Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl": Different Means to the Same End

By

Annie Sears

Kuyper Scholars Program 151

Dr. Mary Dengler

10 November 2014

Outline

Thesis: Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" employ different styles of writing. Jackson describes her setting, her characters, and her plotline in great detail while Kincaid is more ambiguous; as a result, the most substantial literary substance is found in the structure and formatting of "Girl." Regardless, both pieces communicate the same theme: one should not blindly accept any cultural norms, especially those of patriarchal societies, for all traditions need to be reevaluated regularly.

I. Introduction/Thesis
   A. Both pieces were published in the same magazine on the same day exactly thirty years apart.
   B. Each piece employs different literary techniques to communicate identical themes.

II. "The Lottery"
   A. Plot Summary
   B. Reader Response
      1. *The New Yorker* received the most reader response letters it had ever received.
      2. High schools argued that the story was not fit for the classroom.
      3. South Africa banned the story entirely.
      4. The story was published just after WW2, when the concept of blindly accepting what the culture dictates was fresh on minds and hearts.
   C. Analysis of Ironic Setting
      1. Detailed placidity offers contrast to brutality of plotline.
      2. Ambiguity of specific location allows for the plot to happen anywhere, even the reader's hometown.
   D. Analysis of Symbolism
      1. The black box goes unchanged for no rational reason, just as the people maintain tradition for no rational reason.
      2. Each character's name holds significance: Mr. Summers is consistency, Mr. Graves is death, etc…
      3. The system of the lottery signifies a patriarchal society.
         i. The rules of the lottery makes larger families desirable, as it decreases one's chances of being selected.
         ii. Men are the preferred to draw a slip of paper, and it is a shame and a scandal when a woman has to draw for herself.
         iii. Mr. Hutchinson offers no sympathy for his wife.

III. "Girl"
   A. Plot Summary
   B. Reader Response
      1. Kincaid's obscurity was criticized.
      2. Generally, Kincaid was praised for her masterful use of language.
   C. Analysis of Setting
      1. No explicit location is offered in the story itself, but Antigua is implied.

2. Kincaid grew up in British colonized Antigua, where the majority of the population was of African descent, but the British maintained control.
3. Kincaid attended a school where only British history, British literature, British customs were taught.

D. Analysis of Structure/Form (as opposed to symbolism)
   1. What the mother does say is just as important as what she doesn't say.
      i. No endearing terms for her daughter
      ii. No gratification in parenthood or in housekeeping
      iii. No enjoyment in loving a man
      iv. No advice about how to navigate the line between African and English culture; only advice on when to suppress heritage.
   2. The mother's speech is repetitive, almost like an incantation, suggesting that the daughter is questioning and rebelling against the norms laid out by the mother.

E. Analysis of Cultural Context
   1. Kincaid grew up in a patriarchal society where the chief end of a woman was to please a man.
   2. Kincaid left Antigua and moved to New York; she challenges her readers to reevaluate their own lifestyles, as well.

IV. Conclusion
   A. Differing literary techniques are employed in both pieces.
   B. The same result is achieved.

Annie Sears

Dr. Mary Dengler

KSP 151

10 November 2014

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl":

Different Means to the Same End

June 26th is evidently a momentous date for *The New Yorker.* On June 26, 1948, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" was published, sparking *The New Yorker*'s largest income of reader response letters at the time, most of which were negative (Bogert 45). On June 26, 1978, exactly thirty years later, Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" was published, receiving primarily positive responses (Kincaid 258). Each story employs a different style of writing. Jackson describes her setting, her characters, and plotline in great detail while Kincaid is more ambiguous; as a result, the most substantial literary substance is found in the structure and formatting of "Girl." Regardless, both pieces communicate the same theme: one should not blindly accept any cultural norms, especially those of patriarchal societies, for all traditions need to be reevaluated regularly.

"The Lottery" opens upon "the morning of June 27th," a placid summer's day on which "the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green" (Jackson 311). The entire town has gathered in the town square, chatting about the mundane usual, though there is an air of uneasiness and the crowd's "jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed" (311). Some local children, recently released from school and exercising their new "liberty," make a "great pile of stones in one corner of the square" (311). Mr. Summers, who is the traditional town leader, having conducted everything from "the square dances, [to] the teenage club, [to] the Halloween program," (312) to the lottery itself, arrives and takes the crowd's attention. He

places the black box on a stool, which was carried to the center of the crowd by Mr. Graves. This worn, faded black box "had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town was born" (312). Nobody cares to make a new box because "no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box" and "there was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village" (312). Some of the Lottery's ritual occurs before the actual lottery begins. For example, slips are prepared for each household, each slip is placed in the box, and Mr. Summers is sworn in as the official presider. These aspects of the ritual have been retained, though the speaker notes that certain chants and greetings have long been forgotten.

Once all the preparations have been carried out, Mr. Summers is about to begin the actual lottery when Mrs. Hutchinson comes running in, justifying her late entrance: "Clean forgot what day it was!" (313). Mr. Summers then calls out the name of each family, first to make sure all are accounted for. When the crowd realizes that Mrs. Dunbar's husband is unable to attend on account of his broken leg, they pity her, wishing she "had a man to do it" (314). Further, when a young Watson son volunteers to draw for his mother, he is commended. Mr. Summers calls out all of the names again, this time to invite one member from each family, preferably the male, to draw a slip out of the box. Everyone waits patiently, not opening their folded slips until each family has drawn. As the drawing pans out, Mr. Adams turns to Old Man Warner and says, "Over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery." Old Man Warner thinks this preposterous, replying, "Pack of crazy fools… There's *always* been a lottery" (315).

Once all the slips have been drawn, each is unfolded simultaneously. Bill Hutchinson, Tessie's husband, holds the slip with the black dot in the center. Tessie immediately begins to

protest, “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair!” (315). Mr. Hutchinson responds with a quick, “Shut up Tessie” (316). The process continues as Mr. Summers figures out how many slips to place in the box for the second round: one for each member of the family, less those daughters that have married and, therefore, draw with their husbands’ families. The second drawing begins, first with little Davy, then with Nancy, then Bill Jr., then Tessie, and finally with Bill, the man of the household. Bill and his children all open their slips when told, but Tessie refuses, and Bill has to “[force] the slip of paper out of her hand. It [has] a black spot on it… Bill Hutchinson [holds] it up” (317). The crowd moved quickly, gathering the stones piled earlier, and soon “they were upon her” (317).

Because of the drastic, dark twist at the end of Jackson’s short story, it is no surprise that reader response was elicited. Jackson received over 300 letters to her home address during the summer of 1948, and “only thirteen of them could be considered kind” (Bogert 45). Because the nature of the prize is unknown until the final few paragraphs, an aura of suspense covers the entire short story and heightens the shock. When the prize proves more of a punishment, any reader is appalled, though Jackson’s initial readers, having just come out of World War II, were certainly more so than modern readers. The concept of a culture blindly accepting what authorities dictate without questioning morality, as occurred under both Adolph Hitler and Mr. Summer’s reigns, was fresh on minds and hearts (“The Lottery” 144).

In her article “Censorship and the Lottery,” Edna Bogert explains that, despite general outrage, many publishing companies saw the short story’s potential and began to publish it in high school and college textbooks as early as 1950. However, debate over whether or not the story should be taught perpetuated for decades. In 1982, 34 years after its initial publication, “The Lottery” was still one of the top 48 books “most frequently challenged by local censorship

groups as unsuitable for high school students" (95). Jackson herself was pleased by the scandal her story caused. In fact, South Africa banned the story entirely, and Jackson's husband revealed "that she was always proud of that fact. She felt that at least they understood it. They apparently could not allow in that country a story which might persuade people to reconsider long-standing policies" (47). The story remains popular today, as societal questioning is always necessary.

Jackson probes readers to reevaluate the societies in which they operate; this purpose is primarily revealed through her use of literary elements, namely an ironic setting and poignant symbolism. Jackson's story is set in a quaint, small town of 300 people. Everything appears serene, as the air was "clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day" (Jackson 311) and all of the townspeople are mingling. Jackson's attention to detail in her setting is misleading: the day may be perfect, but the tradition about to be actualized is far from wholesome. Further, Jackson is very specific in describing the pleasant aura of the setting, but she does not offer a specific town, country, or even culture. This specific ambiguity suggests that societal acceptance of unjustified traditions can occur anywhere, even the reader's hometown ("The Lottery" 143).

Jackson uses the black box as a poignant symbol of this widespread, blind acceptance. The box itself has been used for decades, as it's been around longer than Old Man Warner, who boasts that this is his 77th lottery. Therefore, the box is "no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some placed faded and stained" (Jackson 312). Although the box is worn, the town will not replace or mend it for the sake of maintaining tradition: "No one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box" (312). Similarly, the lottery itself is worn. The townspeople follow the process monotonously, lacking emotion. Nobody is excited about the lottery, nor is anybody afraid of it.

It is simply what is done; the community maintains this tradition for the sake of tradition. Even Old Man Warner, who has been around longest, cannot offer legitimate reason for the lottery's perpetuation in response Mr. Adams' statement about neighboring communities abandoning the ritual entirely. Just as the box is incapable of change until the townspeople exert some effort, the townspeople are incapable of change until they honestly reevaluate their traditions.

Each character's name also holds symbolic significance. For example, Mr. Summers' name implies his regularity as the town leader; just as the summer comes each year, so does the lottery. Mr. Summers' name also implies the same false pleasantness as the summer setting ("The Lottery" 144). Interestingly, Mr. Summers works with Mr. Graves, whose name implies death, to arrange the black box of tradition. The contrast between the placid nature in which the lottery is carried out and the brutality of its results is symbolized in the names of those who head the event.

Further, as Virginia Tech professor Fritz Oehlschlaeger notes, the system of the lottery is suggestive of a patriarchal hierarchy. The initial drawing is fair, as each family draws only once. The second drawing, however, wherein each family member draws his or her own slip, "isn't fair!" (Jackson 317). Oehlschlaeger writes,

> The process by which the victim is selected gives each woman a very clear incentive to produce the largest possible family... There is a strong pattern of detail in the story, then, suggesting that those who are most discomforted by, or resistant to, the lottery are women. On the other hand, men control the lottery. ("The Lottery" 148)

Families composed of large quantities of children young enough to live at home offer each family member the greatest chance of survival. The society doesn't seem to think in terms of

family, though, as little Davy was given stones to throw at his own mother; instead, a woman who focuses on duties stereotypically assigned to women, such as childbearing, childrearing, and homemaking in submission to her husband, increases her *personal* chance of survival, which is of highest value ("The Lottery" 149).

Not only does the system itself reward women who perform their womanly duties well, but society also commends these women. Both Mrs. Dunbar, who opted to draw for herself, as her husband had a broken leg and her son was too young, and Mrs. Watson, who chose to have her young son draw, prove prime examples. Mrs. Dunbar is pitied while Mrs. Watson's son is applauded: "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it!" (Jackson 314). These brief interactions reveal the patriarchal nature of the lottery, which is controlled by men.

Similarly, the women who do not conform to patriarchal hierarchy are condemned, with Tessie serving as the prime example. Tessie arrives late to an event she supposedly forgot about, which is questionable. One does not forget the day a neighbor is stoned; Tessie more than likely arrived late as her own form of subtle protest. Further, from the moment her husband drew the damnable slip to the moment the first rock hit her head, Tessie reiterates, "It wasn't fair!" (Jackson 315). In response, Mr. Hutchinson exercises his male authority, forcefully telling Tessie to "Shut up" (316). In addition to her verbal protests, Tessie refuses to open her own slip. Again, Mr. Hutchinson takes control and opens it for his wife, showing no signs of sympathy, compassion, or protectiveness. Tessie's opinions are not valued by anyone, not even her own husband, simply because she is a woman.

Because a woman win's the lottery, it is reasonable to conclude that Jackson is commenting on the patriarchal nature of the society she lived in, wherein men always dominate over women. Jackson writes in the constraints of 1940s and 1950s society, "one in which women

were expected to stay at home and raise the children" ("The Lottery" 145). Through eliciting reader emotion in a compelling story touching on injustice, Jackson is criticizing American society as a whole.

In her book *Shirley Jackson,* literary critic Lenemaja Friedman asserts, "The lottery may be symbolic of any of a number of social ills that mankind blindly perpetuates" ("The Lottery" 147). This argument is undoubtedly true; the story as a whole condemns all forms of blind acceptance. Ultimately, Jackson calls her readers to reevaluate the cultural norms and traditions that they have inherited. However, a strong case can be made for Jackson's focus on condemning a patriarchal society. Why must women submit to man-controlled system, keeping their opinions quiet? Simply because "there's *always* been a lottery" (Jackson 315)?

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" raises similar questions about a woman's role in society, objecting to the stereotypical confinement of women to the home. However, Kincaid employs different means of raising those questions than Jackson does.

"Girl" is far less plot-heavy than "The Lottery." In fact, the entire story is a single, 650-word sentence spoken from a mother to her daughter, chronicling the necessary habits to survive in perpetual poverty ("Girl" 84). Practically, women must know how to maintain a household, cook, prepare table settings for various occasions, etc. Relationally, women must know how to interact with a man, how to "smile to someone you don't like at all… [and] to someone you like completely" (Kincaid 259). Publically, women must behave in a ladylike fashion, not "squat[ting] down to play marbles" or "walk[ing] like the slut" all are "bent on becoming" (259). The mother's advice goes on and on and on, covering a wide array of subjects. The daughter only interjects twice, first to assert that some of her mother's chiding is unnecessary, as she doesn't "*sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (258). In this case, the

mother plows right over her daughter's rebuttal, simply moving onto the next topic of button sewing. The second time her daughter interrupts, however, the mother stops and addresses the complaint: "*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?" (259). The piece closes with this shift, in which the mother addresses her daughter with a sarcastic question instead of listing mish-mashed tidbits of advice.

"Girl," Kincaid's first published piece, received an overwhelmingly positive response, especially considering Kincaid's inexperience. Generally, literary critics such as Anne Tyler of *The New Republic* admired Kincaid's "care for language, joy in the sheer sound of words, and evocative power." However, Tyler also called Kincaid's style "often almost insultingly obscure." Edith Milton, Tyler's contemporary, found Kincaid's imagery "too personal and too peculiar to translate into any sort of sensible communication." Nonetheless, Kincaid became great success, publishing more short stories and eventually a complete novel entitled *Annie John* ("Girl" 90). Because Kincaid wrote primarily on her personal experience, however, these critiques stand to reason. Without background knowledge on Kincaid's living situation, much of the piece's significance is lost. If one does obtain background information on Kincaid herself, however, the short ambiguity proves effective and lengthy exposition proves unnecessary.

Therefore, unlike "The Lottery," Kincaid does not detail her setting or the characters involved, but launches straight into the dialogue. The informed reader can assume that Kincaid is addressing her childhood in the Caribbean. Kincaid was born and grew up on the island of Antigua, which has been a British colony since 1667. The sugarcane industry became popular in 1674; consequently, African slaves were purchased, forced to work until legal freedom was attained in 1834. Since then, those of African heritage compose the majority of Antiguan

population. When Kincaid came of school-attending age in the 1950s, the only educational option available was a British system focused on British history, British culture, and British authors, even though the majority of students were of African descent. A strange dichotomy between her two heritages resulted: she was encouraged to sing benna and cook traditional African foods at home, yet she had to put all that aside while attending to her studies. Frustrated, Kincaid moved to New York when she turned 17 and soon began work for the *New Yorker*, in which "Girl" was first published ("Girl" 88-89).

Various clues throughout the mother's recitation point to an Antiguan setting, though none is every explicitly stated. For example, the mother opens her list with instruction about placing laundry "on the stone heap" and "on the clothesline to dry," (Kincaid 258) indicating a lack of electrical appliances. Later, the instruction on "how you make ends meet," (259) indicates a monetary struggle. Lastly, all of the differing foods, from "pumpkin fritters" to "salt fish" to "okra" to "dasheen" to "bread pudding" to "pepper pot" (259) indicate a Caribbean setting. Clearly, "Kincaid grew up on the island of Antigua, in a home without electricity or running water, and although she does not name the place, in her mind it is set there" ("Girl" 88).

Also in contrast to Jackson's "The Lottery," Kincaid's piece does not employ any symbolism. Instead, as literary critic Cynthia Bily asserts, the blatant manner in which each task is laid out emphasizes both what the mother does say and what she does not say:

> Apparently the mother has learned to do all these things, and they are probably not beyond the girl's capacity either. But if she learns her lessons well, what will she have to look forward to, to be excited about? Where is the pleasure in this life?... The relationship that concerns the mother is the relationship between a man and a woman. If she derives any pleasure or pride from her own experiences

with parenthood, she does not reveal it here. (“Girl” 93)

Instead of addressing her daughter with any sort of endearing or affectionate nickname, the mother warns her daughter against “The slut [she knows her daughter to be] so bent on becoming” (Kincaid 259). Instead of noting the fulfillment found parenthood, the mother advises, “this is how to make good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child” (259). Instead of expounding upon the joy of loving and serving a man, the mother offers dismissive consolation: “if [the way you love a man doesn’t] work, don’t feel too bad about giving up” (259). Instead of celebrating her African heritage, the mother gives advice about when to suppress it: “don’t sing benna in Sunday school” (258). The mother does not ask her daughter to completely eliminate singing benna, to completely eliminate indulgence in African heritage; rather, she asks her daughter to hide her heritage when engaging in a British context (“Girl” 95). There is no room for emotion, no room for purpose amidst the endless activities. There simply is what needs to be done for the sake of maintaining the feminine façade, the balance between African and English cultures required of African-Antiguan women.

In all her impassive repetition, the mother speaks an “incantation” of sorts over her daughter. In her article “The Rhythm of Reality in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid,” Diane Simmons explains, "In the long, seemingly artless, list-like sentences, the reader is mesmerized into Kincaid's world… Like the girl to whom the mother speaks, the reader is lulled and drawn in by the chant of motherly admonitions" (“Girl” 94). It is as if a spell is needed to keep the daughter within social constraints. She is evidently “so bent on becoming [a slut],” so inclined to “sing benna in Sunday school” (Kincaid 258), so prone to questioning the social norms that her mother sees the need to blatantly spell out just what a woman is expected to be, should she want to survive in Antiguan society. Thus, Kincaid paints a picture of Antiguan culture wherein, rather

than challenging these preconceived principles, women simply teach other women to conform into patriarchal society. The entire passage suggests that a woman must submit to a man, her work confided to the home. And because this notion is adhered to without thought, a static state results.

Because the piece lacks any emotion, however, the monotony of this submissive lifestyle proves unappealing to the reader. Just as Kincaid herself chose to move to New York City, questioning and ultimately rejecting her static, inherited cultural norms, the reader too questions whether his or her cultural norms, especially those than promote patriarchal hierarchies, should be adhered to blindly or whether they should be challenged.

The differences between Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" are vast. Jackson's story is full of detailed explanations, symbolism, and much dialogue while Kincaid's is a straightforward list from a mother to a daughter. Regardless of the means by which each story is told, both pieces challenge readers to examine their social contexts, to reevaluate the traditions they have inherited. Further, both pieces place particular importance on reexamining societies wherein men are placed above women. These themes are timeless; they applied in Jackson's 1948 context, they applied in Kincaid's 1978 context, and they certainly apply today, to whatever context the reader finds himself or herself in.

Works Cited

Bogert, Edna. "Censorship and "The Lottery"" *The English Journal* 74.1 (1985): 45-47. *JSTOR*. Web. 3 Nov. 2014.

"Girl." *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Ira Mark Milne. Vol. 7. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. 84-98. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.

Jackson, Shirley. "The Lottery." *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*. Ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. 12th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 311-17. Print.

Kincaid, Jamaica. "Girl." *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*. Ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. 12th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. N. 258-59. Print.

"The Lottery." *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 139-154. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.