

Shen te character analysis

Literature, American Literature



First performed in 1943, the play “ confronts one of the great contradictions of modern life the impossibility of being good while participating in the market”. Shen Te, as her character is explored throughout the play and contrasted with the prudent split personality of Shui ta, is a hopelessly magnanimous giver. Her attitude of giving borders on foolishness and she is brought to the brink of ruin. In a poverty-stricken and self-serving society, Shen Te’s goodness might have emerged from the guilt that she is conditioned to nurture because of the stigma around a woman who has once lived as a prostitute – a lifelong stigma that her landlady repeatedly makes her feel.

The god’s when they first arrive define goodness in someone as “ we must at least be able to show some people who are in a position to keep our commandments”. For them, it is the principle of moral absolutism.

When looked at from the perspective of being burdened the goodness itself comes into question, it would seem that Shen Teh’s foolish goodness which is constantly taken advantage of is something to be emulated which completely counters Brecht’s purpose.

No form of goodness can effectively function when it is burdened by uncompromising commandments which also discourages the giver to continue to be helpful. Shen Te, s goodness is subject to an immense number of resolve shaking hurdles. Brecht represents the flawed system that has turned most people victims of the capitalistic system. The playwright introduces Shui Ta from the very same Shen Te so that one must understand that the good person herself has some limits beyond which they cannot be

pushed. At first, Shui Ta only appears when Shen Te is in a particularly desperate situation, but as the action of the play develops, Shen Teh becomes unable to keep up with the demands made on her and is overwhelmed by the promises she makes to others. Therefore, she is compelled to call on her cousin's services for longer periods until at last her true personality seems to be consumed by her cousin's severity.

“ In Szechwan, the god's commandments, which urge love and goodness, are in direct conflict with the requirements of the economic situation for ruthlessness and brutality.”

Brecht famously wrote himself: “ Grub first, then ethics” which is really relevant here. It means to say “ survival must always come first, and morality and consideration for the ethics concerning the means of survival must come second.

Shen Te, in order to survive, must become Shui Ta “ despite the moral and ethical implications. This idea of survival over morality is explored in the play and “ the resulting parable play” “ as he himself dubbed it “ confronts one of the great contradictions of modern life “ the impossibility of being good while participating in the market” (Unwin, 2005: 205).