

# The ambiguity in i.b. singer's "gimpel the fool" essay sample



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## **The Ambiguity in I. B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" Essay Sample**

In Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool" the question of the main character's foolishness is in a constant state of ambiguity. Given Gimpel's knowing internal dialog, it seems that at least his thought process is not that of fool. Yet, his willingness to play his role in even the most ridiculous schemes hints toward a total void of judgment on his part. This pattern of very aware thoughts followed by foolish actions and excessive passivism seems deliberate in the story and continually poses the question: Is Gimpel a fool? The answer will likely depend on the reader's theological disposition and where they draw the line between gullibility and faith.

Both the title and the first line of the story state that Gimpel is a fool. The uncertainty of how to view him begins instantly when in the second line he states "I don't think myself a fool" (3). This is also the first bit of insight into the fact that he is not at all oblivious to the other character's jokes and motives. He knows he is being tricked, which in most stories would indicate a clever character who maintains the upper hand. Gimpel contradicts this by willingly becoming the butt of everyone's jokes. This uncertainty is one of the most powerful things about the story because it challenges the reader to weigh Gimpel's morals and honesty in one hand, and his apathy in the other. The reader must search themselves and make his or her own judgment as to whether or not Gimpel is a fool. A person of devote religious beliefs might respect his reverence for God, while a nonreligious person might see his leaps of faith as naïve. The confusion continues as he hopes that believing the people's antics at least "did them some good" (4). This statement and <https://assignbuster.com/the-ambiguity-in-ib-singers-gimpel-the-fool-essay-sample/>

many others like it, speak to his good nature and subtly attempts to persuade us that he is the true hero of this tale and therefore not a fool.

Yet even saint like patience does not excuse him from the ignorance of proclaiming " who really knows how such things are", when he gives up questioning why the first child of his marriage is born asexually, and five months premature (5). The fact that he loves the children he has with Elka also speaks to his character. But he eventually leaves his children and fails to ever truly redeem himself from foolishness. At times the story does seem to push strongly toward the idea that Gimpel is the wise one. The most obvious proof of this when the rabbi tells him " You are not a fool. They are the fools." (4). Here the reader is compelled to take this as the truth. It can also be seen as a sign that those who are taking advantage of him will inevitably get what they deserve. Elka pays her price in gimpel's first vision of her, as she cries " I'm paying for it all, Gimpel. They spare you nothing here" (13). This vision of her urges us, again, to believe that Gimple is the righteous one, and that all who are taking advantage of him are the bad guys.

They call him " donkey", yet they are the ones who " hee-hawed" (3). We can even forgive his gullibility when it comes to the practical jokes and tricks like " a cow flew over the house and laid brass eggs" (2). He knows such ridiculous things are not true, but maintains a childlike wonderment in his belief that " everything is possible" (1). Most people lose this type of vulnerability as they grow older, but it is still a trait that could almost be admired as long as the consequences are minimal. But when Gimpel

approaches consequential matters like whether or not a child is his own, with <https://assignbuster.com/the-ambiguity-in-ib-singers-gimpel-the-fool-essay-sample/>

such naivety, we become less forgiving. One is a fool if they are deficient in judgment, sense, or understanding. Gimpel's senses seem to be fine. He is never unaware of the lies and tricks. His problem is lack of judgment, and in this regard, Gimpel is definitely a fool. It is better to have Ideas than beliefs. Ideas are an expression of one unique mind. Beliefs are taught. They require one to set aside their own intuition and reason, and to basically just do what they are told. Throughout the story Gimple both believes and does what he is told. He never takes time to discover his own view and opinion, or to do what he thinks is right.

He lets the town's people tell him who to marry and later the rabbi tells him how to handle his wife's infidelities. It is difficult to see a man who is constantly unwilling to make up his own mind on decisions of such magnitude. The weight of these choices seems to go right over his head as he says to himself " what did I stand to lose?"(5-6). There are no heroes in this story, only the question of where to place your faith, and how to distinguish it from the mundane. Gimpel's biggest mistake is thinking that his faith in his god is somehow synonymous with his belief of what human beings tell him. He may have realized this had he stuck with his " vow to believe nothing more" (2) from the people. Instead, when he is waiting for the rabbi's word to go back to Elka, he resolves that he will always believe what he is told because " Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in."(9) The conclusion can be made that Gimpel is a good man because he is able to resist the temptation of evil in the end. But it is only one conclusion among many. He is also a weak man.

At first he gives in and decides to take revenge upon the town by urinating in the dough.

It takes a vision of his wife burning in hell, and the fear of losing eternal life to change his mind. It is very disappointing that he would consider this type of vengeance. It would be much more satisfying to see him simply stand up for himself and put an end to all the deception. But he does not. Rather than face his problem he numbs himself to it by concluding that "there were really no lies" (14). Gimpel's second vision of Elka is not a true vision, but a dream in which Gimpel lies to himself about whom his wife was. He sees her with "the eyes of a saint", and she comforts him with "outlandish words . . . strange things" (14). This is the same as what she did when she was alive. Her words might as well have been gibberish for all the truth they held. He perpetuates these assuaging lies even in his dreams and tortures himself with desire for her. Perhaps being orphaned left Gimpel with a need to be told what to do, or how things are. Either way, placating himself with dreams of a lying wife could only be the habit of a fool.

Life can definitely seem shrouded in "a thick mire" at times (13). The important thing is to find what makes you happy. Anyone with a clear conscience should be safe from an eternity of hell fire. Gimpel never finds this type of peace. It is sad to see that one of his only comforts in life is that he will, "go joyfully" when his time comes to die (14). Instead of working to finding honesty and happiness in life, he looks forward to death and anticipates a place where "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (14). In conclusion, "Gimpel the Fool" is an ambiguous tale that challenges how we view things like faith, apathy, or passivism by allowing us to test Gimpel

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against our own standards and beliefs. At times it seems to sway the reader toward thinking that it is going to be a typical moral story with a clear lesson learned in the end. Yet no such clarity ever comes. Each time we think that our would-be hero is about to be redeemed by the truth, we find him entangled in another lie. We are deliberately forced to decide whether Gimpel's willingness to believe what he is told is a fault, or a requirement for faith. One thing that is for sure: you can't help but feel sorry for poor gullible Gimpel.