Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" – Discussion and Analysis Questions

Answer the following questions in complete sentences on your own paper. Provide quotations (with page/line numbers) from the story to support your answers.

1. Why has Jackson chosen common people for her characters? Could she have chosen characters from other levels of sophistication with the same effect? What is the **irony** of the tone of this story?

2. What seems to have been the original purpose of the lottery? What do people believe about it?

3. Is it important that the original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost? What do you suppose the original ceremony was like? Why have some of the villages given up this practice? Why hasn't this one?

4. What is the significance of Tessie's final scream, "It isn't fair, it isn't right"? What aspect of the lottery does she explicitly challenge; what aspect goes unquestioned?

5. This is a different sort of story when you read it for the second time. What elements (such as Mrs. Hutchinson's attempt to have her daughter, Eva, draw with the family) might take on a different meaning the second time through?

6. Some critics insist that the story has an added **symbolic** meaning. Do you agree? If so, what is Shirley Jackson trying to tell us about ourselves? (Hint: Consider that this story was written during the height of the rise of Communism and the Soviet Union.)

7. Is the lottery a collective act of murder? Is it morally justified? Is tradition sufficient justification for such actions? How would you respond to cultures that are different from ours that perform "strange" rituals?

8. Describe the **point of view** of the story. How does the point of view affect what we know about the situation? How does it preserve the story's **suspense**?
Answers to Discussion Questions

1. Why has Jackson chosen common people for her characters? Could she have chosen characters from other levels of sophistication with the same effect? What is the irony of the tone of this story?

   By choosing common people, Jackson is attempting to have the general reader relate to the grotesque situation at hand. The dangers of blind allegiance to tradition become more “close to home” when an average, small-town American population is the center of the action. It becomes more general and all-applicable. (Lines 1-17)

2. What seems to have been the original purpose of the lottery? What do people believe about it?

   The original purpose of the lottery seems to have been some twisted sort of rain dance ritual. As Old Man Warner explains, the old saying used to exclaim, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (line 122). It takes on an air of Aztec/ritualistic sacrifice, that by performing the blood ritual and sacrificing one, the needs of the majority will be met. If the ritual is not followed, society will collapse – or so the townsfolk believe.

3. Is it important that the original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost? What do you suppose the original ceremony was like? Why have some of the villages given up this practice? Why hasn't this one?

   The loss of the original ceremonial paraphernalia is significant, as it suggests that the original meaning and reasons for the lottery have been lost to time. It is a ritual with no true purpose, other than that of blind allegiance to tradition. Some villages presumably have matured beyond this ritual, but this one has not.

4. What is the significance of Tessie's final scream, "It isn't fair, it isn't right"? What aspect of the lottery does she explicitly challenge; what aspect goes unquestioned?

   There are two ways to approach this question.

   1) From an in-character perspective, Tessie is objecting to the fact that she is the subject of the sacrifice, having been the “winner” of the lottery. She doesn’t want to die, and is protesting merely the fact that she has to die, not that people die in general.

   2) From an authorial / reader response perspective, Jackson challenges the reader to question the idea of conformity and blind allegiance to tradition. If we don’t know why
we observe a specific tradition, perhaps we should question its usefulness. Besides, it’s good to question and analyze.

5. This is a different sort of story when you read it for the second time. What elements (such as Mrs. Hutchinson's attempt to have her daughter, Eva, draw with the family) might take on a different meaning the second time through?

Tessie’s attempt to have her daughter draw with the family is a half-baked (and somewhat heartless) attempt to have a larger pool of “winners” (victims) to draw from. While reading, it sort of sounds like she wants an extra chance to win some money or something of that nature. In reality, she is trying to provide more of a buffer between herself and being murdered.

6. Some critics insist that the story has an added symbolic meaning. Do you agree? If so, what is Shirley Jackson trying to tell us about ourselves? (Hint: Consider that this story was written during the height of the rise of Communism and the Soviet Union.)

She is providing a symbol of societies such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, where great atrocities are committed under the indifferent watch of tradition-oriented conformists. She is trying to tell us that we should be guided by our moral compass, not merely by the expectations of society. If something is unjust or wrong, we should stand up against it.

7. Is the lottery a collective act of murder? Is it morally justified? Is tradition sufficient justification for such actions? How would you respond to cultures that are different from ours that perform "strange" rituals?

Effectively, the lottery is by definition a collective act of murder, regardless of the reason it is held. Its existence does, however, beg the question of whether tradition (and, by extension, moral relativism) supersedes any sort of universal morality. Is killing wrong no matter what, or does its intended purpose – prosperity for the many at the expense of the few – justified? Regardless of the answer, Jackson’s message is that doing anything simply because it’s “what always has been done” is not an acceptable approach to life. We should question and analyze our traditions, and understand why we continue to observe them.

8. Describe the point of view of the story. How does the point of view affect what we know about the situation? How does it preserve the story's suspense?