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Retiring Archaic Traditions:

A Closer Look at Ritual Sacrifice in Jackson's "The Lottery"

Traditions, no matter how old their roots may be, should evolve alongside society. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" brings readers to a small farming village and shows their beliefs in one of their dark, annual traditions that no longer fits their current social and cultural environment. Throughout the story, Jackson uses subtle symbolism that starts laying the mood/groundwork for introducing exactly what the village's annual tradition is, which is a public ritual sacrifice of one citizen being stoned to death, by friends and family, chosen by a random drawing for the sake of a hearty harvest. This idea that traditions must be blindly upheld simply because of the fact that they are called "traditions" is barbaric. Some may argue that, since these are in fact the traditions of a culture, it is fair and justified for harm to come to an individual if that is what the tradition calls for. There are times for some old traditions to die out, such as when that archaic tradition involves harming, whether it be mental or physical, a member of the community. Since traditions should be considered good and happy occasions and not an excuse to infringe on other people's rights, some outdated traditions and beliefs should be done away with due to the damage they cause to interhuman relationships and the fact that they prevent further social evolution.

Up until reaching the climactic truth of “The Lottery,” the town appears to simply be preparing for some routine gathering after which they’ll all be able to go about their days. A fleeting mood of calm is set as the narrator opens with the imagery of “the fresh warmth of a full-summer day” (696). The narrator continues on to introduce members of the village, for example Mr. Summers who is the coordinator of the lottery, Mr. Adams who mentions that neighboring villages are ending their lotteries, and Old Man Warner, the oldest villager, who is the recipient of Mr. Adams’ information and quickly showed his disdain for the idea. The narrator introduces many more characters, as well as their loved ones in order to show the familial bonds and the relationships throughout the community. The narrator wants you, the reader, to feel comfortable, like this is just some normal gathering, right before pulling the rug right out from under your feet and revealing that someone will be dying by the hands of their friends and family by the end of the day. By using this format to tell the story, the narrator is showing you that the town does not truly feel the weight that the act of murder should carry by lightening up the mood leading up to this tradition.

As shown in “The Lottery,” calling something a tradition without evolving the contents of said tradition can be an excuse to harm someone without the connection of feeling responsible for what happens to others, including loved ones. This tradition of stoning someone to death has existed since long before their current longest-living citizen, Old Man Warner, was born. These outdated rituals are blindly followed because they are told that it’s how things have always been done. The original believers are long gone, as are many of the original parts of the ritual such as a chant and a salute which “years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse” (Jackson 698). Although this “tradition” is a shell of what it used to be, the existing

citizens are under the assumption that this ritual must go on because it has always taken place. This tradition is going backwards and regressing instead of evolving. In “The Lottery,” citizens discuss that other villages have already done away with the sacrifice completely, and a number of people act as if they are leaning towards seeing that way as well. Despite their brief reluctance about stoning one of their friends to death, they do it anyway because that’s the way things have always been done.

The idea that the suffering of one person means joy and prosperity for the rest is a dark tradition surviving under the feet of those who live in the coastal town in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*.” The narrator invites the reader into Omelas on the day of a festival with decorations and music filling the streets in celebration with “a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people . . . dancing” (Le Guin 1). The narrator paints this beautiful scene of the town in the middle of celebration and describes the simple joy that the people emit regularly before opening the door to a dark, secluded basement room somewhere in town: “It has one locked door, and no window” (Le Guin 2). Omelas has a long-lasting tradition of keeping a child locked in this dark and dusty room, alienated from any warmth or kindness: “The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (Le Guin 3). The child only sees another person when food and water are delivered or when another child is brought solely to witness this display of pure suffering. It’s this town’s dark tradition to make one suffer almost their whole life in order for no one else to have to feel those looming feelings of loneliness or hunger or hopelessness in their own lives on the surface. This inhumane tradition is upheld with the idea that simply knowing this child suffers makes everyone in the town make sure no one else, other than the one, has to feel the kind of pain that child feels.

While the majority of the citizens accept this tradition as a necessity, there are some that just can't handle living in a place that can find justification for this kind of harm to another person: "They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back" (Le Guin 3). Some acknowledge the primitive mindset that the town of Omelas is built on and absolutely cannot stand side by side with the rest in solidarity.

Some would argue that the traditions in these stories are meant to be upheld out of respect for their origin. Some would argue that, if the traditions call for the harming of another, it is justified because that is part of the tradition. When writing about "The Lottery," Carol Cleaveland writes "What is about to happen to her is, of course, perfectly fair and right" (Cleaveland). Tessie Hutchinson is the character chosen in "The Lottery" to die by stoning thanks to this tradition. In her final moments, she shouts "It isn't fair" (Jackson 702) just before getting hit in the head with a stone. Cleaveland is arguing that it is actually justified because even Tessie likely participated in past lotteries as a tosser of stones before. One can understand why Cleaveland would see Tessie's death as fair. This was how she had lived her life leading up to this moment, but she "refused to imagine the lottery from the victim's point of view until forced to" (Cleaveland). While this stance is understandable, it doesn't mean that it should continue until all past participants become victims. In the case of "The Lottery," is no proof of a correlation between the ritual and a healthy harvest, nor is there proof of correlation in "Those Who Walk Away from Omelas" between the destitute child and the citizens' capacity for happiness. It will be an endless cycle of death and murder until someone finally stands up and puts an end to these barbaric sacrifices.

Harmful, outdated traditions are not limited to literature, but can be found in present day happenings as well. Inherited racially-charged traditions have kept the American society from evolving into a cooperative multicultural community and from healing past wounds of racism. In modern day society, there are still “traditions” being upheld that are widely rejected by most outside of those communities, and a handful of those from within those communities. Much of the world has become more accepting of individuality and differing opinions, but that sadly can’t be said for everyone. Even here in the U.S., citizens saw a steep rise in hate-fueled attacks after Donald J. Trump became president. Hate groups from all over came out in full force as his own hate speech flew through televised events and social media rants. Through his words, people felt encouraged to perform acts of hate all over the country; shootings at Black Lives Matter protests, calling immigration services on neighbors, unprovoked assaults on unsuspecting citizens of Asian descent. Although a four year term is shorter than the span of time that the lottery in Jackson’s story has existed, the hate-fueled urges inside of people Trump touched were as strong, harmful and inexplicably thoughtless. On January 6, 2021, these hateful individuals banded together, as they had been doing in their respective communities throughout Trump’s presidency, and stormed the U.S. Capitol in Washington. They flew their hate flags, destroyed property, attacked officers and held the rest of the country at the edge of their seats hoping it wouldn’t get exponentially worse as the hours progressed. “. . . the impulse can lead otherwise ethical individuals to engage in groupthink or mob violence” (Schumacher). This was the community Trump had nurtured, the typical, or “traditional,” behavior he encouraged. I will not say that Trump created these hate groups, but he gave them a platform and a voice. He made them feel comfortable enough to bring out their hate, which has been a long-lasting “tradition” in their

communities, and said things in a way that encouraged those individuals to act upon those barbaric beliefs. He added more fuel to their fires and they blindly followed the path which he was laying throughout his presidency.

“. . . [B]lind adherence to traditional forms of behavior that have lost their original meanings and acquired no new, positive ones, can be destructive” (Schumacher). Traditions should have a significant meaning that is remembered and passed on. Traditions should not have negative outcomes, like murder or harm of any kind. In “The Lottery,” we see a community that believes that the sacrificial death of one will benefit the many for the rest of the year. Through Trump’s presidency, we saw hate speech sparking fires in hate groups and reasons publicly shared for them to continue, or increase, their “traditional” attacks. These traditions, or archaic ways of thinking, are causing real harm to people, and Jackson’s story is a window into that kind of community. It shows that blindly following traditions just because that is what they're called is something that needs to be seriously reevaluated. Both in “The Lottery” and my real-world example, those involved can detach themselves from the assumed consequences of their actions because they were “following” something; either a leader or a tradition. “. . . [T]he power of mass psychology, the possibility that blind adherence to tradition will forestall judgment, and the ease with which responsibility can be denied” (Schumacher). It would be more beneficial to the world if those following barbaric practices would abandon those beliefs or actions and release themselves from the obligations to a tradition that no longer makes sense.

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