

Isaac bashevis singer's gimpel the fool: first paragraph analysis

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The Power of Faith in “Gimpel the Fool”

The first paragraph of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool” introduces readers to Gimpel, a bread baker living in the town of Frampol. Being prone to credulity, Gimpel is given the moniker “Gimpel the Fool” by the townspeople who find enjoyment in playing tricks on the protagonist in order to test the limits of his gullibility (Singer 278). Through the use of characterization and symbolism Gimpel’s trustingness becomes the foundation for expressing the power of faith as a theme in the text.

For instance, the author uses the characterization of Gimpel to define faith. As Gimpel recounts occasions when the townspeople tricked him, he says that he knew “very well that nothing had happened but something could have happened” (278). Gimpel’s willingness to believe in the townspeople despite his initial skepticism suggests that faith is a belief in possibilities. This suggestion is more apparent during Gimpel’s interactions with Elka. After Elka claims that the child born four months after their wedding was Gimpel’s premature son, Gimpel is initially skeptical (280). Gimpel’s skepticism of the child’s paternity remains until he talks to the schoolmaster who asserts that the “same thing happened to Adam and Eve, and there is not a woman on Earth who is not a granddaughter of Eve” (281). This renewed trust in Elka continues during Gimpel’s brief separation from his wife when Gimpel states to the rabbi that he “may have seen a shadow, or a mannekin, instead of a man” sleeping in bed with his wife (282). By choosing to doubt himself rather than the goodness of his wife, Gimpel is not choosing to live in denial of his wife’s infidelity, but choosing to believe in the

possibility that he may have hallucinated the figure in bed with her. This use of Gimpel's characterization to define faith as a belief in possibilities brings awareness to the power of faith as the narrative's theme.

Similarly, the use of the characterization of Elka is used but not to bring attention to the short story's theme. The author uses the characterization of Elka, specifically the two archetypes she represents, to symbolize the struggle between faith and doubt. The first archetype, Elka the Sinner, is lustful (" I see but the apprentice lying there beside Elka" (283), greedy (" Don't let them think they can take advantage of me. I want a dowry of fifty guilders" (279), and deceitful (" I have to go clean to my Maker, and so have to tell you that the children are not yours" (285). Elka the Sinner does not seem to care much for Gimpel based on her numerous infidelities and incessant lying; however, she is contrasted with Elka the Saint who exists solely in Gimpel's mind. Elka the Saint is the virtuous and faithful Elka Gimpel believed her to be (" What is there to forgive?" You have always been a good and faithful wife" (284); and, she serves ultimately as Gimpel's savior from following the path of darkness (" You fool! Because I was false does that mean everything else is false too? I never deceived anyone but myself and now I am paying for it" (285). These two Elkas serve as opposite ends of Gimpel's struggle between faith and doubt. Elka the Sinner is the embodiment of doubt Gimpel has towards the essential goodness of people. When Elka the Sinner tells Gimpel that he was hallucinating when he saw the bakery apprentice in bed with her, Gimpel says, " What do you mean? The apprentice. You were sleeping with him" (284). By questioning her, Gimpel is

doubting his faith in the goodness of humanity; and, this doubt is pronounced more when the Spirit of Evil visits him shortly after his wife's death when Gimpel asks the Spirit of Evil, " How can I deceive the world?" (285). In contrast, Elka the Saint is the embodiment of Gimpel's faith in the goodness of people. When she reminds Gimpel that her deception does not mean that the world is deceptive, she is reminding Gimpel to maintain his faith by not seeking vengeance (285). If Gimpel gave into his doubt of Elka (or humanity) and sought vengeance on the townspeople, he would have lost his soul (" A false step now and I'd lose Eternal Life. But God gave me His help" (285). By giving into the belief that Elka was always a good person, and trusting her just as he had always trusted her, Gimpel retained his innocence and his faith. This symbolizing of the struggle between doubt and faith suggests that faith can redeem anyone who has it, just as through Gimpel's faith in Elka redeemed her. Through this use of symbolism, the author maintains the power of faith as the theme in the text.

The author uses Gimpel's characterization to define faith as a belief in possibility. By using Gimpel's characterization to define faith, the author brings awareness to the power of faith as the theme of the text. To maintain this awareness, the author uses the symbolism of the struggle between doubt and faith to highlight the redemptive qualities of individuals who possess faith. Through this use of characterization and symbolism, the reader gains a broader understanding in what it means to have faith.