“The Possibility of Evil” (Shirley Jackson) Study Questions

1. Describe the setting.

2. Describe/discuss the character of Miss Adela Strangeworth.

3. How long has Miss Strangeworth lived in her town? Discuss her ties to the town and infer how this makes her feel about her position there.

4. Discuss how the town’s visitors respond to Miss Strangeworth’s roses. Explain how she responds.

5. Explain how the people in town react and respond to Miss Strangeworth. What do you think their impression of her is?

6. Discuss the relationship between Tommy Lewis and Miss Strangeworth and explain how that relationship has changed over the years. Infer what might have been the basis of the relationship. Then explain how and why it changed.

7. Describe Ms. Harper as she reaches for her pocketbook. Explain what Mrs. Strangeworth thinks about Martha’s behavior.

8. Mrs. Strangeworth meets Helen Crane, the mother of a six month old infant, and Miss Chandler, the librarian. Discuss her interactions with them and her observations about them.

9. There is a revealing statement (p. 176) about how the town views Miss Strangeworth. Explain what that is and why.

10. Explain the difference between the papers Miss Strangeworth uses to write letters. discuss the other ways in which these letters differ.

11. Discuss the purpose of Miss Strangeworth’s letters.

12. Why does Miss Strangeworth lie about the goings on in her town?

13. Explain what Miss Strangeworth sees as her role in the community.

14. After finishing the letters, Miss Strangeworth sets down to tea. discuss the irony of her thoughts after writing the letters. Explain Miss Strangeworth’s idea of “liv(ing) graciously” (179). Then, prove that she is not.

15. Explain why Miss Strangeworth never suspects the children of laughing or mocking. What does this prove about her opinion of herself.

16. Miss Strangeworth overhears a conversation between Dave Harris and Linda Stewart. Discuss the content of the conversation and explain Miss Strangeworth’s role in it.

17. Miss Strangeworth thinks that there is “so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one” (181). Explain what the evil is.

18. Explain how the townspeople discover Miss Strangeworth’s role in the letters being sent to citizens. How do they get Miss Strangeworth back?

19. Examine the last sentence of the story. How does Miss Strangeworth view her punishment? How does she view what she has done? Explain the irony of this.