

# A Freudian Analysis of Erin McGraw's "A Thief"

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**Note:** This is an academic exercise that takes a psychological critical approach to Erin McGraw's short story, "A Thief." This is not intended to be a well-developed critical paper, but it should prove a useful tool for examining **one aspect** of McGraw's work. It should also serve to help students learn more about the use of the psychological (particularly Freudian) critical approach to literature.

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Erin McGraw's short story, "A Thief," is susceptible to a Freudian interpretation. The main character of the story, Evelyn, suffers from an inactive or perhaps wholly absent ego. The superego and the id, without the ego to mediate between them by regulating "the instinctual drives of the id so that they may be released in nondestructive behavioral patterns" (Guerin 121), inevitably clash. Because Evelyn's superego represses her sexual desires, her id strains against it and seeks release through thievery, which eventually becomes a complete substitute for sex.

At the beginning of the story, Evelyn clearly suffers from an excessively powerful superego. In Freudian psychology, the superego "serves to repress or inhibit the drives of the id, to block off and thrust back...those impulses toward pleasure that society regards as unacceptable." (Guerin 120). Evelyn unconsciously regards sex as unacceptable, and her superego will not allow her to experience such pleasure. Her dress and mannerisms reveal her inhibited nature. The "crease in her trousers [hangs] sharp and specific;" she speaks with "unflagging diction and meticulous pronunciation;" she even folds her dirty blouse *before* "placing it in the laundry basket" (18). She obviously cannot allow herself to engage in any behaviors which might break or disturb this fastidious routine.

Yet, despite the seeming predominance of her superego at the start of the story, Evelyn's id soon begins to strain against it. When she sees the cats copulating under the bed, she says, "It is difficult to ignore this" (18). It is difficult for her to ignore her sexual urges. And although she technically concedes to her superego's sexual inhibition by abstaining from sex, ironically her id leads her to find an even less morally acceptable outlet: thievery.

At first, the thievery is not a complete substitute for sex. "It [is] scarcely even thrilling" (19). However, Evelyn does manage to escape the guilt her superego would inevitably attach to an actual sex act. "She [does] not hurry. She behave[s] as if this were an everyday activity, something that was moral, clean," and she does at least feel "a sharp sting of satisfaction" (19). The thievery soon becomes more sexual. When she steals the bracelet, "she [is] warm with seamless, liquid pleasure" (19). She feels "heightened, as if charges were racing inexhaustibly over her nerve endings" (20). Her id begins to exert itself more forcefully. "What had once been pure order had become defiance" (21). She feels "bold and daring," and, perhaps most importantly, she escapes both the guilt and reservation that her superego had attached to actual sex because she no longer fears "detection" (21).

Although her id becomes more apparent as the story progresses, the only evidence which can be found of the existence of Evelyn's ego appears in her statement about the watch she steals: "One must be careful," she says, "not to leave the watch open for long periods, since the smallest particles of dust can cause malfunction. But it is a pleasure, from time to time, to look at a well-crafted piece of machinery" (22). Here, moderation, and not repression, is urged. If her ego were stronger, Evelyn could handle her id when it began to assert itself. But because this is the only time the ego even seems to make an appearance, the superego and the id are left to battle one another.

This battle is allegorized when Evelyn walks her dogs. The id strains violently against the superego, as the dogs tug "at their leashes so hard that Evelyn [veers] acutely to the left" (22). Her superego attempts to reign in the id: "She [gives] a sharp snap, and [the dogs slouch] back onto the sidewalk." (22). But the superego's attempt is futile; the assertion of her id through the thievery is "not just a fluke...The order of her life [has] opened up like huge jaws," and soon the dogs (her id) are "straining again, intent and urgent" (22-23). Motivated by her superego's concern that if she continues to indulge them (the dogs and her passions), they will "dig until [they] hang [themselves]," she calls them twice, "the second time so sharply that they [slink] back to her as one penitent body" (23). But soon the dogs straining again, this time in three directions, and she indulges her id, flaring "her own nostrils experimentally" like the dogs and feeling that "she wanted to pound the softest flesh of her body against stone and sand for the pure pleasure of touch" (23). She yearns to completely indulge her id, engaging in fierce sex, going down with the dogs "until she was shoulder deep, deeper" (23).

Finally, the id releases itself in an orgasmic frenzy. With a stolen pen, Evelyn engages in an act which is clearly sexual. The pen is phallic, "full between her fingers" with a "barrel" and a "nib narrowed to a point of such tense delicacy that Evelyn could hear as well as see the ink flow" (24). In her unoccupied guest house, she writes with the pen, bearing "down until the pen quivers] in her hand and its tip rip[s] through the page," an obvious metaphor for sexual penetration (27). However, after the orgasmic experience, when the ink (representative of semen) puddles on the "clean floor," Evelyn's superego reasserts itself, and she stops, "dropping the pen" and realizing that if "she didn't hurry, she would have to spend hours scrubbing at the blue stain on her floor" (27). The superego reintroduces guilt into the sex act, and she quickly scurries to catch the ink on paper. Having achieved orgasm, she is able to relax; she lays "her cheek to the page and" sleeps (27).

Despite this orgasmic experience, the id has not yet found a complete substitute for sex. Evelyn's sexual urges are motivated partly by her unconscious desire to have a baby. The narrator makes repeated references to children. The art teacher to whom Evelyn rented the guest house calls her students her children and herself has a baby boy (25-26). Evelyn's sister stays with her baby boy in the guest house (25). Indeed, it is the emptiness of the guest house which motivates Evelyn to engage in the orgasmic writing experience, because it is "a shame that such a

house should remain unoccupied" (27). It is a shame that Evelyn herself cannot have a baby. Sex is the logical way to obtain a baby. Earlier, she had realized that "Digging [sex] was the way to find treasures [babies]" (23). But the id's substitute for sex, thievery, has not yet brought Evelyn that treasure.

The id finally finds a complete substitute for sex when Evelyn actually steals a baby. She tells the baby the house, the house that was shamefully empty, is "a good house for babies" (30). She confesses that she can not overcome her desires. "People will tell you," she say to the baby, "that you outgrow desires, but they're wrong" (30). Unconsciously, she has long desired not just sex, but the product of sex, a baby. "We aren't meant," she says, "we never were, to live alone" (30).

The stealing of the baby is the climax of the story because it at last represents the id's triumph. Without an ego to release her desire in a healthy manner, Evelyn must give in either to her id or to her superego. In a sense, she fools her superego to indulge her id. Because her superego does not permit her to have sex, the id enables her to find a complete substitute, and the end result, ironically, is far worse than any illicit sex; it is kidnapping. Evelyn looks "down at the child" and waits "for it, the wave of exhilaration that would come crashing down on her with the force of a lifetime" (30). At last, all her desires are fulfilled, if not through the sex act, then at least through thievery.

### **Works Cited**

Guerin, Wilfred L., et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.

McGraw, Erin. "A Thief."

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