

“It isn’t fair, it isn’t right”:

The Affective Politics of Fear in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”

LIBBY SCHOFIELD

“What makes us frightened? Who gets afraid of whom?” Sara Ahmed asks these questions at the beginning of “The Affective Politics of Fear.” Fear, for Ahmed, is sticky. It appends itself to objects and in so doing obfuscates its mode of circulation. In “‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t right’: The Affective Politics of Fear in Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery,’” Elizabeth Schofield employs Ahmed’s theory to unfurl the ways in which state violence and community surveillance are sanctioned through the weaponization of politicized fear. Figuring the lottery itself as a “moving object of fear,” Schofield offers a nuanced and instructive reading of the ways in which community values can be harnessed as methods of suppression and domination. In her uncannily relevant analysis Schofield figures fear as systemic violence that sticks to the community and, by proxy, sticks with the reader.

– Dr. Erin Wunker

Published on June 26th, 1948 in *The New Yorker*, Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” shocked its readers with its haunting exploration of politicized fear and state-sanctioned community violence. The story’s initial idyllic tone—describing the quiet, orderly, and content daily life of small town, post-war America—slowly and eerily transforms to reveal the brutal significance of the annual holiday on which the titular lottery takes place. Primarily using the chapter “The Affective Politics of Fear” in Sara Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, this essay will theorize the political affects of fear in Jackson’s “The Lottery.” This theorization will take place through an examination of the lottery as a moving

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object of fear, the importance of fear in maintaining the community's "national" tradition and values, and the way in which the winner of the lottery becomes the other which must be eliminated to protect community values.

Ahmed writes that we fear objects that approach us, both physically and temporally, in anticipation of the harm that it may cause, projecting us "from the present into the future" (65). In Jackson's story, the annual lottery—and its signification of the potential harm it may cause to any individual's body—is the primary object of fear. The opening sentence establishes the story's temporal movement: "The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny" (Jackson 253). The narrative immediately announces itself as simultaneously historical and prophetic. While there is nothing inherently threatening about this description, the use of the past tense suggests the following events took place on June 27th of a previous year, but for Jackson's readers on the day of publication, June 27th is also *tomorrow*. By investing in the first readers' proximity to the story's temporal setting and drawing attention to the circular nature of time—both the lottery and the reader are continuously moving closer and further away from the next and the last June 27th—the story situates the significance of the lottery as a moving object of fear. Two of the women in the crowd comment on the quickness of the lottery's repetitive arrival:

"Seems like there's no time at all between lotteries any more," Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row. "Seems like we got through with the last one only last week."

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“Time sure goes fast,” Mrs. Graves said. (Jackson 258).

Ahmed describes the movement of objects of fear as pressing the future into our bodies at the present, resulting in physical reactions that may include sweating, elevated heart rate, and recoiling from the object. Although the reader does not know the purpose of the lottery until the end of the story, the narrator points out the increasing physical symptoms of fear in the villagers as the lottery approaches. The narrator repeatedly describes the villagers as nervous, “wetting their lips” (257), and “breath[ing] heavily” (261). Because the lottery is an event rather than a physical object, it manifests itself in the ceremonial black box that contains the ballots. The villagers recoil from the fetishized box, each person fearful that the harm it represents will be inflicted on them: “The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool [on which the box rests]...” (Jackson 254). Ahmed, however, points out that “[f]ear, in its very relationship to an object” – in this case, black box’s performance of the lottery – “...is intensified by the loss of its object” (65).

Although the lottery terrifies the villagers on a personal level (no one wants to be stoned to death by their family and neighbours), on a community level, the loss or eradication of the lottery seems just as terrifying. Mr. Adams mentions that some villages have given up lotteries, to which Old Man Warner, the oldest man in the community and a continual representation of tradition, replies, “Nothing but trouble in *that*” (Jackson 259), citing the lottery as a marker of maintaining social stability:

“[n]ext thing you know, they’ll be wanting to go back to living in caves...” (Jackson 258). Here, we encounter the social significance of the lottery as a structural system wherein the ritualistic execution of a random member of the community ensures the continuation and protection of the community. Ahmed writes that “fear functions as a technology of governance” (Ahmed 71), and Patrick Shields points out that the lottery is officiated by the men with the most economic and government power (a coal mine owner, the postman, and the grocer) who “represent authority, power, tradition, and conformity” (Shields 415). The villagers accept and rely on the necessity of the lottery to avoid the chaos promised by government and social narratives, despite its gruesome and personal consequences. The lottery, in simultaneously creating *fear of* and *preventing* community crisis, offers a “moral and political justification for maintaining ‘what is’ (taken for granted or granted) in the name of future survival” (Ahmed 77). Thus, an action which would ordinarily be considered homicide is both legally and morally justified; personal connections are stripped away for the perseverance of the community² as the reader sees Tessie Hutchinson’s friend Mrs. Delacroix “[select] a stone so large she [has] to pick it up with both hands” and “someone [give] little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” to participate in Tessie’s stoning (Jackson 262). This emphasis on the villagers as Tessie’s collective executioners echo Ahmed’s idea that citizens police the behaviours—and

² This idea is influenced by Amy Griffin’s examination of mob mentality and ritual in Jackson’s story.

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bodies – that threaten their communities out of “love” for community values, “in which love becomes the foundation of community, as well as the guarantor of the future...” (Ahmed 78). Of course, the lottery selects its winner at random; indifferent to whether or not that individual actually poses a threat to the continuation of the community.

In order to protect the community, there must be a threat to the community’s continuation, values, and “borders.” Ahmed discusses how fear triggers the impression of borders, and that “transgression of the border is required in order for it to be secured as border in the first place” (76). In the context of Jackson’s story, the lottery’s selection of Tessie Hutchinson is performative, and in naming her as a threat to the community she becomes that threat, triggering borders which must be protected. Tessie becomes the other which the community fears will wreak havoc on its traditions, values, and ways of life. Furthermore, her rejection of her new role heightens the villager’s understanding of her as a fearsome other. After the lottery narrows its selection down to the Hutchinson household, she rejects the results: “You didn’t give [Mr. Hutchinson] enough time to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair!” (Jackson 259). She then attempts to divert and deflect the lottery’s proximity to her and impose it on someone else, even her married children: “‘There’s Don and Eva,’ Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. ‘Make *them* take their chance!’” (Jackson 260). The villagers thrust the otherness evoked in the lottery back towards her: “‘Be a good sport, Tessie,’ Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs.

Graves said, ‘All of us took the same chance’” (Jackson 259). Here we see the effect of the lottery separating the individual from the collective, similar to Ahmed’s figure of the terrorist, which is “detached from particular bodies” (79). Fear attaches to these othered bodies that *could be* terrorist, and this potentiality justifies structural and/or social power to control these bodies. While Ahmed refers primarily to racialized bodies, the implied universal whiteness in Jackson’s story requires the community to select a body and *make it other*—the villagers no longer recognize Tessie as a member of their collective, but rather as a *could be* terrorist. For Tessie to reject her role as winner of the lottery enforces the villager’s view of her as fearsome, and pushes them to protect both the community and individuals from her. Not only does she become a dangerous other and threatens the endurance of the system which ensures stability, but if Tessie successfully refuses the lottery’s results, any one of the villagers may be selected in her place and subject to execution. Thus, no one in the community hesitates in their role in detaining her body (that is, killing her), indifferent to her pleas: “‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her” (Jackson 262).

Through a theorization of Ahmed’s affective politics of fear, Jackson’s story reveals itself as a complex commentary about the structural, and seemingly arbitrary, violence imposed on selected bodies under the promise of protecting the nation—or in this case, the microcosmic nation represented as Jackson’s rural, white, American town. The temporal movement of the lottery as an annual

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event suggests the continuous presence of fear, and in this repetitive “generation of ‘the threat,’ fear works to align bodies with and against others” (Ahmed 72), both creating an other to create the effect of “borders” available for transgression and simultaneously eliminating that other in a show of collective preservation. “The Lottery” allows readers to react in horror to this system, as Tessie begs for her life while her husband, children, and neighbours stone her to death: “...she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. ‘It isn’t fair,’ she said. A stone hit her on the side of her head” (Jackson 262). The affective nature of both the lottery and “The Lottery,” through Ahmed, encourages the reader to contemplate the continual movement of fear in government and social structures, the creation of borders, who is fearsome, and why.

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