

Comparing
problematic societies:
the good person of
szechwan vs
autobiography of ...



Literature often presents itself in different themes and messages for audience members. These themes may be reoccurring or even opposing at times between different texts. The play *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht and *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson are two texts that present both differences and similarities. One difference between the texts is that while a theme in Brecht's play can be the lack of trust and good character among people, Johnson's book shows the narrator building strong ties and relationships to people in his life. A similarity between the two writings is that both show the struggles people face with their identity. As a result, both writings give readers characters that are torn by their environment showing that people often face problems with the world they live in.

In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Brecht shows audiences a town of people who lack trust and good character. The play shows three Gods come to Szechwan in need of shelter. No one in the town is willing to give shelter to the Gods due to their non-religious outlooks and selfish intentions with one man even stating "how should I know what kind of Gods you've got there? A fellow that lets people into his house likes to know what he's getting... You must be trying to find a place for a nice bunch of crooks" (Brecht 7). Here the audience sees the skepticism within people living in Szechwan, even towards Gods. The people of the town also did not give food or donations to beggars because of their suspicion that the "beggar probably had money" and is not truly a beggar (Brecht 14). Furthermore, relatives and neighbors in the play look out for themselves before others and do not provide assistance if it puts them in any sort of deficit, for example, the unemployed who saw

Wang's hand get smashed but were unwilling to be witnesses for Wang's compensation. The characters in the play keep personal distances unless the relationship is required to reach their own goals. Sun is a character in the play who tells Shen Te, the one person who is actually good, that he loves her and then continues to take her money. Sun advises Shen Te to sell her tobacco shop for his own expenses in order to become a pilot, all with the intent of moving away after he receives the money, leaving her with nothing.

Comparatively, the book *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* shows the narrator in several close relationships based on love and trust. For example, one character is a boy named Red who was a failing student in the same school as the narrator. The two quickly formed a friendship of "faithfulness" after the narrator helped Red with a word in a spelling bee (Johnson 7). The two remained close as the narrator continued to help Red do well in order for them to stay in the same grade level. Right away the audience can see this pure and selfless relationship the narrator has at such a young age. The relationship cements the good intentions the narrator has throughout the book and is the beginning of a list of meaningful relationships the narrator builds further down in his life. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, readers often notice a display of selfishness and hate among characters, even those that ought to be good such as the townspeople and the Gods or Shen Te and her lover Sun. However, in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the readers witness relationships that, against all common sense, are good and loving. For example, the narrator notes that his mother speaks of his father, the man who left her and her son, with only compassion and kind words. She defended his actions and remained faithful to his memory although he kept

his distance and rarely made the effort to see the two. Another rarity readers see in Brecht's play that can be seen in Johnson's book is assistance and support among characters. A character referred to by the narrator as, "the millionaire," is one of the many people with whom the narrator creates a close bond with (Johnson 118). The millionaire often paid the narrator in large tips for his musical talents before giving him an even higher paid private job. Soon enough the two become extremely friendly with the millionaire offering the narrator a chance to leave with him for the chance to live in Europe. The millionaire does this after seeing the narrator in a disturbed state from having seen a beautiful woman being shot in the throat by her African American companion. Here we see a character looking out for the narrator's best interest and helping him escape what can be considered as a life changing and scarring experience. People helping people in their time of need is a kind act that is nowhere to be seen in Brecht's play apart from Shen Te's good deeds. In Brecht's play, the audience sees the character Shen Te have problems with her own identity and who she has to be in order to be good versus who she must be in order to thrive economically. In order to stay well fed or financially stable, the characters in the play are ruthless. Their morals are blurred with the mentality that survival is their purpose in life and religion or being good just gets in the way of that. Shen Te is a kind and sympathetic woman in the play. The people of Szechwan know this and therefore, take advantage of her goodness and exploit her decency. Soon enough Shen Te creates an alter ego, known to the people as her cousin Shui Ta, who is bold and brash in his ways. At first Shen Te keeps his appearance as minimal as possible only using him for emergency situations. However, eventually she keeps Shui Ta around for six

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months and in doing so, her business flourishes as she becomes highly respected and feared among the people. Shui Ta has a heavy hand on his workers and business associates and favors logic over what is right or wrong. Shen Te could never put others through hardship for her own comfort and knows that doing that is what makes a person bad. She wants to be good but in doing so, also wants to be successful money-wise. The struggle to either be good and suffer or be bad and live well ensues as Shen Te remains unsure as to which identity is the better choice. Similar to Brecht's play, Johnson's book shows the narrator having trouble with his identity and who he wants to be in terms of black or white. Being mixed race, with his mother being black and his father being white, the narrator often struggled to figure out what race he ought to be. Throughout the book he meets kind and soulful African Americans and sees the beautiful side of his mother's heritage. Nonetheless he also comes into contact with violent and bitter African American people whose actions he cannot justify. He also sees the maltreatment of African American people which horrifies him. Similar to Shen Te's identity crisis, the narrator tries to become the identity that will provide the best possible outcome for himself. His identity is lost somewhere along the lines of being either black or white with a thick line separating the two. Ultimately he chooses to be white and was glad to do so for the sake of his children. Nonetheless, the narrator states that although he thinks he made the right choice for his kids and for a beneficial life, he feels he abandoned his roots and his African American identity.

The conclusion that *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* come to is that people tend to face difficulties in dealing with

the world around them. While Shen Te was pregnant she imagined her child coming into the world and soon enough realized that this world was not good enough for a child. Shen Te becoming Shui Ta and finally coming clean to the people gave them the image that those who are good cannot stay good in this world. The Gods in the play struggled to find a single good person and when they did, even she committed crimes against people for her own profitability. Shen Te is an optimistic character who sees the good in everyone, but even she struggled to stay good for people who manipulated and used her. In Johnson's book, the narrator sees the racial bias and hardship African Americans must go through. For this reason, he claims that he chose to be white for an easy going life and so his kids may avoid the difficulty they'd have to go through if they embraced their African American heritage. He sees how cruel the world can be to a black man and for that reason he sheltered that part of him and kept it hidden, even from the love of his life before eventually telling her the truth. Both characters have difficulty in accepting the corrupt world around them.

As shown above, readers can see the contrasts and similarities that come from themes and concepts of two different texts. On one hand, Brecht's play shows characters who are cold and untrusting. They are brutal in their ways and show no compassion for anyone other than their own cause. On the other hand, Johnson's book shows a myriad of people the narrator meets throughout his life with whom he creates affectionate bonds. That said, both writings show a reoccurring theme of identity diffusion and indecisiveness based on who the character think they should be or how they should live their lives. In the end, both *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Autobiography*

of an Ex-Colored Man give readers characters that have a hard time accepting the world they live in.