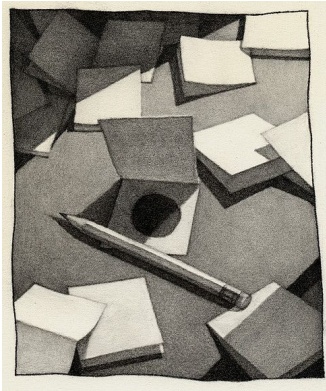


# The Normality of Evil

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*Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.*



In her *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, first published in 1963, the philosopher Hannah Arendt observed that many of the people responsible for the genocide of the Jews “were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”<sup>1</sup> With her systematic way of thinking, the philosopher explained how, in the 20th century, millions of people were killed while entire nations were watching or taking part in the slaughter.

Within a remarkable short story published nearly fifteen years before

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, rev. and enl. ed., 1965; this work first appeared, as a serial, in *The New Yorker* in 1963), 276.

Arendt's book, the American author Shirley Jackson also grappled with the problem of evil. The story—"The Lottery," which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1949—explored the dynamic of a pointless cruelty pursued and accepted by an entire community as a normal fact of life. Jackson, like Arendt, offered a warning for humankind. Evil does not have the appearance of a monster. Evil is rooted in human nature and threatens the most important bonds in human society. Such evil shaped the history of the 20th century, and it is still a threat in our time.

Jackson's tale is set in a peaceful town in rural America, and it is written in a realistic style. On a morning in late June, the community gathers in the square for the lottery. In fact, they have gathered in this way every year since the settlement of the village. Everybody is required to be there; the roll is quickly taken, and nobody is missing. One by one the villagers draw their lot from a black box and the winner is chosen. The "prize" is death by stoning. Ending in a shocking way, the story is fashioned to startle the reader both through its content and its narrative strategies. There are no accelerations or variations in the narrative pace; no emotional response or judgment on the events are suggested by the narrator, who proceeds emotionlessly, describing the events with a cinematographic technique. First, the focus is wide-ranging and takes in the whole village gathering in the square: Children are playing together, people are chatting, ladies are greeting each other, a mother calls her children, and another does the same. The sun is shining, and the sky is blue. Very soon the focus zooms in on the lottery's black box and on the citizens gathered around. The ritual is quickly prepared. The drawing starts and methodically carries on. Some voices are heard: The man who leads the lottery is calling everyone in alphabetic order; someone comments on the tradition of the lottery; and few short conversations break the general silence. The drawing is over, the "winner" is selected. Now the focus is on Mrs. Hutchinson. She raises her voice desperately, claiming the unfairness of the process. No one helps her and suddenly "they [the villagers] were upon her," throwing stones.<sup>2</sup>

When Jackson's short story was first published, the *New Yorker's* readers reacted mainly to the brutality of the plot; even now readers

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Jackson, *The Lottery and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 302.

may be speechless after reading the harsh ending.<sup>3</sup> It is important, however, to overcome this first disturbing impression and seek to understand what the author is trying to convey. Some of the story's details provide clues. The names of some characters, for instance, are not accidental. The names of Summer and Grave, the two men leading the lottery, suggest the contrast between the bright peaceful summer day of the lottery and the dark, deadly ending. The name of the "winner," Mrs. Hutchinson, who is the only one to denounce the unfairness of the lottery, is the same as the name of the heroine Anne Hutchinson, who fought tradition in Puritan New England.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Delacroix and Mrs. Grave answer to Mrs. Hutchinson's desperate shouts with "Be a good sport, Tessie" and "All of us took the same chance." According to the meaning of their names (a cross and a grave), they bury their friend with these words before burying her with stones. These details engage the insight of the reader and disclose the implied themes of the story.

A careful analysis helps to recognize some signals of violence inside the story, disguised as innocent actions. In the very first scene of the tale, children are gathering stones, filling up their pockets with them or piling them at the corners of the square. The reader is deceived, thinking that they are merely playing, like children typically do when they gather together. Furthermore, during the drawing, the general silence is broken by an old man shouting in defense of the lottery against the younger generations of the village, who are tempted to abandon it. It seems a normal generational contrast in which the young and the old play their expected roles. In light of the ending, we discover that children are not preparing for playing, and the tradition is a hideous ritual of slaughter. No one is innocent; all the villagers are involved in an act of inconceivable violence.

A number of studies have offered interpretations of Jackson's story. The majority of these highlight the cultural, historical, or sociological context that inspired the author. I found particularly compelling, for example, the feminist interpretation, focusing on the masculine dominance in the organization of the lottery and the village's life and stressing that the choice of a housewife as victim is an example of this dominance.<sup>5</sup> In my view, however, Jackson

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Bayley, "Sacred Violence in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*," *British and American Studies* (2014), 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

addresses the case in a more general sense, with a focus on a moral failure in human society when it is unable to recognize and react to evil. With her unadorned style, she indicates how an entire community can accept evil as a normal event in life; *once again, no one is innocent.*

How can evil be disguised as a normal fact of life? First, all the community have to approve the lottery, feel that it is necessary. "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon,"<sup>6</sup> says old Warner, indicating that the annual lottery is a guarantee for a good harvest and consequently for peace and wealth in the community. Secondly, the lottery has to last a short time. It is once a year. Mr. Summer, who leads the Lottery, addresses the citizens in the following words: "guess we better get started, get this over with, so we can go back to work."<sup>7</sup> Third, the lottery is limited to the villagers. Just one "winner" is selected. This is the ancestral principle of the scapegoat. "All of us took the same chance,"<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Grave says to Mrs. Hutchinson. This shows the terrifying system of the selection: there are no other values that count, except the instinct to survive. The slaughter affects just one, all the others are safe, at least for another year. This is their normality.

With the move of a great writer, Jackson ends her story. She doesn't describe the ending in much detail; it is not necessary. Few words, well chosen, conclude the story. It is enough to imagine a few drops of blood on the side of Tessie's head when the first stone hits her, or to feel the burden of the entire community closing upon her. It is enough to feel all the horror that Jackson wants to depict: horror for the barbarian act, but above all horror for the community's universal endorsement of it. If we feel a hint of rebellion at this guilty approval, we are already learning to keep our minds aware of the evil that snakes its way into our ordinary lives. This is the message of this gifted writer: The evil is among us, and we must remain aware of what we are capable of doing to one another.

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, "The Lottery," 297.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 298.