

THE VILLAGE (2004)

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: Ethics, Consequentialism, Logic

CHARACTERS: Ivey Walker (Bryce Dallas Howard, blind heroine), Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix, Ivey's intended), Noah Percy (Adrien Brody, mentally impaired friend of Ivey and Lucius), Mr. Walker (William Hurt, father of Ivey and the village's leading elder), Ms. Hunt (Sigourney Weaver, Lucius's mother and another elder)

OTHER FILMS BY DIRECTOR M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN: Signs (2002), Unbreakable (2000), Stuart Little (1999), The Sixth Sense (1999)

SYNOPSIS: The film appears to be set in an early American society that is ruled by a group of elders that is comprised of both men and women. Scenes depicting youthful dalliance, communal intimacy, and a wedding of two of the young colonials give the village a utopian feel. However, the village is haunted by the death of its own members to disease and the fear of creatures that inhabit the woods outside the village. The colonials refer to these creatures as "those we do not speak of," and the villagers have negotiated a deal with the creatures that neither will venture into the other's territory. Lucius Hunt wishes to go to the neighboring towns to seek medicine that would improve the village's well-being. He believes that his good intentions will spare him the wrath of the creatures, but the elders refuse to grant him permission. After Lucius becomes engaged to Ivey Walker, Noah Percy stabs him out of jealousy. As his condition worsens, Mr. Walker decides to send Ivey, his blind daughter, to the town for medicine. The rest of the story is revealed as one watches the film.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The movie opens with the scene of an elder burying his child. Later on, the movie reveals that the elders moved to the village to escape the pain of death that was so imminent in modern day America. Have the elders achieved anything? Can the pain of a loved one's death be lessened by the means of that death?
2. In the first half of the movie, a number of viciously killed and skinned animals are found on the grounds of the village. A whisper arises among the villagers that the creatures within the woods are responsible for these brutal acts. Ms. Hunt addresses the townspeople and offers the following argument:
 - a. A coyote or wolf probably killed the dogs.
 - b. Those we don't speak of are bigger than coyotes or wolves.
 - c. Therefore, those we do not speak of are not responsible for the killing of the dogs.

2. (Continued) How might a community of human beings succumb to such a faulty explanation?
3. Ivey Walker, the blind heroine, claimed that “some people, just a handful... give off the tiniest color. It’s faint, like a haze. It’s the only thing I ever see in the darkness.” She then taunts Lucius that she won’t tell him what color he gives off, claiming that it wouldn’t be ladylike. The problem with this scene is the obvious question of how can a blind person identify colors. Even if she perceived these colors, how could she know red (the bad color) from gold (the protective color)? How dependent are humans upon senses for the acquisition of knowledge?
4. Lucius Hunt points to the locked black box in the corner of his mother’s living room and claims that everyone in the village has secrets. To this, his mother replies that the contents of the box are reminders of past sins: “Forgetting would be to let them live again in another form.” It is not exactly clear what other form Ms. Hunt has in mind, but her point merits consideration. How essential is memory for ethical behavior? Is one doomed to repeat previous immoral behavior if one forgets it?
5. Ivey and Lucius discuss his intentions to enter the forest and venture to a nearby town. She tells him that his intentions are noble, but nevertheless wrong. As a counter argument, he asks what if there are medicines in the town. The consequentialist ethical theory maintains that the goodness or badness of a moral action ought to be determined by the goodness or badness of its results. Between Ivey and Lucius, whose position represents consequentialism, and with which position do you agree?
6. Before revealing the farce of the creatures to Ivey, Mr. Walker explains the problems with the town: “Money can be a wicked thing. It can turn men’s hearts black... Good men’s hearts.” Money drove townspeople to commit murder. Yet, the village elders have allowed people to die and go blind, when medicine was close. As the murders were driven by capital gain, so the elders were driven by the elimination of pain. Haven’t the elders’ hearts been turned black as well? Are their actions any more morally justifiable than the murders in the town?
7. One of the young men that accompanies Ivey into the woods becomes afraid very early in the journey. Jiggling a bag of rocks, she seeks to comfort him with the promise of protection from magical pebbles. He answers, “Why haven’t we heard of these rocks before?” In this one scene, a villager uses logic to refute deception. Why haven’t any of the villagers done this before?
8. When Mr. Walker divulges his idea of sending Ivey to the town to his wife, she reminds him that he cannot go because of a sacred oath. However, under a consequentialist approach, wouldn’t it be permissible to break an oath if it saved a human being’s life? Is Shyamalan rejecting the consequentialist rationale laid by Lucius Hunt?

9. After revealing the plan to the elders, Walker asserts that if they didn't send Ivey, "We could never again call ourselves innocent." Yet, it seems hard to conceive of the elders as innocent up to this point. They are lying to the entire village and have contributed to the death of villagers when medicine was close. Furthermore, sending a blind girl into the woods hardly seems innocent; it is improbable she would return. Perhaps, sending Ivey is the best option because her blindness makes her less capable of detecting their lies. In light of the whole movie, can the elders ever truly call themselves innocent?

10. Some have claimed that Shyamalan's attempt to fool the audience doesn't work in *The Village*. First, the accents and vernacular are not distant enough; they appear forced. Secondly, would early American societies ever allow women such a primary role in ruling? Some feel that the costumes are not convincing enough to make "those we don't speak of" threatening. Another inconsistency hurts the director's effort; many of the villagers appear to be close in age to the elders. How are these members of the community being deceived, since they were not born into it? Despite all of this, were you fooled by *The Village*, and, if so, why?

11. Shyamalan said that for *The Village*, he "wanted to write about innocence." At the end of the movie are there any truly innocent figures remaining? If Ivey continues the deception, can she still be considered morally good? Is Noah Percy innocent in his tabbing of Lucius Hunt because of his mental handicap?

12. The director also states that he was setting the feigned village in the 1800s, and in that time "innocence couples with not knowing a lot." Is ignorance any criterion for innocence?