

Goodness

The theme of "goodness," which seems so simple in the title, is revealed as multi-faceted right from the beginning of the play. While Wong runs off to find a house that will welcome the gods for the night, the gods confer among themselves about how their mission to find a good person is failing. The second god says, "People just aren't religious anymore, let's face the fact. Our mission has failed!" The third god, reading from the resolution they are trying to follow, defines good people as those "living lives worthy of human beings." This definition is vague, since it is unclear what exactly a human being is worth.

The gods reveal a bit more about their definition of "goodness" in Scene 1a, during their interaction with Wong. They ask him to find Shen Te and "show interest in her goodness - for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." This reveals that they recognize how difficult it is to be good without support from others. However, Shen Te provides her own support, in the form of her invented cousin, Shui Ta. When the carpenter asks him to call Shen Te because "she's good," Shui Ta answers, "Certainly. She's ruined."

The old woman is a candidate for a "good" person, and Shen Te recognizes that when she offers to lend her money to pay her rent. Shen Te says, "I wish the gods could have heard what your wife was just saying, Mr. Ma. They're looking for good people who're happy - and helping me makes you happy because you know it was love that got me into difficulties!"

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"Goodness" as a theme is addressed in Scenes 6 and 6a by Yang Sun and by the gods, respectively. The Song of St. Nevercome, sung by Yang Sun, reveals that he believes it is futile to try to be "good." He sings sarcastically, "Oh, hooray, hooray! That day goodness will pay!" and describes the day that will never come as when "all men will be good without batting an eye." To him, this day is unachievable. The gods cite goodness as a strength, telling Wong that they cannot intervene in Shen Te's life because "The good man finds his own way here below! The good woman too."

When Shen Te realizes she is pregnant, her perception of goodness changes as well. She sees the carpenter's child digging in the trash and realizes her son will come into this kind of world. She sings and it is unclear whether anyone else hears the song. She sings, "To be good to you, my son / I shall be a tigress to all others / If I have to. / And I shall have to." With this resolve, she will stand up for her own property as Mr. Shui Ta.

When the gods appear to Wong in Scene 9a, they reveal how little goodness they have found in the world. Shen Te is the only person who has "stayed good," and Wong draws attention to the fact that she has not even done that. The third god concludes that, "Good intentions bring people to the brink of the abyss, and good deeds push them over the edge." The gods have discovered that it is impossible to be "good" in accordance with their rulebook. When the courtroom is later empty, Shui Ta reveals that he is just Shen Te, disguised. Shen Te then tells the gods, "Your injunction / To be good and yet to live / Was a thunderbolt." It was impossible for her to be good to others and herself at the same time. The first god refuses to hear that Shen Te did bad things disguised as Shui Ta, instead congratulating her for remaining good. They leave without changing