



## The Lottery

by Shirley Jackson

### Introduction

“The Lottery” is Shirley Jackson’s famous 1948 short story about a fictional small town in America with a yearly ritual involving human sacrifice. Every June 27, villagers of all ages gather to draw slips of paper from a box. The “winner” is stoned to death by the other villagers using rocks gathered by the children before the 10:00 am event. Amid rumors that nearby towns have given up the lottery, the villagers continue to accept and perform their local tradition as they believe it ensures a good harvest. Old Man Warner says “there’s always been a lottery” as he proudly steps up to draw a slip of paper for his 77<sup>th</sup> time. He also alludes to another justification as he cites an old proverb, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.” The story ends with the “winner,” Tessie Hutchinson, trying to convince the crowd that gathers around her that this year’s lottery proceedings were rushed and therefore unfair.

“The Lottery” captured the attention of many people at the time – many were offended, some wanted to know where the “fictional” small town was in real life so they could witness the lottery themselves. Today it continues to pull on the imaginations of readers, and, in a classroom context, it can provide an opportunity for meaningful exploration of issues related to gambling even though, as Homer Simpson discovered to his chagrin, it is not about gambling or lotteries in our sense.

### Instructional strategies

1. Read aloud (or have students read) *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson. If you do not have the text, it is available at [https://sites.middlebury.edu/individualandthesociety/files/2010/09/jackson\\_lottery.pdf](https://sites.middlebury.edu/individualandthesociety/files/2010/09/jackson_lottery.pdf). Then facilitate a class discussion or have students work in groups to discuss one or both of the following. The questions below might provide a starting point for the discussions.

#### Rational-irrational

- a. Would you characterize the behaviour of the townsfolk in the story as “rational” or “irrational”? Why? Use elements in the story to explain your position.
- b. Millions of Canadians buy lottery tickets every week. Each ticket has about a 1 in 14 million chance of winning the jackpot. Would you characterize the behaviour of regular lottery players as “rational” or “irrational”? Why?
- c. Why might someone engage in irrational behaviour? Illustrate your ideas with other examples that seem to involve irrational behaviour.
- d. Might any of those reasons explain any irrational behaviour you identified in either of the examples above? Is there any one reason that explains all irrational behaviour? Why or why not?

#### Note to teachers!

In the following discussion, students may note that in the story one person pays so that the community supposedly can benefit. In modern lotteries, the reverse may seem to be true. They may need to be prompted to remember that some of the profits from government lotteries are used to fund community programs and to think about how this impacts the issues. You might also want to draw attention to [reports](#) that suggest people on low incomes spend disproportionate amounts on the lottery while “insufficient funding” is invested back into disadvantaged communities in spite of the high rates of play by people from those communities.

**Who benefits? – who pays?**

- a. Old Man Warner’s statement, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” seems to imply a view about cost and benefit. In this case, who benefits from the “lottery” and who pays?
- b. How does this compare and contrast with the case of modern-day lotteries?
- c. Is the distribution of costs and benefits fair in either or both cases? Explain.

**Marketing behaviour – marketing ideas**

- a. Some people in the town seemed to be questioning the value of the lottery. What arguments does Old Man Warner provide to bolster support for the lottery? Why might those arguments not have been effective in “some places” where they have quit lotteries?
  - b. How do those arguments compare and contrast to modern marketing for lotteries and casinos?
  - c. What key messages or ideas dominate in the marketing of lotteries or casinos? How might these messages impact the thinking or behaviour of different groups of people?
2. After discussing at least some of the ideas and questions in strategy 1, you might ask students to write a short essay on a topic such as the following.

While the “lottery” in Shirley Jackson’s story is very different than the lotteries many people buy tickets for today, how might her story help us think about gambling in our own time?

3. After discussing at least some of the ideas and questions in strategy 1, invite students to explore (e.g., by doing an Internet search) the ways “The Lottery” inspired people to adapt the story to different art forms (short films, comic strips, etc.). Then have them design or create an artistic response (cartoon, painting, [portraiture](#), film, story or poem) related to gambling and Shirley Jackson’s story, “The Lottery.”

**Gambling literacy****Big ideas**

- Gambling can be a fun recreational activity but can also lead to significant harm
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage gambling in our midst
- We can learn how to control gambling by examining the different ways people have thought about it, engaging in critical self-reflection and listening to each other

**Competencies**

- Assess the complex ways in which gambling is linked to human culture and impacts the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Assess the ways in which material goods are distributed in society, how those goods are valued and how this is related to gambling policies and behaviours
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., win vs lose or success vs failure) and assess their limitations in addressing complex social issues like gambling
- Consider dominant social discourses and assess their impact on the distribution of risk and benefit associated with gambling
- Explore and appreciate the diverse cognitive, social, emotional and physical factors that impact gambling behaviour
- Develop personal and social skills to reflect on and manage personal behaviour and choices related to gambling

For a complete look at the gambling literacy competencies, as defined by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, see: [www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf](http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/iminds/hs-gambling-curriculum.pdf)



## Links to Curriculum

### First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story

### English Language Arts 9-12

#### Big ideas

- Texts are socially, culturally, geographically and historically constructed
- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens

#### Competencies (English Language Arts 9)

- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize and identify the role of personal, social, and cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts
- Recognize how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identity
- Exchange ideas and viewpoints to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways

#### Competencies (Focused Literary Studies 10-11, English 12)

- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize personal, social, and cultural contexts, as well as values and perspectives in texts, including race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, place
- Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understanding and extend thinking
- Construct meaningful personal connections between self, text, and world
- Use writing and design processes to plan, develop, and create engaging and meaningful literary, imaginative, and informational texts for a variety of purposes and audiences
- Respond to text in personal, creative, and critical ways
- Synthesize ideas from a variety of texts/sources
- Transform ideas and information to create original texts, using new or unfamiliar genres, forms, structures, and styles

### Arts Education 9

#### Big ideas

- Identity is explored, expressed, and impacted through arts experiences.
- The arts provide opportunities to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of people from a variety of times, places, and cultures.

#### Competencies

- Demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of personal, social, cultural, historical, and environmental contexts in relation to the arts
- Explore relationships between identity, place, culture, society, and belonging through artistic experiences
- Take creative risks to experience and express thoughts, emotions, ideas, and meaning



- Create personally meaningful bodies of artistic works that demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of social, cultural, environmental, and historical contexts

#### Arts Education (Visual Arts 10-12, Media Arts 11)

##### Big ideas

- Traditions, perspectives, worldviews, and stories can be shared through [art] (Visual Arts 10)
- [Art] offer unique ways exploring one's identity and sense of belonging. (Visual Arts 10)
- The [arts] reflect the interconnectedness of the individual, community, history, and society (Visual/Media Arts 11)
- [Art provides] a unique way to represent self, identity, and cultural expression (Visual/Media Arts 11)
- Ideas and beliefs within a [work of art] have the power to effect change (Visual Arts 12)

##### Competencies

- Investigate and identify [ways to use art to reflect on, or respond to,] social and environmental issues
- Communicate ideas and express emotions through [art]
- Use [art] to communicate and respond to social and environmental issues occurring locally, regionally and globally
- Create personally meaningful [artistic works] that demonstrate an understanding of, and appreciation for personal, social, cultural, environmental, and historical contexts