

The Good Woman of Setzuan Short -Summary

Wong, a poor water seller who works in the impoverished village of Setzuan, meets a trio of shabby, weary travelers at the city gates one day. Wong instantly recognizes them as gods in disguise. When the first god tells Wong that their group is in need of a place to spend the night, Wong hurriedly tries to find someone who will shelter the gods for the evening—but they are turned away at every door in town. Eventually, a kind prostitute named Shen Te reluctantly agrees to take the gods in. Wong returns to the sewer drain where he lives. In the morning, the gods thank Shen Te for her hospitality and they tell her that she is the only “good human being” they’ve encountered in their travels. Shen Te says she doesn’t believe she’s truly good—and that she might have an easier time being good if she had more money. The second god is wary of “meddling in economics,” but the third god insists upon giving Shen Te some money for her troubles. The gods shove (push) over a thousand silver dollars into Shen Te’s hands and they depart, continuing their mission of finding good people on Earth

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in order to help decide whether the world can “stay as it is” or whether it must be remade entirely.

Shen Te uses the money the gods give her to rent a humble tobacco shop but she soon finds herself in trouble as news of her good fortune spreads throughout town. Mrs. Shin, the disgruntled (dissatisfied/displeased) former proprietor of the store, demands Shen Te give her enough rice to feed her family each day. The carpenter who installed the shelves in the store for the last owner threatens to take them away unless Shen Te gives him an enormous sum. An unemployed man begs for damaged tobacco stock for free. A destitute family of eight—a husband, wife, nephew, niece, brother, sister-in-law, grandfather, and young boy—who

begs for damaged tobacco stock for free. A destitute family of eight—a husband, wife, nephew, niece, brother, sister-in-law, grandfather, and young boy—who once sheltered Shen Te briefly when she arrived in Setzuan from the provinces begin squatting (unlawfully occupy an uninhabited building) in the store's back room. Mrs. Mi Tzu, the landlady, demands male references who can vouch (testify/witness) for Shen Te's finances—as well as six months' rent in advance. Shen Te claims she has a cousin, Shui Ta, who is a savvy (commonsense) businessman; she promises that Shui Ta will visit soon to meet with Mrs. Mi Tzu and vouch for Shen Te. As Shen Te's busy first day at the shop concludes, she marvels at how tightly needy people cling to the "lifeboat" (a specially constructed boat to rescue people at distress in sea) of one lucky person's success.

As the gods continually visit Wong in his dreams to check in on whether Shen Te has remained good, things get more and more complicated for Shen Te herself. Shen Te begins disguising herself as Shui Ta in order to make the ruthless business and personal decisions needed to keep her shop afloat. Shen Te, dressed as Shui Ta, kicks the family of eight out during business hours, threatens the carpenter, haggles (bargain persistently) with Mrs. Mi Tzu, and even puts an ad in the paper for a wealthy husband who can help Shen Te run her business. When Shen Te, however, meets a suicidal, out-of-work, but romantic pilot named Yang Sun in the park one afternoon, she falls in love with him. Though Yang Sun is poor and cruel, Shen Te loves him too deeply to accept the marriage proposal (and financial assistance) of her wealthy neighbor, a barber named Shu Fu. Shen Te's needy neighbors lament that her newfound love is distracting her from her duties to

them, while Shen Te, hoping to pull Yang Sun out of financial ruin, becomes indebted to an old man and old woman who own a nearby carpet shop in an arrangement which threatens her "goodness."

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While in disguise as Shui Ta one afternoon, Shen Te learns that Yang Sun is only using her for her money because he needs to bribe someone at an airfield in Peking for a job. Nevertheless, Shen Te chooses to move forward with her wedding to Yang Sun. The wedding is a disaster—and because Yang Sun and Mrs. Yang, Yang Sun's mother, insist on waiting for Shui Ta's arrival at the ceremony, the marriage is never confirmed.

Meanwhile, each time the gods visit Wong in his dreams, he tells them of Shen Te's trials—but the gods insist that Shen Te's burdens will only give her greater strength and more goodness. Mrs. Shin soon discovers Shen Te's ruse when Shen Te changes too hurriedly into her disguise as Shui Ta in order to capitalize (take the chance to get advantage) on a large stock of stolen tobacco which the family of eight brings into her shop. A blank check from Shu Fu allows Shen Te—as Shui Ta—to open up shop in a series of cabins that Shu Fu owns on the outskirts of town. Shen Te, however, has become pregnant with Yang Sun's illegitimate child. Mrs. Shin warns her that Shu Fu will cease his generosity if he learns of Shen Te's condition.

Shen Te decides to stay in disguise as Shui Ta for months on end. Though the tobacco business flourishes and Shui Ta's steady weight gain is attributed to his mounting wealth and gluttony [excessive eating], the needy of the village begin missing the sweet, generous Shen Te—and even worrying that Shui Ta has murdered her. When a policeman, at Wong's behest, confronts Shui Ta and demands to know where Shen Te is, Shui Ta cannot answer. He is arrested. Wong warns the gods that if Shen Te has truly vanished, then "all is lost," so the gods reluctantly agree to return to Setzuan to help look for her.

At Shui Ta's trial, the entire village gathers. The gods enter in disguise as a trio of judges to hear the arguments. The wealthy business owners who have had good dealings with Shui Ta leap to his defense, while the needy poor who miss Shen Te and who have only ever been on the receiving end of Shui Ta's cruelty lambast

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(criticize harshly)him. As the agitated crowd demands to know why Shen Te left Setzuan, Shui Ta declares that if she had stayed, the villagers would have ripped(tear) her to shreds. Shui Ta demands for the courtroom to be cleared because he has a confession to make to the judges.

Alone in the room with the gods, Shen Te drops her disguise and she reveals the truth to them. The gods are shocked. In a sorrowful lament, Shen Te describes how hard it has been to try "to be good and yet to live"—she feels she has literally been torn in two. She hates that bad deeds are rewarded while good ones are punished. The gods, however, insist that Shen Te stop beating herself up—they tell her how happy they are to have found the one good person they encountered in all their travels. Shen Te points out that she failed to be a good woman and instead became a "bad man." Rather than help Shen Te solve her moral crisis, the gods choose to return to their "void" by ascending into the sky on a pink(colour between red and white) cloud. Shen Te begs the gods to tell her what to do about all of her entanglements(complex situation); the gods, however, tell her simply to "continue to be good."

In a brief epilogue, one of the actors in the play steps forward to deliver a speech which is not attributed to any specific character. The actor suggests it is up to the audience to find a happy ending for the play and to decide what will change the world, whether it be new gods or atheism, materialism or ascetism, moral fortitude(tolerance)or increased decadence.