

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Lottery

by

Shirley Jackson

Book Information

Shirley Jackson, The Lottery
Quiz Number: 7921
Creative Education, 1983
ISBN 0-87191-964-8; LCCN
32 Pages
Book Level: 5.9
Interest Level: UG

The people of a village perform their annual lottery, with startling consequences for the recipient of the one paper with the black spot.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Mysteries, Misc./Other; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Bill Hutchinson Tessie's husband, who selects the marked paper in the first round of the lottery

Bill Jr., Nancy, and Davy Hutchinson Bill and Tessie's children

Mr. Harry Graves The postmaster, who swears Mr. Summers in as the official of the lottery

Mr. Joe Summers the man who runs a coal business and conducts the town's annual lottery

Mrs. Tessie Hutchinson a mother and housewife who is stoned to death as a victim of the lottery

Old Man Warner the oldest man in town and a strong advocate for the lottery's traditions

Vocabulary

interminably continually

lottery an event in which a selection is made by a random drawing

paraphernalia the articles used for an activity

petulantly irritably or with ill-temper

ritual the procedures with which a ceremony is conducted

Synopsis

On a beautiful summer morning an entire small town gathers in their public square to conduct a lottery. The ritual has been going on for many years, though

some parts of it have lapsed or changed. Still, the lottery is always conducted on June 27th, and the people assemble in family groups. When Mr. Summers, the conductor of the lottery, arrives carrying a black box, the crowd begins to grow quiet. Mr. Summers had been preparing for this lottery beforehand by assembling lists of family members and heads of households. As the time approaches for the lottery to begin, Tessie Hutchinson arrives late.

With every towns person present or accounted for, the lottery gets underway. The head of the household from each family is called up by name to draw a paper. The paper is not to be looked at until all have chosen. When the papers are finally unfolded, the townspeople discover that Bill Hutchinson holds the marked one. Tessie protests about the unfairness of the selection, complaining Bill was not given enough time to choose. Those around her tell her to be a good sport. The second part of the lottery now proceeds, in which each member of the Hutchinson family must select a paper. Five papers are inserted into the box and stirred. The children select first, then Tessie and, finally, Bill. As the children open their papers, a sigh rises from the crowd as each holds a blank sheet of paper. Bill's is blank too. Bill must force Tessie's paper from her hands and, when he opens it, it reveals a black mark. Mr. Summers instructs the crowd to "finish quickly," and the villagers stone Tessie to death.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Lottery

by

Shirley Jackson

Initial Understanding

In the eyes of the community, why is Mr. Summers an ideal choice for the lottery official?

Mr. Summers has a number of qualities that make him the ideal official. He is an easy-going gentleman and can conduct the lottery in an official, but friendly manner. The atmosphere he creates is more like a community social or community business meeting than a public murder. He has both the admiration and sympathy of the people -- admiration because of his success as a businessman and sympathy because of his wife's demeanor. He is able to retain his composure throughout the process and move it along with as little personal emotion being expressed as possible.

Literary Analysis

How does the author build tension in the story?

The author builds tension by carefully crafting the story to reveal hints and information in a way that heightens curiosity and anticipation. For example, the children collect stones, Tessie protests about the fairness of the drawing, and Old Man Warner complains about the young folks. The necessity of all the people of the village being present hints that it is not a voluntary lottery. There is little physical action in the narrative, so the tension builds verbally as names are read from the list. Finally, the ironic twist of ordinary people participating in a cruel act leaves the reader horrified.

Inferential Comprehension

The original intent of the lottery is never stated. Why do you think it was started?

Answers will vary. Old Man Warner gives one hint when he says, "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." Certain societies used to sacrifice people to honor the gods they worshipped. Possibly, this lottery is a remnant of some ancient rite performed to bring a good harvest or control the community's population. In some cultures, sacrifices were sometimes made as atonement for wrongdoing, in which case, the person sacrificed may have served as the community's offering for the offenses that occurred during that previous year.

Constructing Meaning

Did you ever find yourself doing something you normally would not do, just because you were with a crowd? When did this happen and how did you feel? Is it usually easy or difficult to go against a crowd?

This has probably occurred sometime in every student's life. For example, some may mention joining a group that taunted another student, cheering or booing along with the crowd at a game, or participating in some other activity to avoid standing out or being ridiculed. The students' personal experiences will vary.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Just because something is legal does not mean it is right or good. There are many examples throughout history in which atrocities took place that were legally sanctioned by a country's government. Have the students choose an example of one of these injustices, research it, and give a report on it to the class.

Understanding the Author's Craft Tessie Hutchinson's words and actions are recorded by the narrator, but her actual thoughts are not revealed. Encourage the students to rewrite the stories from the first-person perspective of Tessie Hutchinson. By having the students read their stories to the class, they can compare their

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Lottery

by

Shirley Jackson

insights about Tessie's character to those of other students.

Extending Meaning Lotteries are used by many states in the United States to raise money for various purposes. Learn about the lottery in your state or a neighboring one. When did the lottery begin? What was the public debate on the issue at the time? How is the revenue generated used? How are the odds of winning calculated?

Responding to Literature Traditions are part of many people's lives. Sometimes traditions are followed without knowing their origin. Have the students choose a tradition or ritual they take part in and investigate its history. What are the images or things associated with the tradition? Why is the tradition practiced? The students may wish to have a class festival, in which the traditions are demonstrated or explained.