Gimpel the Fool

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Isaac Bashevis Singer, winner of the 1978 Noble Prize for Literature, was one of the most admired and influential Jewish writers of the twentieth century, as well as a key figure in the history of literature written in Yiddish, the language in which he published throughout his career. He was born in 1903 into an orthodox Jewish household in the village of Leoncin, Poland, just outside Warsaw, the city where the family moved a few years later. Descended from a long line of rabbis, including his father, Singer initially aspired to become one himself, but ultimately decided his calling lay elsewhere. During his twenties, he transitioned to a secular lifestyle and immersed himself in literary pursuits, writing and publishing his first short stories, as well as working as an editor and translator. By 1935, anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe had so intensified, especially with the rise to power of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany, that Singer decided to emigrate to New York City, just after the publication of his debut novel *Satan in Goray*. Once in the United States, he continued to write, but it was not until his fiction started to appear in English translations in the 1950s that he achieved widespread recognition. Soon thereafter, he became internationally revered for his witty and poignant renderings of the pre-World War II lives of Jews in Eastern Europe and his ability to make the part of the world he knew so well feel universal to a global audience. "Gimpel the Fool" remains one of his most famous stories. Although Singer lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for most of his adult life and became a fluent speaker of English, he continued to publish almost entirely in Yiddish and made the celebration and preservation of that language the subject of his Noble Prize Lecture. In his final years, he moved with his wife, Alma, to Florida, where he died in 1991.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frampol, where "Gimpel the Fool" takes place, is a real town in Poland and is the setting for several of Singer's short stories, including "The Unseen," "The Little Shoemakers," and "The Gentleman from Cracow." As it existed during Singer's youth, Frampol was an example of what was known as a *shtetl*. Shtetls were small, village communities inhabited by European Jews between the Middle Ages and World War II, typically located within the Pale of Settlement, the region of the Russian Empire in which Jews were legally permitted to reside (this included select areas of Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Moldova) or in various parts of the Austrian Empire. For centuries, these communities were the targets of continuous racial hatred and violence from their surrounding nations. During the earlier part of the twentieth century, the prevalence of Pogroms—terrifying organized riots and bombings, which wounded and killed numerous residents of shtetls—prompted mass emigration of Jews from Europe, especially to the United States. Tragically, most of the people who chose or were obligated to remain in the shtetls of Europe, including the remaining Jewish population of Frampol, were taken to concentration camps by Nazi authorities during the Holocaust, the horrific genocide responsible for the deaths of over six million Jews between 1941 and 1945.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Gimpel the Fool" is the title story of the first short story collection by Isaac Bashevis Singer to appear in English translation, *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (1957). It was this book that got him the attention of the wider, non-Yiddish speaking literary community. Additional important works by Singer include the novels, *The Family Moskat* and *The Magician of Lublin*, the memoirs *In My Father's Court* and a *Day of Pleasure*, and the short story collections *The Spinoza of Market Street* and *The Crown of Feathers*, the latter of which won the National Book Award in 1974. Reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at age fourteen was particularly formative for Singer; meanwhile Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, like "Gimpel the Fool, centers on a similar "holy fool" archetype. Some additional important influences for Singer were Kafka, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Maupassant. Another author who wrote Yiddish-language fiction capturing the day-to-day existence of Jews in Eastern European is Sholom Aleichem. His eight stories about Tevye the Dairyman inspired the hit 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The translator of the first English version of "Gimpel the Fool" was Canadian-American novelist Saul Bellow. Bellow, along with Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth are three of the central figures in post-war Jewish-America fiction, and all owed a debt to Singer, perhaps Malamud especially. Some of the most famous works by that trio include: *Seize the Day*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, and *Herzog* (Bellow), *The Natural*, *The Assistant*, *The Fixer*, and *The Magic Barrel* (Malamud); *Goodbye Columbus*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Ghost Writer*, and *American Pastoral* (Roth). These novels and stories deal principally with the lives of Jewish immigrants and their descendants in the United States. Finally, for a sense of what the people and places of Singer's stories would have *looked* like, Roman Vishniac's book of photographs *A Vanished World* provides incredible visual documentation of the life of Eastern European Jews before World War II.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gimpel the Fool
- **When Written:** 1940s
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** Originally published in Yiddish in 1945; published for the first time in English in 1953.
- **Literary Period:** Late Modernism
- **Genre:** Yiddish short story, allegorical fable, magical realism
- **Setting:** The town of Frampol in Poland
- **Climax:** After Spirit of Evil persuades Gimpel to take revenge on the people of Frampol by urinating in the bread he will sell to them, the ghost of his wife Elka comes to him in a dream and urges him not to go through with the crime, prompting him instead, when he wakes up, to bury the bread.
- **Antagonist:** The Spirit of Evil
- **Point of View:** First-Person Narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

A Family of Writers. Before Isaac Bashevis Singer became famous, his older brother Israel Joshua Singer, author of the novel, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, was much more well-known. Singer's older sister, Esther Kreitman, was also a novelist. Meanwhile, the offspring of both Isaac Bashevis Singer and Israel Joshua Singer include several poets, novelists, and translators.

Late-Life Vegetarianism. In his fifties, Singer became a passionate vegetarian. He believed that that "when a human kills an animal for food, he neglects his own hunger for justice" and viewed people's mistreatment of animals as intimately connected to their cruelty to each other. His short story "The Slaughterer" follows the moral growth of a butcher who becomes horrified by the suffering of his victims.

PLOT SUMMARY

As a child, Gimpel became known for being easy to fool, which is why his neighbors in Frampol call him "Gimpel the Fool." He works at the local bakery, and his customers and all of the villagers are constantly playing tricks on him, such as telling him that the Messiah has come. In such cases, Gimpel seldom completely believes those tricking him, but he figures that it *might* be possible and so who is he to judge. Gimpel finds the constant mockery tiresome and considers moving elsewhere, but just as he is about to leave, his fellow-villagers start encouraging him to marry a local woman, Elka, whom they swear would be an excellent match. She is a sharp-tongued, irritable woman rumored to have had many lovers and a bastard son (whom she claims is her younger brother), but, eventually, after much urging, Gimpel is persuaded to marry her.

He is greatly disturbed when, four months later, she gives birth to a son whom, Gimpel realizes, another man must have fathered. But Elka, along with all of Gimpel's neighbors in Frampol, insist that the baby is simply premature. After a while, Gimpel accepts her story and the child as his own. He grows to love his wife and baby, and is more or less content with his lot until one day, he comes home from work early and finds Elka sleeping with another man. When Gimpel informs the village rabbi, he is told he must divorce her and cease to see her or their child. While apart from them, Gimpel thinks about how, when first confronted with the accusations, Elka repeatedly denied them. He becomes horrified by the idea that he might have imagined the man in her bed; shortly after, he returns to the rabbi to tell him he must have been mistaken and that he would like to go back to living with his wife.

The rabbi explains that Gimpel's new version of the story will need to be discussed by a group of rabbis. While he is waiting for them to deliberate, Gimpel befriends an apprentice at the bakery. After nine months, the council of rabbis concludes that if Gimpel is really certain that he had hallucinated Elka's adultery, he may resume his life with her. Overjoyed, Gimpel returns home, but, to his horror, he finds her in bed with his friend, the apprentice. Elka, on awakening, tells Gimpel to go and check on their goat; when he comes back, the apprentice is gone, and in response to Gimpel's accusations, Elka tells him he has lost his mind. The next day, the apprentice also questions Gimpel's sanity. Confused, not wanting to be in the wrong, Gimpel decides to forget the whole thing. He lives happily for twenty years with Elka, becoming a wealthy baker and the father of several children, until Elka suddenly gets very sick. On her deathbed, she confesses that she lied to Gimpel throughout their marriage, that she had several affairs, and that none of the children are really Gimpel's. Gimpel feels deeply betrayed.

One day, a short time later, The Spirit of Evil comes to Gimpel in a dream and persuades him to get revenge on his neighbors in Frampol for their years of deceiving him by urinating in the bread he sells. Under the Spirit's influence, he does urinate in some bread dough and bakes it. But then he has another vision, this time of the dead Elka, who reproaches him for trying to do evil to his neighbors and persuades him that he will not get his place in Paradise if he does not do the right thing this time. When he wakes up, Gimpel buries the bread he was going to use to trick the townspeople. Then he packs his things and leaves the town of Frampol forever. For years, Gimpel wanders Eastern Europe, becoming an itinerant traveling storyteller in the process. Good people support him as he travels, and he comes to believe that there's no such thing as a lie: that anything not happening now will either happen one day or in someone's dreams. He frequently dreams of Elka and looks forward to an afterlife where he can be reunited with her and where there is no such thing as deception.

CHARACTERS

Gimpel – Gimpel is the narrator and protagonist of the story, and is characterized by his gullibility, gentleness, open-mindedness, kindness, and moral strength. A resident of the small Polish town of Frampol, he is orphaned early and raised by a sickly grandfather. When his grandfather dies, Gimpel starts work at the town bakery. The single significant fact about Gimpel for the people of Frampol is that he believes whatever he hears, however ridiculous—hence his nickname "Gimpel the Fool." However, his belief is actually more complex than his neighbors realize. First of all, he does not blindly accept everything; he actually doubts many of the stories he is told. Yet while he judges them to be highly unlikely, he cannot bring himself to dismiss them outright when he reflects that, theoretically, *anything* is possible. In this sense, more than being gullible, Gimpel is an extremely open person. Further, Gimpel is afraid to think or speak ill of any person unjustly. This is why, on the two occasions that he catches his wife Elka sleeping with another man, he ends up persuading himself that he must have imagined the sight. For even though he beheld the betrayal with his own eyes, the slight possibility that his own vision, and not Elka, has deceived him, keeps him from blaming Elka, since to him, the worst thing would be to do so unfairly. Moreover, Gimpel ultimately feels that even if Elka *did* cheat on him, she is still worthy of forgiveness. This is another major character trait: he is very forgiving, which goes hand in hand with how loving he is. Although Elka is cruel to him throughout their marriage, Gimpel loves her passionately. Although he has questions about the true paternity of his children, he adores and is extremely devoted to them all. He even feels intense affection and concern for their family's goat. Overall, while Gimpel is perceived by others as a pathetic simpleton, the story actually portrays him as a person of rare virtue. The story suggests that through his extreme trust, generosity of spirit, and capacity for love, Gimpel should be considered not a fool, but an unappreciated hero, a man of wisdom, and uniquely able to appreciate and trust in God and his creation.

Elka – Gimpel's wife, Elka, is a very tough woman, fond of shockingly vulgar language and getting her own way. She has already had several relationships before meeting Gimpel: two previous husbands (one who died and one from whom she is divorced) and, it is implied, numerous extra-marital affairs, including one that produced a bastard son, Yechiel, whom she claims is her younger brother. Although Gimpel is convinced to marry her on false pretenses and falls deeply in love with her, Elka ignores his affection and spends most of the time belittling and bullying him. The real anguish she causes him comes from her serial infidelity. Gimpel repeatedly catches her cheating, and while each time she manages to convince him that he has been mistaken—shamelessly taking advantage of his trustfulness—she ultimately admits on her deathbed that she really was unfaithful the whole time, a heartbreaking revelation for Gimpel. Looking at her dead face, Gimpel notices a smile, as if she were pleased or amused at having deceived him. Yet after her death Elka undergoes a sort of moral transformation, acting as conscience and guardian angel for Gimpel. When Gimpel sets in motion a plan to take revenge on the people of Frampol for the years of mockery and deception they've made him endure, it is the repentant ghost of his wife who redirects him to the path of goodness. Appearing in a dream, she warns that she is suffering greatly for her past misconduct and that he must not complete his evil deceit if he hopes for a place in Paradise. At this point, it seems like she is doomed for her own crimes, yet in Gimpel's old age he constantly has visions of her as a shining saint, comforting him, granting him the affection and kindness he always craved from her, and indicating that they will have a blissful afterlife together. While this may just be wishful dreaming on Gimpel's part, it also seems to be a suggestion from Singer that even a person as seemingly morally bankrupt as Elka is not beyond redemption. Her apparent presence in Paradise also fits in with the story's vision of the next world as a place in which all the evils and lies of earth will be simplified into goodness and truth.

The Spirit of Evil – Shortly after Elka's death, the story's main antagonist, The Spirit of Evil—a classic demon figure, with horns, pointy teeth, a tail, and a goatee—appears to Gimpel in his sleep and encourages him to get revenge at the people of Frampol for the years they've spent mocking and deceiving him. The Spirit suggests that Gimpel make a habit of urinating in the bread that he sells them. Not only does the Spirit propose a revenge plot, something quite foreign to Gimpel's nature, he also challenges some of Gimpel's fundamental and most cherished beliefs. When Gimpel asks whether the trick the Spirit recommends will in any way hurt his chances for the next life, the Spirit sneeringly replies that there is no afterlife. When Gimpel asks if there is a God, the Spirit matter-of-factly declares that there is no God, either. When Gimpel asks what *does* exist, the Spirit says, simply: "a thick mire"—basically, a giant swamp of nothingness. *Everything* is false, he insists, so it won't matter if Gimpel throws some more falsehood into the mix. This Spirit of Evil might equally be called the Spirit of Negation. While Gimpel is tempted by the Spirit's words, he ultimately rejects the Spirit's advice. By the end of the story, he articulates a philosophy that is the exact opposite of the nihilistic worldview the Spirit of Evil promotes. Instead of everything being false and fake, Gimpel comes to believe that in God's expansive universe everything is true and real, even the apparently imaginary or impossible. The Spirit of Evil's plea for deception becomes symbolic of faithlessness, of the attitude of the person who believes in nothing, whereas Gimpel's is that of the pious man of faith, who deems whatever he encounters a meaningful and sacred part of God's reality. For the Spirit of Evil, nothing matters. For Gimpel, everything matters immensely.

The Rabbi – The rabbi is the chief religious authority in Frampol. He is one of the few people in the town who shows kindness and respect to Gimpel, and Gimpel frequently turns to him for advice. It is the rabbi who tells Gimpel what ends up being something like the main message of the story: "better be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses paradise himself." The rabbi is also the person who orders that Gimpel divorce his wife, Elka, after he reports her for adultery. When Gimpel comes back with a new story, declaring that he had only imagined his wife's betrayal and he would like to get back together with Elka, the rabbi surprises him by organizing a council of rabbis from neighboring villages to discuss the matter. Nine months pass before they decide that Gimpel can return to his wife. While Gimpel does not relish the long wait, the rabbi's need for reflection and debate may actually be part of what attracts Gimpel to him and to the scholarly Jewish books he and his fellow rabbis study. Unlike the townspeople of Frampol, they do not consider it ridiculously simple to evaluate a story; they are sensitive to the many-sidedness of every situation and, like Gimpel, take unlikely possibilities seriously.

The Apprentice – While separated from Elka, Gimpel becomes friendly with an apprentice at the bakery. The apprentice lives near Elka and helps ferry food to her and the children, since the rabbi has forbidden Gimpel to visit them. Originally, Gimpel disliked the apprentice, who was not the most respectful to him, liking to have fun at his expense. But once they start seeing more of each other, Gimpel decides that the apprentice is actually a very pleasant and generous person, and that he must have judged him too quickly. Understandably, Gimpel feels deeply betrayed when, after finally being allowed to return home to Elka, he finds the apprentice in bed with her. What is worse still, later that night, after the apprentice has gone home, Elka insists to Gimpel that he imagined the whole thing. The next day, the apprentice assists with the gaslighting, opining that Gimpel must "have a screw loose."

Yechiel – Yechiel is Elka's bastard child, fathered by some unknown lover. He is already born when Gimpel first meets Elka, and Elka claims that he is her little brother. Yechiel and Gimpel do not get along, with Yechiel often physically attacking Gimpel, and the almost always gentle and unconfrontational Gimpel being tempted to fight back. Later in the story, when Gimpel returns from the puzzling errand Elka sends him on after he catches her in bed with the apprentice, Yechiel jumps out from behind the oven and strikes Gimpel hard on the back of the head. It seems possible that Elka planted him there.

The "Premature" Son – Four months after Gimpel and Elka's wedding, Elka gives birth to a baby boy. This greatly angers Gimpel, as he figures that there is no way he can be the father's child. Elka insists that the baby is just extremely premature, and she offers up, as support, a very implausible anecdote about her grandmother having borne a similarly premature child. Gimpel sees right through this. But as the days go on, she remains so adamant that she is telling the truth, that Gimpel starts to become persuaded that maybe the child really is his. He is helped by a talk with the school-master, who shares that Eve herself brought two children into the world almost immediately after conceiving them. Finally, Gimpel accepts the son as his own, and the two grow extremely close. The boy always wants to be in Gimpel's arms, and if he is feeling unwell, Gimpel is the only one who can soothe him. Sadly, at the end of Elka's life, she reveals that this child, along with the others, was not Gimpel's, but the child of one of her lovers, a confession that causes Gimpel deep grief. We never learn this child's name, but we know that it is the same as Gimpel's deceased father.

The Daughter Born During Gimpel and Elka's Separation – During the time that Gimpel and Elka are separated, while the rabbis discuss whether it would be appropriate for them to resume their marriage, Elka gives birth to a daughter, whom Gimpel names after Elka's deceased mother. After the rabbi tells Gimpel that it is alright for him to return home, the first thing Gimpel does is look in the crib to have a look at the new child. He falls in love with it at once. Unfortunately, like all the children Gimpel believes are his, this daughter is actually the product of one of her mother's affairs, as Gimpel learns just before Elka dies.

The Rabbi's Daughter – One day, after coming out of an uplifting meeting with the rabbi, Gimpel encounters the rabbi's daughter. She reminds Gimpel that he needs to kiss the wall. He is surprised, as he has never heard of such a necessity before. She insists that it is very important. He goes ahead and kisses the wall, and no sooner than he has done so, the rabbi's daughter starts laughing hysterically. Gimpel fell for her prank, and is disappointed that a person with such proximity to the kindness, wisdom, and piety of her father, the rabbi, should behave in this manner. Only moments before, her father had been telling Gimpel, that, no matter how much his neighbors make fun of him or call him a fool, he can take comfort in being a faithful and benevolent person, while the real fools are those who are mean-spirited and choose to cause embarrassment for others. The rabbi's own daughter, it would seem, is one of the fools.

THEMES

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CREDULITY AS WISDOM AND HOLY FAITH

Since he was a child, the people of the **town of Frampol** have mocked Gimpel for being extremely gullible. However improbable a tale they tell him—the Czar has come to town, the moon has fallen down—he is "taken in" and accepts it. Even when Gimpel does feel skeptical about a story he has heard, the idea that it might be true makes him doubt himself, and he decides to believe, just in case. To his neighbors, this credulity of Gimpel's is a hilarious weakness, something to be mocked and exploited. Yet while being gullible may seem like a weakness, "Gimpel the Fool" suggests that it is actually Gimpel's strength by making clear that his inclination to trust, rather than doubt, even when trust seems totally undeserved, is actually a version of the religious person's trust in a God and afterlife for which there is no hard evidence. "Gimpel the Fool" portrays its protagonist's credulity as a kind of holy faith and a path to goodness, righteousness, and even wisdom.

First of all, Gimpel's inclination to believe people reflects his innate kindness and generosity of spirit, while the "smarter" skeptics all around him show a distinct lack of kindness. Gimpel is always wary of doubting people, for fear that, if he is wrong, he will have cast a sort of shadow on their character unjustly. The rabbi tells him that it is better to be fooled all one's days than for a moment to cause embarrassment to someone else, reinforcing Gimpel's feeling that it is safer to trust people, because it would be worse to have doubted them and shamed them unfairly. The extreme concern for the well-being of other people at the root of this motive for a belief is a big part of what makes Gimpel such a virtuous, almost holy person. By contrast, those around Gimpel—his neighbors, his wife Elka, and The Spirit of Evil—who ridicule him for being so trustful, are themselves morally and spiritually impoverished by their own lack of faith. It's no accident that these other characters are both so adept at spotting lies *and* such competent deceivers themselves. It would not be easy to trick Wolf-Lieb the thief, Elka, or the Spirit of Evil, but that's because of their own familiarity with evil. Furthermore, while it pains Gimpel to be the cause of pain, these more world-wise people get a kick out of it. The townspeople love to see him fall for a prank; Elka dies with a smile on her face, as if she is proud of her trickery; and the Spirit of Evil certainly seems excited by the idea of making the villagers eat Gimpel's urine.

Although the other characters regard Gimpel's credulity as a sign of stupidity, it actually endows him with a special kind of intellectual openness that grants him access to knowledge unavailable to his more narrow-minded neighbors. Early on, Gimpel cites an assertion from *The Wisdom of the Holy Fathers* (an important book of Jewish thought) that "everything is possible." This basic premise for evaluating situations makes Gimpel more open than those around him to improbable scenarios that others would simply dismiss. His alertness for unseen complexity is also shared by the Frampol rabbi and his fellow-rabbis, who scour Jewish scholarly literature to make sure they have considered from every light Gimpel's assertion that he must have imagined it when he caught his wife committing adultery. In a little-known passage, it turns out, Maimonides, a giant of Jewish thought seriously pondered the same (rather implausible) possibility. Furthermore, while many of the things Gimpel believes turn out to be false, his openness is largely validated when he leaves the town of Frampol to explore the world. Outside of the small, insular village, he discovers that many things that his neighbors would almost certainly reject as impossible "had actually come to pass." The townspeople who in Frampol had seemed so worldly-wise with their skepticism come to look like people whose outlook is limited by a kind of smug provincialism, an inability to believe in possibilities they have never seen, which, living in Frampol, is very little. Gimpel, meanwhile, becomes a worldly person who learns from experience that the world is so vast that many unlikely things do end up occurring. That he had faith in such things even before his travels is a proof of the innate wisdom of his impulse to believe.

Gimpel's gullibility also has an important connection to his strong religious faith, since faith inherently relies on one's willingness to believe things without hard evidence. Multiple characters make explicit this tie to religious belief. When Gimpel reports to the rabbi, after being repeatedly deceived, that he's adopted a new policy of believing everything he hears, the rabbi declares, "Belief in itself is beneficial. It is written, a good man lives by his faith." Gimpel makes a similar comment while convincing himself that, against all evidence, his wife Elka has been faithful: "today it's your wife you won't believe; tomorrow it's God himself you won't take stock in." The Spirit of Evil follows this same logic in the opposite direction when he uses the frequent lying and trickery of people on earth to support the conclusion that even the convictions most sacred to Gimpel—the existence of God and the afterlife—are false, too. The Spirit likens the religious authorities, holy books, and other people of faith to swindlers, and in so doing shows the spiritual peril of doubt and negation.

Ultimately, "Gimpel the Fool" suggests that the people of Frampol are wrong to view Gimpel's trustfulness as his great weakness. Instead, his belief makes him wiser, kinder, and more pious, while the villains of the story are those who are perpetually doubting, who are always skeptical, a habit directly connected to their faithlessness and evil-doing.

PUNISHMENT VS. FORGIVENESS

Near the end of "Gimpel the Fool," Gimpel receives a crushing deathbed confession from his wife, Elka, that she has been cheating on him for years and that none of their six children are really his. Soon after this revelation, Gimpel is visited, in a dream, by the Spirit of Evil

who proposes that Gimpel, a baker, urinate in the bread he will sell to the other villagers to eat the next day, thus deceiving *them* for a change. It is no accident that the story makes the Spirit of Evil, rather than Gimpel himself, the one to first have this idea. As the story portrays it, the desire to punish *is* evil. Although it might seem that Gimpel's revenge would be justified, as his neighbors have already caused him so much pain throughout his life, "Gimpel the Fool" suggests that the correct response to such harmful behavior is not revenge—fighting evil with evil—but forgiveness. Gimpel himself reflects at one point, "I wanted to be angry, but that's my misfortune exactly, I don't have it in me to be really angry." The story suggests that this trait is actually Gimpel's strength, his literal *good* fortune, the thing that prevents him from doing evil to others and ensures his own goodness now and in the afterlife.

While it might seem natural for Gimpel to resent and crave vengeance against those who have wronged him, he realizes that doing evil—even in response to evil—is never justified. Early on, the rabbi cautions Gimpel never to be evil: "better to be a fool your days than for one hour to be evil […] he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses paradise himself." The endless mockery and degradation Gimpel suffers from his neighbors certainly meets this definition of evil. But the problem with the idea of punishing his neighbors for their cruelty is that it would require *Gimpel* to do evil, too. He would have to willfully bring pain and shame to them. Part of what makes Gimpel such a good person is his extreme reluctance to ever do this. Gimpel does momentarily succumb to the temptation to punish when the Spirit of Evil proposes his revenge scheme. But Elka visits him in a dream and reminds him that such a choice to hurt others is itself a crime, which may jeopardize his place in Paradise. Elka demands, "Because I was false, is everything false?" She calls upon Gimpel to be a beacon of goodness and honesty in a too often corrupt world, to do his part in saving the world from becoming entirely evil. This intervention inspires Gimpel to abandon his plan, a decision the story suggests is crucial for his fate in the next life.

Gimpel is also keenly aware of how easy it is for people to make mistakes; therefore, he finds it difficult to judge them too harshly for doing so. For example, while Gimpel is dismayed to catch Elka cheating, he reasons that making mistakes is an inevitable part of the human condition: "there's bound to be a slip up sometimes. You can't live without errors." If messing up is something that everybody must, at times, do, Gimpel feels that they deserve forgiveness. Gimpel acknowledges that he himself does not always act rightly. His passion for Elka, for instance, has made him into a thief. He is so eager to please her he regularly steals from the bakery, including from the pots of food women bring in to warm in the over. Timidly he expresses a "hope [he] may be forgiven" for this. Just as he would like forgiveness for himself, he feels an imperative to forgive rather than inflict punishment on others. The only one with a right to judge and punish, as Gimpel sees it, is a perfect being—that is, God.

Gimpel's forgiving attitude ultimately brings him much more satisfaction than revenge or punishment ever could. He is, by nature, not an angry or punishing person. Unlike many of the townspeople, or the Spirit of Evil, it brings him no satisfaction to make others suffer. What Gimpel likes best is to love people. He is miserable when he is apart from Elka, even though leaving her to fend for herself might be an effective way to punish her for her offenses. He always becomes happier whenever they reunite, even though those reunions usually involve her getting off the hook for bad behavior. Furthermore, because people are imperfect, love necessarily requires forgiveness. Gimpel understands throughout his marriage that getting to be with the person he adores requires that he tolerate her significant faults: he showers her with affection despite her constant harsh mockery. He decides to set aside feelings of resentment so that he can get the most out of his love for her.

For Singer, the desire to punish evil is itself an evil. His hero Gimpel, therefore, sets aside the temptation to get back at those who have wronged him, concentrating instead on forgiveness and love. The story's moral calculus is complex, to be sure, but it suggests that as long as Gimpel continues to be generous to people rather than cruel, he will be happier in this life, and his prospects for the afterlife will be safe.

THE REAL VS. THE IMAGINARY

"Gimpel the Fool" can in many ways be taken as a critique of those who purposely distort the truth and deceive others—a kind of denunciation of the imaginary. Through much of the story, Gimpel has a difficult time establishing facts. His neighbors are constantly telling him tales which he takes as true, only to reveal moments later that they were entirely made-up. Meanwhile, Gimpel's own wife is able to get him to set aside the evidence of her infidelity that he witnesses with his own eyes and accept her implausible denials. Yet the story's ideas about the relationship between the real and the imaginary do not end there. An important dimension of the story is also its *celebration* of imagination. The story does this first through Gimpel's three dreams, one where he is visited by the Spirit of Evil and two where he encounters the spirit of his deceased wife, Elka. These dreams are as real to Gimpel as the rest of his life, and affect his behavior as much as anything else that he experiences. Second, while Gimpel initially struggles with the effort to discern the real from the imaginary, by the end of the story, he has himself become a traveling storyteller. Gimpel's transformation is based on a realization that the supposedly "real" world of the living is best understood as imaginary—anything you can make up is probably happening somewhere, or will happen at some point, in waking life or in dreams. And since the "real" world is imaginary, Gimpel, and the

story itself, ultimately argue that it is only in the afterlife that people will first encounter what is actually true and real.

Gimpel's dreams are integrated into the narrative so seamlessly and have such a direct effect on his subsequent actions that they feel as real as the story's "actual" events. Gimpel describes his encounter with the Spirit of Evil and the ghost of his wife not so much as the stuff of illusion, which one would expect from a dream, but as literal visits from other worlds. The line in the story between the real world and the imaginary world becomes blurred, since it is unclear whether these interactions are genuinely happening. Then, he immediately puts the advice he receives in these dreams into action. When the Spirit of Evil tells him to urinate in the bread, he obeys the instructions as soon as he awakens. When Elka warns him that such a deed will endanger his chances in the afterlife, he immediately abandons the plan. In the third dream (actually a recurring one), Elka has become a saint-like figure and promises Gimpel they will soon be together soon; he appears to be deeply reassured by her presence and her words, even when he wakes up. Gimpel's dreamworld feels so lifelike when he narrates it in part because he has come to believe that the life of the imagination should be considered as real as what takes place in the external world.

By the end of the story, Gimpel still likely has moral qualms with others' intent to deceive when they lie, but he has an epiphany that there are "really no lies." What we think of as lies, to Gimpel, actually represent an important aspect of reality. For one thing, as Gimpel travels around the world, he observes that the world is so vast that all kinds of things that seem extremely unlikely, even impossible, actually do happen. Thus, when the imagination "invents" a "ridiculous" story, it may often be, Gimpel concludes, that the thing it describes really did happen somewhere, at some time, or that it will happen at some date in the future. Furthermore, when Gimpel says that "whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night," he is arguing that even if the events of dreams never "really" happen, they are, in a meaningful sense, "real." After all, they reflect our psychological reality, a whole world in which we spend so much of our lives. Meanwhile, in the final paragraphs of the story, Gimpel reveals that he has become a travelling storyteller who regularly recounts highly fanciful stories to people on his travels. This is evidence of how fully he has embraced the world of the imagination, the world of "lies," to entertain and enlighten.

Gimpel also reaches the conclusion that what we call real life should itself probably be viewed as an imaginary or dreamlife, for it is a mere shadow of the afterlife, which he considers to be the actual real world. While Gimpel feels strongly that the world we live in is a large place with wide possibilities, he does accept that it is finite. He believes that it is just a fragment of the world to come, in which the truth of things will be revealed. Thus, for Gimpel, the "imaginary" has special validity because it goes beyond the limitations of our relatively shallow "reality." But an essential feature of the afterworld as Gimpel understands it is that its "truth" will be plain for all to see, no matter how complex or magnificent it may be. As a world essentially bathed in truth, Gimpel trusts that the afterlife is a place where "even Gimpel cannot be deceived."

Over the course of the story Gimpel changes from being a person who struggles to get a handle on reality and views falsehood as the enemy to someone who sees the products of the human imagination, including dreams and lies, not as detracting from but actually helping to complete our picture of what reality is. Reality on earth, Gimpel believes, is small and insubstantial compared to the reality of the afterlife, and thus our openness to stories that inflate the boundaries of everyday life actually help our minds inch closer to what it will be like in the next world, where all things are real. Gimpel at the end of the story is eagerly awaiting his entry to that greater, truer world.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WASHTUB, UNCLEANLINESS, AND WASHING

When Gimpel firsts meets his future wife, Elka, she is standing by a washtub, and he comes to associate her with that object, envisioning her beside it years after she has died. The washtub symbolizes the potential for Elka—and by extension, a sinful world—to be cleansed of evil. Though Elka is next to the washtub during the first encounter, Gimpel's overall feeling is that he is in an unclean place ("it reeks," he says). Gimpel's whole relationship to Elka is punctuated by the symbolism of the effort to wash a dirty body. Their wedding takes place during a dysentery outbreak, and the ceremony is held just beside the hut where the diseased corpses are washed. When Gimpel first attempts to have intercourse with Elka, she replies that she is having her period. Gimpel protests that in that case she should not have gone the day before, as she did, to the ritual bath, which woman are supposed to do just after finishing a period, to clean and "purify" themselves. If she is telling the truth, it seems that she did not follow the correct procedure for getting clean; and of course, if she is lying, she is even more significantly, morally, unclean.

Elka is again and again associated with uncleanliness. Gimpel likens her hostile words to him to "pitch," a sticky, black substance (often called resin), and to "sulphur," a toxic chemical. When she comes to the rabbinical court to answer Gimpel's accusations of adultery, the child she brings along (himself the product of her sinful infidelity) soils himself, and she is sent

away, for fear he might end up contaminating the court's Ark (the cabinet where the holy Torah scrolls are kept). Such a potential desecration might also be taken as foreshadowing of the later evil soiling that the Spirit of Evil encourages Gimpel to perform, urinating in the bread that will be eaten by the people of Frampol.

There is a part of Elka that is conscious and even ashamed of her moral stains. The reason she gives for deciding, while dying, to confess her years of deception to Gimpel is that she "want[s] to go clean to her maker." A short while later, the first time Gimpel encounters her ghost, it does not seem that she has managed to leave earth clean: it appears that she is being subsumed by her shroud and tormented by terrible punishment. Yet as a vision in Gimpel's dreams she ends up making an essential moral intervention that saves Gimpel's goodness by stopping him from selling the bread he urinated in. And, indeed, in his visions of her after this moment, she takes on a heavenly aspect—she looks as pure and shining as a saint. And importantly, Gimpel notices her standing next to the same washtub from their first encounter. She has finally been washed of her evil, the symbolism suggests.

THE TOWN OF FRAMPOL

The town of Frampol is the setting of "Gimpel the Fool," but it also functions as an important symbol in the story of the limitations of our small earthly lives compared to the life to come. The small-minded townspeople never think of themselves in connection with anyone or anything beyond the borders of Frampol. That, for instance, the Czar should have even the remotest interest in Frampol is a hilarious joke to them. And part of the reason they find unlikely scenarios so ridiculous stems from their confinement to such a small place and their extremely limited experience of the wider world. When Gimpel finally decides to leave Frampol, he tells his neighbors that he is setting out "into the world." He is itching to get acquainted with a wider range of environments and cultures than what he has always known in this one tiny community. What he discovers on his explorations is that the world really is much vaster and more varied than it would seem from insular Frampol. Gimpel's realization that his hyper-local, repetitive, slightly claustrophobic existence in Frampol is embedded in a much more complex and colorful one actually mirrors his contemplation of the distance between this world, the world of the living, to the next world, the afterlife, God's world. This world, Gimpel realizes, like Frampol beside that rich world around it, pales in comparison with the grandeur of what is to come.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* published in 1983.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ Everything is possible, as it is written in the *Wisdom of the Fathers*. I forget just how.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The speaker of these lines is the story's narrator Gimpel, who is attempting to explain and justify his tendency to believe whatever he is told, no matter how absurd. For Gimpel, a story's implausibility is not enough to make him reject it instantly because, as Gimpel sees it, even unlikely things could potentially occur.

Here he cites the *Wisdom of the Fathers*, an important book of Jewish ethics that is also known as the "Pirkei Avot," in which it is observed that "everything is possible." It's notable that Gimpel finds his rationale for his belief in such a significant work of religious literature: it suggests that his tendency to have faith in what other people tell him is connected to the more serious faith of religious Jews in God. This idea, that Gimpel's gullibility is in fact a trait that makes him not a fool but rather a "holy fool" whose very foolishness reveals a deeper religious understanding, pervades the story.

More generally, Gimpel's immense respect for *Wisdom of the Fathers*, as well as his gentle, self-effacing personality, comes through in the way he makes sure to clarify that he is merely paraphrasing the quote, noting that he "forget[s] just how" the sentiment is worded in the original text.

❝ To tell the truth, I knew very well that nothing of the sort had happened, but all the same, as folks were talking, I threw on my wool vest and went out. Maybe something had happened. What did I stand to lose by looking?

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote illustrates a common pattern for Gimpel's thoughts when he hears a far-fetched tale. At this particular point in the story, he has just been told that the Messiah (the savior for whom the Jews have been waiting for thousands of years) has finally arrived and that, as is predicted will happen when the Messiah comes, the dead have been brought back to life, including Gimpel's long-ago departed parents.

Gimpel shows himself to be fairly confident that this much-anticipated event has not taken place, which might surprise the many neighbors who think he blindly accepts everything he hears without so much as a shred of doubt. Yet he also reveals the kind of thinking that leads him not to dismiss an implausible story outright or to behave as if he thinks it might be true.

First of all, his inclination is to trust other people. "Folks were talking," he reflects, and, with his good heart, he wants to believe that they are all talking for some reason other than a plot to be cruel and deceitful. Meanwhile, even if he feels quite assured that the Messiah has not come, he is open-minded and sensitive enough to the subtle aspects of situations that can cause confusion or misjudgment, to suppose that *something* could be happening to make his neighbors believe that they saw what they claim to have seen. He also reasons that he has nothing to lose by checking, whereas he might do wrong by *not* checking: he might miss something interesting or important that is actually going on, or he might hurt his neighbors by insinuating that they are attempting to deceive him, which, to Gimpel, would be a serious moral offense, if they are in fact innocent of such an intention.

Though Gimpel's thought process ultimately leads him to act "gullibly" by trusting what his neighbors are saying to him, the process itself is quite subtle, and reveals his goodness, kindness, and openness to the possibilities of the world.

> "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses Paradise himself."

Related Characters: The Rabbi (speaker), Gimpel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The rabbi says these words near the beginning of the story when Gimpel, overwhelmed by the constant teasing he has to endure from his neighbors, comes to him for advice. The rabbi articulates here what turns out to be one of the most important guiding principles for Gimpel as the story's events unfold. Gimpel has come to think of himself as what the townspeople call him, a fool, stupid enough to fall for any trick they play on him. But the rabbi insists that such a view of things is all wrong. Foolishness, the rabbi argues, does not consist in being gullible, in falling for pranks. Rather, a fool is someone who willingly chooses to embarrass or wound another person. Thus, those who are always calling him "fool," the pranksters and deceivers of Frampol, Gimpel's neighbors, would be much more appropriately labeled fools themselves. Such foolishness comes with consequences, says the rabbi, far more serious than the gullible person suffers when he takes a silly story seriously. The foolish evil-doer who sins against his neighbors forfeits eternal life in Paradise.

This speech helps Gimpel recognize that it is not he, but his bullies, who are the real fools; yet the sentiment it expresses also prevents him from taking any sort of retaliatory action against those people who have deceived him. For to try to get back at them, to injure them as he injured him, would constitute the same kind of evil for which he would be punishing them. He would be bringing shame and pain to his neighbor, which, despite the provocation, remains a sinful action. Such logic is what keeps him, for instance, from later in the story carrying out the revenge plot that the Spirit of Evil suggests to him (urinating in the bread that he will sell his neighbors). As he is considering what to do (aided by a surprising visit from the ghost of his wife Elka, who urges him not to go through with the plan), Gimpel realizes that "everything hung in the balance. One false step now and I'd lose eternal life." This thought strongly echoes the rabbi's words and his warning that an act of premeditated evil against one's neighbors will be punished by the loss of one's place in Paradise.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ She swore at me and cursed, and I couldn't get enough of her. What strength she had! One of her looks could rob you of the power of speech. And her orations! Pitch and sulphur, that's what they were full of, and yet somehow also full of charm. I adored her every word. She gave me bloody wounds though.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gimpel is describing his first years of married life with Elka. Evidently, she is extremely hostile, even abusive, to him, "cursing" and giving him "bloody wounds." It is perhaps surprising that Gimpel's tone here is predominantly one of awe and affection even as he attests to his wife's cruelty. The author of the story, I. B. Singer, skillfully alternates between what feel like Gimpel's very contradictory sentiments about Elka. First she "swore and cursed," and yet "Gimpel couldn't get enough of her." Her words, which are full of "pitch and sulphur," (pitch being basically like tar, an icky, sticky black substance—sometimes used in a tarring and feathering ceremony, for the purpose of humiliating someone—and sulphur being a toxic substance), are somehow also "full of charm". He more or less cherishes whatever she says, regardless of how cruel. And yet she repays his devotion with "bloody wounds." The dirtiness of her language also belongs to a pattern of symbolism in the story around Elka being unclean. The dirtiness of her house, her belongings, and her speech are all meant to symbolize the corruption of her soul, which, it becomes increasingly clear over the course of the story, is in dire need of being cleaned, purified.

Gimpel's overlooking of Elka's mistreatment of him may seem like a sort of ridiculous, blind love on Gimpel's part, unable to recognize that Elka probably feels little kindness, let alone love, for him, in return. But instead, it can be taken as a love so strong that it is willing not simply to accept, but also to embrace and hold dear even the most unpleasant aspects of its object. He adores "every word" of Elka's, however harsh any one of those words might be. This attitude is meant to be one of Gimpel's character strengths, his ability not to feel resentful and vengeful in response to another person's shortcomings, but to forgive them and to try to love them for everything they are, including their shortcomings. In a sense, this acceptance of Elka's cruelty mirrors Gimpel's acceptance of the cruelty in God's world, a world which the religious person is meant to love and honor down to all of its smallest details, even the unpleasant ones, given that all are part of God's creation and will.

❝ I thieved because of her and swiped everything I could lay hands on: macaroons, raisins, almond cakes. I hope I may be forgiven for stealing from the Saturday pots the women left to warm in the baker's oven.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel is confessing here how his devotion to Elka became so intense that he started stealing food for her from the bakery, not just robbing his employer, but also the women in the town who make use of the oven to warm their food from home. Note that his stealing was not a rare, minor behavior: he describes himself as a repeated offender and grabbing "whatever [he] could lay hands on."

This is a significant detail, because it shows Gimpel, who, for the most part, is a consistently righteous person throughout the story, acting sinfully. It matters that he behaves this way, and that he admits it, because his acknowledgement of his misconduct here helps him to be forgiving of other people's moral failings. He hopes for forgiveness for his crimes and so, in order not to be a hypocrite, is compelled to be forgiving, too. Gimpel speaks elsewhere about his conviction that no human can make it through life without sometimes erring. Thus, to prove this point, Singer makes sure that in the story Gimpel also practices some kind of evil behavior, so that it is clear that even Gimpel, arguably the most moral character in the story, is imperfect, as all humans are.

❝ I'm the type that bears it and says nothing. What's one to do? Shoulders are from God, and burdens too.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel is talking about how his wife never wants to have intercourse with him, giving a different excuse every time he proposes it. He is frustrated, but he expresses with these words his acceptance of whatever Elka wishes—and more generally, of everything that comes his way. In this passage he is displaying a number of significant features of his character. The first aspect is his overall mildness and lack of the impulse to protest or fight. Another might get angry at his disappointment and find some way to make this anger known. But as Gimpel says elsewhere in the story, "I don't have it in me to be really angry." Despite the fact that his wishes are not being met, he simply does not feel strongly any resentful emotion. In addition, his tolerance of Elka's rejection reflects his love for her and his honoring of whatever she says and desires. Finally, he also links his resignation to his religious faith. Any troubles, Gimpel reasons, such as this domestic trouble with his wife, represent the will of God and thus ought not to inspire his anger or resistance. As Gimpel phrases it, frustration and struggle are built-in-parts of God's plan.

Gimpel's attitude also relates to what his neighbors perceive as his blind acceptance of whatever they tell him. It is not always that he simply credits everything they say without a second-thought; it is often instead that he is the "type that bears it and says nothing." He is the sort of person who does not object to any story not because he feels no private reservations but because of his overriding sentiment that it is not his place to doubt things that seem implausible to him, in case they might really be genuine anomalies in the normal course of events, sent by God.

❝ Another in the town would have made an uproar, and enough noise to rouse the whole town, but the thought occurred to me that I might wake the child. A little thing like that--why frighten a little swallow, I thought.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka, The "Premature" Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel has just come upon his wife in bed with another man right when he had been eagerly looking forward to coming home to her much earlier in the week than usual, and is understandably outraged. He says that he, like most men, was tempted to start screaming so loud that everyone would hear him. But Gimpel is not quite like everyone else. He is stopped from shouting by the thought that if he were to make such a scene, it would wake up his sleeping son. Gimpel's conduct is always guided by the fear of hurting others with his actions, most especially when they have done nothing to deserve it.

Interestingly, as he describes the situation, Gimpel compares the boy to a little swallow. Weak people in need of protection are repeatedly associated with vulnerable animals in "Gimpel the Fool." Gimpel himself is twice likened to a donkey and once to a cow, animals mocked for their reputed stupidity. This child is likened to a delicate bird here and in an inversion of that metaphor, Gimpel feels a similar kind of tender concern for his goat to that which he feels for his children. Meanwhile, cruelty and deception is often linked in the story to predators in the animal kingdom. One of the tricks a neighbor plays on him is to produce a sound that makes Gimpel think there might be a viscous dog nearby; this character happens to be the town thief, called Wolf-Lieb, and it is perhaps significant that his name Wolf calls to mind an animal even more dangerous than an aggressive dog. When Gimpel speeds home the night he is allowed to return to his wife, "dogs in the Christian yards" seem to be taunting him (Christians, too, who would have been seen by Gimpel as potential predators). Notably, the butchers are the townspeople Gimpel mentions as taking Elka's part the first time she lies that she has not committed adultery. Perhaps this imagery has something to do with the fact that I. B. Singer, who would later in life become a vegetarian, saw human cruelty to animals, their exploitation of weaker creatures in their own self-interest, as mirroring the sort of cruelty that people do to each other when they are able to identify some weakness of which they can take advantage.

❝ 'Enough of being a donkey,' I said to myself. 'Gimpel isn't going to be a sucker all his life. There's a limit to the foolishness even of a fool like Gimpel.'

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka, The "Premature" Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

While Gimpel for the most part displays remarkable tolerance of the many obstacles life throws at him, in this moment, after the first time he catches his wife cheating on him, he shows that he can get fed up with being so frequently deceived and humiliated. Even Gimpel has his limits.

This moment is significant because it is sometimes tempting while reading the story to start to see Gimpel as this preternaturally serene and all-accepting figure, above the bullying and betrayal of everyone around him. But it is important to recognize how real the suffering is that the constant trickery, especially this major betrayal of Elka's, causes him. His thoughts here, in fact, are particularly painful and self-recriminating. He speaks of himself critically in the third-person, as if there is part of him that is siding with his own detractors, fully buying into the popular estimation of him as a ridiculous fool, which he usually resists. The reader can feel him turning against himself, taking on uncharacteristically vindictive feelings. The fact that he understands the depths to which he is being deceived, and feels such pain in these moments, makes the fact that he then refrains from taking revenge all the more noteworthy and remarkable.

> A longing took me, for her and for the child. I wanted to be angry, but that's my misfortune exactly, I don't have it in me to be really angry.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka, The "Premature" Son

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel says this while absent from his wife and child, after he has reported Elka for adultery and the rabbi orders him to divorce her and never see her or their son again. At this moment, Gimpel thinks that his abandonment of the family is justified, and yet he cannot get rid of his feelings of love and longing for them. His inability to stay angry at Elka reflects his forgiving and unresentful nature. While he frames this aspect of his character as a misfortune here, the story suggests that this is actually one of Gimpel's great strengths. He is an intrinsically forgiving person, which makes forgiveness come much more easily to him, whereas many others would cling to their anger and even enjoy the act of punishment, of making Elka feel her misdeed. As the story teaches, punishment of others is in itself a kind of evil, similar in its cruel-heartedness to whatever original crime has brought it about.

Furthermore, as Gimpel discovers in the story, for a loving person like him, resentment is not simply unkind; it is also impractical for his *own* happiness. What he desires is not to cause pain to Elka, a person whom he cherishes, but rather to get to live with her and enjoy her company, to do whatever is in his power to give her pleasure. Being angry and forcing himself to be estranged from the home he loves makes Gimpel miserable and so is no proper solution to the unhappiness caused by Elka's betrayal.

> This was how my thoughts went—there's bound to be a slip up sometimes. You can't live without errors. Probably that lad who was with her led her on and gave her presents and what not, and women are often long on hair and short on sense, and so he got around her.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Gimpel is contemplating Elka's adultery and finding himself unable to confidently condemn her for it. It occurs to him that occasional misconduct is an inevitable part of the human condition. Nobody is perfect and life is long, and thus "there's bound to be a slip up sometimes." Such a line of thought illustrates Gimpel's forgiving nature and generosity of spirit. He enters empathetically into what might have been the train of events that tempted Elka to act in the way she did, and while the terms in which he puts it are, to the modern reader, unpleasantly sexist (he jokes that women have long hair but little good sense), he demonstrates real sympathy for the sort of vulnerabilities that can lead a person into error. He also shows himself not to be a hypocrite, since he himself earlier in the story admits that he has been driven by passion to do wrong: in his eagerness to please Elka, he has taken to regularly stealing food for her from the bakery. Back then he expressed the wish that he be forgiven for doing that, and so it makes sense to him to show forgiveness to Elka.

Finally, the way Gimpel begins this quote is also a telling

detail about his character. There is something unmistakably humble about the phrase "this was how my thoughts went," as if he is somewhat unsure of the logic of what he is saying and is simply trying to bring the readers into his frame of mind at the time, to decide for themselves whether his thoughts make sense. His words would feel different if he had a more confident, didactic tone, as if he were expounding a moral principle of which he is absolutely certain. Gimpel, though he is presented as a character with unusual moral strength, does not feel any great conviction that all of his own moral reasoning and judgment are sound. Indeed, this in itself is one of his great moral strengths: his alertness to the complexity of morality and how difficult it is to formulate any perfect ethical principle.

❝ And then she denies it so, maybe I was only seeing things? Hallucinations do happen. You see a figure or a mannikin or something, but when you come up closer it's nothing, there's not a thing there. And if that's so, I'm doing her an injustice. And when I got so far in my thoughts I started to weep.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel has these thoughts during the time that he is separated from his wife, after accusing of her adultery and being ordered to separate from her by the town rabbi. Up to this point, he has had no doubts that his wife actually cheated on him, as he saw her in bed with another man with his own eyes. Yet his inclination to trust her is so strong that he cannot help but seriously consider her repeated claims that she is innocent, despite the fact that virtually any other person in his position would be unable to have the least doubt of her guilt. It is in his effort to believe Elka that Gimpel conceives a particularly implausible theory about what happened: that he had simply hallucinated the sight of her lover. In this moment, Singer skillfully narrates Gimpel's thoughts, his mental struggle to persuade himself that such confusion could really have been possible, and captures these thoughts in such a way as to make what seems to be an implausible state of mind convincing to the reader.

When Gimpel has finally convinced himself that it is not only possible but maybe even quite likely that he had imagined his wife's infidelity and that he has wrongfully accused her of a shameful crime, he begins sobbing. For Gimpel, to unjustly injure someone is one of the worst possible sins and the prospect that this is exactly what he has done is far more painful to him than even his original conviction of his wife's duplicity had been. This turn shows what a sensitive, caring person he is, so anxious never to hurt others, especially unfairly and especially someone as precious to him as Elka is.

This moment is also crucial for the development of one of the story's central themes, which concerns the murkiness between the real world and the imaginary world. While Gimpel has spent much of the story somewhat detached from reality in that he has frequently allowed himself to believe absurd stories, in this passage he reaches a new level of confusion about what is real and what is false, since he has begun to distrust even the evidence of his own senses. Seeing is no longer believing for Gimpel, so distorted has the boundary between reality and illusion become for him.

Part 3 Quotes

❝ I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of *not* believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God himself you won't take stock in.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

After becoming convinced that he had merely imagined the adultery of which he'd previously accused Elka and thus unjustly brought her shame, Gimpel resolves to always believe what he is told by others. He has just been through enormous mental pain, torn between his memory of seeing her in bed with another man and the potential moral crime of wrongfully accusing her if he did in fact hallucinate that man. In addition, he has himself endured the pain of being separated from the woman he loves, due to believing his own eyes rather than her words. For both of these reasons, Gimpel concludes that it is riskier to distrust people, and thus risk harming them unfairly than it is to allow yourself to be deceived by them. This an important moment for Gimpel, since he takes the gullibility that has been a character trait everyone around him has always considered his great weakness, and erects it as a formal ethical policy.

He also articulates here a close relationship between his faith in Elka's innocence (and all the many implausible things

he believes over the course of the story) and his faith in God. As Gimpel sees it, if you allow yourself to start having doubts about what you're told regarding everyday things, it won't be long before you start feeling comfortable questioning what you've been told about God, God's laws, or the promise of the world to come. Such religious revelations might well seem just as implausible as Elka's innocence, yet he knows it would be moral and spiritual ruin to reject them. Thus he reasons that it is the safest path to reject all skepticism, so that that type of thinking never creeps into his attitude toward God.

> It was all up with Elka. On her whitened lips there remained a smile. I imagined that, dead as she was, she was saying, 'I deceived Gimpel. That was the meaning of my brief life.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears during the scene of Elka's death. Elka has just confessed that she has been deceiving Gimpel for over twenty years, that she has had more lovers than she can count, and that he is not the real father of any of the children he loves. Gimpel is heart-broken. In this state of emotional pain, he notices a smile on Elka's dead face and interprets it to mean that she took some kind of perverse and evil pleasure in the success of her deceptions of Gimpel. He is sad not only for himself but also for her and how morally degraded her entire existence appears to him at this point. It strikes him that this was the whole point of her life, to betray his faith in her, which seems to him a very bad use of one's time on earth. He can only imagine what suffering awaits her after death.

Yet while Elka *does* end up getting punished severely for her past misconduct in the next life, her moral arc also turns out to be more complex than that of a straightforward villain. First, in the deathbed scene, Elka indicates that she has mixed feelings about her treatment of Gimpel. She is not simply proud of how effectively she has bamboozled him. She explains that the reason she is confessing her sins to Gimpel is that she wants his forgiveness, so she can go "clean to [her] Maker." Then, later in the story, Elka shows a significant moral transformation when she visits Gimpel after his meeting with Spirit of Evil and urges him to reconsider the cruel revenge plot the spirit has persuaded him to undertake. Her intervention is what restores Gimpel to his goodness and faith. It is hinted that she is rewarded for this change of character: in Gimpel's subsequent visions of her she has been changed into a saintly figure, who, it is hinted, Gimpel will one day meet in heaven.

Elka's eventual transformation also suggests that Gimpel's interpretation of the smile on her face may have been mistaken. It is one of the few moments in the story when Gimpel interprets something in a cynical rather than optimistic way. That cynicism makes sense given the circumstances—he has just learned that his wife has spent decades cheating on him and none of his children are in fact his own. But it is equally possible to take Elka at her word—which is what Gimpel has sworn he will always do—and take her smile as indicating her satisfaction or joy that she has finally come clean to Gimpel. Gimpel's cynical interpretation of Elka's smile can in this reading be taken as Gimpel's despair leading him to give up his former ethical stance about belief, which then leads to his near spiritual ruin in subsequent scenes.

Part 4 Quotes

> 'Let the sages of Frampol eat filth.'

'What about the judgment in the world to come?' I said.

'There is no world to come,' he said. "They've sold you a bill of goods and talked you into believing you carried a cat in your belly. What nonsense!' 'Well then,' I said, 'And is there a God?'

He answered, 'There is no God either.'

'What,' I said, '*is* there, then?'

'A thick mire.'

Related Characters: Gimpel, The Spirit of Evil (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most important conversations in the story. It takes place not long after Elka's death, when Gimpel falls asleep in the bakery and has a vision of the Spirit of Evil. The spirit recommends to Gimpel that he take revenge on his

neighbors by urinating in the bread he sells them at the bakery. The tone of the spirit's words are full of animosity and disrespect, encouraging the same in Gimpel. His reference to the people of Frampol as "sages" is a highly ironic way of implying he thinks they are idiots, worthy of the indignity of being fed "filth." In rest of the exchange, the spirit shows himself to truly be a thoroughly evil influence, brutally assaulting Gimpel's faith in God and the world to come. The spirit says that a person who believes in the next life is as stupid as a person who lets himself get swindled by a crafty salesperson or who could let himself be persuaded that he was pregnant with a cat. This choice of imagery seems significant here, as pregnancy has often been linked in the story with Gimpel's gullibility, from the original trick that gave him his nickname, where he stayed home from school when his classmates made up that the rabbi's wife was having a baby, to the stories his clients at the bakery tell him about the rabbi himself giving birth to a calf or a cow laying brass eggs, to the many times Elka deceives him about the real paternity of the children she bears.

The spirit proceeds to declare that there is also no God, that indeed there is nothing in the whole universe but a thick mire—a sort of giant swamp of nothingness. The spirit is promoting a worldview in which everything is false and meaningless. This is a view which stands at odds with Gimpel's worldview through much of the story, but in this moment of despair after learning of Elka's endless deceptions of him, Gimpel is more open to it. In this way the story shows how cynicism leads to more cynicism—Gimpel's cynicism resulting from Elka's treatment of him now opens him to cynicism about God and God's creation. Cynicism and skepticism, the story hammers home, is a path to spiritual and moral ruin.

It is worth noting that Gimpel will ultimately reject the spirit's advice. In fact at the end of the story, Gimpel comes to the conclusion that rather than everything being false, *everything* is true, even the things that appear to be false, like the stories people make up to deceive each other or the fantastic events we witness in our dreams. Thus, the spirit of Evil and Gimpel represent directly opposed philosophies, the creed of goodness and the creed of evil. They can be seen as perfect foils for each other.

> I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived, the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference does it make? Often I heard tales of which I said, 'Now this is a thing that cannot happen.' But before a year had elapsed I heard that it had actually come to pass somewhere.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel speaks this arresting passage after leaving Frampol and traveling the world for many years. While he spent much of his life disturbed by the trouble he had distinguishing the real world of facts from the imaginary and false stories created by his neighbors to trick him, by the end of the story, he has come to the conclusion that what we think of as "false" or "imaginary" should be considered just as real as what we normally categorize as belonging to "real" life. First of all, Gimpel reasons, we neglect to count as real many of the events that we dream at night or imagine in our head because they don't "actually" take place in the external world. Yet these things *do* take place in our minds and thus have an important mental reality which plays a huge role in our lives. Second, because he has traveled so widely and reached such a mature age, he has learned from experience that there is so much time and space in the world that many things that seem highly improbable, even impossible, often do take place somewhere, at some point in time. And if they have not happened yet, Gimpel sees no reason that they should not occur one day in the future. Thus, he has transitioned from regarding lies and fantasies as distracting, pernicious things to representing meaningful, essential pieces of real life.

This curious fact of the probability of most unlikely things eventually happening, and more frequently than one would guess, is something that is difficult for the people of Frampol to grasp. Because they lead extremely insular lives, confined almost completely to that one small town, anything new or different or extraordinary seems to them to be impossible and ridiculous. But Gimpel's broader experience allows him to see that the citizens of Frampol's skepticism is, in fact, actually a kind of provincial blindness—they think amazing things can't happen because they don't understand just how

big or amazing the world actually is. It is therefore a testament to Gimpel's innate wisdom that he had a kind of worldly openness to things that stretch the boundaries of what seems possible long before he ever set foot outside Frampol.

> She is standing by the washtub, as at our first encounter, but her face is shining and her eyes are as radiant as the eyes of a saint, and she speaks outlandish words to me, strange things. When I wake I have forgotten it all. But while the dream lasts I am comforted. She answers all my queries, and what comes out is that all is right.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker), Elka

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Gimpel in this passage is describing a recurring dream he has of Elka, even as he is far, far away from Frampol and it has been many years since he last saw his wife. She has undergone what appears to be a total transformation, no longer a sinful villain but a shining, comforting saint. The story has hinted this redemption was possible in a few ways. First, while dying Elka does express regret for her mistreatment of Gimpel and wishes that she might go "clean to [her] Maker." Then, it is a vision of Elka who confronts Gimpel when he is about to commit an evil crime (giving the people of Frampol bread in which he has urinated). She urges him not to let the immorality he witnesses all around him contaminate his own moral integrity. In this way the story suggests that it is Elka who saves Gimpel from losing his place in Paradise.

Now, perhaps because of this feeling of remorse and because of this significant moral intervention, it appears that Elka herself has been cleaned of the evil that had contaminated her soul, and that her days of hellish punishment have been replaced by joy in Paradise. It is meaningful that Gimpel envisions her standing by the washtub, just as he first saw her. This washtub has important symbolic value, representing the potential for her to wash away her sins. When Gimpel first encountered her she was depicted as dirty, fond of foul language, and motivated by a corrupt heart. Now she seems to be almost transcendently pure and good. She also appears to represent the kind of clarity Gimpel anticipates from the next world. It is a place where all of the confusion and murkiness of this earthly life, Gimpel thinks, will be removed, and the real truth will become clear. Accordingly, Elka, a sort of emissary from that world, is able to answer all of Gimpel's burning questions about the paradoxes that have perplexed him in life. Though Gimpel, who still inhabits the earth, is unable to understand what she is saying, nor to remember his dream-encounters with her very clearly, he trusts that real peace, satisfaction, and truth lie with her in the afterlife.

While these visions are possibly just the the stuff of Gimpel's imagination, Singer seems to be raising the possibility that even a person as sinful as Elka could still have a chance at redemption, a chance to revise the "meaning of [her] brief life

> No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the real world....Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived.

Related Characters: Gimpel (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the final paragraph of the story, as Gimpel, in his old age, contemplates his impending death. He is not afraid of death. On the contrary, he is eager to commence his afterlife, particularly because he hopes he will be reunited with Elka when he gets there.

Furthermore, he has spent many years ruminating about the subtle distinction between the real world and the imaginary world. On the one hand, he has come to believe that many things that we think of as imaginary, like dreams and lies, actually have a significant kind of reality. But in this passage he articulates a further insight that this "real" world is itself probably best understood as an imaginary world, as a mere fragment of the afterlife to come, God's world, which, concludes Gimpel, is the actual real world. That world will be much vaster and all-encompassing than the one we currently inhabit, he believes, and since everything will exist there, there will be no such thing as falsehood.

Indeed, part of the reason Gimpel so enthusiastically embraces the world of the imagination at the end of the story is because he thinks that the fictions which we dream up bring us closer to the reality of the next life. This world of life on earth, he reasons, is only "once removed" from the world to come. Thus, we can help to bridge that distance by taking seriously what seems to be beyond the limits of what is possible on earth.

Gimpel is also especially eager to go to the next world, because he believes that once he arrives, the whole truth of things, which is obscured by the limitations of this world and the deceptions people practice on each other, will become evident, no matter how complex or multi-faceted that truth might be. He thinks that this is the first time he will have access to the full reality of the universe, a thrilling prospect indeed. His final words about this prospect are very touching, as he presents a vision of a world where deception is impossible, while making use of his characteristic self-deprecating humor: "God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived." Such a place, he both seriously and playfully observes, would be a miracle world indeed.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Gimpel, the narrator, introduces himself by the nickname he has long been called in the village of **Frampol**: "Gimpel the Fool." He does not agree that he is a fool but explains that people think he is one because of his reputation for believing whatever he hears. It all started when he was a school-boy. Some classmates (falsely) told him that, since their teacher's wife was giving birth, school was canceled. Gimpel took their word for it and stayed home—only to find everyone laughing their sides off at him the next day, amazed that he fell for their trick so easily.

This opening immediately connects Gimpel to his reputation in Frampol as an extremely gullible person. "I am Gimpel the Fool," he says quite simply. Yet already in this paragraph, the reader is meant to feel a tension between Gimpel's acceptance of the clownish role his town has assigned him and his own private resistance to that persona. He confides that, in spite of public opinion, he does "not think [himself] a fool. On the contrary." When he shares the origin story of the nickname, he makes clear that he does not believe it was really so idiotic of him to take his classmates' story at face value. These kids are astonished that Gimpel did not have any doubts. The important reason, however, that Gimpel does not suspect any trick is because he is not a trickster himself. This is an early instance of the story's connection of the habit of skepticism with the ability—or even a proclivity—to cheat and deceive.

These kids taunted him taunting him endlessly, even going so far as to fill his hands with disgusting goat's droppings that they told him were raisins. Gimpel reflects that he could have made his classmates regret their cruelty, as he was a very strong boy and might have punched them hard; but he has never been the retaliating type and simply "let it pass." Gimpel realizes that this aspect of his personality encourages people to take advantage of him, since they know he won't fight back.

In this anecdote, the merciless cruelty of Gimpel's classmates stands in strong contrast to his own gentleness. Importantly, none of them suspect that Gimpel, who seems so weak and ridiculous, would be capable of injuring them himself. As will be the case throughout the story, nobody guesses Gimpel's hidden strength. This moment also demonstrates Gimpel's impulse to forgive rather than punish. Although he would have been able to wound the kids who pranked him, he explains that he doesn't really have it in his nature to hurt others. This aspect of his character is one of his major moral strengths, and his commitment to it is what ultimately allows him to triumph over evil at the end of the story.

Gimpel recalls another incident from his boyhood that helped create his reputation as a "fool." One day, as he was walking home from school, he heard what sounded like a dog barking. Even though he was not afraid of dogs, he ran in the other direction, reasoning that if the animal happens to be rabid and then also happens to bite him, he could get very sick. Moments later, Gimpel once again found all his fellow-villagers laughing at him. It hadn't been a dog at all, but only the village thief, Wolf-Lieb, pretending to be one. Another trick.

Everyone thinks Gimpel flees from the dog because he is a wimp who fears everything. But Gimpel's concern is somewhat more subtle than his neighbors suppose, more than a simple gut reaction to a loud animal. Instead, he is being extra cautious about an unlikely but possible scenario (that the dog has rabies and could infect him). Unlike Gimpel, the townspeople of Frampol do not spend much time pondering unlikely situations. While they see his earnest contemplation of the improbable as a sign of stupidity, of a failure to understand how reality actually works, the story suggests that it is in fact an indication of Gimpel's intelligence and his greater alertness to the complexity and unpredictability of life.

Since those first successful tricks, his neighbors in the village have been constantly pranking him. They tell him outlandish stories: the Czar is coming to **Frampol**; the moon has fallen down; a little girl found a treasure behind an outhouse; the rabbi gave birth, prematurely, to a calf. Gimpel believes each of these tales. He reasons that, as it says in the famous book of Jewish ethics *The Wisdom of the Fathers*, "everything is possible." Further, he finds it impossible to reject a story when everyone in Frampol insists that it is true.

That Gimpel believes this list of utterly absurd stories is a useful illustration of just how trustful he is. While he is *conscious of how far-fetched these tales are, he is simply too open-minded to reject them instantly, since, theoretically, "everything is possible." It is noteworthy that these words come from a major work of Jewish ethics,* The Wisdom of the Fathers *(also known as Pirkei Avot). Here, as well as elsewhere in the story, it is made clear that Gimpel's extreme openness to unlikely possibilities, while mocked by the people of Frampol, has much in common with traditional Jewish thought. Meanwhile, Gimpel's sense here that he has no choice but to believe a story when everyone says it is true is a typical instance of his inclination to think well of everyone and of his difficulty accepting that there could be so many mean-spirited, lying people in the town.*

Gimpel explains that he is an orphan and spent his childhood living with his sickly grandfather. When his grandfather died, Gimpel was apprenticed to the village baker. One day, when Gimpel is working in the bakery, a student from the Yeshiva comes in and tells him that the Messiah has finally come. He and other townspeople tell Gimpel that all the dead, including Gimpel's parents, have risen from the grave. They urge him to come see. Gimpel knows that this is almost certainly not true, but he decides he has nothing to lose by taking a look. Of course, when he steps out, the villagers are all there, heckling him as usual.

The fact that Gimpel is an orphan, who has basically never had anyone in town to love or protect him, contributes significantly to his position as a particularly isolated, vulnerable member of the community. Gimpel frequently refers to his orphanhood over the course of the story, and it is clear that he feels his parents' absence as a profound loss. Thus, it is terribly heartless of his neighbors to make believe that the Messiah has come, and that (as is supposed to coincide with the Messiah's arrival), the dead have been restored to life. They are preying on one of Gimpel's deepest sorrows; they are also trivializing one of the most fervently anticipated events in Judaism by acting as if it ever actually happening would be ridiculous. They are, in other words, revealing their own spiritual impoverishment. Gimpel, on the other hand, gives the story a chance in part because of his earnest religious faith, which teaches him to believe that this incredible event really will someday occur (though he is *skeptical that it is happening at this moment). His open-mindedness and kindness are once again on display when he figures that no harm can be done by checking, whereas it might be harmful to his neighbors to accuse them of deceit.*

Gimpel, embarrassed and frustrated by all the mockery, goes to the rabbi for advice. The rabbi declares that the only important thing is to be a good person. He says that it is "better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools." These words comfort Gimpel. On his way out, the Rabbi's daughter tells him that he has forgotten to kiss the wall, and that it is the law to do so after every meeting with the Rabbi. Gimpel has never heard of such a law but dutifully follows her orders. The girl starts wildly laughing.

The rabbi's advice here might be taken as the central moral message of the story. To be foolish, the rabbi declares, is not to be gullible, like Gimpel, but rather to be cruel, deceptive, mean-spirited and to willingly commit the sin of injuring another person. Ironically, moments after this speech, it becomes clear that the rabbi's own daughter, with her lie to Gimpel about the need to kiss the wall on the way out of the religious court, is, by her father's definition, one of the world's evil fools. Her invention of a phony religious law indicates her lack of seriousness about religious things, whereas Gimpel's acceptance of the rule points to his extreme faithfulness, his intense eagerness to do whatever God requires, however arbitrary it might seem. Importantly, while the rabbi's speech serves to strongly condemn the behavior of Gimpel's neighbors, the sentiment it expresses will also be what prevents him from punishing them later in the story (even if they deserve it), since doing so would be replicating the same kind of evil harm that they caused him.


Gimpel decides he has had enough of the village, but just as he is on the point of leaving, his neighbors start insisting that they have the perfect bride for him. The woman they propose, Elka, does not seem to Gimpel to be a good match: he has heard she is sexually promiscuous; that the little boy she lives with, Yechiel, is believed to be her bastard son, by a lover; and also that she has a limp. The villagers protest that she is a virgin, that the child is her younger brother, and that she walks with the limp intentionally, as a bit of innocent playfulness. They tell Gimpel he should be ashamed of himself for calling her a "whore." This makes him feel guilty, and he agrees to pay her a visit. He thinks to himself that he would probably enjoy being a husband.

Naturally, it is great fun for the townspeople to try to convince Gimpel that Elka, a woman widely considered to be among the most tainted and immoral in the town, is actually a pious virgin. Gimpel knows about Elka's reputation and does not want to let them trick him. Yet while he wishes to reject their assertions that she is pure and to demonstrate his awareness of what her history probably has been, his conscience stops him. It would be a terrible crime, Gimpel thinks, to have wrongfully shamed her by insisting on a sexual history he cannot know the truth of—once gain he opts to protect others rather than to disbelieve what he is told.

The villagers are in high spirits as they lead Gimpel to Elka's house. However, they are too afraid to actually go inside with Gimpel, for they fear Elka. She is a tough woman with a "fierce tongue." Gimpel enters and finds Elka standing barefoot by the **washtub** in a "worn hand-me-down gown," doing the laundry. The place "reek[s]." Gimpel asks Elka if there is any truth to the rumors about her and tells her she should be honest with him, as he is an orphan. Elka responds that she is an orphan, too, and would hate to see anyone make trouble for Gimpel. Yet she ignores his original question, informing him instead how much money she expects from him as a dowry (fifty guilders). He protests that the bride, not the groom, is supposed to give a dowry. She ignores this and demands "either a flat yes or no."

It is notable that the townspeople are too terrified of Elka to confront her themselves. Gimpel, by contrast, is brave enough to meet her and indeed will end up showing himself fit enough to endure much worse from her than the unpleasantness his neighbors fear. She does indeed prove quite intimidating here, speaking crudely and brashly to Gimpel about their potential marriage, and deftly controlling the conversation so as to ignore all of his concerns. The interior of Elka's home and her own appearance are suggestive of poverty and uncleanness. The dirtiness of everything, alongside the washtub by which Elka is standing, functions symbolically to indicate that Elka is a spotted, corrupted woman, in need of a spiritual bathing. The washtub is going to become an ongoing symbol in the story, closely tied to the theme of forgiveness, of the potential for a sinful person to become cleansed and redeemed.

Gimpel's neighbors enthusiastically pitch in to raise the money Elka requires. During the wedding ceremony (which takes place during a dysentery epidemic, with the corpses of those who succumbed to the illness being **washed** nearby), Gimpel is humiliated to learn that his bride, whom everybody promised was a virgin, has already had two previous husbands (one died, one she divorced). Yet Gimpel feels it would be inappropriate to desert Elka at this point. So, he goes through with the wedding and ends up heartily enjoying himself at the rest of the festivities. Among the very many wedding presents the new couple receives, there is a crib. This confuses Gimpel, since he and his new bride are not yet expecting a child.

This is the first occasion on which Gimpel discovers that Elka has tricked him. Though he is shocked, he proves his decency by choosing not to humiliate her by leaving her under "the chuppah" (the canopy under which a Jewish bride and groom are married), regardless of the fact that she has already humiliated him. Gimpel's enjoyment of the rest of the wedding and his optimism that he could still have contentment in this marriage are the result of what will be his ongoing inclination to seek love and happiness with Elka, despite her frequent misconduct, rather than resent and punish her. Also of note here is the presence of the corpse-washing hut. This is another occurrence of the imagery of a diseased or contaminated body in need of washing, symbolic of the sinful soul (especially Elka's) in need of purification.

PART 2

Four months after the wedding, Elka gives birth to a baby boy. Gimpel is furious, since he knows that this means she was already pregnant with another man's child when he married her. She protests that the baby really is Gimpel's and was simply born very prematurely, an explanation her husband finds hard to believe. However, after Elka insists that her grandmother also gave birth equally prematurely. When Gimpel goes to the local school-master for advice, the man tells him that Eve, the first woman, gave birth to her two sons immediately after conceiving them with Adam. Gimpel decides to accept Elka's story and love the baby as his own.

Gimpel is not so blind that he is unable to determine that the timing of this baby's birth is pretty much a dead giveaway that he is not the child's father. Yet Elka knows how to exploit her husband's trustfulness and open-mindedness, forcing him to go against his instincts and accept her story. It also makes sense that the school-master's use of the Adam and Eve anecdote helps sway Gimpel, since, with his devout faith, he would have a hard time considering something impossible that also happened in the Hebrew bible. Meanwhile his strong impulse to forgive probably plays an equally important role in persuading him to let Elka off the hook.

Gimpel and his new son grow extremely fond of each other. He also comes to cherish Elka, despite the fact that she is constantly insulting him, using the bitterest and foulest language. He even admits that he regularly steals food from the bakery for his wife, so eager is he to please her. To Gimpel's disappointment, Elka almost always refuses to have intercourse with him, offering a new excuse each time.

During this period, Gimpel blossoms into an extremely loving family man, devoted to his son and wife. He is also amazingly tolerant of Elka's hostile behavior toward him, pardoning and even coming to love that behavior. Meanwhile, his confession that this love has driven him to sinful deeds (frequent theft) is significant: he recognizes that he himself is not always a perfect person. This self-awareness helps him to be merciful to the other imperfect people in his midst. He prays that he "may be forgiven" for the stealing, and accordingly, he feels obligated to extend forgiveness to others for their lapses.

Usually Gimpel sleeps over at the bakery all week, only seeing his family on the weekend. One day, the oven breaks, temporarily making work impossible, and he is excited for the opportunity to go home early. But what he discovers when he arrives home sends him into a rage: Elka is sleeping beside another man! In his anger, Gimpel feels like shouting at the pair; then he realizes that doing so would awaken his young son. Unwilling to disturb his beloved child's peace, he simply returns to the bakery. The next morning, he brings the news of Elka's betrayal to the rabbi. Elka comes to the rabbinical court and protests her innocence, but she is sent away when her boy defecates in his pants, and it is feared that he might end up **soiling** the Ark (the cupboard where the holy Torah scrolls are kept). The rabbi then orders Gimpel to divorce his wife. He is told he must never again set foot in her house, not even to visit the child.

Gimpel's outrage at catching his wife cheating on him seems a fairly natural reaction to such betrayal. Yet it is a sign of Gimpel's unusual thoughtfulness, tenderness, and profound love for his son that he refrains from making a loud scene so as not to upset the innocent, unsuspecting child. It is characteristic of Gimpel to resist the temptation to add to the pain of a painful situation, to go out of his way to make sure no one is wrongfully harmed. However, this moment in the story does test Gimpel's tenderness toward his family. He chooses to expose Elka to the rabbi, and then he also agrees to the rabbi's order to abandon Elka and *the child, punishing them both for the mother's misdeeds. Meanwhile, the detail about the fear of the people in the synagogue that the child might accidentally desecrate the Ark is noteworthy. It once again connects filth or dirtiness with impiousness.*

Gimpel obeys the Rabbi's orders, but soon enough he begins to yearn for his wife and son. He thinks he *should* be angry yet finds he "do[esn't] have it in [him] to be really angry." Furthermore, he starts to wonder if it is possible that he only imagined the man in bed with Elka. After all, she has repeatedly denied the allegations against her whenever questioned by the Rabbi. And all of the villagers have defended her. Gimpel is moved to tears by the idea that he could have wrongly accused her. The following morning, he tells the Rabbi he made a mistake, that Elka is guilty of nothing, and that he would like to reunite with her and the child.

In this passage, Gimpel's anger toward Elka is supplanted by his feelings of love and forgiveness. He is simply not a resentful person at heart and finds it difficult to want *to shun her as he has been commanded to do. Further, even though it seems obvious that Elka is guilty (he saw the man in her bed with his own eyes), his trustfulness makes it very hard for him to confidently dismiss the repeated assertions by Elka and the other townspeople that she is innocent. His seemingly absurd supposition that he might have hallucinated the whole incident is a testament to how fearful Gimpel is that he might ever wrongly think badly of or accuse another person (especially someone he happens to love as much as he loves Elka). As far as he is concerned, it would be far better to be deceived than to do someone such injustice.*

PART 3

For nine months, a council of rabbis discusses whether it would be permissible for Gimpel to return to Elka after accusing her of adultery. In the meantime, Elka gives birth to a daughter. The town mocks Gimpel even more, but Gimpel decides to believe his wife on the logic that if today you don't believe your wife, perhaps tomorrow it will be God whom you don't believe.

Gimpel articulates here his sense of the close relationship between faith in others and faith in God. Gimpel fears that if he gets in the habit of doubting people, it won't be long before he starts to doubt God. Thus, his decision to trust his wife is also a reaffirmation of his religious faith.

Because he is not allowed to go home, Gimpel has an apprentice at the bakery transport food to Elka and the children. Gimpel initially disliked the apprentice, who liked to tease him, but now that they have started spending more time together, Gimpel decides that he may have misjudged the man, who strikes him as being, on the whole, a kind and helpful person.

Gimpel is able to set aside his original negative feelings toward the apprentice upon closer acquaintance, deciding that the man's positive qualities should outweigh any previous unpleasant behavior. This reassessment once again reflects Gimpel's inclination to forgive other people, and to try to find and enjoy the good in them, rather than focus on the bad.

Finally, at the end of the nine months, one of the rabbi's on the council stumbles upon a little-known passage by Maimonides (an important Jewish scholar scholar) which leads him to believe that if Gimpel is absolutely confident he had been mistaken about seeing a man in Elka's bed, it would be acceptable for him to return to her. Gimpel affirms his certainty that he had imagined the whole thing and is overjoyed when the Frampol Rabbi informs him that, in that case, he is welcome to go home. When he finishes his workday, he excitedly races there. He feels like singing—although he decides not to for fear of attracting the attention of dangerous spirits. Once he makes it to the house, he is surprised to realize how hard his heart is pounding. Curiously, he feels like "a criminal."

Most people in Frampol find Gimpel's belief in his wife's innocence ridiculous, as he witnessed her betrayal with his own eyes. Yet the rabbis take Gimpel's scruples seriously. Like Gimpel, they are committed to considering the implications of even the most improbable scenarios, and also like Gimpel, see a genuine ethical dilemma in the possibility of Elka's betrayal having been a hallucination. The fact that there is even a passage by Maimonides, one of the most important Jewish scholars, that supports Gimpel's view of the situation, suggests that rather than being foolish, his concerns are wise, shared by the most respected Jewish thinkers. Meanwhile, Gimpel's ability to declare himself totally confident about his version of the story shows how fully he has willed himself to believe his wife. All the same, the details the story includes about his emotions on the way home paint a mixed picture of his state of mind. He reports being thrilled, and yet he also apparently feels a certain fearfulness or uneasiness, sensing evil spirits in the air. He even experiences a sensation of guilt—an odd thing for him to feel, which may reflect a number of conflicting, probably subconscious anxieties. He is rushing back to his home at an unexpected hour (and without Elka knowing he has been allowed by the rabbis to return), and the last time he came home unexpectedly he "hallucinated" Elka in the act of infidelity. Perhaps somewhere in his conscience he stills feels lingering doubts about Elka and there is even part of him that expects to see the same horrible sight he found last time. He may feel like a criminal because it seems to him like such a wrong thing to think badly of her. Or maybe, strangely enough, if he does find her like that, he would feel like a criminal because of the embarrassment such exposure would cause her, the crime of bringing shame to another person.

When Gimpel gets inside the house, his first stop is to look at the new baby, asleep in her cradle. Even though he has never met her before, he "instantly" adores her, "each tiny bone." His happiness doesn't last long, unfortunately. Once home, Gimpel discovers his wife yet again sleeping beside another man, and this time it is none other than the apprentice.

Gimpel's instant warmth for the child illustrates how generous he is with his heart. It is significant that he speaks of loving "each tiny bone," which seems to speak to his overall commitment to loving the whole *person, whatever flaws they may possess. It is very challenging, however, to Gimpel's generous nature to find Elka again in the act of betraying him, after he has gone to such lengths to trust in her. It only makes it worse that the man with whom she is sleeping is the apprentice, whose more annoying personality traits Gimpel had just recently managed to forgive (also the apprentice's affair with Gimpel's wife puts the apprentice's previous kind words about Elka in a new light). Gimpel's earnest faith is painfully confronted here by an ugly reality that seems to prove these two people totally unworthy of the faith he had so generously extended to them.*

Elka wakes up and is shocked to see Gimpel. But instead of addressing the situation, she tells him that their nanny-goat has been unwell, and he must urgently check on her. Gimpel, who loves the goat dearly, is instantly concerned and dashes to the shed to investigate. Yet after a thorough inspection, Gimpel cannot find anything wrong with the goat, so he decides to go back and confront Elka. When he returns to his wife, the apprentice is gone. Gimpel asks her where the man is, to which Elka replies angrily that she has no idea what he is talking about. She begins screaming and cursing him, insisting that he is out of his mind. Meanwhile, Yechiel springs from behind the oven and strikes Gimpel on the head. Gimpel is bewildered by the whole incident and feels that "something about [him] was deeply wrong." This feeling is only amplified the next day when he confronts the apprentice about sleeping with his wife. The apprentice, like Elka, behaves as if Gimpel is crazy and recommends that he see a doctor.

Elka does not express any shame or apologetic feelings toward Gimpel. Instead, she showcases her considerable manipulative ability, sending Gimpel on a meaningless errand to make time for the apprentice to escape. When he returns and confronts Elka about her behavior, she questions his sanity, cleverly taking advantage of Gimpel's growing distrust of his own senses, his fear that he will confuse the real with the imaginary. The apprentice takes this same approach the following day. Together, they are gas-lighting Gimpel, severely destabilizing his sense of reality. Perhaps Yechiel's blow to Gimpel's is meant to symbolize Elka and the apprentice's assault to his mind.

Confused and embarrassed, Gimpel simply resolves to believe Elka and the apprentice, and, in addition, never again to doubt what he is told. And for the next two decades, this is exactly what he does. He finds new happiness, passionately loving Elka and the several additional children she gives birth to over the years.

Unable to determine what really happened, Gimpel reverts to his impulse to simply believe his wife's story and everything else she says from then on. This allows him to stay with Elka and continue to love her, which is ultimately what he really desires, far more than holding her accountable for any misconduct.

Twenty years after the incident with the apprentice, Elka becomes gravely ill from a breast tumor, much to Gimpel's dismay. He spends whatever is necessary to try to save her, but all of the doctors' efforts come to nothing. On her deathbed, Elka begs her husband for forgiveness so she can "go **clean** to my Maker." She reveals to him that, during their marriage, she had more affairs than she could count, and Gimpel is not the biological father of any of the children. This confession is deeply shocking and painful for Gimpel. Elka dies with a smile on her face, and Gimpel thinks it looks as if she is saying, "I deceived Gimpel. That was the meaning of my brief life."

This moment of revelation is the most painful moment for Gimpel in the whole story. He has managed for twenty years to preserve his faith in his wife only to find out it was totally misplaced. What's worse, the smile on Elka's dead face seems to suggest that she is pleased, or at the very least amused, that she has so thoroughly tricked her husband. Looking at her, it appears to Gimpel that, for Elka, this was the whole meaning of her life, to be cruel and deceitful. Yet there are signs here that Elka does feel remorse. She begs for Gimpel's forgiveness and expresses the wish to somehow cleanse herself of her sins, to "go clean to her maker." While it is unclear how sincere she is, or whether she has any chance at earning the forgiveness she claims to desire, the suggestion that she repents is definitely there. Perhaps the tumor can be taken as symbolic of the evil that has become lodged in her and that she wishes she could remove from herself. And her smile, regardless of how Gimpel perceives it, can be read as indicating her joy at having repented.

PART 4

Not long after Elka's death, Gimpel is napping in the bakery. In a dream, he sees the Spirit of Evil—a demonic creature with "a goatish beard and horn, long-toothed, and with a tail" —who advises him to take revenge on all the people who have deceived him. The spirit suggests that Gimpel use his urine to make the bread he sells to his neighbors in **Frampol**. Gimpel asks whether he would be judged for such a deed in the next life. The Spirit of Evil scoffs and tells him there is no next life, and that, just like the other nonsense Gimpel has fallen for, the afterlife is also a false story. Gimpel then asks if there is a God. God is also a lie, says the Spirit of Evil. Gimpel asks: "What *is* there then?'" The Spirit of Evil replies: "A thick mire."

The story makes it very unambiguous that this visitor is bad news: he is literally called the Spirit of Evil and looks like every classic depiction of the devil. What he has to say confirms his moral corruption. First, he urges Gimpel to behave in a mean-spirited, vindictive manner. What's even worse, the next thing he does is encourage Gimpel to reject God and everything he has been told about the afterlife. He presents to Gimpel a distinctly nihilistic view of the universe as being fundamentally empty and meaningless. Nothing *exists, says the Spirit of Evil, but a "thick mire"—basically a great swamp of darkness and nothingness. As Gimpel listens to the spirit's words, the reader is meant to feel that he is in grave spiritual danger, as to adopt this view of the world would constitute the ultimate moral fall.*

Moved by the Spirit of Evil's words, Gimpel goes ahead and urinates in some nearby dough. He thinks to himself that he has now gotten his revenge for all the times that the people of **Frampol** have shamed him. While the bread is baking, he dozes off again, only to find himself having another intense dream. This time he sees the ghost of his wife, Elka. "What have you done, Gimpel?" she cries. She warns him that she is being punished terribly where she is, "paying" for everything she did. Gimpel is extremely shaken up when he awakens from this vision and feels that he is perilously close to losing his chance at eternal life. Then he suddenly feels as if God has told him what he must do. He goes into the yard and buries the bread in the ground, while his apprentice, who has just arrived, looks on, astonished.

Gimpel has been overwhelmed by the temptation to punish his neighbors. He feels a certain satisfaction when he urinates in the bread, a sense of spite that Gimpel has not displayed before but which is clearly motivated by the hurt he feels at Elka's betrayal. It is therefore both startling and fitting that it is Elka who intervenes and makes Gimpel see that he has embraced evil, that he is imperiling his place in paradise. She makes him see that revenge, even in response to evil, is in itself evil. It is an interesting detail that Gimpel chooses to bury *the soiled bread in the ground. This act is reminiscent of the Jewish custom of burying a damaged Torah scroll. Perhaps this is symbolically connected to the moment when the rabbi fears that Elka's bastard child will accidentally soil the "ark," the cupboard where Torah scrolls are kept. In each case, an object in which people have faith is being preserved from contamination, from both literal physical contamination and the contamination of evil. Finally, it is worth noting how realistic these dreams feel to Gimpel and how directly they influence his subsequent actions. Gimpel, who has been fighting so long to get a good grasp on reality, is starting to embrace the world of dreams, and to take the things that happen there as seriously as "actual" events in the external world.*

After burying the bread, Gimpel returns home and divides his money among the children. He tells them he has seen their mother suffering, which shocks them. Then he takes his coat, boots, and prayer shawl, kisses the *mezuzah* in the doorway, and leaves. He is spotted by some neighbors who inquire where he is going. "Into the world," he says. These are his last moments in **Frampol**.

This is quite a painful moment in the story since Gimpel is saying farewell to the children who he has loved so intensely. Yet his relationship to them probably hasn't felt the same to him since he discovered the children are not really his. It is also notable how casually he mentions to them his encounter with their mother. The boundary between the dream world and the real world is becoming increasingly fluid to him, and he betrays this by his referring to his vision of Elka as if it had taken place in the "real" world—understandably bewildering the children. Gimpel's inclusion of his prayer shawl among the few items he is taking with him speaks to his ongoing commitment to his faith, even as he plans to embark on a new life. Finally, Gimpel's statement that he is going into "the world," has a few different layers of symbolic meaning. First of all, it represents his departure from the provincial life of Frampol and emergence into the wider "world," where he encounters all kinds of things that would have seemed fantastical to his old neighbors, with their scant knowledge of the vast range of human experience. At the same time, this transition from one small world into another much vaster one also symbolizes the transition he will eventually make from the limited world of this life to a much richer, more magnificent existence in the "next" world of the afterlife, a place unfathomable to the earthly mind.

Gimpel becomes a vagabond, wandering from place to place. He spends years like this, growing old in the process. "Good people" help him on the way, he says. Though he continues to encounter people who tell him preposterous stories, he comes to the realization that there is no such thing as a *lie*. "Whatever doesn't happen is dreamed at night," he reflects. "It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year." Gimpel himself becomes an inventor of fantastic tales, using them to entertain the people he meets on his travels. His story-telling makes him especially popular with children.

As Gimpel explores the world, discovering how vast it is and how varied and remarkable the events are that take place in it, he has an epiphany about the distinction between "lies" and the "truth." He comes to the conclusion that the things we identify as lies—because we imagined them or because they strike us as implausible—constitute a significant part of reality. First of all, as Gimpel has learned from his travels, many things that seemed impossible in Frampol really do happen. The world is such a big place and human history has been going on for so long and has such a long future ahead of it, that all kinds of preposterous-seeming things happen, or will happen. Thus, often when we invent what we think is a piece of fiction, it may well be the case that it has actually taken place somewhere; or if it hasn't happened yet, there is a strong chance that it will happen. And even if it never happens, the fact of our dreaming it up in our heads means it has a place in our mental reality, which plays as significant a role in our lives as the reality of the external world. Thus, lies and dreams, rather than distracting from the truth of the real world, actually give a fuller picture of what the real world is. The fact that Gimpel has also become a travelling story-teller, weaving the same kinds of preposterous tales people used to make up to trick and humiliate him, also speaks to how whole-heartedly he has embraced the world of the imagination. But Gimpel makes up his tales not to deceive, but to entertain and enlighten. Finally, it is worth noting that as Gimpel has left Frampol behind and embraced the life of an itinerant traveler, "good people" of the world support and protect him in a way that the people of Frampol, his neighbors, never did. Gimpel finds that as he more fully and clearly embraces the role of the holy fool, the world has in it space for goodness and kindness, too.

One day, a little boy complains that Gimpel has repeated himself, that he has told a story they've already heard. Gimpel realizes this is true and reflects that his dreams repeat themselves, too. Very often, when he sleeps, he finds himself back in **Frampol**, face to face with Elka. She is standing by the **tub**, just like when he met her, only now she looks "radiant" and saintly. She speaks to him in a strange language that he cannot comprehend, but he is happy while he listens. He asks her many questions, and although he is unable to understand her replies, he feels reassured that "all is right" between them. He yearns to be reunited with her, and she tells him to be patient.

While Gimpel has become a much more cosmopolitan person than he once was, a citizen of the world much more than the little village of Frampol, it is notable that his inner life brings him back to Frampol, which shows what a big role it plays in his internal reality even though his external surroundings are now completely different. Meanwhile, his frequent visions of Elka suggest that she may have undergone a significant transformation in the other world. No longer does she appear to him suffocated by her shroud and full of anguish; now she comes in the form of a shining saint, a sort of guardian angel, who brings him solace for his own grief and hope that they will be happy together in the next world. Although it is unclear whether Elka's transfigured state represents her real situation in the afterlife or whether this is simply Gimpel's fantasy, it does seem that Singer is suggesting that she is a changed soul and that through her repentance, as well as her rescue of Gimpel from evil (by persuading him not to through with his revenge plan), she has been granted a place in Paradise. Significantly, she is standing beside the washtub where he first saw her. The washtub is a symbol of the potential for Elka (and other sinners) to be cleansed of evil. While Elka is frequently represented as a dirty or stained person over the course of the story, she is portrayed here as shining and pure. The implication is that her soul has finally become clean.

In his old age, Gimpel is ready, even eager, for death. He has come to the belief that the "world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world." He expects to discover, in the next life, a place where everything is "real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception," where "even Gimpel cannot be deceived."

Gimpel has come to see the world as a huge place where much more is possible than could ever be supposed by the cynics of Frampol, as a place where things that seem like they could only exist in the "imagination" actually often do happen. Yet he has simultaneously come to see the world as itself being, in a sense, imaginary, as a sort of dreamlike shadow of the much vaster, more magnificent afterlife to come. That *world, the next world, Gimpel believes, is the* real *world. Once there, Gimpel believes that the ultimate truth of the world will become plain. No confusion or deception will be possible. Gimpel is not afraid of death because it will mean the end of the limitations of this world shadowy world: he will finally get to know the real truth.*

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