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ENG 251

December 3, 2009

### The Deadly Cost of a Textual Gap

According to Wolfgang Iser, the function of literature is for the reader and the text to become “partners in a process of communication”, as they try to determine “if what is communicated is to be of any value” and if it is, looking for its effect (7). This theory can be applied when studying Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery.” Through the use of textual gaps, Jackson exerts influences of anxiety, horror and disbelief onto the reader, leaving him unsettled, trying to adjust to the idea that humans could value ritual over life.

The setting of “The Lottery” is quite ambiguous. The only information that the reader is given is that the story takes place mid-June in a village of “only about three hundred people” (120). Since the reader is not given the time period that this story takes place, it is unknown whether or not this story took place during the early twentieth century or if it occurred just two years ago; it could have happened in a small town hundreds of miles away or the next town over. Jackson inserted this absence of details to make the story seem ominous to the reader, adding anxiety and curiosity for what has lead a town of three hundred people towards this gruesome ritual.

The background of the lottery is not given, which contributes to a major theme within the story. According to Old Man Warner, the oldest citizen of the town, “there’s always been a lottery” (123); however, “the original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago” (121). “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (123) is the only hint for why the original lottery was

imposed. Early civilizations would perform sacrifices for many reasons, one of them being good harvest. Therefore the reader could infer that the lottery had been enacted years earlier as a ritual to ensure that the crops would be heavy when harvest time came. This inference doesn't offer much comfort, as the reader could be wondering why any civilization, or an otherwise civilized town, would consent to a practice where the details have been forgotten and leads to a person's death.

This question is another gap that Jackson left within her story. This town still enacts and participates in the lottery when they don't even remember the reasoning. It becomes known that neighboring towns are "talking of giving up the lottery" (123). However, because "there's always been a lottery", habit and ritual have taken over and the value of human life becomes insignificant, since "although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones." This sentence alone is quite disturbing, as it produces horror and disbelief within the reader as he reads Tessie Hutchinson's dying words of "it isn't fair, it isn't right" (125).

This ending of the story leaves the reader unsettled since there isn't a resolution. There are plenty of unanswered questions: Has this town followed their neighboring town and given up the lottery? Will the townspeople realize the horrific truth to Mrs. Hutchinson's words? This unsettlement leads to the reader having to contemplate the idea that any person, let alone a group of people would follow such a ritualistic sacrifice.

These unanswered questions, along with other gaps present within the story are put in intentionally by Jackson, as the reader then becomes influenced by the words he is reading and has the job of "bringing out the meaning" (Iser 13) of the story while becoming emotionally

entangled. Because these gaps drain the story of important details, it has to be assumed that the small amount of details given is of value and therefore have a menacing effect on the reader.

Works Cited

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