

Mob Mentality in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*

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Abstract: This paper explores mob mentality in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* (19) and its connection to the theories of Gustave Le Bon, particularly his ideas on crowd psychology. Le Bon's concept of the "collective mind," which asserts that individuals in a crowd act emotionally rather than rationally, is reflected in the villagers' blind adherence to the violent lottery ritual. Jackson illustrates how group dynamics and tradition override individual morality, aligning with Le Bon's belief that crowds are susceptible to suggestion and lose their sense of personal responsibility. This paper aims to analyze how Jackson uses Le Bon's theories to critique the dangers of conformity and unexamined traditions, while also exploring how the story exemplifies the loss of individual agency within a group. Ultimately, it will provide a deeper understanding of how crowd psychology shapes human behavior, particularly in the context of societal rituals and authority.

Key points: Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery*, Mob Mentality, Tradition, Gustave Le Bon.

1. Introduction

Charles Marie Gustave Le Bon (1841 –1931) was a French social psychologist, sociologist, and physicist. He is the author of several works where he explored theories about national traits, racial superiority, crowd psychology, and mob mentality. Le Bon argued in his well-known book *The Crowd* that cultural evolution was shaped by the "soul" or character of people, which appeared as an unconscious "collective mind." This collective mind could influence the behavior of a crowd in ways not noticed when studying individuals alone. (New World Encyclopedia)

Le Bon asserted that crowd behavior was driven by emotion more than by reason. His well-known theories on crowd psychology influenced researchers in media who used them to create propaganda to implant certain ideas in people's mind. (ibid)

From the psychological point of view the expression "crowd" assumes quite a different signification. Under certain given circumstances, and only under those circumstances, an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed, doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics. (Bon, 2009)

Le Bon's characteristics of the mob mentality is portrait in a masterful way in Jackson's *The Lottery*.

Shirley Jackson was born in 1919 in San Francisco, later moving to Burlingame and Rochester. She began writing poetry and short fiction during high school. After briefly attending the University of Rochester, she transferred to Syracuse University in 1937, where she published her first story, "Janice," and later became a fiction editor. In 1948, Jackson published *The Road through the Wall* and her most famous story, *The Lottery*. Her works like *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* also gained recognition. Shirley Jackson continued writing until her death in 1965 from heart failure. Her work was honored posthumously, including the publication of *The Magic of Shirley Jackson and Come Along With Me*. (Bloom, 2001)

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the psychoanalytic theories of Gustave Le Bon, particularly his analysis of the crowd. Le Bon's psychology provides a theoretical lens through which to explore the characteristics of the psychology of crowds, including the mental unity, the ideas of the crowds, and religious sentiment as depicted in Shirley Jackson's short story *The Lottery*.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the meaning of the mob mentality and its psychological implications, focusing on the plot of Shirley Jackson's novel *The Lottery*. Qualitative research is chosen for its ability to delve deeply into complex phenomena and understand subjective experiences.

The main data source for this study is Shirley Jackson's novel *The Lottery* and Gustave Le Bon's book *The Crowd*. Through close textual analysis, specific passages and scenes are examined. These passages are selected based on their relevance to the theme of mob mentality.

4. Plot Summary

The story unfolds one morning between 10 a.m. and noon on June 27th, in a small, presumably American village. The exact year is unspecified. The village's 300 residents gather for their annual lottery, a tradition that occurs on this date every year. The village children are seen collecting and guarding a pile of stones in a corner of the village square. (Tearle, 2022)

The lottery is overseen by Mr. Summers, who uses an old black box containing slips of paper, all blank except for one. Each head of household, called up by Mr. Summers, must draw a slip from the box. Once every household has drawn a slip, they are revealed, and it is found that Bill Hutchinson has drawn the marked slip. Consequently, one member of his family must be chosen. Bill's family includes himself, his wife Tessie, and their three children: Bill Jr., Nancy, and Dave. (College Transitions, 2023)

Tessie Hutchinson is upset that her family has been selected and argues that the lottery should be redone, claiming that Bill did not have enough time to draw his slip. Despite her protests, the process continues: each member of the Hutchinson family must draw a slip from the black box, one of which is marked while the others are blank. (Tearle, 2022)

The drawing starts with the youngest child, and once everyone has picked their slips, they are instructed to open them. All slips are blank except Tessie's, which has a mark made by Mr. Summers with his pencil the previous night. (College Transitions, 2023)

The earlier significance of the pile of stones is now evident. The villagers each pick up a stone and move towards Tessie, eager to finish the task. One of them throws a stone at Tessie's head. Despite her protests that this is unfair, the villagers continue to throw stones, ultimately stoning her to death. (Tearle, 2022)

5. The Characteristics of Mob Mentality in Jackson's *The Lottery*

The Lottery presents an example of what happens when people cease to think independently and mindlessly conform to the actions of others just to maintain tradition. Le Bon said "It is tradition that guides men, and more especially so when they are in a crowd." (Bon, 103). In *The Lottery* the villagers have a tradition of a lottery every year and they believe that it increases their harvest

“Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” (Jackson, 2007). Old Man Warner's role as a guardian of tradition also speaks to the preservation of power dynamics within a community. Despite the distressing implications of the ritual, he is invested in maintaining the hierarchy and structure that the lottery upholds. His character illustrates how those in positions of authority can perpetuate harmful practices to retain control, even at the expense of the well-being of the community members. Furthermore, Old Man Warner's name itself carries significant symbolism. His last name, "Warner," suggests that he serves as a warning against challenging tradition. (StudyMoose, 2023)

Old Man Warner's character highlights the strong attachment to tradition, even when it conflicts with basic moral principles. He insists that stopping the lottery would cause people to revert to "living in caves," emphasizing an irrational fear that letting go of tradition will lead to disorder. This perspective reflects the misguided notion that tradition is always good and valuable, even when it involves harm or violence. (ibid)

People tend to lose their individuality when they are in a crowd and act in a way that different from their real nature, because they acquire invincible power that allow them to do whatever they want and there are no consequences. Also, every act in the crowd is contagious to an extent that they would sacrifice their personal interest for the collective interest. (Bon, 35)

In *The Lottery* it is apparent that the villagers act in unacceptable way like when Bill Hutchinson said to his wife “Shut up, Tessie,” (Jackson, 2008). In any other scenario this would be extremely inappropriate and even if he thinks it is normal to act in this manner, other people who are witnessing this should prevent him from doing so. But since he is in a crowd the unacceptable is now acceptable. In addition to that, the villagers are ready to stone a woman to death without hesitation because it is what everyone in the crowd is doing so there are no consequences.

According to Le Bon the most powerful force in the world are not clergymen in temples who are respected and followed by their followers, nor tyrants who implant fear in their people’s hearts to keep them loyal and prevent them from revolting against them. Both are breakable easily and it happens all the time, but what is stronger than those two is tradition that people cling to for centuries even if they do not know the original purpose behind it or why they are doing it but they keep it alive thinking that it is for the greater good.

No example could better display the power of tradition on the mind of crowds. The most redoubtable idols do not dwell in temples, nor the most despotic tyrants in palaces; both the one and the other can be broken in an instant. But the invisible masters that reign in our innermost selves are safe from every effort at revolt, and only yield to the slow wearing away of centuries. (Bon, 104-105)

The Villagers in *The Lottery* are an example of that, they keep the lottery alive even though they forgot about most of the rituals and even the color of the black box that they use to put the names inside is faded away and it is not the original instrument that used in the past. (Jackson, 2004). Moreover, this lottery has been conducted for years and no one dares to oppose it. Thus, this is the real power of tradition.

Another characteristic that Le Bon asserts is that a leader must be one of those who is hypnotized by the mob idea himself. It most possesses him to the degree that nothing outside it matter, nothing is more important than the idea so he could transfer it to the other people who follow him.

He constitutes the first element towards the organisation of heterogeneous crowds, and paves the way for their organisation in sects; in the meantime he

directs them. A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master. (Bon, 144)

Mr. Summers is one of the most important characters in the story, he plays the role of the leader of the crowd. He is the one who initiate the lottery by preparing the slips of papers and make sure that everyone is there on time and will participate in the lottery. He has been more successful in convincing the villagers to use paper slips instead of wooden chips when drawing for the lottery. (Munirah, 3) The lottery begins when Mr. Summers arrives and said “guess we better get started, get this over with, so’s we can go back to work.” (Jackson, 206) So, the lottery did not start until he shows up and instruct them because they are servile flock who are unable to do anything without a master.

Crimes committed by crowds often follow a distinct pattern. The usual motive behind such acts is a powerful suggestion, and those who participate are later convinced that they acted out of a sense of duty, which differs greatly from the motivations of an ordinary criminal. (Bon, 197) The typical traits of criminal crowds are exactly the same as those found in all crowds: susceptibility to suggestion, gullibility, instability, and the amplification of both positive and negative emotions, along with the display of certain forms of morality, among other characteristics. (ibid, 198)

Tessie Hutchinson the unlucky winner of the lottery faced the criminal crowds. She stands in middle pleading for her life constantly repeating that It is not fair but no one listened to her ““It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.” (Jackson, 210-211) The crowd just needed a suggestion a signal from Mr. Summers to begin stoning her. Everyone participated in this crime her friends, neighbours, kids, and even her son, those who used to care about her wellness now are ready to kill her. (Bojan, 2023)

While doing so, the villagers think that it is their duty to stone her to death, no one hesitate or think that it would be wrong to do such heinous act because they are convinced that it is something normal to do. (Brodowicz, 2024)

Fully aware of the significance of their duty, they start by establishing a kind of tribunal. In doing so, the naivety of crowds and their basic understanding of justice quickly become apparent. (Bon, 199)

6. Conclusion

Shirley Jackson's "*The Lottery*" serves as a profound exploration of mob mentality and its alignment with Gustave Le Bon's theories on crowd psychology. Through her depiction of the villagers' unwavering compliance with a brutal tradition, Jackson vividly illustrates how the "collective mind" can dominate individual judgment and morality. Le Bon's concept of the crowd's susceptibility to emotional influence rather than rational thought is mirrored in the story's portrayal of communal behavior, where tradition eclipses personal ethics.

The analysis underscores the perilous consequences of conformity and highlights the erosion of individual agency when submerged in group dynamics. Jackson's narrative not only critiques the dangers of unexamined rituals but also provides a broader commentary on the impact of societal norms on human behavior. By integrating Le Bon's theories, this paper illuminates the intricate ways in which crowd psychology influences actions and decisions, ultimately offering valuable insights into the interplay between individual and collective identity in the face of authority and tradition.

Thus, it becomes evident that understanding mob mentality is crucial for addressing contemporary issues of conformity and groupthink. The story serves as a cautionary tale, urging vigilance against the perils of blind adherence to societal norms and the erosion of personal responsibility. In an era where collective actions continue to shape societal and cultural landscapes, Jackson's "*The Lottery*" remains a poignant reminder of the importance of critical thinking and individual moral integrity amidst the pressures of conformity and tradition.

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