

The Square and the Crowd: Public Assimilation in Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”

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<https://ss.damray.com>

OPEN ACCESS

DOI: 10.26855/oajrcss.2022.10.008

Received: September 20, 2022

Accepted: October 18, 2022

Published: October 31, 2022

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Abstract

Shirley Jackson’s 1948 short story “The Lottery” relies heavily upon its setting of the village square. This essay focuses on the function of the square as a representation of public space in the story. By triggering out the image of the Athenian agora and the Roman forum, the square as a center of public life in the village functions as a political enclosure in which the villagers’ psychological unity and imaginative rationalization of public order are strengthened. Such a space, though it seems to allow for the manifestation of diverse discourses, gradually silences dissents by involving the participants in a process of psychological assimilation, which leads to a loss of subjectivity among individuals. In its transformation of the villagers from the individual beings to members of the collective, the square reveals its duplicity—its perceived openness belies its function as a political enclosure in which the complete process of public assimilation can be achieved.

Keywords

Shirley Jackson, The Lottery, square, public space, the crowd

Introduction

The short story “The Lottery,” published in *The New Yorker* in 1948, is one of Shirley Jackson’s best-known works. The narrative describes an annual rite called “the lottery,” held in the square of a fictional village, and ends shockingly in a collective criminal act by the crowd, with the “winner” cast as the scapegoat. Because of its surprising twist and thematic insight, the story received a deluge of critical responses after publication, but seldom did they address the physical space of the story—the square. The square as a public space of assembly plays a vital role in the story’s description of the irrational unconsciousness of the crowd. This essay focuses on Jackson’s delineation of the square, and its function as a form of control over the villagers in the story.

1. A Political Enclosure for Imaginative Rationalization

The plot of “The Lottery” relies heavily upon the setting of the village square—the representative public space for the co-construction of community in which the sacrificial ritual is held. In its opening scene, as the villagers assemble, the story introduces the square’s location with an emphasis on its civil function in the unnamed village. Set “between the post office and the bank” (Jackson, 1949, p. 291)—institutions that represent the village’s communication and financial cores—the square is presented as its political and economic center. It is consequently related to the daily life of the villagers, whose actions in turn reinforce the politicality of the space. Such public terrain both physically and psychologically, “either in conformance with laws or transgressing them,” helps “recreate the legal contexts” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 129). It is within this constructed sphere that political order becomes widely accepted, and unconsciously influences the recognition and the behavior of every citizen.

To some extent, the square in the story can be seen as an archetype of the Athenian agora and its developed form, the Roman forum—a combination of an agora and acropolis. An agora, whose literal meaning is “assembly,” or “to meet,” was a central public space that accommodated “commercial, educational, religious and social activities,” including “theatrical and gymnastic performances and special celebrations” in ancient Greek city-states (Caves, 2005, p. 7). This developed into the forum in Roman times, in which the public, irregular space was not simply an open square, but rather a “whole precinct, complex in layout” (Mumford, 1961, p. 222). Once so enclosed, the square was transformed into a multifunctional space, into which people, as both spectators and participants, would be drawn “for shopping, for worship, for gossip,” and most importantly, “for taking part [...] in public affairs or in private lawsuits” (p. 222). The square in “The Lottery” is an open area, whose location (between the post office and the bank, as previously stated) indicates its status as the center of the public life in the village. Similarly to the Athenian agora and the Roman forum, this space is used for various civic activities, including “square dances, [...] the Halloween program,” and, crucially, the lottery (Jackson, 1949, p. 292). Jackson delineates the villagers’ gathering in the square in detail, which creates a deceptively peaceful, harmonious atmosphere at the beginning of the story, and unfolds the public life of the small village. The children assemble there for “boisterous play,” and to talk about “the classroom and the teacher” and “books and reprimands;” the adults speak of “planting and rain, tractors and taxes,” and exchange gossip (p. 291). These characteristics make the square an archetype of Hellenistic open space, in which people participate in unifying activities and trade information with each other.

The production of such a space, seemingly endowed with the fundamental tenets of democracy, is necessarily political in essence. In his analysis of the open area in a city, Mumford (1961) compares the forum to its Hellenistic prototype, and explains that the former not only functions as a public area, holding activities such as general assembly and religious congregation, but also signifies “a higher degree of formal order,” which unites individuals in a greater whole (p. 223). In this case, the square as a place for civic unification serves as a tool with which to consolidate order and political deception. Mumford expounds on the forum’s political function:

... [T]he new Rome of aggressive fact and reality [...] was concealed beneath the toga of the traditional Rome of patriotic aspiration and Stoic dream. Who could doubt here the reality of that ideal Rome, under whose enfolding law and peace, order was order, justice was justice, efficiency was efficiency, not masks for rapacity, greed, lust, and cruelty on a gigantic collective scale. In the Forum one might remember, without ironic reserves, indeed with honest admiration, the moral meditations and the duty-bound activities [...] Here [...] one might easily forget the stinking pits of the carniarium or the orgy of torture that daily took place in the nearby arenas. (p. 223)

This excerpt explains how the politicization of the square means that the individual is integrated into the collective scale, masked and controlled by a sense of collectivity upon stepping into the public enclosure, and becoming a participant who forgets the human morality. In “The Lottery,” the public space, with the square as its representative, is produced politically, and within it activities are held to strengthen the villagers’ acceptance of certain political orders and constructed truths. The first scene, in which the citizens assemble in the square, begins with the gathering of the children and ends with the arrival of the grown-ups. This serves as a situational metaphor for the formation of the crowd, and of the collective consciousness, which rationalizes its behavior. Critics cite Le Bon’s Theory of the Crowd to explain this process of rationalization (HuZhe, 2019, p. 159), but often fail to point out that the establishment and strengthening of the mechanism of collective naturalization hidden behind it—or in Le Bon’s (2001) words, the “mental unity of the crowds” (p. 2)—is highly dependent upon the open, political space of the square.

The process of rationalization is evident in the fact of the lottery, a ceremony that draws all the villagers onto the square on a specific day each year. In fact, it is the fixity of this assembly in a public enclosure that transforms and

strengthens the identity of the villagers: from individuals into the participants in the greater whole. This transformation of self-identification in turn leads the individual to believe in the legitimacy of the activity, and ignore the perversity hidden behind it. The square provides a space for the process of socio-psychological discipline, based on which people are gradually conditioned to accept certain discourses, and consequently lose the ability to resist. The villagers in the story have never questioned whether the lottery is morally reasonable. If the words of Old Man Warner—the representative supporter of the ceremony—are scrutinized, they reveal two reasons for the strengthening of the ritual over time. One is the acceptance of the proverb “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (Jackson, 1949, p. 297). Such a time-tested saying is effectively a statement of cause and effect, in which the former event (the lottery) causes the latter (the ripening of the corn). If interpreted through Hume’s philosophy of causation, however, this relationship between events is an imaginatively construct—a product of experience and the constant conjunction of phenomena. In this case, as they enter the square in which the saying has haunted them year in and year out, the villagers are unconsciously forced to immerse themselves in the politicized enclosure. They gradually internalize the causation, which further governs their actions. Such psychological internalization bears out Le Bon’s (2001) analysis of the psyche of the crowds, in which he explains that when individuals become part of a group, they tend to “enter upon a purely automatic and unconscious state, in which they are guided by suggestion” (p. 104). Le Bon’s “suggestion” equates to the scheme of causation in the story—the assumed connection between the lottery and the harvest—that is rooted in the crowd’s mind.

2. An Ostensible Discursive Field: Silence of the Other in Public Spaces

The square, as a political enclosure for rationalization, provides an assumed space for free conversation. In this sense, the story itself is an archetype of various forms of public discussion. Such public terrain is vital in democratic societies, because its presence indicates the possibility of democratic participation. In his exposition of the relationship between such spaces and individual citizens, Low(2003) points out that the social production of public space is “dialogic”—an “interactive process [...] creating new [...]social structures,” and is “dialectical, [...] oppositional, [...] but ultimately politically transformative, uniting contrasting points of view and perspectives through new political and social alternatives” (p. 311). In many situations, however, though the (physical or virtual) public space encourages diverse discourses and thereby spawns a larger discursive field, these different voices are ultimately normalized into a legitimate paradigm, which limits the whole. Although on the surface it permits the presence of varying voices, in essence, such a domain gradually standardizes the boundaries of utterances, and eliminates the conflicting ideas.

Jackson’s description of the villagers’ discussions during the ritual reflects this standardization in its consensual re- fute of the dissidents. When Mr. and Mrs. Adams, for example, mention that the lottery is to be given up in other places, Old Man Warner insists that those who quit lotteries are a “pack of crazy fools,” and will be punished (p. 297). By labeling the dissidents “fools,” Warner—as his name indicates—sends a warning to those who might potentially threaten the existence of the present order. His negative attitude toward the abolishment of the lottery represents the voice of the majority in this small village, while the Adams’ prudent disapproval of the ceremony represents the heterogeneity of the minority, and is instantly rejected and silenced. There is a sharp contrast in the utterances of Mr. and Mrs. Adams and Old Man Warner. While the former only dare to implicate their slight objection to the ritual, referring to its abolishment in other villages, Old Man Warner decisively negates the possible rationality of their suggestion. Such instant silencing of conflicting ideas within a crowd reflects Le Bon’s (2001) “conservative instincts” (p. 26) of the collective. Possessing a sense of conservativeness, the crowd is governed by the “unconscious horror of all novelty capable of changing the essential conditions of their existence” (p. 26).The lottery’s supporters, represented by Old Man Warner, are troubled by the idea of abolishing the ritual, as it signifies the fallibility of the tradition and the potential for change. This explains Warner’s emphasis on the ceremony’s longevity—“[t]here’s *always* been a lottery” (Jackson, 1949, p. 297, italics in the original)—and his petulant attitude, which indicates a level of anxiety among the crowd.

This sense of collective anxiety is mitigated when a capitalized Other appears—Mrs. Hutchinson, who nearly forgets the day of the lottery and is finally chosen as the scapegoat. In fact, the purpose of the ceremony as a whole is to create an Other, to distract the villagers from their collective anxiety and disagreement about the activity’s legitimacy. The strategy works: in the final scene, when Tessie Hutchinson is about to be stoned to death, Mr. Adams, the former imprudent dissident, is “in the front of the crowd of villagers” (p. 302). Both Hutchinson, as the chosen Other, and the dissident part of Adams’ split self, are expelled, disappearing at the decisive moment. The automatic banishment of dissent in the crowd trains the individual to self-silence. By highlighting this alienation of individuals, Jackson foregrounds the silence of individuals in the multifunctional square. There is a scene in the narrative in which the villagers, being familiar with the procedure of the lottery, “only half listened to the directions” and “were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around” (p. 296). This description echoes Le Bon’s (2001) criticism of crowds who “cannot appeal to the influence of reason, deprived of all critical faculty,” and “cannot be otherwise than excessively credulous” (p. 14).

Within such a politicized enclosure, the individuals are left in a state of paralysis, which leads to their automatic self-silence and enmity towards the Other.

3. Conclusion

The square in “The Lottery” is a space that accommodates the village’s various activities, traditions, shared memories, and collective recollections. As the center of the public life, the space becomes a political enclosure, in which the villagers, self-identifying as participants of the whole, are weaved into an unconscious unity, and gradually internalize the constructed causation implanted by the crowd. Although such a space is seemingly democratic, and apparently allows various voices, it leads participants in the ceremony to eliminate automatically the existence of the Other, and even to silence the dissident self. In its transformation of the villagers from the individual beings to members of the collective, the square reveals its duplicity—its perceived openness belies its function as a political enclosure in which the complete process of public assimilation can be achieved.

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