

Active versus Passive

Eden Healy

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Active versus Passive:

Religious Ideology and Dystopia in James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* and Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*

Eden Healy, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

The representation of dystopian realities within fiction lends valuable insights into the various methods which could be employed in order to maintain control over the thoughts, actions, and lives of a subjugated population. Prominent among such methods is religion, which, in fiction as in reality, has a unique ability to facilitate hope, fear, and group dynamics as means of policing behaviour. The following, though examining one example of active theocracy (active religious control) with cultural norms and traditions (passive religious control) as represented in literary fiction, alongside research on real-world parallels, argues that while both suffice in short-term maintenance of dystopia, it is the latter which maintains the most effective domination over behaviour.

Keywords: Dystopia, fiction, religion, Shirley Jackson, James McTeigue, ideology.

Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to the Corresponding Author: Eden Healy, edenhealy@gmail.com

Eden Healy is a recent graduate of the BRelEd teaching course in DCU, as well as a graduate of Fine Art Media and Visual Culture at NCAD. She is currently working as a secondary school teacher of English and Religious Education in west Dublin, near her home.

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Introduction

While the establishment of a dystopian society can be guaranteed by as little as force alone, its longevity hinges on the extent to which the subjects of such a system can be made complicit in its perpetuation. It is the position put forward by the following article that one tool of control which can make or break the perpetuation of such a system is religion: specifically, the amalgamation of religion, culture, and state. There are, in essence, two ways in which religion (or, in the case of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery", ritualised traditions which closely align with those often associated with religious practice) can be established within worldbuilding for the purpose of population control. Firstly, there is the use of pre-existing religious and ritual tradition in passively controlling the population. Secondly, there is the deliberate establishment of a state religion, often at the beginning of the formation of a fascist state, as is the case in James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta*. The following will discuss both approaches towards religion as a tool of control in the dystopian universe, first outlining how each might look, before establishing how each plays out in its respective text, and discussing which approach proves more effective within its text's universe.

1. Religious Ideology in Shirley Jackson's The Lottery

1.1: Defining the use of passive religious ideology in dystopian systems and outlining its purpose

This article defines passive religious ideology as follows: passively religious dystopia does not garb itself in outward visual symbols of the religion. It does not necessarily assign government positions to religious representatives, nor is there necessarily a legally enforceable prerogative for subjects of the dystopian regime to become or remain members of the dominant belief system. Rather, the ideology is enforced passively by each (or the majority) of members of the society, through rigid adherence to tradition, and communal fear of the appearance of straying from the norm. One real-world example of such a system, which is reflected in the fiction to be discussed below, is the relationship between church and state in the US. According to the research of American sociologist Gary J. Adler, US government officials' trend towards being more religious than the average American (Adler 4). Additionally, while surveys tend to show that local representatives show less of a discrepancy in religiosity by comparison to the general public, their religiosity increases the more rural their constituency (Adler 11). The United States has a globally-understood reputation as a deeply culturally-Christian nation, as reflected by the religious views of officials established above. Yet the US also constitutionally separates church from state and protects by law the freedom of religion. This is a key example of religious control over and influence on a society being something which can be exerted passively, through the culture of a nation, rather than by law. It is not unreasonable in this real-world example to suggest, that despite the legal separation of church and state, the religious beliefs of elected officials might logically result in a degree of religious influence over the laws, customs, and practices of the country as a whole.

1.2: Why Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' is a prime example of the passive use of religious ideology in dystopian society

Having established what, it means for religion-like practice (in the sense that it is ritualised and cemented into tradition) to exert passive control over a society, it remains necessarily to clarify why such circumstances can be applied to the world of Jackson's 'The Lottery', and how this contributes to the text's dystopian worldbuilding. Most immediately of note in this world is the constant justification for the Lottery's existence being that "There has always been a lottery" (4). Jackson states that the townspeople had "forgotten" many aspects of the lottery, with the violence being the only core aspect consistently remembered and maintained (7). Further to this point, the townspeople appeared comfortable making concessions related to the modernisation of their ritual such as the substitution of wood chips for paper slips (2). In a dystopia where the use of religious ideology as a tool of control was active in nature, and government constructed, it is highly unlikely that the people would be allowed to make alterations, or to forget. In many ways, this is a disorganised dystopia; yet, this contributes to its continuation; the members of Jackson's society are allowed just enough freedom (as highlighted by the fact that some other towns have abandoned the lottery, which, incidentally, also establishes that the lottery is not enforced nationally by law), (7) that they resist the urge to rebel, where such an urge exists to begin with; after all, they are free to leave at any time- it is the sense of duty towards their traditions which keeps them in a state of perpetual dystopia. It is for this reason that Jackson's 'The Lottery' is the epitome of the self-sustaining dystopia, structured by the kind of duty and self-policing which can only be so strongly ingrained by the passive but deeply affecting influence of long-held religious ideology, and its associated communal traditions.

1.3: Impact of the tradition of the lottery, as an expression of passive religious ideology, on other dystopian elements within Jackson's worldbuilding

While the lottery itself is but a single example of ritual (religion-like) practice within Jackson's worldbuilding, it acts as a focal point, through the various elements within the ritual, for wider societal control- all of which contribute to the story's dystopian nature. One such element which is clearly visible throughout the text is the strict adherence to misogynistic sex-based expectations. Within the lottery ceremony itself, for example, there are several references to the expectations placed on women versus men. For example, women are not allowed to draw for their families (as males are considered heads of the household) (2) unless there is absolutely no male of age available to do so, and there is an air of judgement around women who have to draw for themselves, such as when Mrs Dunbar draws, and the next family's son is told by Mr Summers is "Glad [his] mother has a man to do it" (3) (all despite Mr Summers himself not having any children, though his sex makes this less relevant). There is also a hint at patrilineal ownership traditions when it is highlighted that "daughters draw with their husbands' families"(5). Yet despite being amalgamated into their husband's families, and being denied the responsibility of drawing for themselves, women are not exempt from being made the ritualistic scapegoats of the lottery, including this year's victim, Mrs Hutchinson (7). Rigid, sex-based roles are a common feature of dystopian fiction, and while they are only outlined here in relation to the lottery itself, the use of passive religious ideology ensures that such roles are present in daily

life- where townspeople take part in an annual, high-intensity, fear-inducing ritual (which they could technically opt out of, as it is not legally enforced as evident by other towns not taking part). The attitudes emphasised within such rituals would likely be strongly self-enforced throughout the rest of the year. While misogyny in the text is one example of this, the same could be said for the sense of paranoia, communal participation, and threat of harm embodied by the ritual, all of which contribute to the dystopian nature of Jackson's world.

2. Religious Ideology in James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta*

2.1: Defining the use of active religious ideology in dystopian systems, and outlining its purpose

For this article, the active use of religious ideology within a dystopian setting will refer to the deliberate and explicit integration of religious ideology into government systems. In many cases, the government itself is a theocracy, and being an actively devout and active member of the religious group is synonymous with being loyal to the party itself. Genuine belief by subjects to the governmental system is essentially optional, but outward participation is an inescapable requirement. In such a system, the lines are blurred between the party leader, and God himself- particularly in relation to authority and surveillance. This particular form of religious control is most commonly seen, in and outside of fiction, in the fascist dictatorship. For example, in his study of the development of fascism within real-world Britain, writer Paul Jackson notes that fear as a tool of control is harnessed in such systems by drawing connections between the power of the leader and the natural fear of an all-seeing, vengeful god; in essence, "fear God, fear the King" (Jackson 510). There is an issue conjured by this comparison; specifically, the question of how any subject could remain loyal in the long-term to a feared leader. However, just as God is put in opposition to the devil (justifying his fear-inducing capabilities as standing in opposition to something worse), fascists have often aligned themselves with Christianity in opposition with the Atheist nature of Communism (510). In this real-world example, fear of the leader is justified morally by the looming threat of another power (communism in this case), and the leader becomes Messianic in the face of perceived evil, justifying his control, despite said control often coming at the cost of freedom, safety, and living without fear. The purpose within dystopia of using religious ideology as an active tool of control lies in the following; intrinsically connecting governmental actions with moral righteousness, facilitating tribalism, and preying on the human tendency to prioritise religious concerns over one's own best interests or that of others, in fear of spiritual consequences.

2.2: McTeigue's film adaptation of *V for Vendetta*

The world of *V for Vendetta* is a prime example of the active use of religious ideology as a tool of control in the dystopian society within fiction. However, this article will focus on the film specifically, as opposed to the graphic novel, due to the immersive nature of the film's live action world. The oppressive fog of religious ideology weighs heavy on the viewer throughout, via a constant, background bombardment of propagandistic posters, broadcasting, and symbolism. Interestingly, the film is nuanced in its view of religion itself; the first scene, before addressing the world itself, looks to Guy Fawkes as an inspirational figure; himself a Catholic

rebel (00:00:00-00:00:45). Yet this positive portrayal of religiously-motivated violence is almost immediately juxtaposed with the hypocrisy of the fingermen, attempting to sexually assault the film's protagonist while baring the insignia of a theocracy; the double cross of the Norsefire party (the use of a double-cross could be considered a visual pun on the party's betrayal or bastardisation of Christianity, as seen by the director) 00:05:00 – 00:06:00). The film then takes a clear stance not against religion, but against organised religious theocracy, thus rendering it the ideal focus in relation to active use of religious ideology as a tool of control.

2.3: Examples of the exertion of religious control in McTeigue's *V for Vendetta*

As stated, the theocratic dystopia, by its nature, draws innate connections between religious faith and the events within- and actions of- the state. One of the first direct mentions of religion within the film is Prothero's broadcast for the BTN, wherein he connects the fall of the United States with their "Godlessness", as well as connecting the idea of God with the notion of surveillance; just like the state, God is always watching, and willing to punish (00:03:00-00:04:00). This epitomises the extent to which the structural integrity of the state is dependent on religion, the feeling of being watched and fear of punishment exists at the hands of a blurred entity somewhere between God and the leader. However, this remains effective as the viewer (subjects of the state) of these broadcasts is allowed catharsis through scapegoating; the US, other foreign interests, homosexuals, Muslims, these are the Godless ones- subjects are expected to be grateful for their station in life, as members of the elect who are not (yet) deserving of punishment. This is reflected in reality. Author Brian Ott, in his writings on the film draws parallels between the world of *V for Vendetta* and the United States during the Bush administration. In the case of the latter, Ott highlights the fact that many were fully content with the surveillance and loss of their own personal freedoms. So long as it was framed as protecting them against a foreign other of ill-intent, such losses in liberty had the paradoxical effect of making many feel safer, rendering the dystopian elements of such actions invisible (Ott 49). Likewise, the Norsefire party takes advantage of the fear and chaos of war and disease to offer structure and safety through religious propaganda, having the people open the doors to their own control in the name of community, identity, and safety. Once these doors have been opened however, it is fear that locks the people in with their rulers, who now are inescapably intertwined with the Church; even from the earliest days of the regime, the highest authority in Larkhill concentration camp was a priest (00:44:30).

3. Passive versus active use of religious ideology in dystopian society: a comparison

3.1: Efficacy of passive control in 'The Lottery'

While it may not be an easy task to topple a fascist regime, there is only so much sudden change a large group of people can take before some form of rebellion is inevitable. By contrast, the truly effective dystopia is one built on ingrained cultural norms. Where behaviours have been integrated into tradition, their effects are far more difficult to excise. In the case of the lottery, the efficacy of passive religious control over the people can be seen by the normalisation of the 'lottery'; despite the fact that many do not wish to take part, there remains a banality to the practice, it has become mundane. One of the first lines introducing the practice assures the reader

that in towns as small as this, most townspeople “get home [from the ceremony] for noon dinner” (1). Townspeople make small talk throughout the preparatory period, children take full participation in the stoning, and those such as Mrs Dunbar who are visibly disapproving of the ritual still make polite excuses to lag behind, rather than directly protesting (7). The ritual, through its passive, long-term approach, has become so ingrained in the world Jackson has created that its participants could not dream of a world without it. Even the oldest resident of the town, Old Man Warner, who had seen the greatest amount of carnage on account of his years, likened doing away with the ritual to “[going] back to living in caves”, and expressed pride in his participation in the tradition (4).

Ultimately, the townspeople benefit psychologically from the ritual; spirituality lends meaning to people’s lives, appealing to the mystical through ritual actions contributes to this communal spirituality, which could be considered a worthy sacrifice at the expense of others. Furthermore, this ritual practice is cathartic; as both Ted Bailey and Patrick Shields note in their respective critiques of the story, ‘The Lottery’ is ultimately a story about the power of scapegoating. The townspeople take comfort in the community, routine, tradition, and sense of control that the lottery gives them, and are happy to sacrifice this for a life; so long as that life is not their own, only then will they actively voice a protest, at which point, it is too late. But finally, beyond the power of the mystical which lies in truly held belief (which, in order to be held so, must be organic rather than governmentally enforced), and beyond the power of the scapegoat, what makes passive religious control so effective in Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ is the slow-burn effect of hereditary belief. Little Davy Hutchinson was said to have ‘looked up in wonder’ at the box of names; too young to understand that his own life and those of his family were at stake (6). Moments later, even as his own mother was about to be stoned to death, the townspeople made sure to “give Davey a few pebbles” so that he could take part in the murder (7). In Jackson’s world, the sacrificial rite is normalised from a young age; everyone takes part, no one is exempt, it’s not personal, but it is inescapable. Overall, then, the passive approach of religious control proves extremely effective in ‘The Lottery’, the sense of duty, catharsis of scapegoating, human craving for mystical practices (and the sense of control such practices can bring) which are gained from the ritual, keep the townspeople involved of their own (coerced, but theoretically free) will. They are not forced in an active way by the government to participate, they are conditioned to want to do so from birth, right up until the point that they are the ones to face the mob.

3.2: Efficacy of active control in *V for Vendetta*

As Douglas Bullock noted in his article on the film, *V for Vendetta* is ultimately about the relationship between power and ideas (Bullock 432). Furthermore, he says of their eventual rebellion against the party, that “the people are united by the idea that they need not live in fear” (433). These two observations epitomise the paradoxical reliance of the state on active religious ideological control on the populus; religion was effective in bringing the population under control due to its unifying nature, making subjects each feel as part of a community with a common goal. However, this same factor- state religion- once established, as an ideological tool rather than an organically occurring and perpetuating belief (as it is in ‘The Lottery’), retains, through the fear it incites, the factor which unifies the people in the orchestration of its downfall.

Put simply, there is now lobster being brought to the boil effect where active religious enforcement occurs, where placed under sudden, relentless control; the people will (and in this case did) inevitably unite in rebellion against the ideology.

The weakness in active, sudden, religious control is that it does not leave room to foster genuine belief; this is evident throughout the film. The church is transparent about their hypocrisy- as evident by the paedophilic tendencies of the archbishop which are scarcely hidden (00:46:20). In the early days of the regime, many do not truly believe, but simply benefit, such as the scientists who chose to use the internment camps as an opportunity to experiment on victims with ease, or the average person who was shown as entirely willing to laugh at the mockery being made of the leader when he was not there to see them do so (00:55:00-01:00:00). While subjects to the regime were happy to go along with it when doing so was beneficial, the sudden control by an ideology which was not truly believed was unstable. The cracks in this façade are personified in Evey Hammond. She, despite her upbringing and experiences, was all too content to go along with the regime, even working for their propaganda broadcaster. She lived in a world where minority groups and dissenters, including her own parents, were tortured and killed. Yet being brought face to face with the suffering of a member of one such group, through reading Valerie's letters and experiences as a Lesbian taken to her death, has a humanizing effect, and gives Evey cause to rebel (01:13:00- 01:18:00). Likewise, her subjection to torture made her stronger, freeing her from fear (01:22:00-01:25:00). In reference to both events, Evey highlights a key issue; the religious ideology only works when it highlights the positive aspects of its power (community, unity, faith), but when the suffering of others is made too relatable, too human, or when an individual oneself is subjected to enough torture, the ideology is rendered insufficiently sympathetic to be believed in, and this creates the breeding ground for rebellion. The Chancellor put it most accurately when he stated, "this is a matter of faith [...] to fail is to invite doubt [to doubt] is to invite the country into chaos" (00:12:00-00:15:00). The country has been too strict, has bet too much of its power on faith and so, when that faith fails, there is nothing left but for the regime to crumble.

Conclusion

Overall, religious ideology within both of these texts has been shown as a powerful source of control within the dystopian world. Religion has the ability to stir fear in the population, encourage self-policing behaviours and paranoia, and breed hate of change and the other, while simultaneously appealing to senses of community, duty, and using the mystical to create a sense of control in a chaotic universe. However, there are two ways for religion to be used as a tool of control; passively, through the use of belief proliferated organically across generations, which is not mandated but which is strongly encouraged (lending the false sense of free choice, as in 'The Lottery'), and actively, through the (often sudden) enforcement of a rigid state religion (as in *V for Vendetta*). While the latter proves effective in gaining control over a population quickly and during times of fear, war, and pandemic, the former holds greater longevity. In *V for Vendetta*, the catalyst for rebellion is the death of a little girl (01:42:00). However, she would not have been the first child to have lost her life at the hands of the regime. One would be more correct in suggesting that the true catalyst was the overreach of the state, the sudden and public

(humanising) nature of her death, at the hands of government forces, who themselves can be united against as oppressor and enemy (the us versus them mindset fostered by the very same government). By contrast, deaths in ‘The Lottery’ are scheduled. They have always been and they will always be, all are made complicit, and there is a strong illusion of choice; it is this passivity and communal participation and belief that make the dystopian world of Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ so much more stable, with the likelihood of passive religious control ultimately having the far greater capacity of longevity; quite apart from violence, it is stability which is quite simply easier to live with, even if the routine that creates such stability is one of ritualistic murder. By contrast, the people of Mc Teigue’s world are not horrified by violence, but by the public chaos bred by an overly firm hand.

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