

A MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF SHIRLEY JACKSON'S 'THE LOTTERY'

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ABSTRACT

A literary work is a product of a social condition reflection when the work is being written. There are questions how literature relates to society: its social situation, its economic, social, and political system, and so forth. Thus, this will deal with Marxism literary theory concerning with an attempt to describe and define the influence of literature in society and vice versa.

This paper will aim at figuring out a Marxist Interpretation on Ideology, Society, and Rebellion in Shirley Jackson's short story. The paper will start with the discussion of Marxism literary theory, then the Marxist Interpretation on Shirley Jackson's short story 'The Lottery'.

Key words: literary, marxism, ideology

Introduction

If criticism is the main concern to deal with a text, a literary theory will then follow its criticism procedures. Anything can be literature; and some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness and some have literariness thrust upon them. Literary cannot in fact be 'objectively' defined.

As people mature and acquire an education, their ability to analyze, their understanding of human beings, and their appreciation of artistic craftsmanship should increase. Then, the study of literature is an essential component in this growth of reflection. *Socrates* finally said, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living".

Marxism Literary Theory

Marxism literary theory comes from the philosophical concept of Marxism, which is proposed by Karl Marx, a German Philosopher. Marx reverses

this formulation and argues that all mental (ideological) systems are the products of real social and economic existence. The material interests of the dominant social class determine how people see human existence, individual, and collective. Legal system for example, is not the pure manifestation of human or divine reason, but ultimately reflects the interest of the dominant class in particular historical periods (Selden, 1997:89).

Within Marx's dialectical account of history is the idea that a given individual's social being is determined by larger political and economic forces. Simply stated, the social class into which a person is born determines the outlook and viewpoints.

Marx then expands this concept of determination into one of the central concepts of Marxism---that of base and superstructure. Marx, in this respect, emphasizes the stress upon the distinction between *BASE* (or basis) and *SUPERSTRUCTURE* (ideology, politics). The base is the economic system on which the superstructure rests; cultural activities, such as philosophy or literature belong in the superstructure. To Marxist critics, a society's economic base determines the interests and styles of its literature; it is this relationship between determining base and determined superstructure that is the main point of interest for Marxist critics. In other words, Marxist sees the social base as essentially economic in nature, and the superstructure as constituting the world of mental activities --- ideas, beliefs, philosophies, and (in the opinion of some but not all Marxists, art and literature) (Hawthorne, 98).

In terms of ideology, Marx believes that because the base determines the superstructure; it inevitably supports the ideologies of the base. Ideologies are the changing ideas, values and feelings through which individuals experience their societies. They present the dominant ideas and values as the beliefs of society as a whole, thus preventing individuals from seeing how society actually functions.

Central to Marx's understanding of society is the concept of ideology. As an economic determinist, Marx thought that the system of production was the most basic fact in social life. Workers created the value of manufactured goods, but the owners of the factories reaped most of the economic rewards. Since the middle classes consume literature, for the most part, it tends to support the capitalists ideology, at least in countries where that ideology is dominant.

According to Marxist, literature reflects those social institutions out which it emerges and itself a social institution with a particular ideological functions. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism: think how often the quest for wealth traditionally defines characters. So, Marxist generally view and consider

literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era (Abrams 149). Literature reflects an author's base or analysis of class relations. The base is determined by economic structure of society.

Further, some of the core principles of Marxist thought that reality can be defined and understood, society shapes consciousness, social and economic conditions directly influence how and what we believe and value. And Marxism details a plan for changing the world from a place of bigotry, hatred, and conflict due to class struggle to a classless society where wealth, opportunity, and education are accessible for all people (Bressler, 211).

Marxist critics not only study these relations between literature and society, but also have their clearly defined conception of what these relations should be, both in our present society and in a future 'classless' society (Wellek, Warren, 1963:94).

Marxist critics, in this respect, interpret literature in terms of ideology. Writers who sympathize with the working classes and their struggle are regarded favorably. Writers who support the ideology of the dominant classes are condemned. Naturally, critics of the Marxist school differ in breadth and sympathy the way other critics do. Further, Marxist literary criticism maybe thought of as a reaction to many of the rigid theories of the New Critics. Unlike the New Critics, who saw the text as a self-contained whole, Marxists generally focus on the unresolved tensions within works of literature.

Similarly, although Marxist criticism has both influenced by structuralism criticism and post-structuralisms criticism, it greatly differs from them in its refusal to separate literature and language from society. Marxist criticism is materialist, so it has more in common with theories that focus upon how literature functions within social, political, and economic structures, than it does with theories that focus only upon the text. Marxist criticism has had influence on feminism, new historicism, and most recently, cultural studies.

Through this paper, I would like to use Marxist Interpretation due to ideology, society, and rebellion in Shirley Jackson's short story 'The Lottery'. In *The Lottery*, there exists a condition where capitalist society presses the classless society; the classless society has no opportunities and rights to be against the condition and the tradition that they think as a fear. Moreover, they do not do anything live happily and peacefully.

Discussion

Summary of the story

The lottery was first published in 1948. Shirley Jackson (1919 - 1965) was born in San Francisco and spent most of her early life in California. After her marriage in 1940 she lived in a quiet rural community in Vermont.

There was a traditional ritual that was usually done by the people of a village to carry on a kind of lottery. The historical background of the lottery seems to be a kind of sacrifice by the people for a better life condition. The lottery is done to determine who will get turn to be sacrificed. Most of the time the one being drawn as the offering, will meet his or her death.

When the lottery time has come, usually by June 26 or 27, all the people of the village no matter they are young or old female or male gather in the central square of the village to join the lottery.

The lottery is done by calling every member of the village people's name to take their turn in order to take one of a wooden chip which has been placed in a black box. There is only one wooden chip which has been marked by a black spot on it. Any body who gets the chip with the black spot will be the one to be sacrificed. The people will then throw stones to the person until he or she comes to his or her death.

The lottery equipments have undergone many adjustments for the long use. The black box is not the original box as it used to be, and the wooden chips have been changed into pieces of paper. Besides that, the essence of the lottery has also experienced changing, whether in the ritual form or in the meaning. Moreover, the condition of the village itself is not as what the village looked like years before. There has been much advancement, and the villager's way of thinking get better as to giving up the lottery. However, this seems to be a culture that it is not easy to get rid of. So the lottery is only conducted as a matter of traditional heritage which has lost its essential meaning.

It is described that the lottery was conducted by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. The black box grew shabbier each year, by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

The village has done the lottery so many times that they only half listened to the official directions most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and call each name

one by one. Every person seemed to be nervous if he/she might get the black spotted folded paper.

When the time came to Tessie Hutchinson to draw the lottery, she turned out to be the one who got the paper with the black spot on it. "It's Tessie," Mr. Summers said, and his voice was hushed. "Show us her paper Bill." (Tessie's husband) Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of the paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

"All right, folks," Mr. Summers said. "Let's finish quickly." The piles of stones the boys had collected earlier was ready, there were stones on the ground with blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar, "Come on," she said. "Hurry up."

Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands and she said, gasping for breath, I can't run at all. You'll have to go a head and I'll catch with you." The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on one side of her head.

Old man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her. She came o her death.

As stated above, Marxism Theory, aims at changing the world from a place of bigotry, hatred, and conflict due to class struggle to classless society where wealth and opportunity are accessible for all people. Developed by Karl Marx, Marxism then expresses its purpose through literature, as a cultural production, and as a form of ideology, one that legitimizes the power of ruling class. Through the literary work, in the nineteenth century, Marx criticized the exploitation of the working classes, or proletariat, by the capitalist classes who owned the mines, factories, and other resources of national economies. In this respect, I would like to show a Marxist interpretation of Shirley Jackson's short story '*The Lottery*'.

In *The Lottery*, there is such a tradition, involving New England villagers to select and to be selected for a lottery, which is finally the selected person will be stoned death. It is described that men control the lottery; the character of Mr.

Summer is particularly interesting in this respect. He is given a special responsibility and the position of leading the lottery. For example, Tessie's most grievous fault is suggesting her married daughter be considered a member of the Hutchinson household for the second stage of the lottery.

Based on the concept of Marxism, *The Lottery* is considered an ideological mechanism; that is to say 'it serves to reinforce the village's hierarchical social order by instilling the villagers with unconscious fear that if they resist this order they might be selected in the next lottery. The main ideology in this short story is capitalism. The village itself is a modern, capitalist society. Identified as the top of the social ladder, Mr. Summers owns the village's largest business and he is also the village's mayor. Then there is Mr. Graves, the village's second most powerful government official; he is the postmaster. And then finally there is Mr. Martin, who has economically advantageous position of the village grocer. These three men, identified as the three most powerful men in the village, run the lottery. When the lottery is not being run, the box is stored in one of their homes or places of business.

However important Mr. Graves, and Mr. Martin may be, Mr. Summer is still the most powerful man in town. Here we have to ask a Marxist question: what relationship is there between his interests as the town's wealthiest businessman and his authority to officiate the lottery? When Bill Hutchinson forces his wife, Tessie, to open her lottery slip to the crowd, Jackson writes, "It had a black spot on it; the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with a heavy pencil in his coal-company office". At the very moment when the lottery's victim is revealed, Jackson appends a subordinate clause in which the blackness of Mr. Summers' coal business being transferred to the black on the lottery slip. At one level at least, evil in Jackson's text is linked to a disorder, promoted by capitalism, in the material organization of modern society. But it still remains to be explained *how evil* of the lottery is tied to this disorder of capitalist organization.

The capitalist society portrayed in this short story, which is divided into "the haves", the bourgeoisie, and "the have-nots", the proletariat, also "the powerful" and "the powerless".

Rules of participation seem to hold important role in the lottery. The first of these rules is for those, who control the village economically and politically will administer the lottery. The remaining rules also tell much about who has and who doesn't have power in the village's social hierarchy. These remaining rules determine who gets to choose slips in the lottery's first, second, and the third's rounds. The lottery's democratic illusion, then, is an ideological effect that prevents the villagers from criticizing the class structure of the society. However,

this illusion alone does not account for the full force of the lottery over the village. The lottery also reinforces a village work ethic, which distracts the villager's attention from the division of labor that keeps women powerless in their homes, and Mr. Summers powerful in his coal company.

In the story's middle, Old Man Warner emerges as an apologist for this work ethic when he recalls an old village adage, "*Lottery in June, corn is heavy soon*". At one level, the lottery seems to be a modern version of planting ritual that might have prepared the villagers for the collective work necessary to produce a harvest. As magical as Warner's proverb may seem, it establishes an unconscious connection between the lottery and the work that is revealed by the entirety of his response when told the other villages are doing away with the lottery:

Used to be a saying about "Lottery in June, corn is heavy soon." There's always been a lottery" (p.297).

But, Warner does not explain how the lottery functions to motivate work. At the end of his remark about lottery, Warner laments Summers' democratic conduct: "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody". Yet, this criticism obscures the fact that Summers is not about to undermine the lottery, even, if he does modernize it, since by the running the lottery he also encourages a work ethic, which serves his interests.

Tessie, after all, is a woman whose role as a housewife tries to show her disagreement with the process of the lottery when the turn to choose the lottery in her husband's hand. But, finally, she was stoned because of the lottery. In stoning Tessie, the villagers treat her as a scapegoat of a rebellion against the rules. The rebellion is channeled by the lottery and its attendant ideology away from their proper objectscapitalism and capitalist patriarchs--into anger at the rebellious victims of capitalists' social organization. Like Tessie, the villagers cannot articulate their rebellion because the massive force of ideology stands in the way.

The Lottery is metaphor for the unconscious ideological mechanism of scapegoat. In choosing Tessie through the lottery, Jackson has attempted to show us whom the village might have chosen if the lottery had been in fact an election. But by presenting this election as an arbitrary lottery, she gives us an image of the village's blindness to its own motives. Marxism, in this respect, reminds the class people to give a chance for women in taking part to eliminate the bigotry and the oppression.

Then, a question is: how do we take such a pessimistic vision of social transformation? If anything can be said against "The Lottery", it is probably that it exaggerates the monolithic character of capitalists' ideological hegemony. No

doubt, capitalism has subtle ways of redirecting the frustrations; it endangers away from a critique of capitalism itself.

Closing Remark

Marxism literary theory is essentially to review a certain literary work on the basic idea that it tells about a class struggle. To clarify the class struggle can be in terms of two binary oppositions such as opposing the powerless to the powerful, the lower social class to the higher social class, the young to the old, the people oppressed to the oppressor, the people to the government, the children to the parents, the woman to the man, and so forth.

The Lottery is a short story that describes the oppression, done by the capitalist society to the classless society in terms of fulfilling the capitalists' society needs and interests. *The lottery* is an ideological mechanism. It serves to reinforce the village's hierarchical social order by instilling the villages with unconsciousness fear that they resist this order.

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