

## ENGLISH HONOURS, SEMESTER VI, CC 13

### NAME OF THE PAPER: MODERN EUROPEAN DRAMA

#### THE THEME OF GREED, CORRUPTION AND CAPITALISM IN BRECHT'S GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN

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."

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

How is greediness commented upon by music in the play?

In Scene one, Shen Te sings, "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. 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 doesn't 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.

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