

Shen of the Sea Short Guide

Shen of the Sea by Arthur Bowie Chrisman

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Overview

Shen of the Sea is a collection of sixteen lighthearted and humorous Chinese folktales. These action-filled stories express ancient Oriental philosophies and culture, and offer descriptions of pagodas and paper-covered windows, brocade tapestries and lacquered sedans, Chinese medicines and foods, and the constant fear of "death by beheading." Many of the tales attempt to explain the invention of a widely used article or the beginning of a custom: How were printing and gunpowder invented?

Why did people begin to drink tea or eat with chopsticks? Who flew the world's first kite?

Each story in Shen of the Sea illustrates an aspect of human nature, often with an emphasis on family and community relationships. Some of the tales reflect how misunderstanding, stubbornness, or fate can influence the outcome of a person's life. In other stories, the human characters interact with mythical demons (Shen), dragons, or bewitched animals.

About the Author

Arthur Bowie Chrisman, the sixth child of Isaac Arthur and Mary Louise Chrisman, was born on July 16, 1889, at Westbrook Farm, Virginia. He received his early education in a one-room schoolhouse near White Post, Virginia, then attended Virginia Polytechnic Institute from 1906 to 1908, studying electrical engineering. He spent several years traveling in California, where he studied the history and literature of China and India.

Chrisman began writing at age eighteen but was unable to sell his early stories. His first published book, *Shen of the Sea*, received the 1926 Newbery Medal for "the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children." Later books included *The Wind That Wouldn't Blow: Stories of the Merry Middle Kingdom for Children and Myself* and *Treasure Long Hidden: Old Tales and New Tales of the East*. All were collections of Chinese stories.

Chrisman taught school and worked as a draftsman, movie actor, writer, and lecturer. He spent most of his adult life in Fox, Arkansas, but returned to White Post to farm in the 1930s. He died in Shirley, Arkansas, on February 24, 1953.

Setting

Shen of the Sea is set in China during the time of the emperors, sometime after the building of the Great Wall. The stories have a timeless quality; several claim to have occurred "thousands of years ago," although others make vague references to America and to the invention of the airplane.

The stories tell of royalty and peasants, city dwellers and common country folk.

They illustrate a society where parents pamper their children and astrology predicts a person's fate. In this society, Barbarians and Tartars invade; emperors and kings compete for power; and soldiers are continually on the march.

A major feature of this ancient Asian setting is the belief in dragons and demons. Characters in the tales trap water demons in bottles or fight the twenty-eight dragons on the moon. They beat copper pans to scare away the demons and protect their homes by placing charms over their doors.

The stories also reflect a primitive but creative understanding of nature. Dew is described as "tears from the darkness," and comets are really the "fiery breath" of flying dragons. Water demons cause flooding and sea levels are high because there are "no ships to weigh down and flatten the sea." Famine is blamed on the presence of a nearby mountain that is shaped like a rat, so a giant wooden cat is constructed to keep the mountain rat from eating the people's food.

Social Sensitivity

Shen of the Sea derives much of its humor by poking fun at various social classes, attitudes, and behaviors. It gives the impression that Asian fathers spoil their sons, and several stories feature Chinese men who have been so spoiled that they are unable to think rationally for themselves. Some stories feature women as heroines, while others display a more negative image of the feminine role. For example, the names of the men in a family are listed, but the wife's name "has been forgotten." There is humor here but also an indication of the secondary role women played in traditional Chinese culture. Women do occasionally get their revenge, as when an unfortunate man is overwhelmed with his wife's demands: "If you don't do what I want," she threatens, "I will beat you up."

Literary Qualities

Chrisman uses numerous Chinese words and phrases to give color and authenticity to his stories. Some of the words are translated, while others are left to the reader's imagination. Chrisman also incorporates Chinese patterns of speech and styles of description into his writing. For example, a beloved son is his father's "pearl in the palm" and a beggar is addressed as "old back of the hands turned down." Streets and mountains are named in a down-to-earth fashion: "Street of Wang's Broken Tea Cup" or "Mountain of Huge Rocks Piled."

Chrisman's vocabulary is vivid and lively. He uses sophisticated words such as "audacious," "languished," and "geomancer." And he creates new words to fit the mood of a story, such as coining the word "fore-umbrellaed" to describe an astrologer who is always prepared for the rain.

Because Chrisman selects individual words with care and incorporates rhyme and alliteration as natural parts of the narration, his stories are easily read out loud. This attention to word choice adds to the humor of the tales. For example, the Four Generals are named Tang, Wang, Mang, and Lang. Little Cheng Chang and Large Ching Chung are pictured as "foot-free, funny, and forty," and ten valiant young princes are described as "deploring a dearth of daring deeds."

Humor is also revealed in the actions and reactions of the characters, as when Dr. Chu Ping is "blown up" by an explosion of gunpowder, only to be severely scolded by an old woman for landing in her cabbage patch. Chrisman also develops humor by emphasizing the ridiculous: he subtly has Wong Sing's number of wives increase by the thousands in each succeeding paragraph until the poor emperor has thirty thousand or more wives, and he makes intentionally faulty references to stories that are well known in Western culture: "very much like the old man—or was it a woman—who lived in a sandal—or whatever it was ... "

Another literary technique employed by Chrisman is irony. He speaks of a house being "luxurious in the extreme," then gives details that show the house is in desperate disrepair. He comments that an emperor was having a "fine time in the ruling of his realm," then lists the wars, rebellions, and revolts faced by that emperor.

Chrisman includes moralisms in his writing, often in the form of rhetorical questions. "Is ignorance ever an excuse?" he asks. "Is not enough always enough?" "Is not a word to the wise like melon seeds planted in fertile ground?"

These moralisms are frequently presented as quotations from a supposedly well-known source.

Themes and Characters

Shen of the Sea portrays a wide variety of Chinese characters. Some are inventive, creative, and optimistic, while others are foolish, contrary, and undisciplined. There are beautiful maidens and overbearing wives, rich rulers and poor peasants, numerous kings, emperors, generals, and soldiers, as well as magical dragons, demons, and a bewitched cat. Several characters have names that provide clues to their personalities: Ah Mee and Ah Fun are mischievous and naughty; Ah Tcha sleeps eleven hours out of twelve; and Hai Low has a brother whose high standards and expectations keep Hai Low in the doldrums.

The themes of the tales focus on the relationship that each character has with his or her family or community.

Within these relationships, misunderstandings arise, challenges are met, and the fate of a person (or even the world) is changed. The tales stress respect for individuality and creativity, while showing how the ridiculous arouses attention. Foolish and childish behavior is contrasted with bravery, wisdom, and faithfulness.



Topics for Discussion

1. In the story "Ah Mee's Invention," what is Ching Chi's attitude towards his son? Why is Ah Mee not punished for his misbehavior?
2. In the story "Shen of the Sea," the old gardener Wu Chang says that inventing writing was "a mistaken thing to do." Why might he feel this way about writing? What role does writing play in the control of the water demons?
3. Why does Meng Hu repeatedly conclude: "How wise were the Old Men!"?
What is the relationship between fate and self-determination in Meng Hu's life?
4. In the story "Chop-Sticks," Chrisman says, "the wedding bell has two tongues." What does he mean?
5. What personal characteristics does the orphan Ah Tzu exhibit that allow him to become the son of the emperor in "Buy a Father"?
6. Why are the "Four Generals" such great leaders? What leadership qualities do they exhibit?
7. What does the story of "The Rain King's Daughter" say about the abilities and rights of women?
8. When Radiant Blossom learns that she is not to be one of Emperor Wong's "Many Wives," she is not upset. Why not?
9. In what way does Ah Fun's father resemble a "pan pu tao, a little toy man who has round feet and always regains an upright position, no matter how often he is knocked over"?
10. In "Ah Tcha the Sleeper," the catwitch first puts a curse on Ah Tcha to make him sleep, then bewitches the tea leaves to keep him awake. Why do you think she changes her attitude towards Ah Tcha?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. According to the stories in *Shen of the Sea*, what did ancient Chinese persons believe about dragons and demons? How did these beliefs affect their lives?
2. What devices and techniques does Chrisman use to add humor to the tales in this book? Give specific examples.
3. Research the roles of kings, emperors, governors, ambassadors, and mandarins in ancient China. How would a person achieve each position, and what duties and privileges did each possess? How do the stories in *Shen of the Sea* correspond or contrast to the information you find about these "offices" in other sources?
4. Using the tales in this book as your guide, describe what life might have been like for a child in ancient China.

What toys would a child enjoy? What games might he or she play, and what responsibilities might he or she have?

What attitudes did adults, particularly parents, have towards children? How were boys and girls treated the same or differently?

5. Compare the ways in which the tales "Chop-Sticks," "Many Wives," "The Moon Maiden," and "I Wish It Would Rain" portray marriage. How are the attitudes expressed about marriage in this book the same or different from current attitudes about marriage in American culture?

6. The stories in *Shen of the Sea* make frequent reference to luck, fortune, astrology, and fate. What role do these play in the lives of the characters? Do they control the outcome of a person's life? Why or why not?

For Further Reference

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