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Bureaucracy, Compliance and Statistical Improbability in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"

[1] Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" might at first be considered a warning about residents of an ordinary farming village becoming a murderous mob possessed by magical thinking. By selecting one of their own through ostensibly random means then stoning the victim collectively to death, the villagers dissolve individual culpability into shared ritual: everyone participates, so no one bears sole responsibility, and their shared murder transmutes into shared hope for better harvest. Since its 1948 publication in *The New Yorker*, "The Lottery" has captivated readers with its gruesome portrayal of redemptive violence and sacrificial economy. The magazine received a torrent of mail in response; the most it had ever received for a work of fiction. Some readers deemed Jackson's work to be "outrageous, gruesome, or just utterly pointless", and they "threatened to cancel their subscriptions" (Franklin). The visceral reaction to Jackson's tale first reveals something uncomfortable about the human capacity for violence; not only the aberrant violence of madmen, but the systematic, procedural, and oddly mundane violence that societies institutionalize in the name of order.

[2] This essay argues that "The Lottery" - *this* village's lottery - is not as random as it seems or once might have been. Instead, it is now manipulated by the village elites to protect themselves from selection while preserving the authority that enables this protection. As a ritual still performed by neighboring towns ("some larger where it takes two days to conclude" (Jackson 1)), this village's lottery could not have reached its present equilibrium through impartial selection alone. But if we were to consider it instead as a form of state control, legitimized through bureaucracy, procedures, and the optical illusion of randomness, the lottery could then be seen for what it truly is: a rigged exploitation of the status-quo.

[3] Three analyses support this claim. First, the bureaucratic structure of “The Lottery” is investigated, arguing that the current administrative arrangement concentrates power in the hands of the lottery officials, who seem to benefit from the lack of oversight and absence of transparency, that tradition has normalized, and social pressure discourages anyone from questioning. Second, a psychological analysis examines how causality, influence, and compliance enable social control, and the parallels employed in the village to control the lottery. Finally, a statistical model analyzes the village’s dynamics and explains the rational actions every villager should take were they truly forced to participate in the lottery. This model, coupled with a population simulation based on 1940 US Census data, demonstrates how it is nearly impossible for some households to survive under fair conditions. Together, these analyses demonstrate that Jackson’s story is not merely about blind tradition but about how power structures disguise themselves as chance. A lottery in another larger village might have been a fable about generic cruelty and the observance of rituals, but Jackson’s lottery, *this* village’s lottery, is about a few in power who administer and legitimize violence to maintain control, all while fabricating an illusion of fairness for the villagers themselves.

[4] Maintaining this illusion requires administration, and administration, historically, requires settled society. The agricultural revolution accelerated the transition from small hunter-gatherer bands to settled agricultural communities, demanding new forms of social organization: hierarchies and social classes. Yuval Noah Harari, in his seminal work *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, argues that humans dominate the planet because of their unique capacity to believe in shared fictions and imagined realities. “Unlike lying, an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief persists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world” (34). If large-scale human cooperation requires shared fictions, it also requires institutions to maintain them. Someone must interpret the sacred texts; someone must enforce the laws; someone must administer the lottery. In the village, this role falls to Mr. Summers, who holds absolute authority over the lottery’s mechanics, prepares the slips of paper the night before the drawing, decides when the lottery begins, determines who draws and in what

order, and interprets any ambiguities in the rules. He is not merely an administrator but also the architect of the lottery's continued existence, akin to the head priest, though incidentally never the sacrificial lamb. This unchallenged delegation of authority might be unremarkable if the lottery did not purport to be a random affair. We are forced to question the text: If the selection of a victim is left to pure chance, why wouldn't the choice of next year's lottery administrator also be determined by a lottery?

[5] The lottery official is not only inexplicably ordained to oversee it but also enjoys a lack of oversight that is equally striking. Mr. Summers prepares the slips "the night before the lottery," and the box that holds them is then "taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company" until he was ready to take it the next morning (Jackson 3). His late arrival goes unnoticed and unquestioned as it is quickly overshadowed by the presence of Mr. Graves, who is following him and carries the stool on which the lottery box will be placed, thus shifting the villager's attention to the inauguration of the ritual. The lack of independent verification of the slips' contents and the public observation of the preparation process are both alarming, yet apparent.

[6] Jackson decides to supplement these facts with implicit symbols that together bring a notion of clericalism which stands in stark contradiction to the American secular values. The first is Mr. Graves, who serves as both the village's postmaster (a government official) and a participant in preparing the paper slips, blurring the line between administration and ritual practices. The second is the setting itself: the town square, a space that typically conjures images of the Athenian Agora or the Roman Forum for its invitation of political discourse and debate. Jackson's selection for the square is not arbitrary but instead political since it serves as a primary place where dissent is silenced and subjectivity is lost, turning the villagers from individual beings into members of a collective (Wang 250). This duplicity is not constrained to the location only. Teresa Hakaraia, analyzing Jackson's use of deliberate ambiguity, argues that the story can be read as a simultaneous critique of multiple social systems - capitalism, religion, and politics - because all of them rely on opaque processes administered by elites who claim neutrality while serving their own interests. The three-legged stool on which the black box rests, Hakaraia

suggests, symbolizes “the three pillars of society: economics, politics, and religion,” each of which has been “corrupted by their leaders” to serve private rather than collective interests (Hakaraia 137). Hakaraia’s symbolic analysis seems to suggest these pillars could be represented by the embodiment of Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves, both of whom represent property, power and authority. Coupled with Jackson’s deliberate ambiguity, the text hints to a system sustained by information asymmetry; the administrators know what the villagers do not, and this imbalance of knowledge is itself a form of power.

[7] Anthropology offers empirical support for this reading. In a 2016 study published in *Nature*, Joseph Watts et al. analyzed data from 93 early civilizations to test whether human sacrifice functioned as a mechanism of social control. Their findings were stark: human sacrifice was far more prevalent in highly stratified societies (67%) than in egalitarian ones (25%). The study concluded that sacrifice “stabilizes social stratification once it has arisen” and is typically “performed by social elites (who rarely if ever are the victims), but targets victims low in the social hierarchy” (Watts et al. 228). The village fits this pattern precisely: The ordeal is conducted by the wealthiest and most powerful men in town; the farming families simply arrive and draw. That Mr. Summers “had time and energy to devote to civic activities” (Jackson 2) signals a leisure class distinct from laborers who discuss “planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (1). The victim, Tessie Hutchinson, is a housewife who arrives late because she was washing the dishes. The stratification is never named, but it is structurally visible in who holds the box and who bears the stones.

[8] Beyond anthropological patterns, historical atrocities such as the Holocaust illuminate how bureaucracy and obedience intersect with violence. Serhat Uyurkulak, drawing on Hannah Arendt, argues that the villagers’ participation in the lottery represents “the banality of evil and instrumental reason, as seen in the bureaucratic and depersonalized execution of the ritual killing” (Uyurkulak 43). Because the lottery is administered like a census or a tax collection, its bureaucratization transforms collective murder into administrative procedure, making it easier for individuals to obey the rules without confronting the moral gravity of their complicity. Stanley

Milgram's famous obedience experiments at Yale University in 1961 demonstrated the role of administrative authority empirically: nearly two-thirds of test subjects would administer what they believed were dangerous electric shocks to another person, even when the recipient appeared to be in severe distress. The parallels between Milgram's laboratory and Jackson's village square are striking. Both scenarios feature a figure of authority whose legitimacy is assumed rather than questioned. Both depend on fictions taken at face value: participants believed electric shocks could improve learning; villagers believe sacrifice ensures a good harvest. Both took place at the symbolic center of their respective worlds: the town square where commerce and governance converge, the Yale laboratory where science is researched. Milgram found that moving the experiment away from the university diminished obedience (Milgram 3). And crucially, both cloak their proceedings in the appearance of randomness. Milgram's subjects drew slips from a hat to determine who would be the "teacher" and who the "learner"; a process that seemed fair but was in fact rigged (1). Where Milgram's experimenter commanded obedience through visible markers of authority (the experimenter had an impassive manner, a stern appearance, and was dressed in a gray technician's coat), Mr. Summers achieves the same compliance through its opposite: a round face, a jovial manner, a clean white shirt and blue jeans. His authority is no less absolute for being wrapped in neighborly warmth.

[9] If Milgram showed that authority compels obedience, subsequent research has revealed how little justification that authority requires. Ellen Langer's research on compliance, for example, demonstrated that people would accede to even nonsensical requests if a reason - any reason - was provided. In her famous study "The Role of Placebic Information in Interpersonal Interaction", colloquially known as the "copy machine study," Langer found that the word "because" dramatically increased compliance, even when the justification was tautological: "May I use the Xerox machine, because I have to make copies" achieved 93% compliance, compared to 60% for a request with no justification (Langer et al. 637). Old Man Warner provides precisely this kind of pseudo-justification: "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon." The claim is meaningless, but it provides the linguistic structure of a reason, and that structure is often enough.

[10] The psychology of compliance is closely related to the diffusion of responsibility observed with collective violence. Darley and Latané's research on bystander intervention demonstrated that people are less likely to help in emergencies when others are present, because responsibility is distributed across the group (Darley and Latané 345). The same principle applies to collective violence: when everyone participates, no one is fully responsible. The death is therefore accomplished by the crowd, not any individual. This diffusion is essential to the lottery's functioning. If one person were designated executioner, they would bear the full moral weight of the killing. As Hannah Arendt argued in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann, the architects of the Holocaust were not monsters but bureaucrats, ordinary men who committed atrocities due to their mindless submission to orders and a desire to have a good career (qtd. in Uyurkulak 47). To take a less grim example, the popular "Five Monkeys Experiment", though often cited as evidence of cultural transmission of arbitrary rules, is instructive even as a thought experiment. The story describes monkeys who are collectively punished with cold water whenever an individual reaches for a banana. The group learns to beat any member who attempts to climb toward the food, and continues doing so even after the punishment has been removed and all the original monkeys have been gradually replaced with new ones who never experienced or witnessed the cold water spray. While the experiment as commonly described never actually occurred, the parable captures something true about human behavior; people often tend to act like others in the group without questioning or revisiting the reasons behind their actions, even long after those reasons cease to exist (Intersol). Old Man Warner, who has survived seventy-seven lotteries, is the village's living embodiment of this principle. He remembers neither the lottery's origins nor its justification, only that it has always been done: "There's always been a lottery" (Jackson 6). His empty justification reveals the ritual's fragility: if its oldest defender cannot explain why the lottery exists, only that it does, then the institution persists through belief rather than experience. Yet paradoxically, his seventy-seven-year survival provides its own circular reasoning; he is alive thanks to the lottery, and the lottery persists thanks to him. Yet as the statistical analysis will demonstrate, his survival is far more likely evidence of manipulation than of chance.

[11] Shielded from scrutiny and dependent on compliance, the lottery's administrators operate freely. Yet, its most overlooked feature - and the key to understanding its injustice - might be its two-stage selection process: first a household is selected, then an individual within this household. This structure, which mirrors proxy voting systems from corporate boards to the Electoral College, creates profound inequality that the villagers either do not recognize or refuse to acknowledge. Consider the mathematics: if a village has H households and each household contains N members, then an individual's annual probability of death is a joint probability: the probability that their household is selected multiplied by the probability that they are selected within their household. If households are selected with equal probability $\frac{1}{H}$, then an individual in a household of size N faces annual risk of $\frac{1}{H} \cdot \frac{1}{N} = \frac{1}{H \cdot N}$. Considering the mean household size was 4 individuals in 1940 according to US Census data, and taking into consideration that in the village "there were only about three hundred people" (Jackson 1), it is safe to assume the village is composed of approximately 80 households, and that Jackson did not name them all in her story. The Hutchinsons, for example, with five members, face individual risk of $\frac{1}{80 \times 5} = 0.25\%$ per year. A childless couple on the other hand - such as Old Man Warner's household or Mr. Summers' - faces the risk of $\frac{1}{80 \times 2} = 0.63\%$ per year each: more than twice as high.

[12] This structural inequality has profound implications; it incentivizes procreation not out of hope but out of fear: each additional child dilutes the family's per capita risk, and if it reaches adulthood, will increase the number of households in the village, therefore decreasing everyone else's probability of getting selected. When Mr. Summers notes approvingly that the Watson boy is drawing for his family "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it" (Jackson 5), he is commenting not merely on gender roles but on household composition; a woman drawing alone faces higher risk than a household with multiple members. This two-stage structure creates game-theoretic incentives that rational villagers would recognize and exploit. Consider a widowed man with one child (a household of two facing annual risk of 0.63% each). Should he remarry? From a game-theory perspective, as a rational agent, he should take the actions that will increase his pay-off (in this case, his chances of survival). His strategy should therefore be twofold:

increase the number of members in his household, and increase the number of households in the village. Considering he only has control over the former, he will realize that if remarriage adds one person to his household, individual risk in that family drops to $\frac{1}{80 \times 3} = 0.42\%$, a 33% reduction. Marriage in this village is not merely romantic or economic but actuarial and a survival strategy; it clearly builds incentives for widowed parents in large families to marry other widows in large families, or for small families to procreate; a strategy that contradicts Mr. Summers' status, as he has no children. Any villager considering remarriage after the passing away of their spouse would evaluate not only the household size but the distribution of household sizes across the village. If most households are large (say, averaging five members), then the marginal benefit of adding one more person is relatively small. But if many households are small, the incentive to expand is stronger. The village approaches a Nash equilibrium in which household size stabilizes based on the competing pressures of child-rearing costs and lottery survival benefits.

[13] This expected equilibrium contradicts Old Man Warner's chance of survival. From a probabilistic perspective, his seventy-seven years of survival suggests he has either been extraordinarily lucky or has benefited from a system that protects certain households. The longevity of both Warner and his wife becomes evidence: if the lottery were fair, the survival of either of them would have been improbable. Determining the level of fairness can be modeled mathematically by relying on census data, and running computer-based simulations. Given the village's population of approximately three hundred people, the naive calculation of survival probability treats each lottery as an independent event in a shrinking population. Therefore, the probability of a specific individual surviving all 77 lotteries, so that the population is 300 individuals, can be defined as:

$$P(\text{survival}) = \frac{376}{377} \times \frac{375}{376} \times \frac{374}{375} \times \cdots \times \frac{300}{301} = \prod_{k=1}^{77} \frac{377-k}{378-k} \approx 79.6\%$$

This seems plausible: a roughly four-in-five chance of survival. But this calculation assumes a single-stage lottery where everyone has equal probability of selection. Jackson's two-stage

process creates fundamentally different odds: lottery draws might be independent each year, but they are not identically distributed.

[14] To understand the implications of this mechanism, a simulation that mimics the tiered selection was developed. Births occur at rates reflecting mid-century fertility (approximately 19.4 births per 1000 people), while natural deaths remove individuals according to 1940s actuarial tables (mean life expectancy of 63 years with an estimated 15 years standard deviation). The simulated dynamics model incorporates additional constraints such as child mortality rates, polygamy restrictions, marriage age restrictions, and incest avoidance rules. Running 10,000 independent simulations of 77 years each reveals striking patterns. The probability of any specific individual surviving 77 lotteries varies dramatically based on household size: members of large households (five or more members) survive approximately 80% of simulations, while members of two-person households survive only 62%. This 18-percentage-points gap represents the structural inequality of the two-stage system. It also reveals that Old Man Warner's survival becomes dramatically more probable if the lottery is rigged. Under fair conditions, a person who begins at age 18 and survives to age 77 while avoiding both natural death and lottery selection has a probability of approximately 0.01%. But if certain families receive protection, the probability rises to between 15% and 40% depending on the rigging mechanism. The calculation suggests Old Man Warner's survival is not accidental, but rather an evidence of collusion and special treatment.

[15] In conclusion, this essay has argued that "The Lottery" depicts a rigged system, not a random one. Given the lottery's persistence in the neighboring villages, this village's lottery may have reached a crisis point where population decline forced administrators to rig the system, protecting themselves and the elders whose survival legitimizes the ritual's continuation. The two-stage selection process creates structural inequality; the bureaucratic administration concentrates power in officials who control the slips, and who employ their authority to influence the outcome. The statistical evidence from Monte Carlo simulation suggests that Old Man Warner's seventy-seven-year survival, and Mr. Summers' continued tenure as official, are

dramatically more likely if the lottery is manipulated than if it is truly random. Only Tessie Hutchinson, in her final moments, seems to perceive the truth. Her first protest, “It wasn’t fair” points backward to her husband’s draw, accusing Mr. Summers of foulplay as she proclaimed “You didn’t give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn’t fair” (Jackson 7). But her last cry, “It isn’t fair”, marks a movement from past to present; from complaint about procedure to recognition of systemic injustice; and from a 20% chance of selection to the 100% certainty of death.

[16] The implications extend beyond Jackson’s fiction into the fictions we live by; our imagined realities as Harari calls them. The Vietnam War draft lottery of 1969, presented as random, was later found to be biased against November and December birth dates because “January capsules were mixed with the other capsules 11 times. The February capsules 10 times and so on with the November capsules intermingled with others only twice and the December ones only once” (Fienberg 257). The appearance of randomness legitimized the outcome while the process ensured unequal burden. Patrick Shields, a proponent for restorative justice, argues that “The Lottery” exposes the disturbing reality of state-sanctioned violence and arbitrary systems of punishment. In his essay, he draws a parallel between the fictional killing in the story and modern practices of capital punishment, explaining that between 1976 and 1988, only 10% of the convicts sentenced to death were actually executed. Their lives, in many instances, are subject to fate or change (Shields 413). Jackson’s genius lies in providing just enough structure to enable analysis while preserving enough ambiguity for readers to construct their own interpretations. The text never confirms deliberate manipulation, but it invites us to question what we have accepted as fair: the systems that appear official, that seem structured, that look random, and that everyone participates in, without question. Perhaps, like Tessie Hutchinson, we might look more carefully and recognize: it isn’t fair.

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