

The Good Person of Szechuan Study Guide

The Good Person of Szechuan by Bertolt Brecht

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Plot Summary

A con artist named Wang knows three prominent gods are walking the earth and looking for “good” people to restore their faith in humanity. Because he lives under a bridge, he doesn’t think his home is good enough for the gods. He tries to find a place for the gods to stay for a night, but everyone turns him down except for the prostitute Shen Teh. The next morning, the gods give her 1,000 silver dollars for her hospitality. They continue on their journey, and Shen Teh uses the money to purchase a tobacco store to try to improve her life.

The day before she opens her new tobacco shop, many people come into the store and ask her for favors. They try to take advantage of Shen Teh’s hospitality. However, she feels she cannot say no to any of these people because she knows they are living in abject poverty themselves. But she also knows if she continues to give them everything she owns, she will be out of business. She tells all the people she has a cousin who will come and help her. The next day, a cousin named Shui Ta comes and tells everyone to leave Shen Teh alone. Shui Ta enlists the help of a local policeman to rid the shop of the squatters, and the policeman suggests Shen Teh marry a wealthy man to help her maintain the shop. Shui Ta is skeptical at first, but he realizes the idea would help his cousin tremendously.

Before Shen Teh can get married, she meets a cynical man named Yang Sun and falls in love with him. All the while, Wang has been seeing the gods in dreams and giving them updates on Shen Teh. They are pleased with her actions, but they think Shui Ta’s decisions are cruel. They still continue to search for a “good” person, though it is becoming quite difficult.

When Shen Teh arrives at her shop the next morning, the locals are upset because she was late bringing them food. She had also forgotten to pay the rent, but an elderly couple loaned Shen Teh 200 silver dollars in order to cover her debts. Yang Sun’s mother, Mrs. Yang then comes to Shen Teh and begs for 500 silver dollars to help her son secure a job as a pilot. Shen Teh gives the woman the 200 silver dollars and then promises to find some way to raise the rest. In an interlude, it is revealed Shui Ta is actually Shen Teh in disguise; she dresses as a man and pretends to be her stronger, tougher male cousin. No one recognizes that Shui Ta is actually Shen Teh in man’s clothes.

Shui Ta is taking care of the tobacco shop when Yang Sun comes to ask for the remaining 300 silver dollars. He wants Shen Teh to sell the shop and live in poverty while he goes away and flies planes. After Yang Sun leaves, the barber Shu Fu comes over and tells Shui Ta he promised Shen Teh the use of some of his buildings to provide shelter for the homeless. Shui Ta says Shen Teh will marry him. Yang Sun then returns to see Shen Teh and sweet-talks her into marrying him and selling the shop. The wedding doesn’t happen, though, because Shen Teh refuses to give Yang Sun the remaining 300 silver dollars. Later, Shen Teh finds out she is pregnant. She realizes the only way to make a decent life for her child is to let Shui Ta take over. Shui Ta then



opens up a tobacco factory using the tobacco an older couple gave Shen Teh to take care of.

Months later, the factory is in full swing. The poor people are all working, though they believe Shui Ta is a difficult boss. After his mother asked Shui Ta to hire him, Yang Sun was now working at the factory. He was eventually even promoted to foreman.

When visiting Shui Ta's office months later, though, Wang tells him Shen Teh was pregnant. Yang Sun gets the police to arrest Shui Ta because he thinks Shui Ta is hiding Shen Teh from him.

At the court, the three gods are the judges. Shui Ta tries to explain to them he was only trying to help the poor people by making them work. At the same time, though, the workers were complaining about the difficulty of the work and how Shui Ta was too hard on them. Shen Teh recognizes the judges as the three gods she invited into her home, and has everyone leave. She reveals her true identity, and the gods are surprised at the turn of events. She tries to explain how difficult it is being kind yet firm with people who only want to steal and take. However, the gods simply leave for heaven and wish her all the best with her life. The play ends with a person standing onstage and apologizing because the play doesn't have a tidy, happy ending.



Prologue – Scene 2

Summary

Wang, a con man who sells water, is fretting about the visitation of three powerful gods. When the gods ask if they can have somewhere to stay for the night, Wang asks countless households if the gods can stay in a spare room. All the people turn him down, much to the dismay of the gods. They have come to see if there are any truly “good” people left on the earth. Wang finds them a room with the local prostitute, Shen Teh. She had to turn away a customer to make room for them, which meant having to forgo earning her rent, but she gave the gods a room to sleep in. The next morning, they leave and thank her for her hospitality. She begins to discuss how difficult it is to be good and still make a living in a poor society. The gods then give Shen Teh 1,000 silver dollars to cover their “expenses” for the night.

Shen Teh uses the money to purchase a tobacco shop - a shop the previous owner failed to mention wasn't making any money. Her old landlords come in ask Shen Teh if they can live with her. She says yes to be nice, and then they gradually reveal six other people will be staying with them as well. A jobless man comes in and asks Shen Teh if he can have a cigarette for free. He says it will give him the strength to find a job. She gives him one, and immediately a carpenter comes along and demands 100 silver dollars in payment for building shelves. She doesn't have his money, but she reluctantly mentions she has a cousin who could handle it for her. When the building's landlady Mrs. Mi Tzu enters, she says she needs references in order to give Shen Teh the shop. Shen Teh tells her her cousin will handle that later as well. Outside the town, Wang has a dream where he sees the three gods. They say they will continue searching for more good people, but they will return to Wang to receive check-ups on Shen Teh.

The next morning, a man named Shui Ta appears. He says he is Shen Teh's cousin and that he will be running things for the day. He tries to make the family leave the building, but they think he is joking. The carpenter and Shui Ta fight about the price of the shelving. The carpenter says he must be paid 100 silver coins in order to feed his family. Shui Ta, though, says the shelves are only worth 20 silver coins, and that is all he will pay. The carpenter gives in just as Mrs. Mi Tzu arrives. Because she has learned Shen Teh was formerly a prostitute, she is demanding six months' rent be paid in advance. Shui Ta cannot convince her otherwise. Shui Ta then asks a policeman in to scare the squatters into leaving. He then admits Shen Teh will probably have to sell the shop. The policeman, though, says Shen Teh should find a rich husband to front her the money. Shui Ta is reluctant at first, but he then agrees marriage is a good plan.

Analysis

Designating the setting to be China rather than a Western city allows the play to take on many strange storytelling techniques and to include mystical elements Western stories



don't usually possess. The play uses the mystique of China and the Eastern world to make these elements more believable. For instance, having the gods walk around and interact with humans would have been difficult for Western audiences to believe; after all, most Western cultures follow Christianity, a religion in which an omnipotent god is watching at all times. It would be much easier for Western audiences to accept gods walking around with mortals within the context of a foreign land and religion. However, the play's themes are intended to be universal. The audience is meant to recognize Shen Teh's struggle to survive life on the brink of poverty as a situation that is true for a portion of every culture's population.

Shen Teh's explanation about the difficulties of being good is brought to life in the first scene. Shen Teh sees all her friends and companions need help; she knows how it feels to be poor. But because the economy is failing, there is no way for them to earn a living. She gives handouts to those who need it, which qualifies her as a "good" person. Yet at the same time, she is criticized by those taking her livelihood. They tell her she is going to run herself into debt if she isn't careful. These people, though, are speaking from greed alone. They know the more Shen Teh gives to others, the less she can give to them. Shen Teh repeatedly finds the strength and kindness to forget her own needs and instead focuses on helping those around her.

Shen Teh has a foil in her cousin Shui Ta. Where Shen Teh cannot refuse to help her fellow townspeople, Shui Ta easily ignores their selfish requests. He sees these people as what they are - parasites. These people are looking out only for themselves without caring about what happens to their kind benefactress. Shui Ta tries to put a stop to their greed. He tries to show they cannot walk all over his cousin without consequences. However, they resort to name-calling and only want Shen Teh back. They know that Shen Teh would not stand up to their manipulation and would continue to let them be lazy and take advantage of her.

Vocabulary

tedious, illustrious, enmity, amiable, accosts, advent, palatial, foist, culvert, confer, abide, sardonically, connivance, auspicious, vouch, tenant, facetiously, dinghy, leant, concessions, trifle, gassing, surreptitious, pauper, duplicity



Scene 3 – Scene 4 Interlude

Summary

One night, a young wannabe pilot named Yang Sun plans to hang himself on a nearby tree. Shen Teh walks by and notices what he is about to do. She approaches and begins asking him why he would want to kill himself. Yang Sun says he cannot get his dream job flying an airplane. The only way to get that job is by a bribe, and he says he doesn't have the money necessary. Shen Teh says she knows how he feels and begins telling a story about a flightless bird she had during her childhood. She breaks into tears and tells him about her own unhappiness. At the moment, she was on her way to meet her arranged husband, but she didn't want to marry him. Yang Sun shows her a slight bit of affection, and she realizes she has feelings for Yang Sun. Wang passes by trying to sell water in the rain, an attempt he knows is futile, but Shen Teh buys some from him anyway. Later Wang meets with the gods again. People are referring to Shen Teh as the "Angel of the Slums" because of her good deeds and kind heart. The gods haven't had much luck finding any other good person. They appear slightly more ragged and tired because nobody will give them shelter during the night.

Days later, people outside of Shen Teh's shop are gossiping about how Shen Teh has spent another night away from her home. Suddenly, Wang runs from the barber shop with its owner, Shu Fu, right behind him. Shu Fu strikes Wang with a hot curling iron, and Wang screams in pain. Shen Teh then comes back happily. She is in love with Yang Sun, and her happiness has made her forget her rent is due the next day. The elderly owners of the nearby carpet store loan her 200 silver dollars under the condition her tobacco wares are their collateral. However, they trust Shen Teh and don't require the transaction to be in writing.

Shen Teh then notices Wang's hand is badly hurt. The homeless people tell Wang to turn Shu Fu in, but none of them will bear witness to the crime. Even though she wasn't there, Shen Teh says she will act as Wang's witness. Afterward, Yang Sun's mother Mrs. Yang appears, elated. Her son found a person that would accept a bribe of 500 silver dollars to allow Yang Sun to fly. Shen Teh gives Mrs. Yang all her rent money and promises to raise the rest somehow. After everyone leaves, Shen Teh brings out the mask and clothes of Shui Ta. She says the only way for one person to get ahead is to crush other people, and she wonders why the god allows this cruelty to happen.

Analysis

Another Eastern technique found in the play is the use of songs the characters sing during their dialogue. Like a western musical, the songs are an integral part of the play. The other characters sing to one another, but the songs are directed toward the audience to help describe the characters' feelings, thoughts, and secrets. In Wang's song, he is very frustrated that nobody wants to buy or work for anything when they can



get it for free elsewhere. This mimics the frustration Shen Teh feels about her “friends;” they know she will provide for them, so they have no reason to work for themselves.

It is from this frustration that Shen Teh created Shui Ta, her foil and alter ego. On stage, this character is obviously Shen Teh with a mask on. However, the suspension of disbelief the play creates allows the audience to understand that Shen Teh’s disguise is elaborate. There is an alternate way to view the disguise, though. Many of the characters are extremely ignorant of anyone’s feelings and situations but their own. By having a simple mask and change of clothes as the only difference between the cousins, it shows the characters are too self-absorbed to even notice the striking similarities between Shen Teh and Shui Ta.

Wang notices this self-absorption in the poor people like Shen Teh does, but he also notices this characteristic in the gods. The three gods, who are supposed to be looking for a “good” soul, are too caught up in the trials of their own journey to realize Shen Teh is the good person they have been looking for. They are suffering greatly because nobody will help them on their journey. Every time they reappear to Wang, they show more signs of wear and tiredness. While this only appears in small amounts throughout the play, the gods’ ignorance will become more obvious in the final courtroom scene.

Vocabulary

complexion, dreary, zither, inefficient, greedily, leaky, keenly, triumphantly, prudent, dejected, gallivanting, tarmac, smitten, aside, security, retailing, heedlessness, magistrate, pension, incredulous, mum, perjury, tempests, ruthless, meekness



Scene 5 – Scene 6 Interlude

Summary

Shui Ta is at the shop when Yang Sun enters. He begins talking with Shui Ta about needing another 300 silver dollars to pay the bribe for his pilot job. Yang Sun says he wants Shen Teh to sell her shop and her means of living in order to give him a chance to be happy flying an airplane. Shui Ta is fine with the transaction, but then Yang Sun admits he doesn't plan on taking Shen Teh with him. If his plan falls into place, Shen Teh will be back on the streets while Yang Sun is in another town for his job. Yang Sun knows Shen Teh is head-over-heels in love with him, but he doesn't truly love her. She is too dreamy and impractical for him.

Yang Sun leaves and Shu Fu comes into the store. He tells Shui Ta he has offered his large warehouses to Shen Teh to make a homeless shelter for the poor. He then tells Shui Ta he is in love with Shen Teh and wants to marry her. Shui Ta says he will arrange for Shen Teh to marry him. Shui Ta leaves to change into Shen Teh, and Yang Sun comes back. Shu Fu tells him of the new arrangement. As soon as Shen Teh comes out, Yang Sun takes her away and woos her into marrying him immediately.

At the wedding, Yang Sun and his mother are holding off the ceremony until Shui Ta arrives. They believe he will bring them the 300 silver dollars they still need in order to pay the full bribe. However, Shen Teh keeps asking Yang Sun if he will sacrifice his job and give back the 200 silver dollars. The old couple who loaned her the money fell on hard times, and they asked for their loan back. Instead of agreeing, Yang Sun picks up two tickets and says that one of them is for her; he sold his mother's furniture to pay for the second ticket as a surprise. Shen Teh questions him further, but Yang Sun remains obstinate and refuses to give up his dream to give the money back to the old couple. Shen Teh is disappointed in Yang Sun, and the marriage never takes place.

In Wang's dreams, he pleads with the gods to help Shen Teh out of her plight. She did so much good for the people of Szechuan, and now things are falling apart for her and her business. The gods, though, are apathetic towards Shen Teh's plight. They are too distracted with the hard time they are having finding someone good. They tell Wang not to worry because good things come to people who help themselves.

Analysis

Because of Yang Sun's selfishness, Shen Teh is learning not everyone should be given help in every situation. In her mind, people should share their prosperity with the less fortunate. Then the people who receive help should take the gift and put it to good use. She sees, though, that giving Yang Sun the 200 silver dollars has only enabled him to see her as the source for the remainder of the money he needs - money that is for the



immoral use of a bribe. He completely disregards Shen Teh's financial situation and what selling the shop would mean to her; instead, he thinks all she needs is marriage.

This demonstrates Yang Sun's beliefs about women. Yang Sun thinks Shen Teh should consider herself lucky someone like him would consider marrying a woman as idealistic as she, with all the problems her idealism causes. But it was, in fact, this idealism that saved his life. When Shen Teh met him, he was about to commit suicide because he thought his dream was unattainable. Yang Sun couldn't see there was more to life than flying. It took an idealistic conversation with Shen Teh for Yang Sun to give up his suicide plot and start living again.

In Yang Sun's mind, he is a deserving man who has a real ambition in life. He doesn't realize how wrong it is he should pay a bribe to be able to achieve his ambition, nor does he actually have any intention of providing for Shen Teh in the long run. He is never going to be the provider he pretends to be. In contrast, Shen Teh is able to make money on her own. She can provide for herself as well as others while Yang Sun relies on both Shen Teh and his mother to provide for him.

There is one action on Yang Sun's part in this section where his motives are not clear. When he presents Shen Teh with the two tickets, it seems to her his feelings for her are genuine. He could, in fact, have changed his mind and is now planning to take her with him. However, it could also be a ruthless ploy to get her to sell the shop. Either way, his motives are unclear at this point. Later in the play, he shows genuine concern for Shen Teh's well-being. However, it is not certain whether or not he discovered his true feelings at this point, when he lost the chance to be with her, or later in the story.

Almost every time Wang meets the gods, he asks them to help Shen Teh with her dilemma. And every time, the gods turn him down with a different excuse. It is odd they are so concerned with finding a "good" person to help them when they refuse to demonstrate goodness by helping other people. In a way, the gods are being hypocritical. They tell Wang good things come to people who help themselves, but they are relying on humans to give them lodging and food. It is through these interactions the audience begins to see the gods are not kind and generous beings; they are petty and self-serving like humans.

Vocabulary

partiality, insuperable, laboriously, brutality, farthing, scrabble, lofty, waive, defamation, foiled, debased, subdued, tumult, dunning, obstinate, rattling, finery, askew, tumbledown, catalpas, circumference, luxurious, quota, ennobles



Scene 7 – Scene 8

Summary

Shen Teh and Mrs. Shin, the woman who owned the tobacco store previously, are doing laundry when Shen Teh gets dizzy. Mrs. Shin comments Shen Teh might be pregnant. Shu Fu enters, and he commends Shen Teh for ignoring her own needs and helping the elderly couple with their money situation. He leaves a blank check and tells Shen Teh to write in whatever amount she desires. Mrs. Shin leaves, and Wang then comes in. Shen Teh tells him her secret, that she is pregnant. After Wang leaves, the elderly couple come and ask Shen Teh if she wouldn't mind storing a few bales of tobacco leaves for them. She obliges, and the couple exits.

Shen Teh goes to change into Shui Ta. She realizes, for the next nine months, she is going to have to use the disguise of Shui Ta and his hard nature if she is going to make a decent future for her child. Soon after, a group of the poor show up to ask if they can live in the warehouses Shu Fu gave Shen Teh. When Shui Ta appears, he tells them they can stay in the warehouses as long as they work for him in a tobacco plant he wants to create. They begrudgingly agree, and Mrs. Shin realizes the truth about Shen Teh and Shui Ta. Shui Ta already has the check and the warehouse from Shu Fu, but then he steals the elderly couple's tobacco bales in order to start his business.

Shui Ta employs all the poor locals as his workers. They think he is a slave driver, but they are content with their pay. Mrs. Yang asks Shui Ta to give her son employment even though he squandered the money Shen Teh had already given him. Shui Ta agrees. At first, Yang Sun hates doing real work. Eventually he thrives in the environment and becomes the foreman.

Analysis

So far, Shu Fu has been very generous with his gifts to Shen Teh. The warehouses and the blank check seem to point to a man who truly has a kind heart and pure motivations. However, it is important to remember his actions were predicated by his request to marry Shen Teh. It was less than a request; it was a transaction. And although it could be said he truly loves Shen Teh, he is hoping for some greater payoff - a wife. Shen Teh, though, is not altogether blameless. She is starting to become like the others who have mistreated her. She takes both the warehouse and the check and uses them to her advantage. While she still plans on using them for the greater good, her actions are clearly motivated by the welfare of her child. The same goes for her use of the tobacco bales. She needed the bales as a start-up, but by taking them she violated her agreement with the couple and used their goods to her advantage.



Vocabulary

sorter, christened, stature, haven, giddy, trod, hamper, strenuousness, suppleness, gaol, timidly, pretense, precepts, alleviation, wearily, predominate, advisable, somberly, inexplicable, ingratiatingly, enmities, slanderous, allegations, felling



Scene 9-Epilogue

Summary

Six months later, Shui Ta appears to have gained a significant amount of weight. Mrs. Shin tells Shui Ta everything will work out in the end, and the secret of her identity is still safe with her. It is apparent by Mrs. Shin's clothes, though, she is blackmailing Shui Ta. Yang Sun comes in and sees Shui Ta crying in Mrs. Shin's arms. He is confused, but he talks business with Shui Ta after Mrs. Shin leaves. Wang suddenly appears and begins asking questions about Shen Teh. Bags of rice have begun to appear around the town and he thinks it must be her good deed even though she hasn't been seen in many months. Wang reveals she told him about the baby, and Yang Sun is immediately upset. He knows the child is his.

Yang Sun is determined to find Shen Teh. Wang leaves to get the police to help find her, and Yang Sun begins accusing Shui Ta of hiding Shen Teh from him. Shui Ta runs to the back room and begins crying, and Yang Sun recognizes it sounds like Shen Teh. He runs with Wang to get the police. When they all come back with the police, Shui Ta tries to bribe everyone in order to divert their attention from Shen Teh. The police don't see anything wrong and are about to leave, but Yang Sun notices a bundle of Shen Teh's clothes Shui Ta tried to hide. The police then arrest Shui Ta for kidnapping Shen Teh.

The gods appear to Wang in a vision. They are haggard and worn out, and they all complain the world is a wretched, wicked place. Wang reminds them, though, Shen Teh was a good person. However, she is missing and needs their help. They all leave in search of the last remaining "good" person on the planet.

All the characters gather inside the courthouse, and the gods appear as the judges. Shen Teh, disguised as Shui Ta, recognizes the judges as the gods she housed months ago. However, they cannot see past her disguise. During the trial, some declare Shui Ta is a good businessman and has created jobs and stability in the community. The workers, though, claim Shui Ta is a difficult boss to please and treats them like slaves. Shui Ta tries to defend himself against the accusations. He tries to tell the workers they needed to be pushed in order to make a good life for themselves. Finally Shui Ta cannot stand the facade any longer. The judges ask everyone to leave, and Shui Ta reveals he is actually Shen Teh. She admits that it was impossible for her to be protective of herself as Shen Teh, so she created her alter ego. She also says their rules for governing "good" and "bad" are unfair, that it is impossible to be ultimately good when the conditions create nothing but a bad environment. The gods barely listen to her pleas for help before ascending back into the sky leaving her to fend for herself.

As the stage clears, a lone character comes and recites a song. He says they are sorry, but it was impossible for them to create a happy ending because of various reasons backstage. He said he was sorry he couldn't leave the audience with a neat and tidy happy ending like they had wanted.



Analysis

The scene in the factory office shows it is getting more and more difficult for Shen Teh to continue her charade. She wants to be strong and create a better environment for her child but she wants to help the workers as well. That is why she chose the serious and stern Shui Ta to run the factory; with him in charge, the business would run smoothly and efficiently. It is difficult for Shen Teh, though, because she wants to reveal her true identity and give to the people. She begins to put rice out for the poor people because she cannot stand to see them suffer. The strain of her situation causes her to break out of the Shui Ta role to go and cry in the back room.

The conversation between Yang Sun and Shui Ta, though, settles a previous question the play raises. The evidence was ambiguous about whether or not Yang Sun truly had feelings for Shen Teh. In this final exchange, Yang Sun shows he truly did care for Shen Teh when he demonstrates genuine concern upon finding out she is pregnant. He knows the baby is his, and he realizes Shen Teh needs help. So Yang Sun takes it upon himself to help Wang and find Shen Teh.

In this scene, the judges truly reveal their ignorance regarding the plight of humanity. Throughout the novel, they have searched for some shred of good and kindness in people. Because they were so consumed with their strict definition of kind, i.e., always doing good no matter the cost, they lost sight of the fact that good actions often lead to dire and unwanted consequences. When they cannot see the good Shen Teh has done even though she is standing in front of them, the play hints the gods cannot see "good" even when it is clearly demonstrated.

The courtroom scene is the penultimate moment of the play. Besides being the setting for Shui Ta's trial, it is time for the play to decide whether kindness wins out over practicality. Shui Ta tries to maintain a steady and commanding presence, but it is difficult because so many people keep accusing him of being a difficult and uncaring man. Because of its ending, though, the play is saying there is no answer to whether or not good can ultimately defeat greed and corruption. When Shen Teh is standing alone in the courtroom begging for help and guidance, the gods leave her alone to deal with her problems by herself. The play uses this image to make a powerful statement that humans are alone. According to Brecht, there will be no divine intervention or spiritual guidance, even for the kindest, "best" human beings.

Vocabulary

bowler, evasively, riffraff, utterly, ironically, enfold, melancholy, repugnant, pernicious, colleagues, magistrates, debasement, dilapidation, lopped, precipice, perjury, exploited, dosshouse, brutes, dudgeon, stifled, wrenched, lingered, shrewdly



Characters

Shen Teh

Shen Teh is a young woman living alone in Szechuan. At the play's beginning, she is a prostitute. When she allows three gods to stay in her home for a night, they tell her that they are on the search for a good person in the world. She is the first to bring up the argument good people can't always make good choices. She tries to be a good person and help the people less fortunate than her, but she realizes these people will keep taking from her until she has nothing left for herself. She dons the disguise of Shui Ta, a cousin she made up, and tries to use him to be more practical with her money and to safeguard her own future and that of her child.

After she creates her alter-ego cousin Shui Ta, she slowly begins to fade away as she realizes it is nearly impossible to create a good life for oneself by being completely selfless. She knows her "friends" miss her generosity when Shui Ta takes over, but she takes solace in knowing they prefer her giving nature over Shui Ta's business-like persona.

Shui Ta

Shui Ta is the male alter-ego of Shen Teh. Out of the necessity for a respectable reference required to rent the room for the tobacco store, Shen Teh created Shui Ta. However, Shui Ta began to serve more and more purposes as Shen Teh dug herself deeper into debt by being too kind. Shui Ta handled all the unpleasant things Shen Teh did not want to do; "he" evicted her leeching landlords, bargained with the carpenter, and got her business off the ground. As Shen Teh realizes being a good person is impossible for someone with ambitions, she allowed Shui Ta to slowly take over her life.

Shui Ta is very professional and business-minded. As the practical side of Shen Teh, Shui Ta is able to sustain the tobacco business and even grow it into a full-fledged factory. With the money Shui Ta makes, he is able to do the things Shen Teh wished she could do. Under this guise, she helps feed the hungry, and she provides jobs and housing for the poor and homeless.

Wang

Wang is a con man who sells water to people on the streets. He is the only one who cares that the gods are coming to Szechuan, and he tries his hardest to help them have a pleasant stay. Afterward, the gods appear to him in dreams. He speaks to them about Shen Teh's goodness and begs for the gods to give her help.



Yang Sun

Yang Sun is a young man with whom Shen Teh falls in love. When she meets him, he is about to kill himself because he cannot find work as a pilot, but Shen Teh talks him out of it. As they develop a relationship, Yang Sun begins to take advantage of Shen Teh. He tries to make her pay the 500 silver dollars for the bribe he says is required to get a job as a pilot, and then he refuses to marry her when she will not give him the money. He eventually becomes the foreman at Shui Ta's tobacco factory, and he enjoys the power it gives him. By the end of the play, he shows that he cares for Shen Teh once he learns she is pregnant with his child.

The Three Gods

The three gods are on a journey to find at least one good person on the earth. They stay with Shen Teh and commend her on her hospitality. However, they ignore the fact she is doing good deeds in her neighborhood for the poor and abject. They appear to Wang and tell him a good person will always make the right choice, no matter the consequences. In the end, they fail to realize it is impossible for humans to always make good choices when there are so many bad people to take advantage of the good people.

Shu Fu

Shu Fu is the wealthy owner of a nearby barber shop. He is in love with Shen Teh, and he wants to make her his wife. In order to win her affections, he offers her the chance to use his warehouses for homeless shelters. He also presents her with a blank check and tells her to make it out for any amount. While his offers seem generous, he only makes them in order to gain her good favor.

Shen Teh's Landlords and Six Family Members

When Shen Teh first came to Szechuan, she lived with her landlords, a couple. She remembered they treated her poorly and ultimately evicted her. However, they tried to use Shen Teh as a meal ticket. They stole from her and begged her for lodging. They were unwilling to work for their food and keep, but they eventually started working for Shui Ta's tobacco factory.



Objects/Places

1,000 Silver Dollars

The gods give Shen Teh 1,000 silver dollars as payment for allowing them to spend the night in her home.

The Tobacco Shop

Shen Teh purchases the tobacco shop with the money she received from the gods.

The Tobacco Factory

Shen Teh (disguised as Shui Ta) starts a tobacco factory in order to make money for her baby.

The Courtroom

Shui Ta is brought to the courtroom and forced to tell where Shen Teh is.

Airplanes

Yang Sun is an ex-pilot who wants to get back to flying aircraft.

Shen Teh's Rent

Shen Teh owes 200 silver dollars for rent, which she gives to Yang Sun for his bribe money.

Yang Sun's Bribe Money

Yang Sun needs 500 silver dollars in order to bribe the man at a hangar to let him fly again.

Water

Wang sells water for a living, though most know that he is a con man trying to scam people out of money.



Shui Ta's Disguise

Shen Teh puts on a mask and clothes whenever she wants to turn into Shui Ta.

Tobacco Bales

The elderly couple give Shen Teh three bales of tobacco for safekeeping. Shui Ta steals them and uses them to start his tobacco factory.

Empty Warehouses

Shu Fu gives Shen Teh the use of his empty warehouses to create a homeless shelter. Shui Ta uses these warehouses to make a tobacco factory.

Blank Check

Shu Fu gives Shen Teh a blank check to help her out of her debts. Shui Ta uses the blank check to start his tobacco factory.

Shen Teh's Bundle of Clothes

Shui Ta tries to hide a bundle of Shen Teh's clothes when Yang Sun realizes that Shen Teh is nearby.



Themes

Being a “Good” Person

The entire premise of the play is set upon the gods finding a “good” person to restore their faith in humanity. When they raise this concern to Shen Teh, she tells them it is impossible to be entirely “good” if someone’s very survival depends on them committing sins or breaking laws. She says she wants to be a help to people and share what little she has with them. However, she relies on prostitution to provide a steady income. When Shen Teh gets her own business, she shares her good fortune with those around her, and she is then known as the “Angel of the Slums.” She knows, though, being “good” is driving her deep into debt with multiple people. In order to continue making a living, Shen Teh creates the alter-ego Shui Ta to do the “bad” and unpleasant things for her. Shen Teh wonders if her actions as Shui Ta, committed to help her survive, have changed her from being a “good” person. This same theme continues as the gods tell Wang a truly “good” person will always make the right choice, no matter the consequence. Wang, though, tries to reason that their rule is too strict; he agrees with Shen Teh in her assessment that making the right choice is impossible in an imperfect world.

Ignorance and Selfishness

Ignorance and selfishness are the two parts of a major theme and motif in *The Good Person of Szechuan*. One of the things Shen Teh faces is the ignorance and selfishness of people - from her “friends” to the gods who were supposed to be there for guidance. When Shen Teh’s first landlords brought their family to stay with her, they did not care or notice that their presence would cause a strain on Shen Teh’s resources. The same is said for Yang Sun. He was so determined to fly he ignored the needs of Shen Teh as well as the elderly couple who ran the carpet shop. He wanted their money so much it didn’t matter if his taking it would leave them unable to have a home, food, or clothes. The gods also ignored the goodness in Shen Teh and were so self-absorbed they didn’t recognize her when she was wearing the Shui Ta disguise in the courtroom. Even Shen Teh and Shui Ta represent selfishness in a way. Shen Teh knows that she can no longer continue with her present life with a child coming. Shui Ta exhibits self-interest side by side by creating the tobacco factory with other peoples’ property.

Identity

Part of the play’s success is that it depends on the switching of identities for Shen Teh. She cannot come to terms with making difficult decisions, so she creates a frugal, conservative-minded cousin named Shui Ta to do these in her stead. What was just a one-time switch, though, caused Shen Teh to use Shui Ta more frequently. She could not bring herself to tell people no, so she relied on Shui Ta and his mean streak to turn



people away. However, she knew the only way she was going to continue to make a living was to rely on Shui Ta's practicality and ability to tell people no. Later in the play, Shen Teh suffered a major identity crisis. It became more difficult to keep the two characters separate, especially when she was pregnant. She knew Shui Ta would provide for her and her child, but Shui Ta was also hated by everyone. Shen Teh, however, was loved and missed by everyone she met. She even began to miss her original self. At the end of the play, Shen Teh does not know who she really is; because it was impossible for her to be Shen Teh with Shui Ta's stronger resolve, she doesn't know how to combine the two personalities and make a complete person. Her identity is compromised when she reveals herself to the gods, and she is left to suffer at the hands of her "friends."

Style

Point of View

The point of view is mainly from that of Shen Teh and Shui Ta. Because the play is about the good person who lives in Szechuan, the play implies that Shen Teh is the good person. There are scenes that focus solely on Wang, a man who sells water, and his conversations with the three gods. By allowing Shen Teh and Wang to be the focus, the play is able to focus on exactly what it means to be a “good” person and whether or not it is obtainable.

Setting

The play is set in the Chinese province of Szechuan. The time period, though, is never explicitly mentioned. There is a factory in the story, so there is a sense the play takes place after the Industrial Revolution.

What is significant about the setting is the play is designed to make the audience feel a sense of universality when it comes to the time and setting. The story is a parable, meaning it should translate to people at any given place and time. But not relying too heavily on Chinese culture, the story seems like it could take place in any town.

Language and Meaning

The language in *The Good Person of Szechuan* is straightforward and easy to understand. Again, the story is supposed to feel like it could transcend time and space. The fact that the English version is understandable even though it is a translation of the German version speaks to the universality of the play’s language; people all over the world can perform the play and understand the themes presented.

Structure

The play takes place over ten scenes. There is a prologue and an epilogue, and a few of the scenes have interludes in which Wang speaks to the gods. The structure is supposed to be easy and effortless; unlike a traditionally structured play, the transition from scene to scene is supposed to seem naturally flowing.



Quotes

There are no god-fearing people left: that is the naked truth which you will not recognize. (Prologue)

The resolution says: the world can go on as it is if we find enough good people, able to lead a decent human existence. (Prologue)

She can't say no. You're too good, Shen Teh. If you want to hang on to your shop you'd better be able to refuse sometimes. (Scene 1)

Once I believed intelligence would aid me I was an optimist when I was younger Now that I'm old I see it hasn't paid me: How can intelligence compete with hunger? (Scene 1)

My cousin naturally regrets being unable to make unbounded concessions to the laws of hospitality. But I fear you are too numerous. This is a tobacconist's, and this is Miss Shen Teh's livelihood. (Scene 2)

For instance, how was she to pay her rent? But the fact remains: it is not respectable. Why not? A: you can't earn your living by love, or it becomes immoral earnings. B: respectability means, not with the man who can pay, but with the man one loves. C: it mustn't be for a handful of rice but for love. All right, you may say: what's the good of being so clever of spilt milk? What's she to do? When she has to find six months' rent? (Scene 2)

When I was little once I was carrying a bundle of sticks and fell. And old man helped me up and even gave me a penny. I have often thought of it. Those who have least to eat give most gladly. I suppose people just like showing what they are good at; and how can they do better than by being friendly? Crossness is just a way of being inefficient. Whenever someone is singing a song or building a machine or planting rice it is really friendliness. (Scene 3)

So why can't the gods make a simple decision That goodness must conquer in spite of its weakness? – Then back up to the god with an armored division Command it to: 'fire!' and not tolerate meekness? (Scene 3)

A day will come, so the poor were informed As they sat on their mother's knees When a child of low birth shall inherit the earth And the moon shall be made of cheese. When the moon is green cheese The poor shall inherit the earth. (Scene 6)

We are but humble observers. We firmly believe that our good person will find her own feet on this somber earth. Her powers will wax with her burdens. Only way a little, O water-seller, and you will find all's well that ends... (Scene 6)

All I did was to save my cousin's bare means of existence, your worships. I only came when she was in danger of losing her small business. Three times I had to come. I



never meant to stay. Circumstances were such that last time I was forced to remain. All the time I have had nothing but trouble. They loved my cousin, and I had to do the dirty work. That is why they hated me. (Scene 10)

And still We'll gladly think, away beyond the planets Of you, Shen Teh, the good person we sought Who makes our spirit manifest down here And through this bitter darkness bears the tiny lamp. (Scene 10)

That's only one solution that we know: That you should consider as you go What sort of measure you would recommend To help good people to a happy end. Ladies and gentlemen, in you we trust: There must be happy endings, must, must, must! (Epilogue)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Shen Teh? How do people describe her? Does she feel like she deserves that title?

Topic 2

Who is Shui Ta? Why was he created? What does he represent?

Topic 3

How do Shen Teh and Shui Ta work together? Do they make a whole person? Or is the separation of “good” and “bad” into separate bodies a dangerous idea?

Topic 4

Which of the characters is most selfish? Does this character change at all? Why or why not?

Topic 5

Which of the characters is the most ignorant? Do they become cognizant at all? Why or why not?

Topic 6

Do the gods know the difficulties associated with being humans? Why don't they listen to Wang or Shen Teh?

Topic 7

How does the story represent a modern-day parable? What qualities does a parable have? Does this story share these same qualities?