

THE POSSIBILITY

(*of*)

Evil

SHIRLEY JACKSON



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.

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. She was seventy-one, Miss Strangeworth told the tourists, with a pretty little dimple showing by her lip, and she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her. “My grandfather built the first house on Pleasant Street,” she would say, opening her blue eyes wide with the wonder of it. “This house, right here. My family has lived here for better than a hundred years. My grandmother planted these roses, and my mother tended them, just as I do. I've watched my town grow; I can remember when Mr. Lewis, Senior, opened the grocery store, and the year the river flooded out the shanties¹ on the low road, and the excitement when some young folks wanted to move the park over to the space in front of where the new post office is today. They wanted to put up a statue of Ethan Allen”²—Miss Strangeworth would frown a little and sound stern—“but it should have been a statue of my grandfather. There wouldn't have been a town here at all if it hadn't been for my grandfather and the lumber mill.” **A**

ANALYZE VISUALS

Examine the portrait. What impression do you have of the woman shown? Which details helped you form this impression?

A MAKE INFERENCES

How does Miss Strangeworth feel about the contribution her family has made to the town?

1. **shanties** (shăn'têz): roughly built cabins; shacks.

2. **Ethan Allen**: a Revolutionary War hero who led a group of soldiers, called the Green Mountain Boys, from what is now Vermont.



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. When the new minister came, and the ladies were gathering flowers to decorate the church, Miss Strangeworth sent over a great basket of gladioli; when she picked the roses at all, she set them in bowls and vases around the inside of the house her grandfather had built.

30 Walking down Main Street on a summer morning, Miss Strangeworth had to stop every minute or so to say good morning to someone or to ask after someone's health. When she came into the grocery, half a dozen people turned away from the shelves and the counters to wave at her or call out good morning. **B**

B CHARACTER MOTIVATION
Why does Miss Strangeworth take time to greet so many people?

"And good morning to you, too, Mr. Lewis," Miss Strangeworth said at last. The Lewis family had been in the town almost as long as the Strangeworths; but the day young Lewis left high school and went to work in the grocery, Miss Strangeworth had stopped calling him Tommy and started calling him Mr. Lewis, and he had stopped calling her Addie and started calling her Miss
40 Strangeworth. They had been in high school together, and had gone to picnics together, and to high school dances and basketball games; but now Mr. Lewis was behind the counter in the grocery, and Miss Strangeworth was living alone in the Strangeworth house on Pleasant Street.

"Good morning," Mr. Lewis said, and added politely, "lovely day."

"It is a very nice day," Miss Strangeworth said as though she had only just decided that it would do after all. "I would like a chop, please, Mr. Lewis, a small, lean veal chop. Are those strawberries from Arthur Parker's garden? They're early this year."

"He brought them in this morning," Mr. Lewis said.

50 "I shall have a box," Miss Strangeworth said. Mr. Lewis looked worried, she thought, and for a minute she hesitated, but then she decided that he surely could not be worried over the strawberries. He looked very tired indeed. He was usually so chipper, Miss Strangeworth thought, and almost commented, but it was far too personal a subject to be introduced to Mr. Lewis, the grocer, so she only said, "And a can of cat food and, I think, a tomato."

Silently, Mr. Lewis assembled her order on the counter and waited. Miss Strangeworth looked at him curiously and then said, "It's Tuesday, Mr. Lewis. You forgot to remind me."

"Did I? Sorry."

60 "Imagine your forgetting that I always buy my tea on Tuesday," Miss Strangeworth said gently. "A quarter pound of tea, please, Mr. Lewis."

"Is that all, Miss Strangeworth?"

"Yes thank you, Mr. Lewis. Such a lovely day, isn't it?"

"Lovely," Mr. Lewis said.

Miss Strangeworth moved slightly to make room for Mrs. Harper at the counter. "Morning, Adela," Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, "Good morning, Martha."



“Lovely day,” Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, “Yes, lovely,” and Mr. Lewis, under Mrs. Harper’s glance, nodded.

70 “Ran out of sugar for my cake frosting,” Mrs. Harper explained. Her hand shook slightly as she opened her pocketbook. Miss Strangeworth wondered, glancing at her quickly, if she had been taking proper care of herself. Martha Harper was not as young as she used to be, Miss Strangeworth thought. She probably could use a good, strong tonic.³

“Martha,” she said, “you don’t look well.”

“I’m perfectly all right,” Mrs. Harper said shortly. She handed her money to Mr. Lewis, took her change and her sugar, and went out without speaking again. Looking after her, Miss Strangeworth shook her head slightly. Martha definitely did *not* look well. **C**

80 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.

C MAKE INFERENCES

What can you infer from the way Mrs. Harper reacts to Miss Strangeworth’s comment?

infatuated
(in-făch’ōō-ă’tīd) *adj.*
intensely fond

3. **tonic**: a medicine for restoring and energizing the body.

Helen laughed. "That's the way we want her to feel," she said. "Like a princess."

"A princess can be a lot of trouble sometimes," Miss Strangeworth said dryly. "How old is her highness now?"

"Six months next Tuesday," Helen Crane said, looking down with **rapt** wonder at her child. "I've been worrying, though, about her. Don't you think she ought to move around more? Try to sit up, for instance?"

"For plain and fancy⁴ worrying," Miss Strangeworth said, amused, "give me a new mother every time."

"She just seems—slow," Helen Crane said.

"Nonsense. All babies are different. Some of them develop much more quickly than others."

"That's what my mother says." Helen Crane laughed, looking a little bit
100 ashamed.

"I suppose you've got young Don all upset about the fact that his daughter is already six months old and hasn't yet begun to learn to dance?"

"I haven't mentioned it to him. I suppose she's just so precious that I worry about her all the time."

"Well, apologize to her right now," Miss Strangeworth said. "*She* is probably worrying about why you keep jumping around all the time." Smiling to herself and shaking her old head, she went on down the sunny street, stopping once to ask little Billy Moore why he wasn't out riding in his daddy's shiny new car, and talking for a few minutes outside the library with Miss Chandler,
110 the librarian, about the new novels to be ordered, and paid for by the annual library appropriation. Miss Chandler seemed absentminded and very much as though she were thinking about something else. Miss Strangeworth noticed that Miss Chandler had not taken much trouble with her hair that morning, and sighed. Miss Strangeworth hated sloppiness. **D**

Many people seemed disturbed recently, Miss Strangeworth thought. Only yesterday the Stewarts' fifteen-year-old Linda had run crying down her own front walk and all the way to school, not caring who saw her. People around town thought she might have had a fight with the Harris boy, but they showed up together at the soda shop after school as usual, both of them looking grim
120 and bleak. Trouble at home, people concluded, and sighed over the problems of trying to raise kids right these days.

From halfway down the block Miss Strangeworth could catch the heavy scent of her roses, and she moved a little more quickly. The perfume of roses meant home, and home meant the Strangeworth House on Pleasant Street. Miss Strangeworth stopped at her own front gate, as she always did, and looked with deep pleasure at her house, with the red and pink and white roses massed along the narrow lawn, and the rambler⁵ going up along the porch; and the neat, the unbelievably trim lines of the house itself, with its slimness and its washed white look. Every window sparkled, every curtain hung stiff

rapt (răpt) *adj.* fully absorbed; entranced

D EVALUATE

Reread lines 90–114. Does Miss Strangeworth seem like a reasonable person? Explain your answer.

4. **plain and fancy:** every kind of.

5. **rambler:** a rose plant that grows upward like a vine, by clinging to a support.

130 and straight, and even the stones of the front walk were swept and clear. **E**
People around town wondered how old Miss Strangeworth managed to keep
the house looking the way it did, and there was a legend about a tourist once
mistaking it for the local museum and going all through the place without
finding out about his mistake. But the town was proud of Miss Strangeworth
and her roses and her house. They had all grown together.

Miss Strangeworth went up her front steps, unlocked her front door
with her key, and went into the kitchen to put away her groceries. She
debated having a cup of tea and then decided that it was too close to midday
dinnertime; she would not have the appetite for her little chop if she had tea
140 now. Instead she went into the light, lovely sitting room, which still glowed
from the hands of her mother and her grandmother, who had covered the
chairs with bright chintz⁶ and hung the curtains. All the furniture was spare
and shining, and the round hooked rugs on the floor had been the work of
Miss Strangeworth's grandmother and her mother. Miss Strangeworth had put
a bowl of her red roses on the low table before the window, and the room was
full of their scent.

Miss Strangeworth went to the narrow desk in the corner, and unlocked
it with her key. She never knew when she might feel like writing letters, so
she kept her notepaper inside, and the desk locked. Miss Strangeworth's
150 usual stationery was heavy and cream-colored, with "Strangeworth House"

E GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 125–130.
Notice how the author
uses **modifiers** such as
red, pink, and white and
unbelievably trim to
vividly describe the house
and its surroundings.

ANALYZE VISUALS

Which details in this
painting fit Jackson's
description of the
story's **setting**?

6. **chintz**: a colorful printed cotton fabric.



The House with Roses (1936), Henri Le Sidaner. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. Photo © Visual Arts Library/Art Resource, New York.

engraved across the top, but, when she felt like writing her other letters, Miss Strangeworth used a pad of various-colored paper, bought from the local newspaper shop. It was almost a town joke, that colored paper, layered in pink and green and blue and yellow; everyone in town bought it and used it for odd, informal notes and shopping lists. It was usual to remark, upon receiving a note written on a blue page, that so-and-so would be needing a new pad soon—here she was, down to the blue already. Everyone used the matching envelopes for tucking away recipes, or keeping odd little things in, or even to hold cookies in the school lunch boxes. Mr. Lewis sometimes gave them to
160 the children for carrying home penny candy.

Although Miss Strangeworth's desk held a trimmed quill pen, which had belonged to her grandfather, and a gold-frost fountain pen, which had belonged to her father, Miss Strangeworth always used a dull stub of pencil when she wrote her letters, and she printed them in a childish block print. After thinking for a minute, although she had been phrasing the letter in the back of her mind all the way home, she wrote on a pink sheet: DIDN'T YOU EVER SEE AN IDIOT CHILD BEFORE? SOME PEOPLE JUST SHOULDN'T HAVE CHILDREN, SHOULD THEY?

She was pleased with the letter. She was fond of doing things exactly right.
170 When she made a mistake, as she sometimes did, or when the letters were not spaced nicely on the page, she had to take the discarded page to the kitchen stove and burn it at once. Miss Strangeworth never delayed when things had to be done.

After thinking for a minute, she decided that she would like to write another letter, perhaps to go to Mrs. Harper, to follow up the ones she had already mailed. She selected a green sheet this time and wrote quickly: HAVE YOU FOUND OUT YET WHAT THEY WERE ALL LAUGHING ABOUT AFTER YOU LEFT THE BRIDGE CLUB ON THURSDAY? OR IS THE WIFE REALLY ALWAYS THE LAST ONE TO KNOW? **F**

180 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 cash⁷ 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 possible evil lurking nearby, if Miss Strangeworth had not sent letters to open their eyes. Miss Strangeworth would have been genuinely shocked if there *had* been anything between Linda Stewart and the Harris boy, but, as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town
190 alert to it. It was far more sensible for Miss Chandler to wonder what Mr. Shelley's first wife had really died of than to take a chance on not knowing. There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in town. Besides, Miss Strangeworth liked writing her letters. **G**

F MAKE INFERENCES

What is Miss Strangeworth suggesting in this letter to Mrs. Harper?

negotiable
(nĭ-gō'shə-bəl) *adj.* able to be bargained with

G CHARACTER MOTIVATION

What two motives for writing the letters are revealed in lines 180–193?

7. **petty cash**: a small fund of money kept handy for miscellaneous expenses.

She addressed an envelope to Don Crane after a moment's thought, wondering curiously if he would show the letter to his wife, and using a pink envelope to match the pink paper. Then she addressed a second envelope, green, to Mrs. Harper. Then an idea came to her and she selected a blue sheet and wrote: YOU NEVER KNOW ABOUT DOCTORS. REMEMBER THEY'RE ONLY HUMAN AND NEED MONEY LIKE THE REST
200 OF US. SUPPOSE THE KNIFE SLIPPED ACCIDENTALLY. WOULD DOCTOR BURNS GET HIS FEE AND A LITTLE EXTRA FROM THAT NEPHEW OF YOURS?

She addressed the blue envelope to old Mrs. Foster, who was having an operation next month. She had thought of writing one more letter, to the head of the school board, asking how a chemistry teacher like Billy Moore's father could afford a new convertible, but all at once she was tired of writing letters. The three she had done would do for one day. She could write more tomorrow; it was not as though they all had to be done at once.

She had been writing her letters—sometimes two or three every day for a
210 week, 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. The town where she lived had to be kept clean and sweet, but people everywhere were lustful and evil and **degraded**, and needed to be watched; the world was so large, and there was only one Strangeworth left in it. Miss Strangeworth sighed, locked her desk, and put the letters into her big, black leather pocketbook, to be mailed when she took her evening walk.

degraded (dĭ-grā'dĭd) *adj.*
corrupted, depraved



Mailboxes & Cosmos, Carl Schmalz, W.H.S. Watercolor. Courtesy of the artist.

She broiled her little chop nicely, and had a sliced tomato and good cup of
220 tea ready when she sat down to her midday dinner at the table in her dining
room, which could be opened to seat twenty-two, with a second table, if
necessary, in the hall. Sitting in the warm sunlight that came through the tall
windows of the dining room, seeing her roses massed outside, handling the
heavy, old silverware and the fine, **translucent** china, Miss Strangeworth was
pleased; she would not have cared to be doing anything else. People must live
graciously, after all, she thought, and sipped her tea. Afterward, when her
plate and cup and saucer were washed and dried and put back onto the shelves
where they belonged, and her silverware was back in the mahogany silver chest,
Miss Strangeworth went up the graceful staircase and into her bedroom, which
230 was the front room overlooking the
roses, and had been her mother's
and her grandmother's. Their
Crown Derby dresser set⁸ and furs
had been kept here, their fans and
silver-backed brushes and their own
bowls of roses; Miss Strangeworth
kept a bowl of white roses on the
bed table.

She drew the shades, took the
240 rose-satin spread from the bed,
slipped out of her dress and her
shoes, and lay down tiredly. She
knew that no doorbell or phone
would ring; no one in town would
dare to disturb Miss Strangeworth
during her afternoon nap. She slept,
deep in the rich smell of roses.

After her nap she worked in her garden for a little while, sparing herself
because of the heat; then she came in to her supper. She ate asparagus from
250 her own garden, with sweet-butter sauce, and a soft-boiled egg, and, while
she had her supper, she listened to a late-evening news broadcast and then
to a program of classical music on her small radio. After her dishes were
done and her kitchen set in order, she took up her hat—Miss Strangeworth's
hats were proverbial in the town; people believed that she had inherited
them from her mother and her grandmother—and, locking the front door
of her house behind her, set off on her evening walk, pocketbook under her
arm. She nodded to Linda Stewart's father, who was washing his car in the
pleasantly cool evening. She thought that he looked troubled. **11**

260 There was only one place in town where she could mail her letters, and
that was the new post office, shiny with red brick and silver letters. Although
Miss Strangeworth had never given the matter any particular thought, she had



8. **Crown Derby dresser set:** a hairbrush, comb, and hand mirror made of fine china.

translucent
(trāns-lōō'sənt) *adj.*
allowing light to shine
through

11 MAKE INFERENCES

Why would Miss Strangeworth be interested in whether Linda Stewart's father looked troubled?

always made a point of mailing her letters very secretly; it would, of course, not have been wise to let anyone see her mail them. Consequently, she timed her walk so she could reach the post office just as darkness was starting to dim the outlines of the trees and the shapes of people's faces, although no one could ever mistake Miss Strangeworth, with her dainty walk and her rustling skirts.

There was always a group of young people around the post office, the very youngest roller-skating upon its driveway, which went all the way around the building and was the only smooth road in town; and the slightly older
270 ones already knowing how to gather in small groups and chatter and laugh and make great, excited plans for going across the street to the soda shop in a minute or two. Miss Strangeworth had never had any self-consciousness before the children. She did not feel that any of them were staring at her unduly or longing to laugh at her; it would have been most **reprehensible** for their parents to permit their children to mock Miss Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Most of the children stood back respectfully as Miss Strangeworth passed, silenced briefly in her presence, and some of the older children greeted her, saying soberly, "Hello, Miss Strangeworth."

reprehensible
(rĕp'rĭ-hĕn'sĕ-bəl) *adj.*
deserving blame and criticism

Miss Strangeworth smiled at them and quickly went on. It had been a long
280 time since she had known the name of every child in town. The mail slot was in the door of the post office. The children stood away as Miss Strangeworth approached it, seemingly surprised that anyone should want to use the post office after it had been officially closed up for the night and turned over to the children. Miss Strangeworth stood by the door, opening her black pocketbook to take out the letters, and heard a voice which she knew at once to be Linda Stewart's. Poor little Linda was crying again, and Miss Strangeworth listened carefully. This was, after all, her town, and these were her people; if one of them was in trouble, she ought to know about it.

"I can't tell you, Dave," Linda was saying—so she *was* talking to the Harris
290 boy, as Miss Strangeworth had supposed—"I just *can't*. It's just *nasty*."

"But why won't your father let me come around anymore? What on earth did I do?"

"I can't tell you. I just wouldn't tell you for *anything*. You've got to have a dirty dirty mind for things like that."

"But something's happened. You've been crying and crying, and your father is all upset. Why can't *I* know about it, too? Aren't I like one of the family?"

"Not anymore, Dave, not anymore. You're not to come near our house again; my father said so. He said he'd horsewhip you. That's all I can tell you: You're not to come near our house anymore."

300 "But I didn't *do* anything."

"Just the same, my father said . . ."

Miss Strangeworth sighed and turned away. There was so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one, there was still so much evil in people. **1**

She slipped her letters into the slot, and two of them fell inside. The third caught on the edge and fell outside, onto the ground at Miss Strangeworth's

1 MAKE INFERENCES
How does Miss Strangeworth feel about the trouble she has caused Linda and Dave? Explain your answer.

feet. She did not notice it because she was wondering whether a letter to the Harris boy's father might not be of some service in wiping out this potential badness. Warily Miss Strangeworth turned to go home to her quiet bed in her lovely house, and never heard the Harris boy calling to her to say that she had dropped something. ❶

"Old lady Strangeworth's getting deaf," he said, looking after her and holding in his hand the letter he had picked up.

"Well, who cares?" Linda said. "Who cares anymore, anyway?"

"It's for Don Crane," the Harris boy said, "this letter. She dropped a letter addressed to Don Crane. Might as well take it on over. We pass his house anyway." He laughed. "Maybe it's got a check or something in it and he'd be just as glad to get it tonight instead of tomorrow."

"Catch old lady Strangeworth sending anybody a check," Linda said.

320 "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."

Sadly, holding hands, they wandered off down the dark street, the Harris boy carrying Miss Strangeworth's pink envelope in his hand.

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. She washed her soft, old face and brushed her teeth, still sound in spite of her seventy-one years, and dressed herself carefully in her sweet, soft clothes and buttoned shoes. Then, going downstairs, reflecting that perhaps a little waffle would be agreeable for breakfast in the sunny dining room, she found the mail on the hall floor, and bent to pick it up. A bill, the morning paper, a letter in a green envelope that looked oddly familiar. Miss Strangeworth stood perfectly still for a minute, looking down at the green envelope with the penciled printing, and thought: It looks like one of my letters. Was one of my letters sent back? No, because no one would know where to send it. How did this get here?

340 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. ♪

❶ **PREDICT**

What do you predict will happen because Miss Strangeworth failed to notice that she dropped the letter?

