

CC9

SEM IV UNIT II

ENGLISH HONOURS

THE GOOD PERSON OF SZECHWAN

The Good Person of Szechwan is a play written by the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, in collaboration with Margarete Steffin and Ruth Berlau. The play was begun in 1938 but not completed until 1941, while the author was in exile in the United States. It was first performed in 1943 in Switzerland. The play is an example of Brecht's "non-Aristotelian drama", a dramatic form intended to be staged with the methods of epic theatre. The play is a parable set in the Chinese "city of Sichuan".

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Bertolt Brecht was one of the most influential playwrights of the 20th century. His works include *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) with composer Kurt Weill, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1941), *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943), and *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1958). Brecht was born in Augsburg, Bavaria, in 1898, and the two world wars directly affected his life and works. He wrote poetry when he was a student but studied medicine at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. After military service during World War I, he abandoned his medical studies to pursue writing and the theater.

A member of the Independent Social Democratic Party, Brecht wrote theater criticism for a Socialist newspaper from 1919 to 1921. His plays were banned in Germany in the 1930s, and in 1933, he went into exile, first in Denmark and then Finland. He moved to Santa Monica, California, in 1941, hoping to write for Hollywood, but he drew the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Although he managed to deflect accusations of being a Communist, he moved to Switzerland after the hearings. He relocated to East Berlin in 1949 and ran the Berliner Ensemble, a theater company. As a director, he advocated the “alienation effect” in acting—an approach intended to keep the audience emotionally uninvolved in the plights of the characters.

SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The play begins with a monologue by Wong, the water seller. He explains to the audience that he has heard that a few of the highest-ranking gods are on their way to the city of Setzuan. They have heard the people of the world complaining about life, so they are coming to deal with it. He is waiting at the gate of the city to greet them when they arrive. Soon, the three gods appear and Wong recognizes them immediately. He tries to find them a place to stay, but everyone keeps rejecting them. Finally, Shen Te the prostitute agrees. Before they leave the next morning, she asks them how to live a good life and still make ends meet; they have no answers. She complains to them that she cannot afford to live, so after conferring with each other, the gods decide to give her money. They explain they are only paying their "hotel bill," and then they leave.

Scene 1 begins with a monologue by Shen Te, explaining to the audience that after the gods gave her money, she bought a tobacco shop from Mrs. Shin. Mrs. Shin enters and demands that Shen Te give her some rice and money; by the end of the scene, Shen Te has been made to feel guilty and help an entire family in addition to Mrs. Shin. A carpenter enters and demands a hundred silver dollars for the shelves he installed in the shop while Mrs. Shin owned it. When Shen Te asks him to have patience, he starts to take the shelves back. The wife suggests that Shen Te let her "cousin" settle the affair when he arrives, inventing the character of Shen Te's cousin on the spot. Mrs. Mi Tzu, the landlady, demands references from Shen Te, and since Shen Te has none, she goes along with the wife's lie about her cousin who does not exist. She names him Shui Ta, and the wife, husband, and nephew all chime in to support her lie. Scene 2 begins with the arrival of Shui Ta. It is just Shen Te disguised as a man. He fools the family that has been staying in the tobacco shop, even though they know they invented this character. He tells them to leave, and bargains with the carpenter about the price of the shelves and with Mrs. Mi Tzu about the rent she is demanding.

As Scene 3 begins, Yang Sun, described as "a young man in rags," is contemplating hanging himself in a park. He is an unemployed pilot. Shen Te enters and notices that he is about to hang himself with a rope. It starts to rain, and Shen Te takes shelter under the tree with him; they are immediately infatuated with each other. In Scene 3a, Wong is asleep in the sewer pipe where he lives. The gods appear to him and he reports that he has seen Shen Te and that she is still good; she proved it to him when she bought his water even though it was raining. He tells the gods that Shen Te loves someone (presumably Yang Sun) and that she is "doing good deeds all the time." However, it is clear to the gods that her good deeds are

unsustainable. When Wong tells them about her "cousin," Shui Ta, they get angry that he has not paid the carpenter what he owes and say he must never visit Shen Te again.

Scene 4 begins with an altercation between Mr. Shu Fu, the barber, and Wong, who has been trying to sell water to Shu Fu's customers. Shu Fu chases Wong out of his shop and hits his hand with a hot curling iron, burning it badly. Many people witness it, but when Shen Te returns and asks if they will be witnesses for him, they say no. The old woman who owns the carpet shop next door with her husband offers to loan Shen Te two hundred silver dollars so she can pay her rent. Mrs. Yang, Yang Sun's mother, enters and tells Shen Te that her son has been offered a job from the director of the airfield in Peking, but that he needs to pay five hundred silver dollars for it. Shen Te pledges to try to help Yang Sun. In Scene 5, Yang Sun enters and interacts with Shui Ta, having no idea he is actually talking to his lover, Shen Te. He demonstrates that he has no interest in Shen Te's financial well-being or her ability to pay the old couple back; he just wants to get to Peking to fly again. After Shui Ta has agreed to sell the tobacco, Yang Sun reveals that his plan is to betray Shen Te. Mr. Shu Fu enters and tells Shui Ta that he would like to offer Shen Te the run of some cabins on his property and other gifts so that she can continue being kind to everyone. Wong and the policeman enter, and Shui Ta betrays Wong (but tells the truth) in saying that his cousin was not present at the time of the assault with the curling iron. Yang Sun returns and Shu Fu tells him that he and Shen Te are about to announce their engagement. Just then, Shen Te emerges from the back room. When Yang Sun reminds her of how he loves her, she chooses to ignore the horrible things he said about her, and agrees to marry him. In Scene 5a, Shen Te explains to the audience that the old woman had to ask for her two hundred silver dollars back, since the anxiety of having loaned them made her husband ill. She said she would.

Scene 6 is set in "the 'private dining room' on the upper floor of a cheap restaurant in a poor section of town." Shen Te is there with her wedding guests. Yang Sun and Mrs. Yang, his mother, are removed from the crowd and have a secret conversation in which Yang reveals to his mother that Shen Te has said she cannot sell the shop for him because of the loan from the old couple; he doesn't want to marry Shen Te now. Without the rest of the money, Yang Sun will not marry her. They decide to wait another fifteen minutes for Shui Ta. At this point, Shen Te tells Yang Sun that Shui Ta will not bring the three hundred silver dollars, since he told her that Yang Sun bought only one ticket to Peking, revealing that she knows about the conversation he had with her "cousin" the day before. Yang Sun shows her two tickets; he tells her that they will have to leave his mother behind. However, the wedding has been postponed too long and the priest leaves, followed by all the other wedding guests. In Scene

6a, the gods visit Wong in a dream again, and he asks them to intervene in Shen Te's life. They refuse.

As Scene 7 opens, Mrs. Shin and Shen Te are taking the washing off the clothesline. Mr. Shu Fu enters and hands Shen Te a blank check, explaining that he wants to support her so she can continue being good. Shen Te feels her belly and realizes that she is, in fact, pregnant. Wong enters with one of the carpenter's starving children. Shen Te reveals to Wong that she is pregnant, but asks him not to tell Yang Sun. The wife and husband who had previously taken advantage of Shen Te enter dragging tobacco sacks; Shen Te agrees to put them in the back room. Shen Te leaves and returns dressed as Shui Ta. Shui Ta says that all the people may only stay in Shu Fu's cabins if they work for Shen Te. Mrs. Mi Tzu enters and Shui Ta tells her that he has decided not to sell the shop after all. As Shui Ta leads the group of new workers back to Shu Fu's cabins, Mrs. Shin realizes that Shen Te and Shui Ta must be the same person. Scene 7a takes place in Wong's sewer. He tells the gods that he has had a nightmare about Shen Te and asks them to help her, but they refuse, saying that helping Shen Te would only create more problems and would be too much work for them.

Time has passed before the beginning of Scene 8; Mrs. Yang reveals this to the audience, explaining that Shui Ta has given her son new motivation and a job in the tobacco factory. By now, he has been promoted to foreman. More time has passed before Scene 9, and now Shui Ta is quite fat (because Shen Te is pregnant). Mrs. Shin tells him that the old couple has lost the carpet shop because the repayment of the 200 silver dollars came too late. Then she reveals to Shui Ta that she knows he is the same person as Shen Te, and that "he" is pregnant.

Wong enters and reveals that it has been six months since Shen Te has been at home. In front of Yang Sun, he tells Shui Ta that Shen Te is pregnant. Shui Ta leaves and Yang Sun assumes that Shui Ta has sent his cousin away so that Yang Sun would not discover her pregnancy. Shui Ta goes into the back room and sobs loudly; Yang Sun overhears it and thinks that it is Shen Te. This eventually leads to Shui Ta's arrest concerning Shen Te's mysterious disappearance. Scene 9a takes place in Wong's den. The gods visit him there for the last time; they are clearly distressed and fatigued. They set off to find Shen Te to make sure she stays good. She is their only hope.

Chapter 10 is set in a courtroom. The policeman introduces the judges, who are the three gods. After testimonies for and against him, Shui Ta begins to cave in and tells the judges to

clear the courtroom so he can make a confession. When the courtroom is cleared, Shui Ta reveals to the gods that he recognizes them and that he is, in fact, Shen Te. After she has explained why she had to take these measures, the first god chooses to be in denial about it. He says that Shen Te is still good, though the other two gods insist that he did not hear a word she said and that he is ignoring the fact that she committed bad deeds while disguised as Shui Ta. The gods exit, singing "The Trio of the Vanishing Gods on the Cloud" as Shen Te's cries for help interrupt them.

Brecht added the epilogue after the rest of the play; it can be spoken either by Shen Te or by Wong. In the epilogue, it is acknowledged, "A nasty ending was slipped up on us;" the play has ended with no satisfactory conclusion and it must be frustrating to the audience. So the audience is implored to "write the happy ending of the play!" They must figure out for themselves how to reconcile goodness in a world where it apparently cannot exist.

THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN THEMES

Goodness

The theme of "goodness," which seems so simple in the title, is revealed as multi-faceted right from the beginning of the play. While Wong runs off to find a house that will welcome the gods for the night, the gods confer among themselves about how their mission to find a good person is failing. The second god says, "People just aren't religious anymore, let's face the fact. Our mission has failed!" The third god, reading from the resolution they are trying to follow, defines good people as those "living lives worthy of human beings." This definition is vague, since it is unclear what exactly a human being is worth.

The gods reveal a bit more about their definition of "goodness" in Scene 1a, during their interaction with Wong. They ask him to find Shen Te and "show interest in her goodness - for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." This reveals that they recognize how difficult it is to be good without support from others. However, Shen Te provides her own support, in the form of her invented cousin, Shui Ta. When the carpenter asks him to call Shen Te because "she's good," Shui Ta answers, "Certainly. She's ruined."

The old woman is a candidate for a "good" person, and Shen Te recognizes that when she offers to lend her money to pay her rent. Shen Te says, "I wish the gods could have heard what your wife was just saying, Mr. Ma. They're looking for good people who're happy - and helping me makes you happy because you know it was love that got me into difficulties!"

"Goodness" as a theme is addressed in Scenes 6 and 6a by Yang Sun and by the gods, respectively. The Song of St. Nevercome, sung by Yang Sun, reveals that he believes it is futile to try to be "good." He sings sarcastically, "Oh, hooray, hooray! That day goodness will pay!" and describes the day that will never come as when "all men will be good without batting an eye." To him, this day is unachievable. The gods cite goodness as a strength, telling Wong that they cannot intervene in Shen Te's life because "The good man finds his own way here below! The good woman too."

When Shen Te realizes she is pregnant, her perception of goodness changes as well. She sees the carpenter's child digging in the trash and realizes her son will come into this kind of world. She sings and it is unclear whether anyone else hears the song. She sings, "To be good to you, my son / I shall be a tigress to all others / If I have to. / And I shall have to." With this resolve, she will stand up for her own property as Mr. Shui Ta.

When the gods appear to Wong in Scene 9a, they reveal how little goodness they have found in the world. Shen Te is the only person who has "stayed good," and Wong draws attention to the fact that she has not even done that. The third god concludes that, "Good intentions bring people to the brink of the abyss, and good deeds push them over the edge." The gods have discovered that it is impossible to be "good" in accordance with their rulebook. When the courtroom is later empty, Shui Ta reveals that he is just Shen Te, disguised. Shen Te then tells the gods, "Your injunction / To be good and yet to live / Was a thunderbolt." It was impossible for her to be good to others and herself at the same time. The first god refuses to hear that Shen Te did bad things disguised as Shui Ta, instead congratulating her for remaining good. They leave without changing anything; Shen Te still has the same problems and still struggles to be good.

Suspicion of Others

The suspicion of others is a character trait common in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*; it is contrary to the quality of "goodness" for which the gods are searching. Although the unemployed man asks for a free cigarette, after he leaves, the husband says, "I bet he had money on him." When Shui Ta arrives at the beginning of Scene 2, the sister-in-law immediately loses faith in Shen Te, declaring, "So we've been cheated. Where is the little liar?"

Historical Materialism

The Good Woman of Setzuan suggests that a society's morality is determined by its economic systems. This theme is introduced in the prologue. When Shen Te complains to the

gods, "But everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!" the second god responds, "That's not our sphere. We never meddle with economics." However, the first god immediately contradicts him and they decide to give her some money to make it easier for her to be good. This irony blurs the distinction between the morality of "goodness" that the gods are searching for and economics.

In Scenes 7 and 8, Shui Ta creates a new kind of "goodness" for Shen Te to live by, employing those people who had come to expect free handouts from his "cousin." Being forced to work to earn his keep in Shu Fu's cabin seems to transform Yang Sun from "a dissipated good-for-nothing into a model citizen," as his mother puts it.

It is clear in Scene 9 that Shui Ta has let economic success get the best of him. He is called "The Tobacco King of Setzuan," since he has continually expanded the small tobacco shop into a huge factory system. He has turned Shen Te's "goodness," which was a weakness, into economic success, which is a strength. This value is in accordance with the theme of Historical Materialism. The theme of Historical Materialism is evident in Scene 10, when Mr. Shu Fu testifies on behalf of Mr. Shui Ta. He tells the judges, "Mr. Shui Ta is a businessman, my lord. Need I say more?" The first god answers, "Yes." This is because economics make no sense to the gods; it is not their realm.

Patriarchal Capitalism

In order to be a true capitalist capable of getting what she wants, Shen Te must "become" Shui Ta, a male alter ego.

The issue of gender comes to the forefront during Scene 4, when Yang Sun interacts with Shui Ta in a completely different manner than that in which he interacts with Shen Te. Shui Ta defends his cousin (himself) by saying, "She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!" However, Yang Sun answers, "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring."

Scene 4a, which consists of "The Song of Defenselessness," demonstrates the theme of Patriarchal Capitalism. Shen Te sings first with Shui Ta's mask in her hand, then as Shui Ta, with the mask on. The first part of the song is an appeal to the gods, pointing out that "even the gods are defenseless" and asking, "Why don't the gods to the buying and selling"? As Shui Ta, she is more cynical: "You can only help one of your luckless brothers / by trampling down a dozen others."

In Scene 6, when Shen Te is planning to marry Yang Sun, it is revealed that the marriage will not happen without Shui Ta's presence (which is, of course, impossible). This is because Yang Sun believes Shui Ta will sell Shen Te's tobacco shop in order to get Yang Sun the money he needs to fly again. When Shen Te tells him that she has promised the money to the old couple to repay the loan they gave her, Yang Sun retorts, "And since you always do the wrong thing, it's lucky your cousin's coming."

Alienation

Brecht is known for his creation of what he called the "alienation effect," which forced the audience to view a play objectively rather than experiencing its content emotionally. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, the epilogue calls upon the audience to decide for itself how goodness can exist in a world that is inherently not good.

The epilogue, which was added after the Viennese premiere of the play, implores the audience to write their own ending. It acknowledges that the current ending of the play is not quite satisfactory, since nothing is fixed. The gods are unable to accept that their rulebook must be changed in order to make it possible to be good in the world, and they leave in denial of Shen Te's situation. This technique of addressing the audience directly is an example of alienation, which forces the audience to see the play for what it is rather than think of it as an analogy for real life.

Music

Throughout the play, the songs comment on the action. The Swiss composer Huldreich Georg Früh composed the music used in the play's 1943 premiere at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in Switzerland. In recent productions, a score composed by Paul Dessau in 1947-48 is more commonly used. Brecht authorized both scores.

Sometimes the songs are recognized as such by the characters, as in Scene 1 when the grandfather sings "Song of the Smoke." The refrain is, "So what's the use? / See the smoke float free / Into ever colder coldness! / It's the same with me." Scene 1 ends with singing by Shen Te, though it is apparently not noticed by her rude house guests. This song, "The little lifeboat is swiftly sent down. / Too many men too greedily / Hold on to it as they drown," is a commentary on the greediness of the characters around her and how impossible it is to help everyone in need. In Scene 1a, the gods sing to Wong in his dream as a way of chastising him for having no faith in Shen Te.

The problem of the economy is addressed in Wong's song, "The Song of the Water Seller in the Rain." It is ironic to be selling water when it is raining, and it represents the futility of being in a profession that supplies something for which there is no demand. The lyrics, "What are lawns and hedges thinking? / What are fields and forests saying? / "At the cloud's breast we are drinking! / And we've no idea who's paying!" draw attention to the tension between nature, which appreciates what it receives in plenty, and humankind, which does not want that of which there is a surplus.

After telling Yang Sun that he only wanted to kill himself because it is a rainy day, Shen Te sings to the audience, breaking the imaginary fourth wall that exists between characters in a play and the audience watching them. She sings "In our country..." and Yang Sun does not acknowledge it, as if the song is not heard by him but exists only in Shen Te's mind and as a commentary for the audience. It happens again as she describes to him why she will not be a prostitute anymore ("I'm rich now, I said..."), but this time Yang Sun recognizes it and responds to the words.

Scene 4a, which consists of "The Song of Defenselessness," demonstrates the theme of Patriarchal Capitalism. Shen Te sings first with Shui Ta's mask in her hand, then as Shui Ta, with the mask on. The first part of the song is an appeal to the gods, pointing out that "even the gods are defenseless" and asking, "Why don't the gods to the buying and selling"? As Shui Ta, she is more cynical: "You can only help one of your luckless brothers / by trampling down a dozen others."

At the end of Scene 6, Yang Sun sings "The Song of St. Nevercome's Day," about the day people wait for when their lives will change. Of course, it never comes. His dream is to be a pilot, but because he does not have the money to buy the job in Peking, the day when he flies again will never come. The song occurs within the context of the play; he tells Shen Te, "While we're waiting, the bridegroom will sing a little song." However, the scene ends with him, Shen Te, and Mrs. Yang looking at the door, waiting for Shui Ta. Shui Ta will never come.

In Scene 8, music is used as encouragement to work. After he is promoted to foreman, Yang Sun directs the workers to sing to make them work faster. They sing The Song of the Eighth Elephant, which is about how the world values power over hard work. The eighth elephant is lazy but is rewarded even though his seven brothers do all the work; he is the one with tusks,

so they are at a disadvantage. The song concludes, "Seven are no match for one, if the one has a gun!"

In Scene 10, music is used to drown out reason. The gods sing "The Valedictory Hymn" ironically, since there is no victory to be celebrated. They have not fixed anything about Shen Te's life. While they make their final exit, they sing "The Trio of the Vanishing Gods on the Cloud" in which they admit that "If we watch our find too long / It will disappear." They do not want to stay in case Shen Te proves to not be good after all; they would rather be ignorant of that change if it does happen, so they will not have to change their rulebook.

Love as a Weakness

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, love is not equated with goodness. In fact, it is "love," or what is described as such, that most hinders Shen Te. The theme of love as a weakness is introduced in Scene 2 as the policeman describes the problem with Shen Te's lifestyle. "Miss Shen Te lived by selling herself... it is not respectable. Why not? A very deep question. But, in the first place, love - love isn't bought and sold like cigars, Mr. Shui Ta." This is also a reference to the play's original title, "Die Ware Liebe," which translates to "Love as a Commodity."

The theme of love as a weakness is emphasized with regard to Shen Te and Shu Fu in the beginning of Scene 4. Shen Te is walking home from Yang Sun's house and everything seems pleasant to her because she is, as she says, in love: "They say you walk on air when you're in love but it's even better walking on the rough earth, the hard cement." In Scene 4, Yang Sun will reveal to Shui Ta that he plans to abandon Shen Te and take her money. After he leaves, Shui Ta says, "One weakness is enough, and love is the deadliest." Meanwhile, Shu Fu speaks of his love for Shen Te for the first time: "I begin to suspect I am in love with her. She is overpoweringly attractive!"

The issue of gender comes to the forefront during Scene 4, when Yang Sun interacts with Shui Ta in a completely different manner than that in which he interacts with Shen Te, Shui Ta defends his cousin (himself) by saying, "She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!" However, Yang Sun answers, "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring." Moreover, when Shen Te returns and Yang Sun reminds her of how he loves her, she says, "Forgive me, Mr. Shu Fu, I want to go with Mr. Yang Sun." She proves Yang Sun's rude characterization of her correct by ignoring the horrible things he said about her to Shui Ta.

They exit as she sings to the audience, "I don't want to know if he loves me / I want to go with the man I love."

Love is represented as a weakness in Scene 6. After the would-be wedding guests depart, Yang Sun makes a fake announcement, explaining that the ceremony is postponed because Shui Ta has not arrived, but "also because the bride doesn't know what love is." He is making the point to Shen Te that if she loved him, she would sell her shop to support him in his dream of becoming a pilot in Peking. Nevertheless, it is clear to the audience that it is Yang Sun himself who does not know what love is, since he has betrayed Shen Te.

Wong is aware that love is a weakness and he reveals this to the gods in Scene 7a. They ask him how he wants them to help Shen Te, and he suggests, "Well, um, good-will, for instance, might do instead of love?" This is because Shen Te's love for Yang Sun has created so many problems for her. This belief is reaffirmed by Shui Ta as he offers Yang Sun a job "in consideration of my cousin's incomprehensible weakness" for him. It is ironic that Shui Ta is able to recognize this weakness, yet as Shen Te he still acts on it.