

The Possibility of Evil



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SHIRLEY JACKSON

Shirley Jackson was raised in a ritzy suburb of San Francisco by Leslie and Geraldine Jackson. Jackson began writing at a young age and she published her first story—"Janice"—while attending Syracuse University in New York. In 1940, after graduating college, Jackson married Stanley Edgar Hyman, a literary critic, and moved to North Bennington, Vermont where she spent most of her life. From 1940 onward, Jackson wrote constantly, a process which culminated in her first novel—*The Road Through the Wall*—in 1948. 1948 proved to be an important year for Jackson as she also published "The Lottery," her most famous story, in *The New Yorker* on June 26th. "The Lottery" proved to be quite controversial, but it made a literary star out of Jackson, and over the next two decades she produced a number of important works, including [The Haunting of Hill House](#) (1959), [We Have Always Lived in the Castle](#) (1962), and "The Possibility of Evil" (1965). Jackson's stories and novels won her much acclaim, including an O. Henry Award for "The Lottery" and a National Book Award nomination for [The Haunting of Hill House](#). Jackson's contemporaries praised her as a master of gothic literature and an incisive critic of American values. Jackson died in 1965 of a heart issue at only 48 years old. At the time of her death, she was working on a new novel, which was eventually published in a collection of her previously unreleased works called *Come Along with Me*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shirley Jackson's work—including "The Possibility of Evil"—is generally read against the background of American society in the decades following World War II. During this time period, America defined itself as the de facto superpower of the world and its economy reached heights never seen before. Such economic prosperity led to a new standard of living for many Americans, symbolized by "white picket fence" homes and neighborhoods. The ideal American life became living in a pristine suburban neighborhood surrounded by friends and family. Of course, this lifestyle was not truly available to everyone, and even for those who did achieve it, things were not actually perfect. In Jackson's fiction, this idealized image of American life is often depicted but soon discarded in favor of something much more sinister.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shirley Jackson often wrote in the Gothic tradition, which began in England with works like [The Castle of Otranto](#) (1764)

and made its way to America via the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Stories such as Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) and Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) are classics in the American Gothic tradition. Worries about sin and perversity are a constant theme in works by Hawthorne and Poe, and this thread runs directly through to Shirley Jackson's "The Possibility of Evil." Other Gothic works by Jackson include "The Lottery" and "When Things Get Dark." Like "The Possibility of Evil," "The Lottery" is interested in critiquing a certain class of mid-century Americans who project a pristine image while concealing the darkness within themselves. Meanwhile, "Things Get Dark" is another story by Jackson where letter-writing plays a key role and evil sits just beneath the surface. The American Gothic tradition—now suffused with Jackson's influence—continues to play out in the present day through works such as [The Shining](#) by Stephen King and *them* by Joyce Carol Oates.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Possibility of Evil
- **When Written:** 1958
- **Where Written:** North Bennington, Vermont
- **When Published:** December 18, 1965
- **Literary Period:** Postwar American Fiction
- **Genre:** Short Story, Gothic Fiction, Domestic Horror
- **Setting:** An unnamed American town in the mid-20th century
- **Climax:** Don Crane ruins Miss Strangeworth's flowers.
- **Antagonist:** Miss Strangeworth
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Posthumous Award-Winner. "The Possibility of Evil" was not originally published until more than four months after Shirley Jackson's death. Despite this, it went on to become one of her most acclaimed stories and won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best mystery short story in 1966.

Witchcraft. Throughout her life, Shirley Jackson maintained an interest in witchcraft and filled her personal library with hundreds of books on the subject. Jackson even played up rumors that she practiced witchcraft, although her friends and biographers all agree that this was merely a publicity stunt.



PLOT SUMMARY

On a bright, sunny day in an unnamed American town, an elderly lady named Miss Adela Strangeworth runs errands. Miss Strangeworth's family has lived in the town for a long time; her grandfather built the first house—the house she still lives in—on Pleasant Street, and her grandmother planted the **roses** which continue to decorate her property. The roses are Miss Strangeworth's pride and joy, and she does not let anyone touch them.

Miss Strangeworth begins her errands with a stop at the grocery store, where she briefly converses with Mr. Lewis, the grocer. Both of them discuss how it is a lovely day, though Miss Strangeworth thinks that there is something not quite right with Mr. Lewis. As their conversation is wrapping up, Mrs. Martha Harper arrives at the store. Miss Strangeworth and Mrs. Harper speak briefly, and Miss Strangeworth thinks about whether Mrs. Harper is taking care of herself.

After her conversation with Mrs. Harper, Miss Strangeworth leaves the store and runs into Helen Crane and her baby. The two discuss how the Cranes pamper their child—something Miss Strangeworth dislikes—and how Helen is worried about the child's development. Miss Strangeworth tells her not to worry and then continues on her way. She stops by the library, has a brief conversation with Miss Chandler, the librarian, who seems distracted, and then heads home.

After arriving home, Miss Strangeworth goes to her desk and begins writing anonymous nasty letters to the people she's interacted with throughout the day. The contents of her letters are not based in fact and could be quite damaging to their recipients' lives. Among other things, she tells the Cranes that their child is developmentally disabled, Mr. Lewis that his grandson is stealing from him, and Miss Chandler that the man she is seeing may be a murderer.

After Miss Strangeworth finishes writing her letters, she takes a nap, eats dinner, and then goes on a walk to the post office. At the post office, she overhears a conversation between Dave Harris and Linda Stewart, who are having relationship issues, most likely because of Miss Strangeworth's letters. Miss Strangeworth then mails two of her letters, but unbeknownst to her, a third letter falls to the ground. Dave Harris finds the letter, recognizes it as Miss Strangeworth's, and then decides to deliver it directly to its recipient, which turns out to be Don Crane, Helen's husband.

Miss Strangeworth walks home and goes to bed. She wakes up feeling great and realizes it must be because of the letters she sent the day before. She walks downstairs and enters her dining room, where she spots an envelope that looks surprisingly similar to one of her own. She starts to cry as she reads the contents: "*Look out at what used to be your roses.*"



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Miss Adela Strangeworth – Miss Strangeworth is an old woman who has lived in the same house her entire life. She feels protective of her community and regularly worries about the possibility of evil things happening in it. In particular, she prizes her **roses** and worries about strangers stealing them. At the start of the story, Miss Strangeworth heads into town to run errands. She starts with a trip to the grocer and then heads over to the library. During and between errands, she has mundane conversations with a number of people including Mr. Lewis, Helen Crane, and Miss Chandler. None of her conversations are too out of the ordinary, but she does think that her interlocutors look distracted and possibly distressed. However, when Miss Strangeworth arrives back at home, she becomes a much more sinister figure. It is revealed that she often spends her evenings writing nasty letters to the people she interacted with throughout the day. She keeps these letters anonymous, and their contents are based in gossip rather than fact. After writing her letters, Miss Strangeworth feels a sense of satisfaction because she believes that she is helping to purge evil from her community. Unfortunately for her, one of her letters falls to the ground as she is mailing it and her anonymity is exposed. At the end of the story, it is implied that her roses are destroyed as a form of retaliation carried out by Don or Helen Crane. Miss Strangeworth weeps at the fate of her roses and bemoans the presence of evil in the world. However, she never thinks of herself as part of that evil.

Helen Crane – Helen Crane is married to Don Crane and mother to a baby girl. She talks to Miss Strangeworth outside the grocery store. Miss Strangeworth chastises her for spoiling her daughter and tells her she worries too much about how her child is developing. Later, though, she receives a letter from Miss Strangeworth calling her daughter an "idiot." Along with her husband, she is likely responsible for the destruction of Miss Strangeworth's **roses**.

Don Crane – Don Crane is married to Helen Crane and father to a baby girl. He only appears by name in the story, but Miss Strangeworth addresses the letter calling the Crane child an idiot to him. Along with his wife, he is likely responsible for the destruction of Miss Strangeworth's **roses**.

Dave Harris – Dave Harris is a young man who is dating Linda Stewart. Miss Strangeworth is distrustful of him and writes to Linda's parents to warn them of the relationship. Near the end of the story, he sees Miss Strangeworth drop one of her letters—the one addressed to Don and Helen Crane—and decides to deliver it himself. Although he is well-intentioned, he ruins the anonymity of Miss Strangeworth's letter.

Linda Stewart – Linda Stewart is a young woman who is seeing Dave Harris. Miss Strangeworth overhears Linda telling Dave

that he has a “dirty mind,” although Dave claims to not know what she is talking about. It is implied that the cause of this argument is one of Miss Strangeworth’s letters. After their conversation, Dave decides to deliver the letter Miss Strangeworth dropped and Linda asks, “Why do anyone a favour?”—an attitude suggesting that the town isn’t as perfect as it seems.

The Crane Baby – The Crane baby is the female child of Don and Helen Crane. Helen refers to her as a princess and insists on spoiling her, much to the chagrin of Miss Strangeworth. Helen also worries about the child’s development. Miss Strangeworth tells Helen she is being silly, but later writes her a letter calling her child an idiot.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Lewis – Mr. Lewis is a grocer with whom Miss Strangeworth exchanges pleasantries. Miss Strangeworth thinks he seems distracted and chides him for not reminding her to buy tea. Later, it is revealed that she had previously written Mr. Lewis a letter accusing his grandson of stealing from his shop.

Miss Strangeworth’s Grandfather – Miss Strangeworth’s deceased grandfather built the Strangeworth residence, which was the first house on Pleasant Street.

Miss Strangeworth’s Grandmother – Miss Strangeworth’s deceased grandmother is responsible for planting the **roses** that populate the Strangeworth residence.

Mrs. Martha Harper – Mrs. Harper is a woman Miss Strangeworth runs into at the grocery store. Miss Strangeworth notices that Mrs. Harper is getting older and wonders whether she is taking care of her health. Later, Miss Strangeworth writes Mrs. Harper a letter that claims Mrs. Harper’s husband is having an affair.

Billy Moore – Billy is a boy Miss Strangeworth briefly talks to while she is out running errands. She asks him why he isn’t riding around in his father’s convertible.

Billy Moore’s Father – Billy’s father is a chemistry teacher who owns a shiny convertible car. Miss Strangeworth thinks about writing to the school board about him but decides against it.

Miss Chandler – Miss Chandler is the local librarian whom Miss Strangeworth talks to briefly while running errands. Miss Strangeworth had previously sent her a letter warning her that the man she is seeing, Mr. Shelley, may have murdered his wife.

Mr. Shelley – Mr. Shelley is a character who only appears by name. At one point he was seeing Miss Chandler, although it is unclear whether their relationship is still intact after he is accused of murder in one of Miss Strangeworth’s letters.

Linda Stewart’s Parents – Linda’s parents are recipients of a letter from Miss Strangeworth that warns them of the relationship forming between Dave Harris and their daughter

Linda. Linda’s father has told her to stay away from Dave as a result of the letter.

Mrs. Foster – Mrs. Foster is an old woman Miss Strangeworth sends one of her letters to. The letter warns Mrs. Foster that her doctor might botch her upcoming operation.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



EVERYDAY EVIL

At the heart of “The Possibility of Evil” is the revelation that evil exists in our everyday lives, which often goes unnoticed by the person perpetrating it. Miss Strangeworth spends her days cataloging the flaws she perceives in her neighbors, only to spend her evenings criticizing them anonymously via letters. Throughout the story, Miss Strangeworth remains steadfast in the belief that she is helping to purge her community of evil, while remaining completely oblivious to the harm she is causing. Central to Miss Strangeworth’s concerns—and to the story’s critique of Miss Strangeworth—is the idea that evil crops up everywhere, even in places one does not expect it. Miss Strangeworth sees evil in how Don and Helen Crane pamper their child and in the romantic relationship forming between Linda Stewart and Dave Harris. Meanwhile, the story sees evil primarily in Miss Strangeworth herself. Though she is confident in the virtue of her letters, the evil contained within them is apparent to anyone else who reads them. Nowhere in her letters is Miss Strangeworth offering constructive criticism, nor is she relying on facts. (As the narrator observes, Miss Strangeworth prefers “the more negotiable stuff of suspicion” over facts.) She spreads venomous gossip—much of which has the potential to destroy relationships—only to provide herself with a sense of satisfaction. Furthermore, while a couple of her accusations are serious offences (adultery, murder), some are minor infractions (shoplifting), and others—such as those pertaining to Dave Harris—appear to be entirely unfounded. As she writes her destructive letters, Miss Strangeworth points the finger at everyone around her, failing to notice that *she* is the perpetrator of the most pervasive evil in her neighborhood.



REPRESSION

Although Miss Strangeworth describes her letter-writing process as a necessity to cleanse evil from her community, it is actually a way for her to release her own repressed thoughts and feelings. In particular,

Miss Strangeworth is fixated on two things: money and sex. Miss Strangeworth is regularly critical of people who she thinks are flaunting their wealth. This includes Don and Helen Crane, who like to buy their child expensive garments, and Billy Moore, who drives around in his father's fancy car. Though she is not subtle about her distaste for such actions even in person, she becomes especially vitriolic in her letters, as she calls the Crane child an "idiot"—meaning intellectually disabled—and tells the school board that Billy Moore's father, a chemistry teacher, should not be able to afford his new car. Similarly, Miss Strangeworth assumes every relationship between a man and a woman to be sexual in nature and therefore evil. This is demonstrated in the letter Miss Strangeworth sends to Mrs. Harper pertaining to adultery and in the letters she sends to Linda Stewart's parents, which imply a sexual relationship between Linda and Dave Harris.

Notably, all of Miss Strangeworth's accounts are unfounded and therefore say much more about her than they do about their addressees. On the subject of wealth, Miss Strangeworth is shown to be hypocritical; she lives in a nice house with expensive objects and takes great pride in the **roses** that she doesn't allow others to touch. Meanwhile, her obsession with sex can be interpreted to be a sign of jealousy. After all, Miss Strangeworth is single and has apparently always lived alone. Miss Strangeworth's repressed feelings might explain the rage exhibited in her letters, as well as why she feels so energized the morning after sending them.



THE ILLUSION OF UTOPIA

"The Possibility of Evil" is a critique of mid-20th-century WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) culture, which outwardly projected an image of perfection while obscuring its unsavory elements. Jackson plays up the utopic lens through which WASPs saw their world to the point of parody. For instance, the street Miss Strangeworth lives on is named Pleasant Street and it is suffused by the smell of **roses**. Similarly, everyone in town cannot help but remark upon what a lovely day it is, and it seems as though the sun never stops shining. Everything on the surface looks picture perfect, but underneath evil still lurks.

Miss Strangeworth is the most obvious culprit in the story, as she regularly sends out her nasty letters that disrupt the lives of others. However, she is not the only person whom Jackson critiques in the story. There is also Linda Stewart, who cynically asks, "Why do anyone a favour?" as well as Don Crane, who presumably destroys Miss Strangeworth's roses. All of the characters in the story project an appearance of innocence, but almost all of them have darkness lurking underneath. The only exception to this rule is Dave Harris, who decides to deliver Miss Strangeworth's letter out of the goodness of his heart—a decision that ironically backfires and results in the Cranes' anger and the destruction of the roses. Speaking of the roses,

they are the perfect symbol to represent this theme: from far away they are beautiful and fragrant, but close up, one begins to see their thorns. Therefore, the destruction of the roses is not just a one-off act of rage, but rather a metaphor for the idea that the "utopia" of mid-20th-century WASP culture is actually an illusion.



COMMUNITY AND ISOLATION

"The Possibility of Evil" is a study of an individual who is at once deeply involved in her community and remarkably isolated from it. Miss Strangeworth is familiar with everyone in town: she knows where the strawberries come from at the grocery store, she is part of the bridge club, she donates to the local library, and she knows everyone's secrets—or at least she thinks she does. In addition, Miss Strangeworth's family has lived in the community for a long time, and she takes pride in the fact that her grandfather constructed the first house on Pleasant Street. However, despite the love Miss Strangeworth professes for her community, all of her connections to it are rather superficial. Everyone she talks to throughout the day is friendly with her, but she does not appear to have any real friends. Furthermore, the conversations she engages in are largely uninteresting, as they only pertain to matters such as nice weather, groceries, and library funds. When Miss Strangeworth is having these conversations, other thoughts are going on in the back of her mind that only come out once she is alone. Also, Miss Strangeworth is completely without family. Her parents are presumably dead, and she has no husband or children. She lives in her house with only the memory of other Strangeworths to keep her company. As such, Miss Strangeworth's letters, which often center around *severing* relationships, can be understood as an attempt to replicate her own situation in others' lives—that is, the loneliness of knowing one's own community both too well and not at all.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



ROSES

In "The Possibility of Evil," roses symbolize the evil that can hide within even the most beautiful and unassuming of objects. Roses, while pretty and fragrant, are covered in thorns that aren't obvious at first, but can hurt those who unexpectedly touch them. Similarly, the unnamed town where "The Possibility of Evil" takes place looks beautiful, but it hides dark secrets. Roses are first mentioned in the story's opening paragraphs, as Miss Strangeworth worries about people taking away her prized roses, which her grandmother

planted in the town's early years. Miss Strangeworth feels fiercely protective of these unique heirloom roses—much as she believes the town needs her to guard and protect it from corrupting evil. Miss Strangeworth treasures the roses and covers her entire house with them, including the sitting room where she writes her vitriolic letters. Here the roses' presence symbolizes the apparent innocence of Miss Strangeworth's letter-writing—but just as a beautiful rose has thorns when one looks closer, the neighborly letter-writing turns out to be a hateful act of harassment.

The final mention of roses in the story comes from a letter, presumably written by either Don or Helen Crane, which reads: "Look out at what used to be your roses." The message implies that Miss Strangeworth's roses have been destroyed because the Cranes found out that she had sent them one of her letters. Upon realizing what's happened, Miss Strangeworth immediately begins crying and bemoans the presence of evil in the world. For her, the destruction of the roses is proof of the evil that she believes has taken over the town. However, in the larger context of the story, the destruction of the roses symbolizes the dismantling of the town's false image of itself. Though on the surface of the community, things may seem lovely and calm, evil still lurks within, no matter how many roses are used to try to cover it up.

sounds perfect—but perhaps too perfect. Although the day looks "washed and bright," this is only the case because of the rain from the night before. This duality of night and day corresponds with Miss Strangeworth's letter-writing habits: she is kind during the day, only to let out her anger at night.

There is also an emphasis on fragrance in this passage, which will continue to pop up as the story continues, primarily in relation to Miss Strangeworth's roses. Smell is important to Miss Strangeworth, and its effect on her is intoxicating.

In addition, this passage utilizes a technique Jackson uses throughout the story, which is to make the town itself deliberately generic. Its streets include Main Street and Pleasant Street, which are names that can be found in towns all over the United States. The implication is that the evil found in this town could be found in many towns like it all over the country.

☞ She knew everyone in town, of course; she was fond of telling strangers—tourists who sometimes passed through the town and stopped to admire Miss Strangeworth's roses—that she had never spent more than a day outside this town in all her long life.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Dark Tales* published in 2017.

The Possibility of Evil Quotes

☞ Miss Adela Strangeworth stepped daintily along Main Street on her way to the grocery. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and clear after the night's heavy rain, and everything in Miss Strangeworth's little town looked washed and bright. Miss Strangeworth took deep breaths and thought that there was nothing in the world like a fragrant summer day.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth


Related Themes:   


Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening lines of "The Possibility of Evil," which succinctly introduce Miss Strangeworth and the town she lives in. It is immediately clear that Miss Strangeworth loves the look, feel, and smell of the town—she even walks "daintily," as if trying not to damage it. The town itself

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This passage immediately follows the previous quote, and here Miss Strangeworth and her roses are more thoroughly introduced. First, it is made clear that Miss Strangeworth knows everyone in her community. Later, it becomes clear that her knowledge is largely superficial and/or fabricated, but nonetheless she knows most people by name, as well as their relationships to one another.

Not only does she know her town well, but she also takes great pride in discussing that knowledge with others, especially strangers. The fact that Miss Strangeworth is often talking to strangers indicates a number of things about her character, which are confirmed later on in the story. First, it indicates that Miss Strangeworth is lonely; second, that she likes to gossip; and third, that the people who live in her community are not interested in talking to



her.


Additionally, it is revealed that Miss Strangeworth has never left the town she grew up in, a fact she takes great pride in. Although this does lend her some authority when discussing the town itself, it also raises questions about some of her later claims, especially her insistence that evil exists everywhere. (How would she know?)

Finally, this quote is important because it is the first mention of Miss Strangeworth's roses. Although the roses do become a rather bleak symbol as the story progresses, they begin as objects genuinely deserving of admiration.

●● Miss Strangeworth never gave away any of her roses, although the tourists often asked her. The roses belonged on Pleasant Street, and it bothered Miss Strangeworth to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears shortly after the first mention of Miss Strangeworth's roses. The repeated references to the roses establish them as a key symbol in the story, and in this quote Miss Strangeworth's feelings about her roses are further elaborated. It is made clear that Miss Strangeworth never gives her roses away to strangers because she worries about what will become of them under someone else's care.

Miss Strangeworth's worries about "strange towns" and "strange streets" underscore the fact that she has never left her hometown. She has no idea what exists beyond the scope of her small community, but clearly, she does not trust it. Ironically, although she is worried about people from outside of town, it is ultimately a member of her community that destroys her roses.

Also, Jackson uses this passage to continue to exaggerate the amiability of Miss Strangeworth's town by naming the place she lives "Pleasant Street." A place named Pleasant Street sounds delightful, and this one is, but only superficially. By the end of the story, it becomes clear that the street name is ironic, as Miss Strangeworth becomes the villain of the story. It is also made less pleasant because

Miss Strangeworth's roses are destroyed.

●● Carrying her little bag of groceries, Miss Strangeworth came out of the store into the bright sunlight and stopped to smile down on the Crane baby. Don and Helen Crane were really the two most infatuated young parents she had ever known, she thought indulgently, looking at the delicately embroidered baby cap and the lace-edged carriage cover.

"That little girl is going to grow up expecting luxury all her life," she said to Helen Crane.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth (speaker), Helen Crane, The Crane Baby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

After finishing her run to the grocery store, Miss Strangeworth exits to find Helen Crane and her child. This is the introduction of Helen and Don Crane to the story, along with their unnamed child. Don Crane never actually appears in person, but he is integral to the story because he likely destroys Miss Strangeworth's roses.

This passage again places emphasis on the bright sunlight that washes over the town, giving it a false sense of perfection. The Crane baby—who is dressed extravagantly—also adds to the idealistic feel of the town. However, Miss Strangeworth quickly makes it apparent that she does not approve of how Helen dresses her child and warns her of what will happen if she continues to do so.

Miss Strangeworth comes off as quite rude in this interaction, not to mention hypocritical. Although the child's outfit could be considered excessive, the same could be said of the many roses which populate Miss Strangeworth's yard, or the gold fountain pens found in her study. Though Miss Strangeworth will continue to chastise Helen about how she treats her child, Miss Strangeworth never directs such criticisms back at herself. Ultimately, it is Miss Strangeworth's cruel attitude about the Crane baby which leads to the destruction of her roses.

Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts; her letters all dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion. Mr. Lewis would never have imagined for a minute that his grandson might be lifting petty cash from the store register if he had not had one of Miss Strangeworth's letters. Miss Chandler, the librarian, and Linda Stewart's parents would have gone unsuspectingly ahead with their lives, never aware of the possible evil lurking nearby, if Miss Strangeworth had not sent letters to open their eyes.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes in the middle of Miss Strangeworth's letter-writing ritual, and it explains the origin of her letters' contents. Apparently, Miss Strangeworth does not care about the truthfulness of her letters. Instead, she relies on suspicion and intuition to guide her. If there is a possibility of evil, Miss Strangeworth sees it as her job to vanquish it, even if it means many of her letters will contain false accusations.

It is clear Miss Strangeworth believes that her pursuit is noble—that she is opening the eyes of those who receive her letters. The recipients themselves, it is revealed, are the people whom Miss Strangeworth comes across during her trips into town, specifically those who are showing signs of distress. However, it is left ambiguous whether their distress is because Miss Strangeworth has accurately surmised an instance of “evil” in their lives or because they find the letters themselves to be concerning.

Certainly, the validity of Miss Strangeworth's letters is questionable at best. For instance, how would she know that Mr. Lewis's grandson is stealing from the store? Alternatively, why would she know what is going on between Linda Stewart and Dave Harris? Almost certainly, Miss Strangeworth does *not* know these things, and therefore it seems as though she sends out many more false accusations than accurate ones.

She had been writing her letters – sometimes two or three a day, sometimes no more than one in a month – for the past year. She never got any answers, of course, because she never signed her name. If she had been asked, she would have said that her name, Adela Strangeworth, a name honored in the town for so many years, did not belong on such trash.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quote provides further information about Miss Strangeworth's letter-writing habits. Apparently, this is a ritual she has taken up rather recently. Although it is never stated explicitly, it can be surmised that this is a habit that Miss Strangeworth started because of her repressed anger and sense of isolation from her community.

Notably, Miss Strangeworth does not sign her name on the letters and instead remains anonymous. Later, it is revealed that she also travels to the post office at night in hopes that there will be fewer eyes to catch her in the act. She claims to do so because she does not want to be associated with “such trash,” but this answer is not entirely plausible. Although it may be true that Miss Strangeworth does not want to be associated with the contents of the letters, it seems much more likely that she worries about retaliation—and rightfully so. Also, Miss Strangeworth's secrecy could imply that she feels she is doing something wrong, although she does not say so explicitly. Certainly, she never undergoes any serious self-reflection over the course of the story.

In addition, it is fair to question Miss Strangeworth's claim that her name is honored in the town. Earlier in the story it is mentioned that Miss Strangeworth is upset that a statue is erected of a man named Ethan Allen instead of her grandfather. Also, no one in the story is particularly respectful to Miss Strangeworth. The most she is greeted with is basic politeness, and later Linda Stewart will make a snide comment about her. All of this adds up to imply that Miss Strangeworth has a distorted view of her place in the community.

There was so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one, there was still so much evil in people.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth, Dave Harris, Linda Stewart

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10



Explanation and Analysis

Miss Strangeworth thinks this after overhearing a conversation between Linda Stewart and Dave Harris. Linda and Dave are having a conversation about how Linda's father does not want Dave around anymore. Linda does not explicitly provide a reason, but claims it is "dirty." Dave appears confounded and does not know what to make of the situation. Although Miss Strangeworth does not realize it, Dave's exile from the Stewart home is likely due to one of her previous letters.

As such, although Miss Strangeworth is thinking about Dave and Linda, Jackson is ironically using Miss Strangeworth's thoughts to critique Miss Strangeworth herself. To Jackson, the evil in the town is Miss Strangeworth and the letters that she writes, not whatever is going on between Dave and Linda. Miss Strangeworth's obliviousness is what makes her such a frightening villain—she remains completely unaware of the harm she is causing, even as it unfolds right in front of her face.

“Catch old lady Strangeworth sending anybody a check,” Linda said. “Throw it in the post office. Why do anyone a favor?” She sniffed. “Doesn't seem to me anybody around here cares about us,” she said. “Why should we care about them?” “I'll take it over, anyway,” the Harris boy said. “Maybe it's good news for them. Maybe they need something happy tonight, too. Like us.”

Related Characters: Linda Stewart, Dave Harris (speaker), Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is a conversation that occurs between Dave Harris and Linda Stewart after they find Miss Strangeworth's anonymous letter to Don Crane on the ground. Although it does not contain Miss Strangeworth's name, Dave Harris sees her drop it, thereby ruining her anonymity.

This section is significant because it is the one scene in the story where Miss Strangeworth is not present and other characters get a chance to say what they actually think about her. Immediately, Linda Harris balks at the idea that Miss Strangeworth would ever send anyone money, suggesting that she does not have positive feelings about her. It also becomes clear that Linda does not care for the

town, in general, likely because of the nasty rumors that are being spread about her.

Despite Linda's protests, Dave wants to deliver the letter anyway. Jackson maintains a dark sense of irony in this scene as Dave suggests that the letter could contain happy news. In reality, the letter is nasty—it calls the Crane child an idiot—so Dave is actually delivering bad news. That said, Dave's desire to deliver the letter is the one genuine instance of optimism and good-heartedness found in this otherwise cynical story.

Miss Strangeworth awakened the next morning with a feeling of intense happiness and, for a minute, wondered why, and then remembered that this morning three people would open her letters. Harsh, perhaps, at first, but wickedness was never easily banished, and a clean heart was a scoured heart.

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is from the morning after Miss Strangeworth sends out her letters. At this point, she is completely unaware that her anonymity was ruined and that her roses have been destroyed. Instead, she wakes up happy and feeling refreshed, proud of herself for her previous day's work.

Miss Strangeworth's "feeling of intense happiness" provides a compelling reason for why she continues to engage in writing these anonymous letters. Although Miss Strangeworth insists that she does so to banish wickedness, in reality she just likes to make herself feel good.


In addition, this quote reveals that Miss Strangeworth finds joy in the moment that people open her letters rather than in the consequences that follow. In other words, she likes the moment where she causes others misery, while the hypothetical goodness that is meant to follow goes unmentioned.

Finally, this passage once again highlights the limitations of Miss Strangeworth's knowledge. She believes that three people are currently opening her letters, even though Don Crane received his the night before.

●● Miss Strangeworth was a Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Her hand did not shake as she opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet of green paper inside. She began to cry silently for the wickedness of the world when she read the words: *Look out at what used to be your roses.*

Related Characters: Miss Adela Strangeworth

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

These are the final lines of the story, as well as the most famous. They occur after Miss Strangeworth finds a letter that looks suspiciously like the one she sent to Don Crane in her dining room. As she reads it, it becomes clear that her precious roses have been destroyed, likely by Don or Helen Crane.

This passage condenses all of the story's primary themes into just a few sentences. First, there is the reiteration of

Miss Strangeworth's place in the community: she is "a Strangeworth of Pleasant Street." However disconnected Miss Strangeworth may be from the actual lives and thoughts of those around her, she remains a proud member of the community.

At the story's end, Miss Strangeworth still does not consciously recognize the harm she caused to her community. Her cries are directed at "the wickedness of the world" rather than the wickedness that exists inside of herself. Her fear and sadness are authentic, but they are entirely detached from any personal sense of wrongdoing.

The phrase "*Look out at what used to be your roses*" accomplishes two things simultaneously. First, there is the literal meaning of the message, which heavily suggests that Miss Strangeworth's roses have been destroyed. Exactly what has happened to them is left up to the imagination, but clearly it is nothing good. Symbolically, the destruction of the roses represents the removal of the town's false image of itself. Miss Strangeworth, like the roses, has deep roots in the town—roots that need to be ripped up and replaced if the town ever wishes to live up to its pristine image.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL

Miss Adela Strangeworth takes a trip into town to run some errands. She is in good spirits as she breathes in the fresh summer air and reflects on the beauty of the town that she has lived in her entire life. At age 71, she feels a sense of pride and ownership over the town. In particular, she is fond of the **roses** her grandmother planted to accompany the house her grandfather built on Pleasant Street—the same house she now lives in. She refuses to give any of the roses away and is distressed by the idea of others “tak[ing] them into strange towns and down strange streets.”

As she walks along, Miss Strangeworth regularly stops to greet people and ask how they are doing. Eventually she arrives at the grocery store, where she strikes up a conversation with Mr. Lewis, the grocer. They both remark upon the fact that it is a “lovely day,” and they share a brief discussion about some strawberries from a neighbor’s garden. While talking to Mr. Lewis, Miss Strangeworth decides that he seems a bit off, as though he is tired and worried about something.

As Mr. Lewis quietly begins to put together Miss Strangeworth’s order, she gently chides him for not reminding her it is Tuesday, the day that she regularly buys her tea. Mr. Lewis then adds some tea to complete her order. They finish their conversation together by once again agreeing that it is a “lovely day.” As Miss Strangeworth checks out, Mrs. Harper arrives. The two women exchange pleasantries, and Miss Strangeworth takes a mental note of Mrs. Harper’s age and apparently declining health.

Miss Strangeworth’s sense of self is built on her heritage. She believes this heritage provides her with a high status among the townsfolk, although it soon becomes clear that this does not match up with how others treat her. The roses are a part of that heritage, and therefore the idea that someone would take them away feels violating to Miss Strangeworth. She feels that her town is almost perfect, and based on appearances alone, that seems to be the case at the start of the story.



Miss Strangeworth’s conversation with Mr. Lewis is largely trivial, but polite. The pleasantries they exchange reinforce the general amiability of the townsfolk, and their mutual remarks about what a lovely day it is confirm that the town is outwardly beautiful. However, Miss Strangeworth’s acknowledgment that something is off with Mr. Lewis suggests that all is not what it seems. Whether the issue at hand resides with Miss Strangeworth, Mr. Lewis, or some combination of the two is not yet clear.



Miss Strangeworth’s gentle chiding of Mr. Lewis begins the shift that will occur in her character through the rest of the story. Here, she is not entirely rude, but there is a degree of entitlement present. It is the first imperfection in this otherwise seemingly perfect day, and therefore it sticks out. Additionally, the repeated use of the phrase “lovely day” suggests that it is something people say in order to be pleasant rather than something that is actually meant. Finally, Miss Strangeworth’s judgement of Mrs. Harper suggests that she is more judgmental than she lets off and once again reinforces that things are not as perfect as they might seem. All of these interactions imply that Miss Strangeworth’s relationships with her neighbors are rather shallow and perhaps not entirely honest.



Afterwards, Miss Strangeworth exits the store with her groceries and immediately runs into Helen Crane and her baby. She thinks about how “infatuated” the Cranes are with their child and takes note of how luxuriously she is dressed, with her “delicately embroidered baby cap” and “lace-edged carriage cover.” Miss Strangeworth warns Helen that the child will grow up to always expect luxury. Helen laughs off the warning and says that it is her intention to make sure her daughter feels like a princess.

Miss Strangeworth’s entitled and judgmental nature comes out again in her conversation with Helen Crane. She judges Helen quite harshly, even using the word “infatuated,” which is typically used to describe someone with an intense love that will soon fade. It is a cruel and cynical way to interpret the relationship between a mother and child, particularly because Helen comes off as sweet and well-intentioned. Ironically, Miss Strangeworth has never had a child of her own, so all of her comments are presumably ill-informed and not based in experience. That said, there is a parallel being drawn between Helen’s treatment of her child and Miss Strangeworth’s treatment of her roses. In both cases, there is an attempt to overemphasize surface beauty while ignoring any flaws.



Unamused by Helen’s wishes, Miss Strangeworth again issues a warning about pampering children and then asks the child’s age. Helen tells Miss Strangeworth that her baby is almost six months old, but she is worried that the child does not “move around more.” Miss Strangeworth laughs off Helen’s concern and tells her that all children develop differently. Miss Strangeworth then asks if Helen has been worrying her husband with such questions. Helen tells Miss Strangeworth that she has not, but she spends much of her time worrying because her daughter is so “precious.”

This moment is significant because of how it will be weaponized by Miss Strangeworth later in the story. This is Miss Strangeworth’s most significant conversation with a member of the community—both in length and topic of conversation—which highlights its importance and foreshadows what is to come.



Miss Strangeworth ends her conversation with Helen by telling her to apologize to her child for worrying so much and then continues her stroll. As she walks, she asks “little Billy Moore” why he isn’t in “his daddy’s shiny new car,” before stopping at the library to talk to Miss Chandler. The two have a brief discussion about the library, but Miss Strangeworth thinks Miss Chandler’s mind is elsewhere, and she takes note of her interlocuter’s disheveled look.

Again, Miss Strangeworth’s tone is judgmental when thinking about the Moores’ “shiny new car.” Later, it becomes clear that Miss Strangeworth’s feelings are much stronger than she lets on, but she represses them for now. In addition, there is yet another character who appears off-kilter to Miss Strangeworth. The establishment of this pattern, along with the title of the story, suggest that something significant is wrong in the town. This contributes to the Gothic feel of the story and again foreshadows the shocking reveal to come.



After her conversation with Miss Chandler, Miss Strangeworth thinks about the many “disturbed” people she’s run into as of late. The day before, she saw a young girl named Linda crying for no discernable reason as she walked to school. Later, Linda is spotted at the soda shop with Dave Harris, both of whom are seen “looking grim and bleak.”

Here, Miss Strangeworth calls attention to the pattern which Jackson layers into the story. The fact that even more people seem “disturbed” confirms that beneath its shiny surface, something significantly wrong—perhaps even evil—is happening in this town.



As Miss Strangeworth's walk nears its end, she begins to move faster, spurred on by the smell of her **roses**. Their smell can be experienced from "halfway down the block," which reminds Miss Strangeworth of her home, a place she is exceedingly fond of. As she enters her home, Miss Strangeworth experiences a "deep pleasure" in relation to the space that she has cultivated. In particular, she is fond of the "red and pink and white roses" which cover her lawn and the slim, "washed white look" of her house.

After she finishes admiring her home, Miss Strangeworth goes inside and takes care of the groceries. She then contemplates drinking tea but decides against it because she does not want to ruin her appetite. In lieu of tea-time, she spends time in her sitting room, which is permeated by the smell of **roses**. As she enters the room, Miss Strangeworth walks over to her desk and unlocks it with the intention of writing letters.

Inside the desk are two different sets of writing materials. The first is "heavy and cream-colored, with 'Strangeworth House' engraved across the top." The other is a multi-colored pad of paper that is commonly used by members of the community to write themselves miscellaneous notes. Miss Strangeworth also possesses two different writing instruments: the first is a gold fountain pen, the second a "dull stub of pencil" which she uses to write in a "childish block print."

Today, Miss Strangeworth picks up the pencil and the multi-colored pad, and writes a brief letter that she was thinking about as she walked home. It says: "DIDN'T YOU EVER SEE AN IDIOT CHILD BEFORE? SOME PEOPLE JUST SHOULDN'T HAVE CHILDREN, SHOULD THEY?" After writing the letter, Miss Strangeworth feels satisfied with herself, happy that she got out exactly what she wants to say. Then, Miss Strangeworth begins writing a different letter for Mrs. Harper, whom she has apparently written to several times before. This letter, also written in block print on multi-colored paper, mockingly asks Mrs. Harper if she knows her husband is cheating on her.

The possible evil in the town is juxtaposed with another passage about Miss Strangeworth's love for her roses. She finds their scent intoxicating and experiences a deep pleasure when in close proximity to them—something she never feels when talking to members of her community. The description of Miss Strangeworth's house suggests that it is typical of what one would expect of an upper-middle-class home in the mid-20th century. Like the town, Miss Strangeworth's house is deliberately generic—the only exception being the roses that surround it. The roses are an attempt to further beautify a space that it is already pleasing. It is deliberately excessive, to the point where it seems as though she is trying to cover something up. Roses are a perfect symbol in this regard because they are outwardly beautiful, but their thorns—which are not immediately apparent—can hurt those who touch them.



Even the inside of Miss Strangeworth's home is covered with roses, which again speaks to her love for them to the point of excess. They even have a place in her sitting room, which—as soon becomes clear—is a much more sinister area than one might expect.



All of the objects in her home establish Miss Strangeworth as a relatively wealthy citizen of small-town America, and her ornate writing materials suggest that she was being hypocritical in her earlier conversation with Helen Crane. In fact, the multi-colored paper used by other members of the community sticks out in her home because it is cheap and does not match the rest of her aesthetic. This implies that Miss Strangeworth is wealthier than most of her neighbors and suggests that she is trying to cover up what she is about to write.



All of Miss Strangeworth's repressed thoughts throughout the day spew out of her. The letters themselves are clearly hateful rather than useful, and yet Miss Strangeworth feels they express exactly what she wants to say. The use of the word "idiot" in this instance means intellectually disabled, meaning Miss Strangeworth is directing her rage at Helen's fears and stating the exact opposite of what she said to Helen's face. It is intentionally cruel, as is the letter to Mrs. Harper.



As Miss Strangeworth writes, the narrator observes that Miss Strangeworth does not care for facts, but rather “the more negotiable stuff of suspicion.” In her previous letters, Miss Strangeworth wrote to Mr. Lewis, accusing his grandson of thievery; Linda Stewart’s parents, informing them of her relationship with Dave Harris; and Miss Chandler, letting her know that the person she is seeing might be a murderer. Miss Strangeworth worries about the evil that goes “unchecked” in her community and takes great pleasure in writing the letters.

Because Miss Strangeworth’s letters are based in suspicion, most of them are likely untrue, although the harm they cause to her community is very real. Yet, Miss Strangeworth is completely oblivious to this fact and instead believes that she is doing something positive for her community. She lives a completely unexamined life and worries about evil everywhere except in herself, where it actually resides.



Miss Strangeworth begins to place her letters in envelopes—one addressed to Don Crane, another to Mrs. Harper—and then inspiration strikes again: she writes another letter to “old Mrs. Foster,” which implies that Mrs. Foster’s doctor might intentionally botch her upcoming operation. In addition, Miss Strangeworth considers writing yet another letter addressed to the school board, inquiring about how Billy Moore’s father, a chemistry teacher, managed to buy a convertible. However, she decides against writing this final letter because she is tired and believes three letters will be sufficient.

Miss Strangeworth’s sudden bouts of inspiration demonstrate that her letter-writing process is arbitrary. She focuses in on a target and then assumes wrongdoing without any proof, in this case before anything has even occurred to justify her insinuations.



This letter-writing process is something Miss Strangeworth has done for a year. Because the letters are anonymous, she does not receive any answers, but she believes they are necessary to keep her beloved town “clean and sweet.” She thinks that the world is “lustful and evil and degraded” and there is “only one Strangeworth left” to protect it.

Miss Strangeworth worries about the integrity of her town, particularly in regard to lustfulness. Several of her letters are focused on sex and infidelity, which suggests a preoccupation with the subject, perhaps because she is lonely herself. Additionally, vile though her actions may be, here it is apparent that Miss Strangeworth does believe her letter-writing is a valuable service to her community. This speaks to the lack of genuine connections Miss Strangeworth has in her life and how distorted her worldview has become as a result.



After she finishes writing and sealing all of her letters, Miss Strangeworth seals up her desk and places them into her pocketbook. Then, she sits down to eat and enjoys the “warm sunlight,” the sight of her **roses**, and the feel of her silverware. She is content with herself and decides to take a nap. When she wakes up, Miss Strangeworth grabs her pocketbook and sets off on her evening walk, eager to mail her letters at the post office. Intentionally, she chooses to mail her letters in the evening, hoping that the darkness will conceal her face and she can remain anonymous.

Miss Strangeworth’s feelings of self-satisfaction once again demonstrate her sense of a job well done. However, although she is convinced of the justness of her actions, she knows that others will not feel the same way, which is why she takes so many steps to remain anonymous. Although her actions could be seen as an admission of guilt, Miss Strangeworth never engages in a moment of self-reflection, suggesting that she believes she is doing the right thing.



As she approaches the post office, Miss Strangeworth sees a group of kids who quiet themselves as she walks by and greet her with respect. Miss Strangeworth returns their greetings and moves into the post office to mail her letters. As she is doing so, Miss Strangeworth hears Linda Stewart, who is once again crying. Miss Strangeworth listens carefully to what is being said because it is occurring in “her town, and these were her people.” Linda is talking to Dave Harris and telling him that he cannot come to her house anymore. When he asks why, Linda refuses to tell him, instead saying, “You’ve got to have a dirty, dirty mind for things like that.” Listening to this conversation upsets Miss Strangeworth, who once again mentally reiterates her belief that there is “so much evil in people,” even in her beloved town.

Afterwards, Miss Strangeworth finishes mailing her letters. She slides two of her letters into the necessary slot, but accidentally drops the third on the ground. She fails to notice this mistake and walks away to return home. Dave Harris notices what she has done and tries to get her attention but fails. However, eager to perform a favor, Dave picks up the letter and decides to deliver it directly to its recipient, Don Crane. Linda is skeptical of Dave’s decision and asks him why he is bothering to do anyone a favor. He responds, “Maybe it’s good news for them. Maybe they need something happy tonight, too. Like us.” Then, Dave and Linda walk off hand-in-hand to deliver the letter.

The kids near the post office are respectful to Miss Strangeworth, but like everyone else in the story—perhaps with the exception of Helen Crane—they have no desire to engage with her. Meanwhile, the conversation between Linda and Dave is significant because it is likely a result of Miss Strangeworth’s previous letters. The exact issue is unclear, though it is almost certainly sexual in nature. Miss Strangeworth takes this as another example of evil in young people, although, ironically, the conversation is about something Miss Strangeworth made up. Therefore, in this moment, Miss Strangeworth does acknowledge her wrongdoing in a way, but does not recognize herself as the culprit.



Dave’s actions are significant because they are the one instance of a good deed that occurs in the story. Despite how the town has treated him, Dave decides to do something for his neighbors which he believes is kind. The dark irony of this moment is that Dave ruins Miss Strangeworth’s anonymity and causes more problems when he only wanted to help.



The next day, Miss Strangeworth wakes up “with a feeling of intense happiness” as a result of the letters she sent the day before. She knows this is around the time that people will be opening her letters and she feels a deep sense of satisfaction. After getting out of bed, Miss Strangeworth moves downstairs to fix herself breakfast. She walks into her dining room to find “a letter in a green envelope that looked oddly familiar.” Miss Strangeworth thinks it looks like one of her letters but is confused about how that could be possible. She opens the mysterious letter and starts to cry as she reads the words: “Look out at what used to be your roses.”

Miss Strangeworth finds satisfaction in the moment when people open her letters, which suggests that she takes enjoyment in the misery she causes and cares little for actual reform, although it seems unlikely that her letters would spark such change in the first place. Again, she seems unaware of this fact, and her tears, which close the story, are not because of any sense of personal wrongdoing. Instead, she remains worried about the evil of others and the destruction of her roses. The roses—which hide thorns beneath their beauty—are representative of the town’s image of itself, and their destruction signifies that illusion being lifted. When such actions occur in plain sight, no one can continue to pretend they live in a utopia, even Miss Strangeworth. The verb “look” is used to suggest to a person and to a community that it is in need of significant self-examination. While it seems unlikely that Miss Strangeworth will undergo any such process, these final lines also speak to the many mid-century communities that are represented by Miss Strangeworth’s town. It is a plea, as well as a warning, of what can happen to a community that focuses too much on its outer appearance and too little to what goes on beneath the surface. In addition, this final moment is heavily implied to be revenge from the Crane family. Miss Strangeworth insulted what they loved most, so they retaliated by destroying what she loved most.





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