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Lesson Plan for Teaching Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery"

Lauren Hee Won Chung

ENGL 071D / The Short Story in the U.S. Fall 2018 Swarthmore College
advised by Professor Peter Schmidt, Department of English Literature

Lesson Plan Details

- Plan is for high school students
- Class size of 20 - 30 students
- Class length of 75 minutes, but lesson plan can be adapted for shorter classes

Sections marked with ** are strongly recommended, while sections marked with * are encouraged, but optional.

Learning Goals

- To understand how the narrator guides reader's interpretation of the story
- To discuss how traditions are preserved and modified through the passage of time
- To evaluate the depth of personal relationships in the face of uncertain tragedy

** Pre-class Activity

- Have students read the story **twice** and record any differences that they noticed between the first and second readings

With a story like this, knowing the ending beforehand can change the interpretation of seemingly minor plot points. One example is the description of children stacking rocks at the beginning of the story; it reads like a harmless game the first time through, but becomes a much more sinister detail during the second reading because one knows that these rocks will be used for the stoning. By having students read the story twice, the teacher can encourage students to pick up on these differences and appreciate Jackson's clever use of foreshadowing.

** Narrative technique - for small group discussions at the beginning of class where 2-3 students can share their reactions to the story (5-10 minutes)

1. What kind of narrator does this story use? Can you tell what they think about the lottery?
 - a. An explanation of indirect vs. free indirect narration is included below on page 5
2. How does the story start? After reading the ending, what do you think is the purpose of having a beginning like this? Are there any other details that you had to re-evaluate?
3. When did you realize that something was not quite right about the lottery? What tipped you off?

4. Are you surprised by the ending? Why or why not? Do you think that this is a good place for the story to end?

After students finish, the teacher can ask them to report a few key ideas from their conversation to the class. However, the teacher should be mindful of not having students repeat themselves, so they could assign different questions to different groups or try this activity when students seem to have a variety of opinions.

**** Inheritance of the lottery - lecture based, with close reading of passages guided by the teacher (25 minutes)**

Part of ritual's terror is that no one knows its origin. The villagers don't know why they have to kill a member of their community each year, and no one questions the necessity of it either. They just do it because it is something that's always happened, and this mindless continuation of tradition, rather than the ritual itself, is perhaps the most horrifying aspect of the story. How does this kind of socialization happen? What techniques does the village use to ensure people's conformity?

One passage that suggests a few answers to these questions is Old Man Warner's response to hearing that some villages have already stopped the lottery. He says,

“ ‘Pack of crazy fools ... Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's always been a lottery,' he added petulantly” (p. 471).

A few socialization mechanisms that can be inferred from this passage are:

- Power of authority: Old Man Warner invokes his authority as the oldest person in the village, as well as the supposed wisdom of the elderly, to belittle younger generations' justifiable concerns about the lottery. His statement, “Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*,” assumes that the northern villagers are questioning the lottery because they are entitled and inexperienced, dismissing the possibility that people could have valid doubts about the tradition. Furthermore, his public rebuke of lottery abolition likely discourages others from voicing their disagreements because people are afraid to contradict an influential figure like Old Man Warner, creating an oppressive environment of silence.
- Fearmongering: Rather than touting the benefits of the lottery, Old Man Warner paints a dramatic doomsday scenario of life without the lottery. The phrases “living in caves” and “eating stewed chickweed and acorns” are likely exaggerated depictions of pre-lottery life meant to evoke fear of the primitive unknown, but no one can challenge him because

no one has lived as long as him. As a result, the townspeople must give some weight to his claims and those who want to end the lottery must take these risks into consideration.

- Understandable desire for continuity: The final sentence of the passage— “There’s always been a lottery”— implies that despite all of his bluster, Old Man Warner does not actually know why the lottery exists. It suggests that Old Man Warner would feel lost without this ritual because as ghastly as it is, life with the lottery is all that he knows. As a result, his previous statements can be interpreted not as a historically correct defense of the lottery, but as an attempt to dissuade the others from even considering the abolition of this tradition. It is his best effort to protect what he has known and survived.
 - This statement is similar to how parents sometimes tell their children “because!” when they ask why they can’t do certain things. “Because!” is presented as a reason, when it is not really a reason at all

However, it is important to note that the previous bullet points are not the only ways to interpret the quote. As a result, while the teacher can present them to the class as different ways of understanding the passage, they should also encourage students to develop their own thoughts about the villagers’ rationalization of the lottery. This could look like a class debate, or a teacher-guided discussion. The questions below are designed to facilitate this process of close reading, helping students to think about narrative choices and evaluate their own reactions to the story.

1. How is Old Man Warner characterized in this passage? What words or phrases stand out to you?
2. Why use dialogue here, instead of narrating Old Man Warner’s thoughts to the reader? When would one use the former, and when would one use the latter?
3. Why do you think the narrator chose to have Old Man Warner address the news of another village stopping the lottery? Would this passage felt different if another character had responded instead?
4. What reasons does Old Man Warner give to justify the lottery’s existence? Do they sound reasonable to you? Why or why not?
 - a. What do you make of the sentence “Lottery in June, corn heavy soon”? How convinced are you of the lottery’s necessity after reading this?
 - b. Some students might put too much belief in this phrase and think that the villagers actually do know the rationale behind the lottery. As a result, it may be helpful to focus on the fact that it is phrased as a generalized proverb. There is little explanation for how this proverb came about, so it is a tenuous explanation for the lottery at best.
5. Does this passage change your feelings about the lottery? Is it more understandable now that you know how the villagers rationalize its existence, or is it even harder to believe?

* Other mechanisms that encourage social conformity are listed below. The instructor can cover this material if there is time, but these points can be illustrated without necessarily using the level of close reading required in in the Old Man Warner passage.

- Inclusion of children in the ritual: One way to ensure future generations' support for the lottery is to introduce the idea of ritualistic killing as early as possible. By allowing children to gather rocks for the stoning, the adults are making them complicit in the ritual and ensuring that they are unable to imagine life without the lottery, just like Old Man Warner. Furthermore, the children can practice admirable traits like helpfulness and teamwork while setting up for the lottery.
 - The narrator also mentions on page 474 that “The children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles,” which emphasizes just how early the normalization of murder starts.
- Emergence of a leader: Another reason for the lottery's survival is the presence of people who are willing to step up and organize the event, like Mr. Summers. This reinforces the idea that there are individuals who actively work to ensure the lottery's existence and consider it their civic duty to make sure it goes smoothly.
- Public stoning as an intimidation tactic: Not only is the public execution a scapegoating ritual, but it also is an implicit threat of violence to the other community members. It suggests that if this society is capable of killing without a valid reason, it will most definitely kill if there is a reason, discouraging any potential townspeople from enacting reform and quitting the lottery. It also shows everyone that their friends and family are willing to participate in murder, which likely engenders mistrust and makes it difficult to organize a large-scale protest movement.
 - The narrator further adds to this doubt by choosing to end the story right as the stoning begins. They allow for the possibility that the sanctioned killing of one individual descends into uncontrollable mob violence that targets those who have caused trouble in the past.

*** Modification of the lottery - also lecture based with close-reading of passages (25 minutes)**

If the instructor does not have enough time, they can either cover inheritance of rituals or modification of rituals. While it is useful to do both because they are complementary topics, it is not essential because they use the same techniques of close reading to think about narrative structure. “Modification of the lottery” explains the use of free indirect narration, though, so this may be especially helpful to instructors who want to expand students' understanding of narrative styles beyond that of first, second, and third person.

While the spirit of the lottery—stoning a community member—has been preserved through history, many of the minor traditions and procedures have been modified or discontinued. This can be seen in the below passage:

“... at one time, people remembered that there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, ritual salute ... but this also had changed with time ... Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important ...” (468)

The fact that some non-essential practices have ended suggests that over time, the lottery has become less of a special ceremony and more of a routine responsibility. This quote also juxtaposes the remembrance of minor practices with the ignorance of the lottery’s origins; people can recall exactly how the lottery official “used to stand just so,” but don’t know why the lottery must happen in the first place.

This passage also contains use of free indirect narration. The phrases “Mr. Summers was very good at all this” and “he seemed very proper and important” in the last sentence sound like the villagers’ respectful admiration, rather than the narrator’s usually objective observations. This suggests that narrator is relaying the thoughts of the assembled group without using explicit quotation marks, which are clear indicators of free indirect narration.

It is important to emphasize the difference between free indirect and narration and indirect narration to students, especially if “The Lottery” is the first time this concept has been discussed. The difference is explained below.

1. Indirect narration: indirect quotation of one individual without use of quotation marks or speaker tags like “he said” or “she said”
2. Free indirect narration: also does not use quotations or speaker tags, but borrows the language of many individuals who do not necessarily have to be named. Free indirect narration can also borrow the voices of an entire group, either to reinforce or criticize their collective mentality

With both of these techniques, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish whether the words on the page on the narrator’s or the characters’, so the students can ask themselves the following questions to help them decide.

1. Does this sound like the narrator? Why or why not?
2. If it doesn’t sound like the narrator, who could it be? Are they quoting a single individual, or more of a group mentality?
 - a. A good way to answer this question is to look at who the narrator has talked about in nearby sentences. If the narrator focused on a specific character earlier, then

they are usually indirectly quoting that individual. If they used more general words like “people,” and “others” like the narrator does in this case, they are likely using free indirect. However, this is more of a general rule of thumb, rather than a fail-safe way to differentiate.

3. Why do you think that narrator switched voices? What purpose does it serve?

Students can use these questions to help understand why “Mr. Summers was very good ...” is an example of free indirect and discuss how the shift in narrative voice affects their understanding of the passage.

**** Community members’ relationships with each other (15 minutes)**

Can people build genuine relationships in a society where they don’t know who they’ll have to kill next?

An interesting way to think about this question is to examine the interactions between Mrs. Hutchinson and Mrs. Delacroix.

- At the beginning of the story, the two women greet each other and laugh together
 - page 468: “Clean forgot what day it was,” [Mrs. Hutchinson] said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly.”
 - page 469: “Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd.”
- Once Mrs. Hutchinson is selected for public stoning though, their dynamic seems to change dramatically.
 - page 474: “Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large that she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Hurry up.’”

The teacher can juxtapose these two images and ask students why they thought Mrs. Delacroix chose such a heavy stone. Did she do it because she wanted to inflict the most pain, or because she wanted to end her friend’s misery? There is no “right” answer to this question, but students should give reasons for why they think one way or another in order to practice building evidenced-based arguments. This exercise can also help them understand the role of ambiguity in literature and realize that sometimes, not knowing an answer can be more unsettling than knowing one.

Potential evidence to support the first interpretation (picking up a large stone as an act of cruelty)

- While the narrator does show us friendly conversation between the two women, it consists only of superficial greetings and cannot be viewed as evidence for any deeper connections.
- The phrase “Hurry up” might actually mean “Hurry up, so that we can stone Mrs. Hutchinson before she’s already dead.”

Potential evidence to support the second interpretation (picking up a large stone as an act of mercy)

- The narrator shows the reader that the two women are friends, so there is reason to believe that they will look out for each other.
- The phrase “Hurry up” could also mean “Hurry up, so that we can put Mrs. Hutchinson out of her pain as soon as possible.”

Concluding thoughts

With a story like this, it is easy to dismiss the lottery as an impossible event and the villagers as one-dimensional crazy people. Students may read this story and find the characters completely unrelatable, but the teacher can help bridge this disconnect by asking them to think about what this lottery can represent. This could be anything that people do simply because it is what they have always done, whether that be daylight savings time or encouraging girls to like pink. The consequences of these practices are much less severe than the lottery’s, but the key takeaway is that these things exist because our society is reluctant to abandon tradition, just like the townspeople in “The Lottery” are. Furthermore, Jackson’s choice not to give this village a name implies that she wanted to ensure the story’s universality; rituals like the lottery can theoretically happen in any place where people are afraid to think for themselves and challenge outdated traditions.

See also my reflections on designing this lesson plan (below).

Reflection on “The Lottery” Lesson Plan

I wanted students to come to class having read “The Lottery” twice for two reasons. First, I wanted them to see how different their interpretation of the story could be if they already knew the ending. For example, the image of children stacking stones and the initial conversation between Mrs. Hutchinson and Mrs. Delacroix seem like unimportant details during the first reading, but become horrifyingly important once one knows the ending twist. Second, I wanted them to think about how the narrator builds suspense throughout the story. I remember racing through the story the first time I read it because I desperately wanted to know the ending, so students will likely have the emotional leisure necessary to notice narrative techniques if they read the story twice.

I then chose to start the class with small-group discussions because a narrative like “The Lottery” is an unsettling one. When I finished reading the story, I wanted to talk about it with someone and deal with the terror together, not on my own. Other students probably had the same reaction, so I thought it would be useful to create a space where people could share their initial reactions to the story and start thinking about the story’s structure.

Afterwards, I decided to transition into a more lecture-based format so that students could learn close reading of text by example and through practice. I chose the first quote because I thought that it demonstrated both the power of dialogue and villagers’ rationalization of the lottery, while I chose the second quote because I wanted to show high school students that narration is more than a decision between first, second, and third person. I included the conclusions I reached from the passages so that teachers could have something to draw upon, but also made questions for students so they could wrestle with the text themselves.

I realize that some students may find close reading of text intimidating, though, so I wanted to end the lesson with a more open-ended, debate-like activity. The fact that there is no right answer may encourage more students to participate in the discussion and help them understand that in certain situations, having strong evidence to support your argument is more valuable than the position for which you're arguing.

When I was making this lesson plan, I found making good questions was particularly difficult. I wanted students to think about how the narrator influenced their interpretation of the text, but I didn't want to ask leading questions that made the answers obvious. I eventually tried to solve the problem by thinking about how I would respond if a teacher asked me that question in class. If I could see myself coming up with more than one, well-supported answer, I decided to include in my lesson plan. If I could only think of one, or couldn't think of any, I revised my question. I also asked them to my friends who were around me and incorporated their feedback into my lesson plan

Through this process, I learned that teaching requires thinking from multiple perspectives. I had to keep instructor in mind when I was writing explanations for my conclusions because I wanted them to understand the reasoning behind my analysis, but I also had to consider students' positions when formulating questions. And sometimes, such as when I was picking learning goals and structuring my lesson plan, I had to think about both parties: would teachers want to cover this material and would students want to learn it? This required more mental flexibility than I thought it would and although it was difficult at times, I feel that I now have a better understanding of how information and ideas flow between student and teacher.

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