that "political form known as bureaucracy" is in reality "the rule of Nobody," what appears to govern in totalitarianism is not individuals or human reason but the thoroughly impersonal political apparatus that is perceived to act of its own accord (p. 289).

What the readers encounter in Shirley Jackson's short story is a similarly impersonal and authoritative tradition that facilitates an unspeakable atrocity by depersonalizing and normalizing evil. As is now abundantly clear, the inhabitants of the village in "The Lottery" engage in a ritualistic stoning without questioning its rationale or morality. This fact parallels Arendt's warning that ordinary individuals can commit evil acts when they are integrated into a system that normalizes such behavior, and when they feel completely unburdened by the legitimacy provided by a higher power, be it tradition or the state. Just like Eichmann, the villagers in "The Lottery" are portrayed as regular, commonplace citizens who partake in their barbaric ritual with unsettling casualness, and there is nothing demonic or monstrous about them even in the closing lines where the stoning occurs and the readers retroactively understand what has been going on all along. Jackson's narrator maintains a distant tone throughout the story bordering on reportage and patiently describes the process by which the villagers prepare for the lottery—a narrative strategy that maximizes the shocking quality of the ending:

> *The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix (…) eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. (…) Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. (p. 8)*

The villagers conduct the lottery as if it were just another mundane task to be taken care of amidst all the other daily errands that they need to run. It is such an ordinary event for them that in the end Mr. Summers easily asks his fellow villagers to kill Tessie without spending much time— "All right, folks (…) Let's finish quickly"—so that everyone can go back to their business (p. 25). This episode, among others, helps reinforce what Eric Savoy (2017) calls the "Jackson affect," signifying "the shock of plausibility" that one has due to a writing style "that brings together a recessive or self-effacing narrative voice; a detached, flat, and cinematic point of view; and the dilation, indeed the perseveration, of the kind of realistic description that is closer to the realism of Balzac" (p. 836).

Along with Arendt, Max Horkheimer offers a sharp critique of the form reason and rationality took in late modernity, and of their entanglement with totalitarianism and fascism. Particularly in his influential 1947 study *Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer closely examines these themes to provide a comprehensive assessment of the ethical and political failures of a society where instrumental reason, as he names it, overshadows moral and ethical considerations made through objective reason. The distinction Horkheimer makes between these two forms of reason—instrumental and objective—presents us with a critical perspective that complements Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil and its manifestation in modernity. Horkheimer argues that in the modern era, instrumental reason has overtaken objective reason, leading to the subordination of ethical and moral values to the pursuit of efficiency, productivity, and power. This shift is especially evident in Western capitalist societies, where everything, including human beings, is treated as a means to an end. Instrumental reason, which prioritizes efficiency and control, often disregards the moral or ethical implications of those ends. It reduces reason to a mere tool for achieving practical goals, disconnected from universal principles like justice, truth, or the attainment of good life. In contrast, objective reason is grounded in these universal principles, considering not only the means but also the ends themselves, ensuring they align with moral and ethical values. The dominance of instrumental reason thus leads to a society where moral questions about the ends are overshadowed by a relentless focus on the means, ultimately resulting in the dehumanization of individuals and the erosion of moral and ethical values (Horkheimer, 2004, pp. 4, 15).

The villagers' uncritical acceptance of the lottery and their unhesitating participation in the ritual through instrumental reason become even more evident in Tessie's character. Doubtless, she is an average member of the community that is set to stone someone to death on that lovely summer day, and just like the other villagers, she seems to have said or done nothing to protest the wickedness of the lottery until she draws the slip with the black dot. When she finally criticizes the ritual, it is not because she begins to see a moral problem with it: "'I think we ought to start over,' Mrs. Hutchinson said, as

quietly as she could. 'I tell you it wasn't fair. You didn't give [my husband] time enough to choose. Everybody saw that'" (p. 21). Evidently, her objection that the lottery "isn't fair, it isn't right" (p. 25) is not motivated by an ethical consideration at all; instead, it pertains only to the formal procedure as she believes that had Mr. Hutchinson been given more time to pick a slip from the black box, he might have not chosen the one with the black dot and there might not have been a second drawing of lots within the Hutchinson family, therefore Tessie might not have been killed. Similarly, the way Jackson depicts Mr. Summers mirrors Arendt's idea that bureaucratic and authoritarian systems can desensitize humans to the moral implications of their actions. Mr. Summers, who conducts the lottery, "had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him because he had no children and his wife was a scold" (p. 9). It is precisely this ordinary, respectful, and even sympathetic citizen who oversees the perfect execution of the ritual killing that everybody is involved in, albeit not finding it particularly delightful.

Horkheimer asserts that in the mid-twentieth century, at the end-point of Enlightenment, "reason has become completely harnessed to the social process" (p. 15) and is reduced to an instrument of domination upholding the development of totalitarian regimes. He argues that when reason is stripped of its ethical dimensions, it becomes a tool for domination and control. In this context, Horkheimer warns that when reason is mechanized or instrumentalized, "it takes on a kind of materiality and blindness, becomes a fetish, a magic entity that is accepted rather than intellectually experienced" (p. 16). Totalitarian regimes exploit this form of instrumental reason to manipulate and control the masses, creating a society where power and domination are justified by the efficiency of means at the expense of the speculative, critical, and ethical functions of objective reason. In this view, fascism represents the culmination of instrumental reason—a perverted form of rationality where the state, driven by the logic of instrumental reason, seeks to maintain control and power at all costs. The emphasis on order, efficiency, and unity in totalitarian regimes is an expression of instrumental rationality taken to its extreme (p. 42), and in Jackson's short story, the villagers' commitment to the lottery despite its brutality and their fetishization of the ritual without scrutinizing the end reflect how instrumental reason has taken complete hold of their minds and practices.

Parallel to Arendt's work, Horkheimer examines how technology and bureaucracy function as the means of instrumental reason in modern society, and they contribute to the all-encompassing processes of dehumanization and automatization. Instrumentality valorizes technology for its power to control the environment and enhance efficiency (pp. 35, 82). This focus on efficiency leads to the standardization of processes, behaviors, and even thoughts, resulting in a society that is more predictable and controlled, and in a system that is thoroughly impersonal. Likewise, bureaucracy, as the organizational embodiment of instrumental reason, functions through rules, procedures, and hierarchies aimed at achieving maximum efficiency and control. In this context, it becomes "impossible to say that one economic or political system, no matter how cruel and despotic, is less reasonable than another" since "despotism, cruelty, oppression are not bad in themselves" according to the logic of formalized reason represented by bureaucracy, and "no rational agency would endorse a verdict against dictatorship if its sponsors were likely to profit by it" (p. 22).

While "The Lottery" does not explicitly involve modern technology, the whole series of intricate rules and tools used in the ritual itself can be seen both as a kind of technology or technique and as a bureaucratic process. The exceptionally methodical and impersonal procedures that Shirley Jackson describes strip the participants of the ritual of their critical humanity or objective reason, and the cold, mechanical efficiency of the lottery mirrors the bureaucratic dehumanization witnessed in late modernity. All in all, in tandem with Arendt, Horkheimer argues that the eclipse of objective reason in modern society leads to the eclipse of morality, where thinking critically about the ends of life and the meaning of existence are often sidelined in favor of practical goals. This moral decline is starkly evident in the atrocities of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, where efficiency and rationality were used to facilitate mass murder, and it goes without saying that the same moral impoverishment and glorification of instrumental reason with its blind adherence to means rather than ends find a strong echo in "The Lottery."

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" goes beyond basic explanations that credit its horrifying quality to an inherent human wickedness or a blind loyalty to tradition. Instead, a more nuanced and historicized understanding of the story has been presented by applying the theoretical frameworks of Hannah Arendt and Max Horkheimer. It has been demonstrated in this investigation that "The Lottery" is an effective critique of the banality of evil and instrumental reason that totalitarian and bureaucratic mechanisms of late modernity rely upon. As seen in the meticulous and depersonalized execution of the lottery, the actions of the villagers are not conditioned by an innately malevolent human nature; rather, they result from the instrumentalization of rationality and bureaucratization of authority and violence. There is a strong correlation between this bureaucratization and Arendt's thesis of the "banality of evil," which posits that atrocities are not committed by monstrous figures but rather by "ordinary, commonplace" people who act mindlessly and uncritically within a system that normalizes such activities. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the

villagers' loyalty to custom is not based on a fetishistic love for the past; instead, it is anchored in their acceptance of tradition as the ultimate source of power that governs their current social order. By drawing on Horkheimer's distinction between two types of reason, this article has demonstrated how the villagers' focus on the efficient implementation of the lottery, rather than challenging its moral basis and content, is an example of the triumph of instrumental reason over objective reason in late modernity.

Jackson's "The Lottery" serves as a prescient warning about the potential repercussions of unfettered instrumental rationality in modern society, especially within its immediate context, which is the aftermath of WWII. The story successfully dramatizes how even the most heinous deeds can be normalized and carried out with bureaucratic efficiency when critical thought and ethical considerations are replaced by blind obedience to authority and adherence to an ideology of instrumentalist efficiency. It can be reiterated in conclusion that "The Lottery" is neither a story about the natural cruelty of humans or their mindless traditionalism; rather, it is a probing look into the grave risks that emerge with the deepening of rational modernity that Horkheimer calls instrumental reason. In this regard, it intends to forewarn the readers about the same mode of rationality, bureaucratization, and dehumanization that might begin to prevail in their own societies, whereby they become more alert and vigilant as citizens using their objective reason and ethical faculties.

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