

Ordinary Monsters:
The Banality of Evil in Shirley Jackson's
The Lottery* and *The Possibility of Evil

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Abstract

Doing something evil because one is unable to think had been the cause of much human suffering. Most people think that evil must be committed by extraordinary monsters or demons. However, Shirley Jackson tries to show how ordinary individuals are prone to do an act of infinite evil due to their lack of thought. The aim of this paper is to reveal that evil can manifest itself as normal and it requires nothing more than unthinking individuals going about their day. By applying Hannah Arendt's theory of the banality of evil to Jackson's short stories *The Lottery* (1948) and *The Possibility of Evil* (1965), the paper tackles a new understanding of evil that stems from the commonplace since it is mundane and its doers are so ordinary.

Keywords: banality, evil, Shirley Jackson, Hannah Arendt

الخلاصة

ان عدم قدرة الشخص على التفكير عند فعل الشر هو السبب في الكثير من المعاناة الانسانية. يعتقد معظم الناس ان الشر يجب ان يرتكب من قبل وحوش او شياطين غير عاديين. مع ذلك تحاول الكاتبة شيرلي جاكسون اظهار كيف يميل الافراد العاديون الى القيام بعمل شرير بسبب افتقارهم الى التفكير. يهدف البحث الى الكشف عن ان الشر يمكن ان يظهر على انه امر طبيعي ولا يتطلب اكثر من افراد عاديين غير قادرين على التفكير. من خلال تطبيق نظرية هانا ارنت عن تفاهة الشر على قصتين قصيرة لجاكسون "اليانصيب" 1948 و "احتمالية الشر" 1965 يعالج البحث فهما جديدا للشر ينبع من المألوف وان مرتكبيه افراد عاديين جدا

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاهة، الشر، شيرلي جاكسون، هانا ارنت

"The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good"

Hannah Arendt

Introduction

Some human beings are ordinary monsters though they do not look like that and do not know what lies within. This research tackles this type of ordinary monsters in two selected short stories by Shirley Jackson, the first is *The Lottery* and the second is *The Possibility of Evil*. Both short stories show that evil lies within human beings' mind and body, that it, sometimes, exists as a reality and that one does not, in fact, need to try to be evil.

Few short stories have ever stirred up the kind of outrage that Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* did upon being published in the June 1948 issue of *The New Yorker*. Shortly after the first publication of the modern horror story, letters of outrage and bitter criticism started pouring in from readers. Some found it "outrageous", "gruesome" and "utterly pointless", while others said it was "a piece of trash" and threatened to cancel their New Yorker subscriptions (Franklin, 2013). Even Jackson was accused of being "perverted" and "gratuitously disagreeable with incredibly bad taste" for writing such story (Franklin, 2013). Reading a short story featuring a brutal ritual was bound to take many readers by surprise and confusion, demanding to know what the story meant. They wondered if such "mass sadism" was still a part of ordinary life in New England "or in equally enlightened regions" and if these brutal rituals were real (Franklin, 2013).

It is such bewilderment that Jackson chose to address. In a letter to Joseph Henry Jackson, the literary editor of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Jackson told her story about villagers choosing slips of paper to decide who would be stoned to death: "I supposed I hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story's readers with a graphic dramatization of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives" (Franklin, 2013). The response *The New Yorker* sent to any letter-writer on behalf of Jackson was very much the same: "Miss Jackson's story can be interpreted in half a dozen different ways. It's just a fable... She has chosen a nameless little village to show, in microcosm, how the forces of belligerence, persecution, and vindictiveness are, in mankind, endless and traditional and that their own targets are chosen without reason" (Franklin, 2013). In writing for *The Atlantic*, Franklin (2013) in her essay *The lottery Letters* states how *The lottery* "anticipates the way we would come to understand the 20th century's unique lessons about the capacity of ordinary citizens to do evil. From the Nazi camp bureaucracy, to the Communist Societies that depend on the betrayal of neighbor by neighbor". Written just several years after the end of the World War II, Franklin thinks that *The Lottery* may have triggered such a reaction from readers as it showed them an ugly glimpse of their own faces in the mirror. Though fictional, *The Lottery* uncovered how little was required to induce ordinary people against each other.

Hannah Arendt's Theory of the Banality of Evil

Can someone do evil without being evil? This was the perplexing question that the philosopher Hannah Arendt struggled with when writing for *The New Yorker* in 1961 on the war crimes trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi official responsible for organizing the transportation of millions of Jews to various concentration camps in support of the Nazi's Final Solution.

Hannah Arendt published the first part of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in the *New Yorker* magazine fifteen years after Jackson published *The Lottery*. Similar to Jackson, Arendt awoke within her readers a sense of trouble and controversy. The difference between the reader's response to *The lottery* and that to Arendt's book is that while Jackson set off emotions of confusion, Arendt evoked pure outrage. Soon after the book was published in 1963, Arendt found, like Jackson, "stacks of letters waiting for her. Some correspondents praised the bravery of her truth-telling" while others found "her book detestable" (Jones, 2014). Later in an interview with Gunter Gaus, Arendt was confronted with a statement: "Above all, people were offended by the question you raised of the extent to which Jews are to blame for their passive acceptance of the German mass murders" (Jones, 2014).

Even though widespread and furious criticism surrounded *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, it seemed that Arendt's assumption, that Adolph Eichmann was 'neither perverted nor sadistic', but "terrifyingly normal" man who only followed orders, was a subject of dispute (Arendt, 1963, p. 276). By claiming that the Jews were driven to their death by a "thoughtless" idiot rather than a monster, many accused Arendt of blaming her victims, the Jews, that they were just as responsible for their destruction as the Nazi who murdered

them. Arendt's claim that Adolph Eichmann seemed less evil and more "buffoon" was her most provocative point (Jones, 2014).

Arendt's theory of the banality of evil relies on the idea that evil needs not to be satanic, in other words it does not need to have superhuman power in order to do severe damage. According to Elon (2006), Arendt believed that evil "needs not be committed only by demonic monsters but- with disastrous effect- by morons and imbeciles as well" (P, vii). Arendt claimed that Adolph Eichmann was an ordinary man who acted without any motive other than to diligently advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy: "Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, [Eichmann] had no motives at all" (Arendt, 1963, p. 287). She concluded in her book that Eichmann was not amoral monster. Instead he performed evil deeds without evil intentions, a fact connected to his "sheer thoughtlessness" (Arendt, 1963, p. 287), a disengagement from the reality of his evil acts. This, Arendt contends, is what humanity needs to fear, a 'remoteness from reality' that when connected to "such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man" (Arendt, 1963, p. 288).

The words Arendt uses to describe the banality of evil are "inability to think," "thoughtlessness," "failure of conscience," and "lack of judgment". This sort of evil, Arendt explained in a letter to a friend, "possesses neither depth nor demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste like a fungus on the surface" (Elon, 2006, p. xiv). In describing Eichmann as thoughtless, Arendt did not imply he was foolish or stupid. Rather he lacked common sense and an ability to exercise thoughtful judgement. She wrote that Adolph Eichmann was "brainless", "never realized what he was doing" due to an "inability...to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (Arendt, 1963, p. 49). Lacking this particular cognitive ability, Eichmann committed crimes under circumstances which made it impossible for him to know or feel that he was doing wrong. Expanding on Arendt's theory of the banal evil, Elon (2006) claims that "evil comes from a failure to think. It defies thought for as soon as thought tries to engage itself with evil and examine the premises and principles from which it originates, it is frustrated because it finds nothing there. That is the banality of evil" (p. xiv). So banal evil is something superficial while thinking entails going deeper, searching for roots and so people who do not think are more prone to do acts of evil. Accordingly, Eichmann was not inherently evil, but merely "shallow" and "mindless", a man who drifted into the Nazi party in search of personal advance and direction, not out of deep ideological belief (Arendt, 1963, p. 287). In Arendt's opinion, Eichmann resembles the protagonist in Albert Camus's novel *The Strangers* (1942) who kills a man at random, but then afterwards feels no remorse. There was no clear intention or evil motive: the deed just happened. Despite the deeds were monstrous, the doer (Eichmann), in Arendt's words, was "quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt, 1971, p. 4) In other words, the evil perpetrated was extraordinary, but the evildoer ordinary. However, the universal understanding of evil was that the evildoer was by all means as extraordinary as the evil he had perpetrated (Carrim, 2017, p. 66). Benhabib (2006) states that the phrase "the banality of evil" is meant to refer to "a specific quality of mind and character of the doer himself, but neither to the deeds

nor the principles behind those deeds" (p. 74). Arendt wanted to tell Eichmann's story so that her readers could understand how ordinary people could commit great acts of evil. What Arendt meant by the banality of evil was that evil is not necessarily caused by demonic or monstrous character traits but can have a very banal source and thus runs counter to the traditional understanding of evil.

Arendt explained that banality means: "No roots, not rooted in evil motives or urges or strength of temptation" (as cited in Assy, n.d.). The idea that the banality of evil has "no-roots" is linked with Arendt's theory that only the faculty of thought can reach the profundity and consequently reach the roots. Since thinking, by definition, "wants to reach the roots" (as cited in Assy, n.d), it is difficult to think about evil when it is not radical, that is, when it lacks roots or depth. With the absence of motives, evil is reduced to a superficial phenomenon in contrast with the mental capacity in which one reaches profundity. In this regard, Arendt writes:

Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think, that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely will he be to yield to evil. (as cited in Assy)

Another point to make concerning Arendt's theory of banal evil is her judgment of the role played by the Nazi bureaucracy. Arendt offered a political theory in an attempt to understand totalitarianism in her other writings including the postscript to *Eichmann to Jerusalem* where she recognized that "... the essence of totalitarian government and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them" (Arendt, 1963, p. 289). A totalitarian state empowers itself and takes domination over others by removing the humanity and thought of the citizens. This "reveals Arendt's belief that political and organizational systems can encourage, but do not justify, the lack of thought that leads to banal evil" (Husmann & Kusko, 2020, p.139). One of Arendt's observations was that the powerful bureaucratic system can normalize anything, even the most horrifying acts of evil. Arendt shows that under totalitarianism, extreme acts of violence can be accepted as normal, as something that surpasses any pre-conceived notion of right and wrong. This captures the idea that evil acts are not necessarily perpetrated by evil people. Instead, they can simply be the result of bureaucrats dutifully obeying orders. Eichmann demonstrated that he was the ideal government servant by following all instructions and performing his duties effectively. He wanted to be a welcomed and essential component of the Nazi bureaucracy. These, Arendt argued, were not radically evil motives connected to a lust for power, revenge or hatred of the Jewish people. Accordingly, Eichmann personified "the faceless nature of Nazi evil" (Elon, 2006, p. xiv), a person within a bureaucratic system which sought to dismantle the human personality of its citizens. Though Arendt confirmed Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" and how he was a "joiner" who blindly and foolishly followed rules, she did not absolve him from guilt, arguing that "cogs" are transformed

back into humans, into perpetrators once removed from the bureaucratic apparatus (Arendt, 1963, p. 289). Moreover, the concept of the banality of evil can offer an explanation for the worst crimes of the century whose perpetrators are ordinary people being led into performing atrocious acts- "just following orders" to hurt, humiliate or kill.

More importantly, Arendt tells us "the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies" (Arendt, 2003, p.111). Arendt defined the nobodies as

human beings who refuse to be persons.... the wrongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, to go back and remember what they did, have actually failed to constitute themselves into somebodies. By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at least persons (Arendt, 2003, pp. 111-12).

In general, evil requires an effort. One has to be tempted to do evil, to know that he/she goes against something whether it is the law of the country, the social norms and rules or one's own principles. Because of this, evil is a strain. The banality of evil is an effortless evil. It is done without giving in into temptation because there is none involved. It is done without malice as there is no motive involved. All that is required for evil to become effortless is for the individual to lose touch with his conscience and common world and by deciding to be passive, the individual becomes the enabler of evil. The banality of evil is about an inability to think. To think means to have an awareness or conscience that enables one to carry out a dialogue with himself/herself after every deed that he/she does. Lacking this awareness leads the individual to do banal evil. Moreover, it is the banality of evil that, sometimes, prepares the ground for radical evil.

The banality of evil has its origin in the human freedom to choose between good and evil. It is the refusal to accept that one is exercising freedom. Evil seems mundane when it is the result of the refusal of the person to engage in choice-making. So the banality of evil should be interpreted as the passivity of the agent, who through refusal to make a choice produces effortless evil. In short, the banality of evil is seen as a deficiency: it is a deficiency of thinking, willing, judging, and effort.

The Lottery's Embodiment of Banal Evil

Being one of the most widely-anthologized American short stories, Shirley Jackson's *The lottery* resonates still today not because of its portrayal of rituals, or scapegoating, or its focus on innate evil, but because of its terrifying depiction of banal evil. *The lottery* takes place on a beautiful June summer day, in a small New England village where all the residents are gathering for their traditional annual lottery which is always drawn on this date every year. The lottery is conducted by Mr. Summers, who runs the coal business, and Mr. Graves, the postmaster, who provides assistance. Though the event first appears festive, it soon becomes clear that no one wants to win the lottery. Tessie Hutchinson, one of the villagers, seems unconcerned about the tradition until her family draws the marked

slip of paper. The winner, it turns out, will be stoned to death by the other residents. Tessie wins the lottery and the villagers, including her own family members, begin to throw rocks at her. Jackson closes the story with Tessie's screaming, "it is not fair, it is not fair" (Jackson, 1968, p. 245). The reader has come to understand that the lottery is indeed a formal, traditional, fully accepted annual ritual that ends in the murder of a fellow villager, and that "the story, told throughout in such a prosaic and mundane manner, ends in true terror" (Husmann & Kusko, 2020, p. 135).

Evil is often a product of "unremarkable people, ordinary human beings that decline to think" (Humann & Kusko, 2020, p. 140). It does not need monsters in order to flourish, instead all it requires is "joiners", "clowns" or "cogs". This is the theory set by Hannah Arendt and this is what Jackson captures so terrifyingly in her short story. From the very beginning of the story, the reader is made to feel as if the event that is about to happen is commonplace. It is just another summer day, another town gathering and another lottery. Jackson clearly shows the normality of the village. It is an ordinary place, populated by ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. The men are gathered, "Surveying their children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes". The girls are "talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys", and the women are exchanging "bits of gossip" (Jackson, 1968, p. 237). Nothing is out of ordinary, since the only real concern is to have everything done regarding the lottery's proceedings within two hours which allows "the villagers to get home for noon dinner". And it is not until the very ending of the story that the reader realizes the atrocity of this routine. A cold-blooded stoning is about to follow, a mundane, though horrifyingly, murder, one in which all the residents of the village will participate including the victim's own family. Despite this, nobody is raising a fuss or asking any questions; instead, everyone is acting as if the lottery is normal. Perhaps this is obvious in the conversations of Tessie Hutchinson after her late arrival:

"Clean forgot what day it was", she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. "Thought my old man was out back stacking wood", Mrs., Hutchinson went on, "and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running". She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said, 'you are in time, though. They are still talking away up there'. Mrs. Hutchison craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front...and began to make her way through the crowd. The people separated good-humouredly to let her through ... and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, "Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie. Mrs. Hutchison said gringing, "Wouldn't have me leave m' dishes in the sink, now, would, Joe?" and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson's arrival (Jackson, 1968, pp. 239-40).

Nothing stands out of ordinary in the above excerpt. It is a normal small town interaction. The residents are generally good neighbors and citizens. They engage in pleasantries and casual laughter, showing kindness and civility to one another even while proceeding the lottery. There is a talk of the trivialities of daily life; there are no signs of discomfort, fear, disgust or that anything is wrong. The villagers are normally going about their day as they do annually on this date. They are even encouraged by Mr. Summers to finish the stoning quickly so they can "get home for noon dinner" (Jackson, 1968, p. 237). Whereas Arendt is attacked for trying to make sense of how a normal person could be motivated to participate in systematic inhumanity, Jackson simply presents it as an unsurprising fact (Mundi, 2014).

Another evidence of the villagers' passive evil can be seen in their total lack of interest in the significance of the lottery. Every year, they carry out this savage ceremony, intentionally sentencing one of their own to death, yet there is no hint in the story why the villagers are committed to fulfill the brutal ritual. They do it because they have always done that and no further justification is required. In fact, the only explanation given in the story is when Old Man Warner, the oldest man in the village, says "lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" (Jackson, 1968, p. 242). It was thought that sacrificing a fellow villager would make the crops grow better. However, such a statement can hardly be considered as a solid justification for holding such heinous event since no character shows a concern for the prosperity of the crops. Indeed, no one expresses a concern for anything except the "shabby black box" that holds the lottery tickets and the "tradition as was represented by the black box" (Jackson, 1968, p. 238). Even such a concern for the traditional rite is superficial and tenuous as Jackson reveals that "much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded" (Jackson, 1968, p. 238). Old Man Warner's words that "there's always been a lottery" (Jackson, 1968, p. 242), after one villager claims that other places have already quit lotteries, indicates that there is no need even to think about what has eternally been done. The annual ritual is an ever existing structure that never permits the villagers any thought to practice it. Following customs that have been passed down for years, the villagers do not even think of themselves as evil. The lottery seems obscene to the reader but normal to the participants.

Additionally, it is not only the banality of evil in *The lottery* that lines up with Arendt's theory, but it is also the systematic, organized ability of such evil. Throughout her writings, Arendt frequently recognizes how the political and organizational systems are inclined to trigger evil. Such systems help transforming men into mere "cogs" and thus dehumanizing them. Arendt believes that the existence of a bureaucracy sometimes, but not absolutely, helps increasing the opportunity of an individual becoming unreasonable and this, in turn, increases the possibility that a person will commit banal evil. Such is the case in *The Lottery*. Though the village is small and "there were only about three hundred people" (Jackson, 1968, p. 237), it still has a deep-rooted bureaucratic structure by which to carry out its ceremony. Jackson describes it as such:

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up- of heads of

families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery... Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins (Jackson, 1968, p. 239).

The hierarchal structure, with its fixed assignment of roles and authority and clearly defined norms and proceedings, undoubtedly contributes to the emergence of such banal evil. It offers an acceptable arrangement and mental distance. It permits the violent ritual to be performed as if it were a routine procedure. The villagers are not betraying their neighbor, friend or family member; they are only carrying out the next step in the process. No additional justification or consultation is provided as no one is asked for or required. The villagers unquestionably and inarguably carry out the prescribed course of the action regardless of the victim. They even "half listened to the directions" told by Mr. Summers as they "had done it so many times", and "most of them were quiet...not looking around"(Jackson, 1968, p. 241). Husmann & Kusko (2020) claim that Jackson "reveal[s] that darkness could manifest as a formality and become normality, that horrors require nothing more than unthinking people going about their day, and that evil, in the words of Hannah Arendt, is often banal" (p, 132). They, further, confirm that the story "continues to scare us because its wickedness is so mundane and its perpetrators so pedestrian" (p, 132)

The last and the most horrifying piece of evidence confirming the banality of evil in *The Lottery* comes at the end of the story when the Hutchinsons turn on their own family member, Tessie. Once the ceremonial process is finished, it is finally revealed that Tessie Hutchinson wins the ticket with the black dot. As a result, it has been decided that she is the chosen one to be stoned to death. No one steps up to defend or rescue her, in fact, her family members neither object nor intervene, instead they join in even her child "little Davy Hutchinson [gets] few pebbles" to throw his mother with (Jackson, 1968, p. 245). This could be considered the most horrifying point of the story and it is due, according to Arendt's concept, the "sheer thoughtlessness" of the villagers, which is similar to what Adolph Eichmann said when he remarked

"I never killed a Jew, or a non-Jew, for that matter-I never killed any human being. I never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew, I just did not do it", or, as he was later to qualify this statement, "It so happened...that I had not once to do it"- for he felt no doubt that he would have killed his father if he had received an order to that effect (Arendt, 1963, p. 22).

In the last line of the above excerpt, Arendt makes an ultimate statement that uncovers the banality of evil, a statement that can also be applied to the characters in *The Lottery* and the Hutchinson family in particular. The Hutchinsons receive an order which comes in the

form of black dot on a slip of paper, and they carry it out indisputably on their wife and mother.

Moreover, Jackson makes little effort to explain why the winner of the lottery is being scapegoated. Chen (2012) writes, "Obviously, the innocent Tessie Hutchinson is blamed or punished to death, not because she has done something wrong or bad. And the 'wrong doing/ something bad' that happens within the village is certainly not her fault- though we are not sure what the wrong doing /something bad really is" (p. 1025). Such a lack of knowledge, such an absence of "wrongdoing/something bad" reinforces the banal violence of the villagers. For the "thoughtless" villagers, Tessie Hutchinson is indeed a scapegoat, but none of them knows or even cares what exactly she is taking the blame for. The villagers are no more than unthinking human beings engaging in the banally evil action.

In *The Lottery*, the readers are given no chance to distinguish between their real world from the world of the story, between the people in their lives and those in the tale. *The lottery* is not only a dreadful story, but a "mundane and universal" one as well (Husmann & Kusko, 2020, p. 148). Mundi (2014) says that "Jackson presents horrific evil as simply a universal and incomprehensible quality of all humanity". The evil described in the story can occur everywhere to every one since all that is needed, for humans, is to be absent of reason. Neighbors, friends, family members, even oneself all can do banal evil, ordinary monsters are everywhere. Arendt (2003) once wrote that "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good" (p. 180). Thus, all ordinary people, once "brainless", are capable of transforming into monsters. In fact, *The lottery* has struck a nerve because it taps directly into the observation that evil can be committed in a nonchalant, everyday way by people just like us.

The Normalization of Evil: Jackson's *The Possibility of Evil*

Much of the horror stems from the discrepancy between the normal outward appearance of the individual and the heinous act that the individual has committed in the guise of goodness. Joseph Brodsky asserts that "what we regard as evil is capable of a fairly ubiquitous presence if only it tends to appear in the guise of good" (as cited in Popova, n.d.). While acts of evil can result in horrible tragedies, the human perpetrators of these acts are often marked not with the quality of being demonic, but with absolute mundanity. Thus, Evil is not necessarily monstrous, yet it takes place under the disguise of "normality" according to Arendt's concept of banal evil.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt argues that those who commit acts of violence have learned to disassociate themselves from the action through "holes of oblivion" (Arendt, 1963, p. 232) either by hiding behind bureaucracy (just following orders) as in *The lottery* or rewriting facts to justify their deeds as virtuous or as McBride (2019) calls them "alternative facts". So evil is what a mindless person accepts as normal and right according to the terms that govern his world. This can be seen in the story of Miss Adela Strangeworth in Jackson's *The Possibility of Evil* (1965). Miss Strangeworth is an old woman who anonymously sends vicious letters to her neighbors in an attempt to judge

their behavior and make them alert to potential wickedness lurking nearby. However, she is gradually revealed as the true villain of the story.

Like in *The Lottery*, Jackson writes a horror story which seems to have a normal setting. The story takes place on Pleasant Street of a small town where the reader follows a seventy-one year old Miss Strangeworth as she goes along her day shopping and socializing. Jackson also uses a description of the story's atmosphere to tell a horror story in which it appears to be normal. The reader is made to feel a sense of tranquility, safety and contentment about Miss Strangeworth's little town: "The sun was shining, the air is fresh and clean after the night's heavy rain, and everything in Miss Stangeworth's little town looked washed and bright" (Jackson, 1997, p. 2). Miss Stangeworth loves her town so much that she never spends more than a day outside it through her entire life: "she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her. 'My grandfather built the first house on Pleasant Street', she would say... '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'" (Jackson, 1997, p. 3). She takes pride in both her house and her heritage. When she arrives at her ancestral house, she looks at it "with deep pleasure" and appreciates its absolutely organized appearance (Jackson, 1997, p. 15). Another sign that Miss Strangeworth is proud of her heritage is her appreciation of her roses: "Miss Strangeworth never gave away any of her roses, although the tourists often asked her. The roses belonged on Pleasant Street, and it bothered [her] to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets" (Jackson, 1997, p. 4). Nothing is out of ordinary, Miss Strangeworth is an ordinary woman who appears to emphasize her family's contribution to the town in which she would determine herself as a respected and superior figure and perceive that this town belongs to her. It is not until Miss Strangeworth delivers cruel anonymous notes to the people of her town in attempt to keep them alert to the evil lurking by that the reader learns she is the one who creates evil.

Moreover, Jackson's description of Miss Strangeworth's character confirms the incongruity between the person and the evil act he/ she might be committing. This again proves Arendt's theory that evil is often a product of ordinary individuals who decline to think, to will and to judge. With small-town woman's interests and mentality, Miss Strangeworth is first shown to the reader as a sweet, kind-hearted old lady who wants the best for the people of her town. While walking down Main Street, "Miss stangeworth had to stop every minute or so to say good morning to someone or to ask after someone's health" (Jackson, 1997, p. 5). The reader has come to know that Miss. Strangeworth, is considerate, proper and polite. This is apparent when she noticed that Mr. Lewis "looked worried" (Jackson, 1997, p. 7), and when Mrs. Harper's hand "shook slightly as she opened her pocketbook", and Miss Strangeworth thought that she "could use a good, strong tonic" (Jackson, 1997, p. 9). Miss Strangeworth's concern is also shown when she encountered the librarian, Mrs. Chandler and noticed that she "had not taken much trouble with her hair this morning", and the narrator has claimed that Miss Strangeworth "hated sloppiness" (Jackson, 1997, p.13).

On the other hand, the way Miss Strangeworth thinks and her actions when no one is watching is a complete opposite. When she talks to Don and Helen Crane about their baby, Miss Strangeworth advises the mother Helen, who seems anxious that her baby is growing too slow, and says that "all babies are different. Some of them develop much more quickly than others" (Jackson, 1997, p.12). Later she wrote a vicious letter to Don, stating "Didn't you see an idiot child before? Some people shouldn't have children, should they?" (Jackson, 1997, p. 19). This letter was meant to tell the couple that their child had a disability and was not just a little slow as she claimed earlier in her conversation with the young mother. Moreover, as she was walking down the streets, she stopped "once to ask little Billy Moore why he wasn't out riding in his daddy's shiny new car", acting as if she was genuinely interested in the child's whereabouts (Jackson, 1997, p. 13). However, it was later revealed that she "had thought of writing one more letter to the head of the school, asking how a chemistry teacher like Billy Moore's father could afford a new convertible" (Jackson, 1997, p. 2). In another letter addressed to Mrs. Harper to whom she shows her concern, Miss Strangeworth writes: "Have you found out yet what they were all laughing about after you left the bridge club on Thursday? Or is the wife really the last one to know?" (Jackson, 1997, p. 20). Though the letter is addressed to Mrs. Harper and the sender does not clearly state her message, the reader can infer that the message means that Mr. Harper is cheating on his wife. Similarly, she seems outwardly friendly to Mr. Lewis at the grocery shop, but secretly harbors sinister thoughts about the shop: "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" (Jackson, 1997, p. 20). Miss Strangeworth clearly writes a letter to Mr. Lewis, addressing the possibility that his grandson might be stealing his money. She does not know if the grandson actually does so, yet she writes a letter accusing him on behalf of her suspicions, causing Mr. Lewis to be suspicious of his descendant.

The banality of evil is the idea that evil does not have the Satan-like, villainous appearance one might typically associate it with. Rather, evil is perpetuated when immoral principles become normalized over time by unthinking people. Evil becomes commonplace; it becomes the everyday. Ordinary people, going about their everyday lives, become complicit actors in systems that perpetuate evil. Miss Strangeworth never makes an attempt to consider if she ever made any mistake or said something inaccurately. She tends to believe that because of her family's reputation, "it would have been most reprehensible" and unacceptable if anyone decides to "mock" her or treats her disregardfully (Jackson, 1997, p. 29). Moreover, based on her overbearing manner, Miss Strangeworth is accustomed to make unreasonable and imperious assumptions. And she has justified such actions by claiming that she is protecting her neighbor by eliminating the evil that exists within her community. Miss Strangeworth explains why she sends the letters: "...as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it...There were so many wicked people in the world and only on Strangeworth left in the town" (Jackson, 1997, p. 21). It is Miss Strangeworth's tendency to adopt judgements and assumptions without thinking upon which she writes her letters that allows banal evil to flourish.

As the story progresses, Jackson shows that Miss Strangeworth's perception of evil is not accurate. Miss Strangeworth did not bother herself to "think" that her honorable work was perceived as evil by others, nor did she take the time to investigate the gossip which was the inspiration for her wicked letters: "Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts; her letters all dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion" (Jackson, 1997, p. 20). This shows that even though she posts her letters like a normal senior woman that cares for everyone in her town, she is a woman who creates malicious tattletales according to her "thoughtless" observations and opinions. Hrebik (2001) states that Miss Strangeworth "sends anonymous letters to the inhabitants of the town, warning not of facts or real dangers". This, once again, aligns with Arendt's theory that banal evil stems from an absence of thought and a disconnection from the reality of one's evil act. Miss Strangeworth does not realize that her letters are causing more problems than solving them. On the contrary, "she was pleased with her letter[s]" just because "she was fond of doing things exactly right" (Jackson, 1997, p.19). She believed that "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" (Jackson, 1997, p. 24). However this self-righteousness does not give a concrete reason for what she has done. She writes a letter to Mrs. Frost, a woman having an operation next month: "You never know about doctors. Remember they're only human and need money like the rest of us. Suppose the knife slipped accidentally. Would doctor Burns get his fee and a little extra from that nephew of yours?" (Jackson, 1997, p. 22). In this letter, Miss Strangeworth implies that her nephew might plot a murder and pay the doctor to get rid of the aunt so that he can inherit her estate. On her way to the post office to mail her letters, she has heard Lind Stewart crying, and "Miss Strangeworth listened carefully" (Jackson, 1997, p. 30). This is the habit of Miss Strangeworth, she is, thoughtlessly, listening, observing and drawing conclusions without investigating and collecting facts. She does not have any evidence that the teenage couple, Linda Stewart and Davis Harris, is in an intimate relationship, but that does not stop her from writing the letter saying they are. Even though things she writes are not factual, she believes it is better to put people on their guard than risk evil going unchecked. Jackson reveals, through Miss Strangeworth, that it is man's mindlessness that induces him to do evil. She points to the "possibility" of evil in the world once this evil confronts thought and challenges mental muscles.

The story ends with Miss Strangeworth's mistake of accidentally dropping one of her letters while mailing them to the post office. No longer viewed as the respected and kindly maiden lady, she is recognized for who and what she is and the townspeople take out their fury on her beloved roses. When she realizes her secret is known, she weeps "silently for the wickedness of the world" (Jackson, 1997, p. 36). The irony is that Adela, even at this point, is incapable of recognizing that a large part of the wickedness she has contributed to others is within herself. Jackson herself might think that such evil, and certainly the possibility of evil, is within us all. So wrapped up in stopping the evil in her town as she claims, Miss Strangeworth does not realize she is the one causing it and by doing this thoughtlessly she herself becomes evil. In Miss Strangeworth's situation, evil sometimes, as Arendt saw it, "had to be pulled down from the heights of the demonic to the lows of thoughtlessness"

(Cotkin, 2007, p. 485). What Arendt terms as "the banality of evil" is the failure to exercise one's capacity to think and to judge, i.e., to become fully human.

Conclusion

In sum, the banality of evil is clearly demonstrated in the two short stories by Shirley Jackson as the ordinary characters participate in doing evil thoughtlessly and accomplishing this evil unaware of the results and consequences. They justify their evil-doing by two captions: "lottery in June corn be heavy soon". In *The Lottery*, the whole members of the society behave normally as if they are brainwashed with an absolute viewpoint of society. Whereas in *The Possibility of Evil*, Miss Strangeworth thinks that "there were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in town" In her viewpoint, Strangeworth thinks that people are full of lustful evil and degraded. They need to be watched and saved. The story shows that many people may have irrational thought which explains why Miss Strangeworth thinks her actions are justified even though they are just as evil as she believes her townspeople are. The banality of evil appears when people without evil intentions, violent past or sadistic character traits can nevertheless become monsters. Following orders and norms like the villagers in *The Lottery* or thinking that they are warriors and can save the world like Miss Strangeworth was what motivated the perpetrators to get involved in committing evil.

The banality of evil is an attempt to undermine evil by mystifying it. It refers to an unprecedented evil that arose from the commonplace in the sense of "the ordinary". There is nothing that can strike one more than ordinary human individuals who commit acts of evil. Evil, according to Arendt, becomes banal when ordinary people participate in it, build distance from it and justify it in countless ways. There are no real motives or revulsions. Evil does not even look like evil, it becomes faceless. Hence evil is banal in the sense that it is inexplicable, unfathomable since it can happen unjustifiably and arbitrarily.

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