Study Materials on The Good Woman of Setzuan by Bertolt Brecht

For SEM VI students, The University of Burdwan,

Paper – CC XIII, Modern European Drama

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Brief Biography of Bertolt Brecht

Born into a middle-class family in Bavaria at the turn of the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht enjoyed a comfortable childhood—though later in life, he claimed to have roots in the peasant class. At the onset of World War I, Brecht avoided conscription into the German Army by enrolling in medical school. His interests soon turned to drama, and in 1918 he wrote his first full-length play, *Baal*, a drama about a degenerate young poet. In the early 1920s, Brecht moved to Munich, where he continued writing plays and he found himself hailed by critics as a harbinger of a new era in the theater. As Brecht's star rose, his first marriage began to deteriorate; he sought the company of his lovers Elisabeth Hauptmann and Helene Weigel in Berlin, where he formed theatrical connections and built artistic collectives in the thriving cultural center. Brecht and his collaborators sought new methods of theater-making which pointed out the hypocrisy of capitalism and the absurdity of art as escapism. ***The Threepenny Opera*** premiered in 1928, becoming a verified hit in Berlin and the impetus for a new experimental era in musicals worldwide. In 1933, when Hitler assumed power, Brecht fled Nazi Germany for Denmark and he spent the subsequent years moving throughout Scandinavia as the Nazis occupied country after country, eventually fleeing to Los Angeles. Despite the tumult of the period, Brecht produced many of his most famous anti-fascist work during it: *Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, and ***The Caucasian Chalk Circle*** are hailed today as emblematic of German *Exilliteratur*, or "literature of the exiled." In the late 1940s, as the Red Scare took hold of America, Brecht found himself blacklisted by Hollywood and on trial for communist sympathies (though an ideological Marxist, Brecht was never a member of the Communist Party). His testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee was controversial, and Brecht returned to Europe the day after testifying. Back in East Berlin in 1949, Brecht established the

famous Berliner Ensemble, but his own individual artistic output slowed. Ongoing political strife in East Berlin distressed and disillusioned Brecht, and in 1956 he died of heart failure. Brecht's artistic contributions to drama remain influential to this day, and the epic theater movement's reverberations can be felt throughout contemporary theater, film, and opera.

Historical Context of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

While *The Good Woman of Setzuan* isn't tied to any particular year, it seems to take place in the early-to-mid-20th century, given the presence of the planes that fly frequently overhead. Brecht began writing *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in 1938 while living in Denmark after fleeing Nazi Germany—but in 1939, when the threat of war seemed greater than ever, Brecht was forced to flee once again to the U.S. Brecht settled in Los Angeles, where he finished work on *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and he composed other seminal plays like *Mother Courage and Her Children* and ***The Caucasian Chalk Circle***. All of Brecht's plays from this period are critical of capitalism, fascism, and indeed humanity itself—his cynical views on humanity's inherent greed and cruelty is reflective of the horrors of World War II and of the Holocaust, events which precipitated the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in 1945. The 1930s and 1940s were largely defined by violence, human rights violations, and genocide on a scale that was unfathomable even in the wake of World War I. *The Good Woman of Setzuan*'s cynical, misanthropic views, then, correlate directly with the shock, horror, and grief that Brecht felt at the time.

Other Books Related to *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

Several of Brecht's other works—including ***The Threepenny Opera*** and *Mother Courage and Her Children*—are also hypercritical of the greed, corruption, and cruelty which capitalism inspires in humanity. Like *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, these plays feature endings which rely on a *deus ex machina* or audience involvement in order to "solve" the complicated moral, social, and ethical questions which the drama has presented. Margaret Atwood's ***The Handmaid's Tale*** is another book that engages with the ways in which capitalism particularly effects women—often by forcing them to develop dual identities, to pursue unhappy relationships or marriages, or

to sacrifices their own needs in order to please and satiate others. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* debuted in Europe in 1943—a time when world literature was influenced by of the horrors of Nazism and the echoes of the Great Depression. George Orwell's classics ***1984*** and ***Animal Farm*** are renowned, as Brecht's works are, for their critique of the status quo and the extant social order, while plays by playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene Ionesco began to dip into the realm of absurdism in order to wrestle with the painful and often disorienting realities of life lived under fascism and antisemitism.

Key Facts about *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

- **Full Title:** *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (from the German *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, often translated literally as *The Good Person of Szechwan*)
- **When Written:** 1938-1941
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles
- **Literary Period:** Modernism; Epic Theater
- **Genre:** Play
- **Setting:** Setzuan, a fictionalized version of the Chinese province of Sichuan
- **Climax:** Shen Te reveals to the trio of gods who first declared her a "good" person that she has, in fact, been living a double life, masquerading as her "bad cousin" Shui Ta in order to better run her tobacco business.
- **Antagonist:** *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is unique in that it sets up almost every minor character as an antagonist to Shen Te and it demonstrates how each person antagonizes her in their own way. Yang Sun, Mrs. Mi Tzu, the carpenter, the members of the family of eight, and even Shen Te's alter ego Shui Ta are all antagonists in their own right.
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

Extra Credit for *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

Play On Words. Brecht originally wanted to title the play that became *The Good Woman of Setzuan* as *Die Ware Liebe*, a phrase which translates in English to “the product love,” “the product that is love,” or “love as a commodity.” The German term for “true love” is *Die wahre Liebe*. Accordingly, Shen Te’s struggles with love are a large part of the play’s action. As she works to be a “good” friend, neighbor, and lover in the face of capitalism and greed, Brecht’s cynical assertion that love can never be more than a commodity becomes clear.

The Good Woman of Setzuan Summary

Wong, a poor **water** seller who works in the impoverished village of Setzuan, meets a trio of shabby, weary travelers at the city gates one day. Wong instantly recognizes them as gods in disguise. When **the first god** tells Wong that their group is in need of a place to spend the night, Wong hurriedly tries to find someone who will shelter the gods for the evening—but they are turned away at every door in town. Eventually, a kind prostitute named **Shen Te** reluctantly agrees to take the gods in. Wong returns to the sewer drain where he lives. In the morning, the gods thank Shen Te for her hospitality and they tell her that she is the only “good human being” they’ve encountered in their travels. Shen Te says she doesn’t believe she’s truly good—and that she might have an easier time being good if she had more money. **The second god** is wary of “meddl[ing] in economics,” but **the third god** insists upon giving Shen Te some money for her troubles. The gods shove over a thousand silver dollars into Shen Te’s hands and they depart, continuing their mission of finding good people on Earth in order to help decide whether the world can “stay as it is” or whether it must be remade entirely.

Shen Te uses the money the gods give her to rent a humble tobacco shop but she soon finds herself in trouble as news of her good fortune spreads throughout town. **Mrs. Shin**, the disgruntled former proprietor of the store, demands Shen Te give her enough rice to feed her family each day. **The carpenter** who installed the shelves in the store for the last owner threatens to take them away unless Shen Te gives him an enormous sum. An **unemployed man** begs for damaged tobacco stock for free. A destitute family of eight—a **husband**, **wife**, **nephew**, **niece**, **brother**, **sister-in-law**, **grandfather**, and **young boy**—who once sheltered Shen Te briefly when she arrived in Setzuan from the provinces begin squatting in the store’s back room.

Mrs. Mi Tzu, the landlady, demands male references who can vouch for Shen Te's finances—as well as six months' rent in advance. Shen Te claims she has a cousin, **Shui Ta**, who is a savvy businessman; she promises that Shui Ta will visit soon to meet with Mrs. Mi Tzu and vouch for Shen Te. As Shen Te's busy first day at the shop concludes, she marvels at how tightly needy people cling to the "lifeboat" of one lucky person's success.

As the gods continually visit Wong in his dreams to check in on whether Shen Te has remained good, things get more and more complicated for Shen Te herself. Shen Te begins disguising herself as Shui Ta in order to make the ruthless business and personal decisions needed to keep her shop afloat. Shen Te, dressed as Shui Ta, kicks the family of eight out during business hours, threatens the carpenter, haggles with Mrs. Mi Tzu, and even puts an ad in the paper for a wealthy husband who can help Shen Te run her business. When Shen Te, however, meets a suicidal, out-of-work, but romantic **pilot** named **Yang Sun** in the park one afternoon, she falls in love with him. Though Yang Sun is poor and cruel, Shen Te loves him too deeply to accept the marriage proposal (and financial assistance) of her wealthy neighbor, a barber named **Shu Fu**. Shen Te's needy neighbors lament that her newfound love is distracting her from her duties to them, while Shen Te, hoping to pull Yang Sun out of financial ruin, becomes indebted to an **old man** and **old woman** who own a nearby carpet shop in an arrangement which threatens her "goodness."

While in disguise as Shui Ta one afternoon, Shen Te learns that Yang Sun is only using her for her money because he needs to bribe someone at an airfield in Peking for a job. Nevertheless, Shen Te chooses to move forward with her wedding to Yang Sun. The wedding is a disaster—and because Yang Sun and **Mrs. Yang**, Yang Sun's mother, insist on waiting for Shui Ta's arrival at the ceremony, the marriage is never confirmed.

Meanwhile, each time the gods visit Wong in his dreams, he tells them of Shen Te's trials—but the gods insist that Shen Te's burdens will only give her greater strength and more goodness. Mrs. Shin soon discovers Shen Te's ruse when Shen Te changes too hurriedly into her disguise as Shui Ta in order to capitalize on a large stock of stolen tobacco which the family of eight brings into her shop. A blank check from Shu Fu allows Shen Te—as Shui Ta—to open up shop in a series of cabins that Shu Fu owns on the outskirts of town. Shen Te, however, has become

pregnant with Yang Sun's illegitimate child. Mrs. Shin warns her that Shu Fu will cease his generosity if he learns of Shen Te's condition.

Shen Te decides to stay in disguise as Shui Ta for months on end. Though the tobacco business flourishes (and Shui Ta's steady weight gain is attributed to his mounting wealth and gluttony), the needy of the village begin missing the sweet, generous Shen Te—and even worrying that Shui Ta has murdered her. When a policeman, at Wong's behest, confronts Shui Ta and demands to know where Shen Te is, Shui Ta cannot answer. He is arrested. Wong warns the gods that if Shen Te has truly vanished, then "all is lost," so the gods reluctantly agree to return to Setzuan to help look for her.

At Shui Ta's trial, the entire village gathers. The gods enter in disguise as a trio of judges to hear the arguments. The wealthy business owners who have had good dealings with Shui Ta leap to his defense, while the needy poor who miss Shen Te and who have only ever been on the receiving end of Shui Ta's cruelty lambast him. As the agitated crowd demands to know why Shen Te left Setzuan, Shui Ta declares that if she had stayed, the villagers would have ripped her to shreds. Shui Ta demands for the courtroom to be cleared because he has a confession to make to the judges.

Alone in the room with the gods, Shen Te drops her disguise and she reveals the truth to them. The gods are shocked. In a sorrowful lament, Shen Te describes how hard it has been to try "to be good and yet to live"—she feels she has literally been torn in two. She hates that bad deeds are rewarded while good ones are punished. The gods, however, insist that Shen Te stop beating herself up—they tell her how happy they are to have found the one good person they encountered in all their travels. Shen Te points out that she failed to be a good woman and instead became a "bad man." Rather than help Shen Te solve her moral crisis, the gods choose to return to their "void" by ascending into the sky on a pink cloud. Shen Te begs the gods to tell her what to do about all of her entanglements; the gods, however, tell her simply to "continue to be good."

In a brief epilogue, one of the actors in the play steps forward to deliver a speech which is not attributed to any specific character. The actor suggests it is up to the audience to find a happy

ending for the play and to decide what will change the world, whether it be new gods or atheism, materialism or ascetism, moral fortitude or increased decadence.

Theme Analysis: The Pursuit of Goodness

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Bertolt Brecht uses the parable of Shen Te, a put-upon woman singled out by the gods as the only good person on Earth, to contemplate whether one can ever truly be plainly, wholly "good." Throughout the play, as Shen Te struggles to be good to others and to herself—and she fails repeatedly—Brecht ultimately shows how the constraints of contemporary society make it impossible for a person to ever be entirely good. Ultimately, Brecht suggests that in a world where true, unimpeachable goodness is impossible, the pursuit of goodness is more important than actually achieving goodness itself.

Early on in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, a trio of gods descends to Earth in search of one good person who can convince them to let the world remain as it is. The gods seem desperate to find this one person—so desperate, in fact, that they choose a kind but imperfect woman, Shen Te, as their paragon of goodness after she lets them shelter in her room for the night. Throughout the rest of the play, Shen Te, burdened by the gods' favor, tries her best to be "good" in the face of increasing pressure and mounting problems. At several important points in the action, Brecht demonstrates moments in which Shen Te falls short of pure, total goodness—but her actions prove that aspiring to be good is just as worthy as achieving the elusive title of "good person."

The first instance in which Shen Te proves that the pursuit of goodness is more important than one's ability to achieve an impossible standard of purity comes early on in the play, after Shen Te hosts the gods in her room for the night. The gods have been turned away at doors throughout Setzuan and the surrounding provinces for many days and nights—when Shen Te lets them in, they believe that they have finally found a "good human being." Shen Te insists she isn't good: she hesitated to put them up at first, after all. She also sells her body as a prostitute for a living, she is covetous of her neighbors' things, and she often lies. The gods, perhaps suggesting that in simply questioning her ability to achieve goodness, Shen Te is putting forth more of an effort than most people do, insist that she is an "unusually good woman" with simple "misgivings" about herself. Though Shen Te doesn't believe she is "good," as she takes stock of the things about herself that she dislikes, she demonstrates her own self-awareness. No one else the gods

have met has admitted to their own shortcomings or expressed any desire to change who they are or how they move through the world. Shen Te is the first person the gods have encountered who has any measure of mindfulness and so they choose to reward this quality in her. This demonstrates that the gods—and likely Brecht himself—all believe that one's desire to chase down the mere potential for goodness is just as important as goodness itself.

The second major instance in which Shen Te proves that aspiration toward goodness is just as important as the pipe dream of achieving goodness itself comes toward the end of the play. After unmasking herself to the gods in the middle of the trial of Shui Ta—an alter ego Shen Te has invented in order to do the "bad" things she needs to do in order to get by in the world as she pursues her promise of goodness—Shen Te attempts to explain to the deities the struggle she has endured as she's tried to follow the gods' "injunction / To be good and yet to live." She claims that trying so hard to be good has, over the last several months, "torn [her] in two," quite literally. Badness is necessary in some circumstances, Shen Te posits in a lengthy speech. She laments that though she "truly wished to be the Angel of the Slums" and take care of all of her needy friends and neighbors, pity became a "thorn in [her] side;" soon, she "became a wolf" when the impossibility of achieving goodness made itself known to her. As Shen Te wrestles with her failure to be good to her neighbors while also maintaining allegiance to herself, she reveals the argument at the heart of the play. Brecht doesn't necessarily believe that there is even one truly good person on Earth—there are only those who strive to be good and those who do not. Shen Te is in the former camp. Despite her failures—and despite her reliance on the alter ego of Shui Ta to get things done—the gods recognize Shen Te as a good woman who has done many good deeds. Shen Te reminds them that she's also been a bad man who's done many bad things—but the gods declare that the self-critical Shen Te is simply "confused." The gods give Shen Te their permission to be *mostly* good and they even suggest she continue using Shui Tai "once a month" or so when being the "good woman of Setzuan" becomes too much for her to bear. Thus, Brecht demonstrates his belief that while complete and total goodness is an impossibility, those who struggle to do good and be good should still be rewarded.

Though Brecht is pessimistic about humanity's collective potential to achieve goodness, he suggests that striving for this ideal is what's important. In the play's final moments, as an actor (who isn't assigned to a specific character) entreats the audience to find a "happy ending" to the

work, Brecht suggests that it is the burden and the purpose of humanity to work together toward collective solutions. Even if total purity is unattainable, the quest for goodness is nonetheless of vital importance to humanity's continued existence.

Theme Analysis: Greed, Capitalism, and Corruption

In the impoverished village of Setzuan, thievery and bribery abound. The village is ruled by money, much like the wider world beyond it. Bertolt Brecht, a playwright whose poems, plays, and operas all wrestle with the role of capitalism and greed in contemporary society, uses *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to suggest that money, capitalism, and corruption are significant factors as to why immorality is so pervasive. Capitalist society, Brecht argues, is an environment in which one can only advance by taking advantage of others. Bad deeds are rewarded and good ones are punished—and money and capital, Brecht suggests, is at the root of humanity's inability to "refuse to be bad."

Many of Brecht's other plays examine the role of greed, capitalism, and corruption—but in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Brecht makes one of his plainest and yet most profoundly frustrated statements about the fundamental impossibility of reconciling humanity's desire to act morally with the impossibility of being a truly good friend, neighbor, lover, or employer under the burdensome weight of capitalism. At the start of the play, **Shen Te** is working as a prostitute in order to survive. She knows that selling her body is immoral—but she is also aware that there is no other way for her to make ends meet. Still, the gods overlook Shen Te's profession and they declare her an "unusually good woman." They reward her for her decision to take them in when no one else in town would by paying her a large sum of money—a sum that will allow her to stop working as a prostitute and open up a shop of her own. Shen Te believes that if she becomes a business owner, she will be earning money in a more respectable way—but she quickly discovers that there is no ethical way of making money under capitalism, a system which requires the exploitation of the poor in order to feed the greed of the rich. As Shen Te opens up her tobacco shop, she soon finds that her relative financial privilege makes her a beacon for her

needy neighbors who seek food, shelter, and favors from her. As Shen Te works to keep her neighbors afloat while simultaneously fending off financial demands from her landlady **Mrs. Mi Tzu**, a **carpenter**, and an **unemployed man**, Shen Te finds herself lamenting that when a lifeboat comes for one person, others "greedily / Hold onto it [even] as they drown." Brecht uses Shen Te's early struggles with money, greed, and corruption to show that in spite of her struggle to be good to her neighbors, kindness and generosity are always taken advantage of. Everyone around Shen Te is struggling—and in a world where the wealthy few hoard monetary resources while the working class suffers, Shen Te must choose whether to protect her own interests and betray her neighbors or be pulled back into poverty and despair.

Brecht deepens Shen Te's struggle as Shen Te creates an alter ego—**Shui Ta**, a "cousin" from a faraway province—to do the ruthless deal-brokering that Shen Te herself feels incapable of doing as a woman who is supposed to be generous and blandly, blithely "good" above all else. As Shui Ta becomes a necessary presence in Shen Te's life more and more often, Brecht charts Shen Te's descent into greed and the pursuit of capitalistic, patriarchal power. Shui Ta himself admits that "one can only help one of [one's] luckless brothers / By trampling down a dozen others," yet he continues amassing capital in the forms of wealth, property, and social control over his employees and neighbors as he expands Shen Te's humble tobacco shop into a large factory conglomerate with dozens of employees. Soon, Shen Te comes to see that her "bad cousin" represents all the social, economic, and political corruption that makes the world such a miserable place to live in for people like herself and her neighbors—toward the end of the play, there are even rumors that Shui Ta has bought a seat as a local Justice of the Peace. Shui Ta is a ruthless boss, a swindler, and a manipulator: all of the things that Shen Te knows are necessary for those who wish to succeed materially under capitalism, but all of the things that she as a "good" woman cannot herself embody. Shui Ta, then, becomes a tool through which Brecht can indict how society materially rewards the deeds of crooked bosses and landlords while ignoring the individuals who toil under terrible conditions.

In Shen Te's climactic, soulful lament to the gods, she decries the fact that pity and empathy became a "thorn in [her] side" when it came time to choose between the good deeds for which she was punished with poverty and the bad deeds for which she was rewarded with wealth and power. By charting Shen Te's struggle to be "good"—and her ultimate failure to do so—Brecht

suggests that even those who work hard to rebel against the impulse to be greedy, materialistic, and self-serving often end up failing to remain moral in the face of capitalism's intense pressures. Brecht's sympathy (and indeed empathy) for Shen Te is undeniable—he, too, seeks answers to how humanity can possibly "help the lost [without becoming] lost ourselves." In the end, Brecht characters aren't given a suitable answer—yet Brecht does not end the play without reminding his audience that "moral rearmament" in the face of capitalism, greed, corruption, and materialism is perhaps the only way "to help good men arrive at happy ends."

Theme Analysis: Women and Dual Identities

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, **Shen Te**—the titular "good woman"—is dismayed to find that her neighbors, her friends, and even her lover refuse to listen to her, heed her wishes, or repay the many kindnesses she does for each of them. In order to preserve her "goodness" while accomplishing the difficult things she needs to do to survive in a capitalistic society, Shen Te creates an alter ego: her "cousin," **Shui Ta**. Shui Ta is imposing, practical, and unapologetic where Shen Te is meek and self-denying. Though Shen Te hates "being" Shui Ta, she knows that she needs her "bad cousin" in order to survive. Through the dual character of Shen Te and Shui Ta, Brecht argues that in a world where women's voices are ignored and their agency is denied, women must create dual identities to make themselves heard. Brecht metaphorically uses Shui Ta to show the extremes to which women must go in order to accomplish the things they need to. As such, he ultimately suggests that while not every woman creates an alter ego as different or as masculine as Shui Ta, all women must engage in some measure of the artifice, self-denial, and masquerade that goes into creating another identity at some point in their lives.

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Brecht portrays Shen Te as a woman so frustrated with the social obligation to be good (which her femininity has thrust upon her) that she creates another person—a man—whose life she can inhabit in order to escape her own. While Brecht doesn't suggest that all women must do what Shen Te does in order to get by, he does use her story as a metaphor for the ways in which society underestimates and overburdens women—and the great lengths to which all women, at one point or another in their personal or professional lives, must go in order to simply make their voices heard. Shen Te "creates" Shui Ta early on in the play when **Mrs. Mi Tzu**, the landlady of the humble tobacco shop Shen Te wishes to rent, demands a series of male references. Shen Te claims that a cousin of hers who lives far away can act as a

reference. When Mrs. Mi Tzu demands to meet Shui Ta, Shen Te disguises herself as the imposing cousin and he (Shen Te disguised as Shui Ta) "arrives" at the shop one morning to kick out the family who has been squatting there, to negotiate with a nasty and greedy **carpenter** who has been trying to extort money from Shen Te, and to get Mrs. Mi Tzu off Shen Te's back. Shui Ta is a helpful presence at first—he is able to say things that Shen Te would feel uncomfortable saying and that she wouldn't be taken seriously for demanding even if she managed to get the words out. As Shen Te comes to rely on Shui Ta more and more often, however, she begins "trampling down […] others" in pursuit of the greater good a bit too heavily. Shui Ta makes financial deals on Shen Te's behalf, seeks out information about her disloyal lover **Yang Sun** for her, and transforms the humble tobacco shop into a massive factory operated out of the cabins behind the property of **Shu Fu** (a local barber). Then, when Shen Te realizes she is pregnant out of wedlock by the scoundrel Yang Sun, she begins living full-time as Shui Ta to hide her shame from her fellow villagers. When Shen Te gains weight from the pregnancy, Shen Te knows the villagers will attribute Shui Ta's new heft to the wealth and comfort that comes from his successful enterprise.

Throughout all of Shui Ta's exploits, Brecht focuses on how Shen Te uses Shui Ta to perform financial negotiations; have difficult conversations with other men; and consolidate property, wealth, and social capital. Brecht uses Shen Te's story as a metaphor to show how society bars women from participating in certain spheres of life—or how, even when society begrudgingly allows women into traditionally male professions and spaces, others fail to take them seriously or compensate them fairly. As Shen Te begins relying on the presence of Shui Ta more and more often (with only **Mrs. Shin**, the previous owner of the tobacco shop, as a confidant), she realizes that she is creating an increasingly difficult situation for herself. Yet Shen Te is unable or unwilling to relinquish the sense of social dominance that the Shui Ta persona enables her to feel for the first time in her life. Shen Te both loathes and envies Shui Ta—even as she recognizes that he has become an inextricable part of herself. Brecht also suggests that Shen Te creates Shui Ta to do the "bad" things she must do to get by—for much of the play, he frames Shui Ta as a necessary evil, a tool through which Shen Te can accomplish things that are forbidden to women. At a certain point, however, Shui Ta becomes a way for Shen Te to unleash her inner frustrations and the "bad" parts of her own personality. In other words, Shui Ta is not just a vessel for the deeds Shen Te is afraid to do as a woman, but for the things she is afraid to say or feel as herself.

Ultimately, as Shen Te's journey unfolds, Brecht expresses empathy for the unfair pressures that the play's corrupt, sexist society piles upon women. Shen Te's entire story can be viewed as a metaphor for these pressures: after a group of authorities charge a woman with the dual task of being good while making something of herself, she is left to crumble under these demands until she creates a version of herself who can handle the contradictory directives thrust upon her. In the end, Brecht suggests that all women must contend with a similar struggle at some point in their lives—and he doesn't fault them for creating dual identities which allow them to cope.

Theme Analysis: Humanity vs. The Divine

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, a trio of unnamed gods comes down to Earth in search of one good person. When they arrive in Setzuan, they have already scavenged the world for one person living a life "worthy of human beings." The kind, accommodating **Shen Te** lets the gods in—and, having encountered goodness, they feel their mission is worth continuing. As the play unfolds, the gods continue their travels in search of more good people—but they also appear continually in the dreams of **Wong**, the poor **water** seller, in order to receive reports from the man as to how Shen Te is holding up and whether she has remained good. As the human world and the divine world overlap in this way, Brecht portrays the gods as pessimistic, bumbling figures who are just as lost and as hopeless as humans are. Ultimately, Brecht bleakly suggests that the human world is a place so full of "misery, vulgarity, and waste" that even a trio of gods would, upon visiting, eventually abandon humanity to its vices rather than waste their time intervening in the face of a lost cause.

Throughout the play, Brecht uses the gods' point of view to show the decayed state of the world—and he uses their central question of whether they must remake the world in order access the larger argument of whether or not humanity is even worth investing time, energy, and effort into. The trio of gods provide a kind of chorus as they dip in and out of the play's action—often appearing only in Wong's dreams—throughout the play. The gods' stated mission is to decide whether to let the earth remain as it is or do something to change it—they must make this decision by finding enough people who are "living lives worthy of human beings." In other words, they must locate the world's good people. The implication, then, is that if the gods can't

find enough "good people," they will have to eradicate humanity—this notion hovers over the entirety of the play and it adds to the conundrum that Shen Te, the play's central character, faces each day as she struggles to uphold the mantle of "goodness" which the gods tell her she possesses after she takes them in for the night. Early on in the gods' mission, they feel a sense of desperation to locate the world's good people, and Brecht uses the divine's invented rules to make a commentary upon the human world. The gods are anxious to find a good person—they feel that if they don't, their intervention will become necessary and they will have proof that their "rules" have failed humanity. The gods pin their hopes on Shen Te—if she succeeds and continues to be "good," they will be able to depart Earth and rest assured that their demands upon humanity are fair and sufficient. Their investment in the human race is palpable in the early parts of the play, even as their confidence in humanity's goodness seems shaky at best.

The gods appear in throughout the play to Wong, the water seller, by inserting themselves into his dreams. The gods' appearances to Wong suggest that they are continually evaluating humanity's worth. Wong is not one of the "good" people of the world, yet the gods choose him to be their go-between. For the majority of the play, the gods' reliance upon Wong to deliver reports of how Shen Te is doing—and thus whether there is any goodness left on Earth after all—shows that they are still invested in humanity even as their search for good people elsewhere falters. The gods are repeatedly turned away as they travel the world, and their investment in humanity wanes even as their hopes for Shen Te become increasingly desperate.

Toward the end of the play, after Shen Te reveals that she has been living as her alter ego (the ruthless businessman **Shui Ta**), Shen Te attempts to engage the gods in a discourse about the cruelty of life on Earth and the impossibility of being good. Shen Te entreats the gods to punish her for her badness, or to at least give her answers. In response, the gods declare that Shen Te is good in spite of her own misgivings about herself. Thus, they declare that the world can remain the same after all and then they swiftly pack up and leave, calling upon a giant pink cloud to bear them back to the heavens. The gods ignore Shen Te's impassioned cries for help and guidance, instead doling out platitudes about her goodness and hollow wishes that her courage will not ever fail her. At the end of the play, the gods see that Shen Te has failed to be truly good after all—and what's worse, she has discovered the secret and terrible truth of humanity: no one can "be good and yet […] live [for themselves]" at once. Shen Te wants genuine answers to the

conundrum of human life—but the gods, overwhelmed by Shen Te's honesty, sadness, and genuine internal conflict, choose instead to divest themselves of their involvement in humanity. They decide collectively that they've seen enough and so they quickly wash their hands of their failed experiment.

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Brecht forces his audience to reckon directly with the destruction that humanity has wrought upon the earth. By having the gods abscond at the end of the play, stating that they'd rather "go back to [their] void" than spend another moment on Earth, Brecht indicts both the human world and the divine one, suggesting that both parties are too lazy, frightened, and self-concerned to improve upon the earth.

Shen Te

Shen Te is the play's protagonist. A poor but kind prostitute, she takes in a trio of gods for the night after her other neighbors refuse them shelter. Shen Te thus becomes the gods' way of proving that there are still good people on Earth—and yet the burdens she begins to accrue as she accepts the gods' favor test the possibility of ever attaining true goodness. Shen Te is a meek woman who does her best to be a dutiful citizen. But after the gods give her a large sum for taking them in, Shen Te uses the silver to acquire a tobacco shop and she soon finds herself torn between her obligation to share her wealth and her desire to pursue success and happiness for herself. To cope with her mounting struggles, Shen Te creates an alter ego named Shui Ta, a man she claims is her cousin. Shen Te dresses up as Shui Ta in order to solve the financial and personal problems that have been heaped on her plate since opening the tobacco shop: she kicks out her lodgers, negotiates with her debtors, and even "spies" on her cruel lover, the good-for-nothing Yang Sun. Through Shui Ta, Shen Te finds herself able to maintain her "good" reputation while still accomplishing the ruthless deals and loathsome negotiations necessary to stay afloat in a capitalist society. By the end of the play, however, Shen Te is exhausted by her own charade. She reveals the truth of her schemes to the gods—only to find that they are unwilling to have their opinion of the last "good" woman on Earth altered. As the gods ascend to heaven, Shen Te calls out to them for help, begging them to give her advice on how to be good while also living life for herself. Shen Te's screams go unanswered, however, and she's left alone. Through the parable of Shen Te, Brecht explores the pitfalls of capitalism, the constraints

of femininity, and the fluctuations in identity and morality that can occur when an ordinary woman feels crushed under pressure to fulfill society's expectations.

Shui Ta

Shui Ta is Shen Te's alter ego. As Shen Te's "bad cousin," Shui Ta is an imposing and ruthless man whose business savvy and unapologetic self-interest stand in contrast to the meek and sweet Shen Te's generosity and hospitality. Shen Te creates the persona of Shui Ta in a moment of desperation as an answer to her landlady, Mrs. Mi Tzu's, inquiry about Shen Te's financial references. Soon, Shen Te sees an opportunity to "prove [her]self useful" by embodying a "strong backer" who can come not just to her aid, but to the aid of all her needy neighbors. Though Shen Te admits that she fears she will only be able to help her neighbors by denying others, she continues to appear at the tobacco shop in disguise as Shui Ta. Dressed as Shui Ta, she wards off those who seek to extort money from her or take advantage of her good fortune and she has man-to-man conversations with her distant, cruel lover, Yang Sun. Though Shui Ta is originally created as a last resort, Shen Te comes to rely on Shui Ta's presence more and more often—especially when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and she's desperate for a way to hide her condition from the world. Shui Ta's ruthlessness becomes legendary as he steals, bribes, and intimidates the needy neighbors he was created to help and he becomes the owner of a large tobacco conglomerate. When Shui Ta is arrested because the other villagers begin to suspect that he murdered the "missing" Shen Te, Shen Te knows her ruse has gone far enough. She reveals the truth to the "judges" of her case—the gods who first declared her the "good woman of Setzuan," who have returned to the village in disguise—but she finds that they do not fault her for becoming a "wolf" when tempted by money and power. The alias of Shui Ta is not just a way for Shen Te to take hold of her fate—soon, he becomes an outlet through which she can express her frustrations, desires, and pent-up rages at the hostility of the world; the burdens of capitalism; and the social superiority of men.

Yang Sun

Yang Sun is a depressed, out-of-work man who longs to be a pilot at an airfield in Peking. Shen Te meets Yang Sun on a rainy day just as he is about to commit suicide by hanging himself. She rescues him and she convinces him to keep living—soon, the two embark on an affair, even though Shen Te knows that she should be seeking a wealthy husband who can afford to help her keep her tobacco shop. Yang Sun, however, is selfish and cruel—he doesn't really love Shen Te and he seeks only to acquire the marginal wealth she's managed to accrue for himself in order to bribe his way into a flying job. Yang Sun is conniving and detestable, yet Shen Te cannot contain or control her love for him. Shen Te's ill-advised devotion to Yang Sun is representative of the many challenges and constraints women face each day under capitalism. Ultimately, her struggle in giving up her feelings for him calls into question the nature of the conflicting desires that women are often forced to navigate to get by in a greedy, patriarchal world.

Shu Fu

Shu Fu is a wealthy barber whose shop is near Shen Te's. Shu Fu is a respected businessman who falls in love with Shen Te in spite of her involvement with the scoundrel Yang Sun. Shu Fu wants to marry Shen Te because of how good, kind, and charitable she is—even though he knows that she is hung up on another lover. Shen Te rejects Shu Fu's offers of kindness, loyalty, and financial support but she instead absconds with Yang Sun, leaving Shu Fu heartbroken. Nevertheless, Shu Fu remains becomes committed to helping Shen Te's business flourish. He offers her generous loans, even writing her a blank check when she falls into dire straits, and he offers Shui Ta the use of his property, a set of cabins behind a nearby field. Shen Te's inability to accept Shu Fu's offers of love and devotion—even as she willingly accepts his cash—demonstrates the dual identities and emotional sacrifices women must make to stay afloat in a greedy, capitalist, patriarchal world.

Wong

Wong is a poor water seller in Setzuan. Wong acts as a sort of narrator or chorus for much of the action—despite his lowly profession, he is the first person to recognize the disguised trio of gods who appear in Setzuan for the deities they are and he offers to help them find shelter. The gods don't see Wong as the "good" person they've been searching for but they nonetheless choose to appear to him in visions throughout the play as they check in on Shen Te, whom they do believe

is inherently good. Wong is a man who has capitalized on a natural resource: when there is a drought and his fellow men are suffering, he earns a profit by selling them water. When there are rains and floods and no one is thirsty, Wong himself is suffering. Wong's dilemma is symbolic of the larger struggles of life under capitalism—one's success in terms of material wealth, Brecht suggests, always comes at the expense of another.

The First God

The first god is the de facto leader of a trio of gods who come down to Earth to determine whether there are any truly good people left in the world. The first god knows that if no good people can be found, the earth will need to be remade and the rules of humanity reconfigured. Such measures would constitute an effort that none of the gods particularly wants to make. The first god is the most communicative and decisive of the trio—and the most determined (or even desperate) to find the world's remaining "good" people. The first god is anxious to push aside any information which threatens Shen Te's goodness—they are unwilling to accept that it is impossible for humans to attain true goodness. When confronted with Shen Te's morally ambiguous actions at the end, the first god leads the other two in a swift ascent back to heaven rather than face down the complicated reality of life on Earth.

The Third God

The third god is one of the trio of gods who come down to Earth to determine whether there are any truly good people left in the world. Whereas the first god is often singular focused on moving the mission forward and the second god is quick to blame humanity for their own problems, the third god is seemingly the most empathetic toward humans and the quickest to suggest lending a helping hand to the mortals of Earth. The third god is a bit more nervous and insecure than their compatriots but is nonetheless committed to finding goodness in humanity.

Symbols in the Drama

Water, and the way in which it's commodified, represents the moral conundrum of the capitalist system. Wong, a water seller, functions as a kind of narrator or observer throughout the play's action. At the start of the play's prologue, Wong addresses the audience directly and he proceeds

to describe the central contradiction or dilemma of his profession: it is a conflict at once practical, moral, and ideological. As a water seller, the impoverished Wong has resorted to commodifying a natural resource to make his living under capitalism. When water is scarce, he must travel far and work hard but is able to make a lot of money—when it rains, however, he has no source of income (even though his fellow citizens are able to slake their thirst for free.) This central dilemma—that Wong must profit off of his neighbors' suffering in order to survive himself—provides a metaphorical critique of the capitalist systems that force people to work against one another to simply get by. In this way, water-selling is a small-scale representation of capitalism at large, which Brecht believes is founded upon greed and immorality.

Like the symbol of water, planes and flying represent the ways in which capitalism controls nearly every element of human society. Whereas Brecht uses the symbol of water to point out how humans engage in the commodification of everything material, even natural resources, for personal gain, he uses the symbol of planes and flying to demonstrate how capitalism often makes the dreams of the working class impossible for the individuals who belong to it to ever achieve. Yang Sun dreams of being a pilot and he's willing to do nearly anything to achieve his goals—even if it means he has to bribe and cheat his way into a flying gig or betray his kind and devoted lover, Shen Te, to get to the nearest airfield. Shen Te, too, begins paying closer attention to the planes that fly overhead over the course of her involvement with Yang Sun. While Yang Sun longs for flight, Shen Te longs for Yang Sun's love—but love, too, is a commodity few can afford under the restrictive and prohibitive chains of capitalism. When planes are heard overhead or when dreams of flight are mentioned throughout the play, Brecht is signaling the physical awe felt by his characters—and indeed the dread as well—at how far away they are, physically and ideologically, from their greatest dreams.

Critical Reading

Using The Good Woman of Setzuan to Illuminate The Communist Manifesto

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Anyone teaching The Communist Manifesto in a first-year core or foundation course will encounter students who bring strongly held assumptions that create formidable barriers to engaging with the text. For example, many students will assume they already know what Marxist communism is: it looks exactly like the Stalinist Soviet Union. They often assume that communism means that everything is owned in common, no one has any personal belongings, and everyone earns the same wage regardless of effort. These assumptions may be dispelled by a close look at a few key passages in the Manifesto, such as the distinction between personal property and private property, or the definition of democracy. A brief discussion of the regulations on ownership that students already accept in the regulated capitalist systems of the West will also help. The most challenging assumption cannot be so easily dispelled by a closer reading, however, because it arises from the text itself. That is the assumption that in describing capitalism, Marx and Engels are attributing the evils of capitalism to the greed of the bourgeoisie, that is, to individual morality, rather than to material causes, to the system of capitalism itself. If the Manifesto were being read in an upper-level course on modern European history, politics, or philosophy, comparative political and philosophical systems would make clear the differences among materialist and idealist understandings of history. Foundation courses, however, where the emphasis is on developing critical reading, writing, and analysis, must provide context solely through the sequence of core texts for the course. To help students understand its materialism, then, I propose that the Manifesto be followed by a reading of Ber

tolt Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan (more accurately translated as The Good Person of Setzuan). Not only does the play offer students an accessible, engaging, and provocative text in itself; it also invites them, in a very different way from the Manifesto, to think through the implications of a materialist explanation of history. There is much in the Manifesto to encourage students to take a good-versusevil approach to the class antagonisms Marx and Engels describe. The language of the Manifesto deliberately appeals to moral sentiments: oppressor and oppressed, exploitation of the many by the few, workers as slaves of the bourgeoisie, the existence of private property for the bourgeois few being due solely to its nonexistence for the proletarian many. Surely, this suggests a morally right and wrong side to be on: the bourgeois are bad and the proletarians are good. And since most students identify with property owners, Marx and Engels are saying they are bad. Defenses naturally go up. This rhetorical appeal to right and wrong, however, obscures the materialist explanation, at the heart of the Manifesto, for how

things came to be the way they are and why they are bound to change. For Marx at this period, "the appeal to rights may help unite the proletariat as a class but rights have no moral significance" (Kain 98).1 Morality is ideology and illusion, an epiphenomena that results from the relations of production: "man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life" (Marx and Engels 33, sec. 2). Freedom will result from communism not because individuals will be self-determining and therefore capable of moral choices, but because through cooperative, conscious control of production and distribution, they will be able to control the social processes whose laws had hitherto dominated them. "For Marx, freedom can only mean controlling these external constraints, not eliminating them entirely" (Kain 119). Material circumstances force the proletariat to become conscious of these systems and to take control. Theirs will be not a moral victory but the victory of historical material forces. It will help to emphasize that the bourgeoisie as described in the Manifesto are as mystified and as subject to the workings of capitalism as are the proletarians. "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (17, sec. 1). Driven by competition, this revolutionizing of production and the periodic crises of overproduction force the bourgeoisie to become ruthless competitors or risk falling into the proletariat. They act ruthlessly not because they choose to be egotistical rather than selfless, but out of historical necessity. For the same reason, the victorious proletarians under communism will apparently act selflessly, but the principle that will motivate the individual then "will no more be the 'principle of love' or devotion than it will be egoism" (German Ideology, qtd. in Kain 103). Whereas Marx and Engels offer an historical view of the struggle between classes, in The Good Woman of Setzuan Brecht dramatizes a similar struggle taking place not between classes but within a single individual. Shen Te, an extremely compassionate but destitute prostitute, in return for giving three wandering gods shelter for the night, is given a thousand silver dollars that she uses to buy a small tobacco shop.

She hopes becoming a shopkeeper will enable her to do more good, and the play is constructed around episodes manifesting her goodness—to her neighbors, to her lover, and to her expected child. Her goodness, however, forces her into successively more difficult financial troubles. She quickly feels compelled, in spite of herself, to put on the mask of a tough businessman, Shui Ta,

whom she calls her “cousin.” Whereas at first she thinks this mask a one-time expedient necessitated by the pressures of a competitive business environment and her own generosity, Shen Te finds herself pressing Shui Ta into service for appearances of ever longer duration, and his actions become, however reluctantly for Shen Te, increasingly unsavory. At the end, seven months pregnant and no longer able hide behind the mask of Shui Ta (for psychological as well physical reasons), Shen Te reveals herself to the gods and begs them to help her. The gods, however, cannot admit that she needs their intervention to be good. They have been counting on Shen Te, in all their wanderings the only good person they have been able to find, as their answer to the atheists’ claim that “The world must be changed because no one can be good and stay good” (7: Prologue). They refuse to accept that Shen Te must have Shui Ta to be bad so that she, Shen Te, can remain good. Seemingly helpless to intervene, the gods ascend from the stage in a reverse deus ex machina, abandoning Shen Te and her cries for help. The epilogue asks the audience, “How could a better ending be arranged?/Could one change people? Can the world be changed?/ . . . It is for you to find a way, my friends” (Brecht 107). With this play Brecht clearly has intended a Marxist lesson: In Shen Te’s world, the gods’ “book of rules” and its accompanying system of rewards and punishments are completely inadequate to support her love and compassion. The fact that the first object of her compassion is a destitute family who used to have a tobacco shop themselves and who are now greedy, ungrateful beggars and thieves suggests what Shen Te is likely to become, a bourgeois fallen back into the proletariat and scrambling for survival. It is this family, in fact, who suggests the ruse of bringing in a “cousin” who can deal “rationally,” that is, without compassion or moral compunction, with creditors and hangers on. In his first brief appearance, Shui Ta’s actions do come as a relief—he drives a very hard bargain with a tradesman; he expels the lazy, greedy, and ungrateful homeless people whom Shen Te has invited to take up residence in her shop; and he convinces the police and the landlady of Shen Te’s rectitude. These actions seem relatively fair and certainly necessary to make the business viable. Paradoxically, however, the money that was to have enabled Shui Ta to reclaim herself from prostitution and to love others ends up alienating her from herself, from her lover, and from her future child (she vows her child will never meet Shui Ta). What makes the play engaging and so useful in the context of the Manifesto, then, is the way it dramatizes that the good proletarian and the bad bourgeois inhabit the same breast. The impulse to be compassionate and put the needs of others before oneself, here associated with the woman Shen

Te, and the impulse to use people and systems instrumentally—for self-preservation, to preserve one's child, and to plan for the future—here associated with the man Shui Ta, are parts of the same "gute Mensch." The material conditions provide an impossible situation for anyone to survive by abiding by traditional standards of morality and, we should add, by traditional expectations for gender.2

At the same time, however, the play resists becoming doctrinaire because the question posed at the end of this open-ended play is, well, so open ended. As the epilogue asks, How could a better ending be arranged? Students at first are absorbed in trying to determine whether Shen Te/Shui Ta is good or bad. They emphasize the way the tobacco factory has been able to employ impoverished people, giving them an alternative to begging; they point to the source of all Shen Te's problems as her foolish choice of an abusive lover, something they believe can easily be remedied; and they take refuge in the belief that in an imperfect world, compromise is necessary. But they have to admit that it is hard to justify that Shui Ta steals from the homeless the tobacco that he uses to expand his business; that he reneges on a loan from a benevolent old couple, putting them out of business; that he agrees that Shen Te must marry for money rather than love, despite her dream to release herself from prostitution; that he appoints Shen Te's devious lover to drive the factory workers, including children, ever harder; and that he panders this lover to the landlady in return for necessary shop space. The bad actions weigh heavily on the scale, even for those nominally willing to accept bad means for good ends. Eventually, students take up the invitation of the Epilogue to ruminate on what would be required for a better ending. The answers can go in several directions, but what will be clear is that focusing exclusively on individual morality will be insufficient to reach a better end, that economic systems—material conditions—must be taken into account. Students do not need prodding at this point to bring a materialist explanation of culture and morality into the discussion. A bonus in using Brecht to illuminate the Manifesto, of course, is that the Manifesto will illuminate Brecht. Brecht's epic theater, rather than aiming to be emotionally transfixing, seeks to provoke an analytical, critical attitude. He relies on characters that are typical rather than psychologically nuanced and on actors who step outside their roles to comment on the action. His plots are episodic rather than climactic, often a parable, since for Brecht the parable can be, paradoxically, the most effective form of realism: "while abstracting it is nevertheless concrete since it opens our eyes to what is essential" (Brecht, qtd. in Subiotto 42). This critical and clarifying effect becomes especially

accessible when reading The Good Woman of Setzuan in relation to The Communist Manifesto. Through the split of Shen Te/Shui Ta, Brecht's play concretizes and clarifies the abstraction of historical materialism at the heart of the Manifesto, and thereby helps students formulate questions about the relations among morality, freedom, and material necessity, while in getting to these questions, students are experiencing something of the aims and artistry of a great playwright.

Notes

1. Kain identifies three stages in Marx's ethical theory: initially Marx formulated an ethics based on the concept of an essential human nature and of individuals as ends in themselves; in his middle stage, the stage during which he wrote The Communist Manifesto, he abandons essence for historical materialism; finally, he formulates a dialectical socialist morality that allows for the ideal of individuals as ends in themselves.

2. For helpful, if opposed, perspectives on gender in this play, see Fuegi and Lug.

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