

# “The Monkey’s Paw”

By W.W. Jacobs

# What is the story about?

A happy suburban family is destroyed when an old Sergeant-Major gives them a mystical monkey's paw which allows the owner to make three wishes, and this leads to the tragic death of their son.

It is part of the horror genre.

# Themes

- The consequences of interfering with fate.
- The danger of wish fulfilment.

# Techniques

Setting.

Characterisation.

Turning Point.

Dramatic Irony.

Foreshadowing.

Tension/suspense.

Motif.

# Characterisation

# Mr White

“possessed ideas about the game involving radical chances”

When he is playing chess with Herbert, we are told that he is a man who takes unnecessary risks. This foreshadows his decision to wish on the monkey’s paw later in the story, and how he wished on the paw without really needing to.

“White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off” .

Despite listening to the Sergeant-Major’s warning about how dangerous the paw is, Mr White desperately salvages the paw from the fire. He knows about the risks of using the paw, but he chooses to ignore them.

He is convinced that the paw has magical powers and is determined that he wants to use it.

“I don't know what to wish for...It seems to me I've got all I want.”

Mr White acknowledges that that he already has everything that he could ever ask for. Despite this, he still decides to make a wish for money to pay off his mortgage.

"Morris said the things happened so naturally," said his father, "that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence."

In the morning after he makes the wish, it appears as though the monkey's paw did not have magical powers after all. However, Mr White never loses his faith in its power, and he remains convinced that his wish will come true somehow.

“the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor”

An employee of Maw and Meggins informs Mr and Mrs White of the tragic death of their son, and the amount of compensation they are to receive.

Mr White's greed and selfishness, and his tendency to take unnecessary risks appears to have caused the death of his son.

He was told of the dangers of wishing on the paw, but he persisted in his fascination and this seems to have led to the destruction of his family.

He wished for £200 and he got it, but at the expense of his son's life.

“Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness”.

Mr White has become a broken man, filled with regret over his decision to use the monkey’s paw.

He feels responsible for his son’s death.

He and his wife have drifted apart as they have lost the one person who held the family together. Herbert was the source of their happiness and joy, and without him their lives are empty.

# Herbert

“he darted around the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs White”

Prior to his tragic death, Herbert can be described as being:

Teasing.

Happy.

Carefree.

Loving and devoted son.

“Well, I don’t see the money...and I bet I never shall”.

- He is also a very logical and sensible person. The opposite of his father.
- He is unimpressed and very sceptical about the stories told by the sergeant-major. He almost mocks the idea that the paw has any magical powers.
- He believes that his father is wasting his time making wishes and that there is not a chance that he will ever get the money that he wished for.

“He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it”

The night before he dies, Herbert sees disturbing and frightening visions of the monkey's paw as he stares into the fire. However, he does not understand the significance of these visions and he dismisses them with a laugh.

He does not think for a second that the wish made by his father might have sinister consequences.

“The firm wishes me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss”

- The turning point of the story is when Herbert is killed in a horrifying accident at work which kills him instantly and leaves his body mangled and unrecognisable.
- Mr and Mrs White receive £200 compensation for his death, and it seems that Mr White's wish has come true, but at the expense of Herbert's life.

Herbert's death has a literal meaning and a metaphorical meaning.

Literally, Herbert died because he became entangled in machinery at work.

Metaphorically, Herbert died after being caught in the machinery of fate, which went wrong after Mr. White interfered with fate by making his wish for £200.

“He has been dead ten days, and...I could only recognize him by his clothing”

Mr White uses the monkey’s paw to wish his son back to life again.

However, Herbert’s accident left his body hideously and terrifyingly damaged.

We can imagine the horrifying prospect of his resurrected mess of mangled bones and flesh being brought back to life and trying to get into the house.

He appears to have been totally transformed from the man he was at the start of the story. He is now risen from the grave as a living corpse.

# Sergeant-Major

“It has caused me enough mischief already.”

When he is telling the White family about the wishes that he made on the monkey's paw his face turns very pale. It is implied that the paw brought him much pain and sorrow to his life and that he is uncomfortable speaking about it.

“I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw.”

The Sergeant-Major very solemnly tells the family about the man who owned the paw before him. It is clear that the paw ruined this man's life somehow, as he used his final wish to ask for death.

“If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire like a sensible man”

The Sergeant-Major clearly does not want the White family to use the paw as he is afraid of the possible consequences.

He tries to get rid of it by throwing it in the fire, but Mr White salvages it.

He tells them to destroy it and to never use it.

He tells them that they can't blame him for what happens if they do.

However, his repeated warnings fall on deaf ears and he knows that all he can do is beg them to make a prudent and wise choice for what they wish for.

Setting

The mood and atmosphere of the story changes dramatically as the story progresses.

- **Start of story**

“blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly”.

The atmosphere is warm, cosy.

Full of fun, conversation and laughter.

The White family are enjoying each other's company.  
Playing games; entertaining a guest; having dinner.

The atmosphere reflects the love and affection between the family members.

- **After Mr White makes his wish**

“A silence unusual and depressing settled on all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the rest of the night”.

The atmosphere in the house changes dramatically for the worse.

It becomes very quiet, eerie and morbid in the house.

The monkey’s paw has already started to have a dramatic influence on the happiness of the White family.

The atmosphere in the house reflects the feelings of uncertainty and foreboding in the family members.

## **After Herbert's death**

“the darkness was oppressive”

The house has become a place of despair and misery.  
Very dark and sinister atmosphere pervades the house.  
Cold, depressing. Full of grief.

The atmosphere in the house reflects the anguish and pain of Mr and Mrs White.

Important things to mention

# The turning point

The turning point of the story is when Mr and Mrs White learn of the horrific death of their son Herbert.

When they find out how much money they will receive as compensation, it seems clear to both of them that the monkey's paw is responsible for the death.

After this point, the mood/atmosphere of the story and the characters change dramatically for the worse.

# Motif: Pattern of threes

- The structure of “The Monkey’s Paw” is centred around a pattern of threes.
- The number three is repeated on a number of occasions in the story.

# Why does Jacobs do this?

This helps to create a sinister atmosphere.

1. There is a famous saying: bad luck comes in threes. This connects to the theme of the text.
2. Twos commonly occur in nature (we have two legs, two eyes, two hands, and so on), threes are often used in literature to produce a perverse or unnatural effect.

- There are 3 members of the White family.
- Three men can wish on the monkey's paw.
- Mr White is the third owner of the paw.
- There are 3 wishes.
- Sergeant Major Morris has 3 glasses of whisky.
- Morris asks Mr White not to use the paw 3 times.
- The stranger with the bad news about Herbert approaches the gate 3 times before entering.
- The story is split into three parts. Each part takes place at a different time of the day, with a different type of weather.

- After Mr White wishes Herbert alive, there are three sounds in the house:

A clock, a mouse, and the stairs.

- Mrs White asks her husband to wish Herbert alive 3 times.
- The dead Herbert knocks on the door three times.

# Tension and Suspense

Jacobs is able to steadily build up tension and suspense throughout the story through the techniques of foreshadowing and dramatic irony.

We are given a number of hints and clues which lead us to think that something dark and sinister is going to take place in the story.

An atmosphere of fear and foreboding is slowly built from the very start of the story.

We feel that something terrible could happen at any moment.

## Dramatic Irony

After his father wishes on the paw, Herbert says “well I don’t see the money...and I bet I never shall”.

This is ironic as he never does see the money due to the fact that he dies the following day. Further, the amount that his father wished for is the exact same amount of money that Herbert’s employers pay in compensation for his death.

“Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home”

Mrs White does not realise that her husband has sealed the fate of their son when he wished on the monkey’s paw, and that her son will never return to them again (in human form at least).

“how could two hundred pounds hurt you,  
father?”

This is ironic as £200 is the sum that the family receive in compensation for the death of their son, and his death is a source of great pain and suffering for the two of them.

## Foreshadowing

“Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late”

This foreshadows the fate of Mr White, who does not understand the evil of the monkey's paw until he wishes on it and it leads to the death of his son.

"It moved," he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. "As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake."

It is clear that the monkey's paw has supernatural qualities when it seems to move in Mr White's hand when he makes his first wish.

“He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it”

The night before he dies, Herbert sees disturbing and frightening visions of the monkey's paw as he stares into the fire.

- **N.B.**

The many warnings that the Sergeant-Major can also be seen as examples of foreshadowing.

# The ambiguous ending

“[H]e found the monkey’s paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish. The knocking ceased suddenly ”

- The ending of the story is so memorable because WW. Jacobs leaves the reader wondering if the monkey’s paw had any real power at all, or if Herbert’s death was just a coincidence.
- We never see Herbert’s resurrected corpse, and neither do Mr or Mrs White. It is entirely possible that another human being was knocking at the door, and that he went away at the same time that Mr White made his final wish.
- We are left wondering if Herbert really just died in an unfortunate accident and if Mr and Mrs White are blaming themselves for their son’s death for no reason.