The Good Woman of Setzuan

INTRODUCTION

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

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.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

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

- **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

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.

PLOT 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.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

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.

The Wife – The wife is one of the heads of the family of eight, a group of poor but crafty criminals who do what they must to get by in the unforgiving village of Setzuan. The wife is a self-righteous and entitled woman: she believes that Shen Te owes her and her family a debt of service since they sheltered Shen Te when she first moved to the village.

The Husband – The husband is one of the heads of the family of eight alongside his wife. He feels that no matter what he does, he cannot provide for his family—to him, living a "crooked" life is just as useless as living on the straight and narrow, yet he often encourages his family to resort to crime to get by all the same.

The Unemployed Man – The unemployed man is an elderly resident of Setzuan who dresses in rags. Shen Te often helps the unemployed man out by giving him free rice and tobacco. He is always scheming of ways to make money and outsmart those around him, yet often ends up resorting to freeloading to get by.

The Carpenter – The carpenter is an opportunistic man who attempts to shake Shen Te down for a large sum of money for a set of previously-installed custom shelves. When Shen Te arrives dressed as Shui Ta, however, she's able to successfully

negotiate with the carpenter and outwit the man, sending him on his way with nothing. The carpenter later struggles to provide food for his three sons, demonstrating that even those who seem like extortionists and grifters are often just doing their best to survive and provide for their families. Through the carpenter's arc, Brecht suggests that capitalism makes everyone who must function within the system greedy and opportunistic through no fault of their own.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Second God – The second 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. The second god is the most pessimistic of the bunch and is quick to comment upon humanity's collective incompetence and cruelty.

Mrs. Shin – Mrs. Shin is the former proprietor of the tobacco shop that Shin Te takes over. The crafty and nosy Mrs. Shin eventually discovers that Shin Te and Shui Ta are one person—and when she does, she simultaneously becomes Shen Te's sole confidant and her most direct threat.

The Nephew – The nephew is a member of the family of eight. He is often coddled by the husband and wife.

The Brother – The brother is the wife's brother and the sister-in-law's husband. He is a member of the family of eight.

The Sister-in-law – The sister-in-law is a pregnant woman who's married to the wife's brother. She's a member of the family of eight. The sister-in-law is moody due to her pregnancy and she loves to gossip.

The Niece – The niece is part of the family of eight. She works as a prostitute.

The Grandfather – The grandfather is part of the family of eight. He is a singer and storyteller who laments that money and greed ruins people's best efforts to live life properly and morally.

The Young Boy – The young boy is the youngest member of the family of eight.

The Carpenter's Son – The carpenter's son is a young, destitute boy whom (along with his two brothers) the carpenter is trying to support.

Mrs. Mi Tzu – Mrs. Mi Tzu is Shen Te's landlady. She is a demanding woman who is protective of her property's integrity—but who ultimately proves herself, as so many other characters do, to be crooked at heart and motivated by personal greed and satisfaction.

The Old Whore – The "old whore" is an older prostitute who works alongside the niece.

The Policeman – The policeman is a local police officer in Setzuan. He dutifully upholds the law and he settles frequent disputes among neighbors.

The Old Man – The old man is the frail, kindly, and elderly proprietor of a carpet store near Shen Te's tobacco shop.

The Old Woman – The old woman is the wife of the old man who owns the carpet shop near Shen Te's store. She is a devoted woman who loves her husband deeply.

Mrs. Yang – Mrs. Yang is Yang Sun's mother. She is a dishonest and unkind woman who only cares about her son.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

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.

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."

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.

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.

SYMBOLS

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

WATER

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.

PLANES AND FLYING

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.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Minnesota Press edition of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* published in 1999.

Prologue Quotes

WONG: I sell water here in the city of Setzuan. It isn't easy. When water is scarce, I have long distances to go in search of it, and when it is plentiful, I have no income. But in our part of the world there is nothing unusual about poverty. My people think only the gods can save the situation.

Related Characters: Wong (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, The First God

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, a water seller named Wong introduces himself to

the audience. He describes the difficult financial situation in Setzuan—a situation which has contributed to an atmosphere of distrust, greed, and cruelty among neighbors. Wong's profession as a water seller comes to function as a central symbol throughout the play, making concrete the evils of the capitalist economy which has impoverished so many of Setzuan's villagers. When water is scarce, Wong is able to profit off his neighbors' suffering (though the work is still difficult for him to do). When water is plentiful, however, Wong is broke and he himself is left destitute. Either way, Wong is suffering—yet he has no other way of making a living, which suggests that capitalism results in suffering whether one is successful or not. Throughout the play, Brecht will go on to investigate whether goodness is attainable in a world structured to make neighbors seek to make money off one another's hardships the way Wong does—and ultimately, he will suggest that while the pursuit of goodness is worthy, it is impossible to ever be truly good under capitalism.

SHEN TE: I'd like to be good, it's true, but there's the rent to pay. And that's not all: I sell myself for a living. Even so I can't make ends meet, there's too much competition. I'd like to honor my father and mother and speak nothing but the truth and not covet my neighbor's house. I should love to stay with one man. But how? How is it done?

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, The First God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After Shen Te welcomes a trio of gods in to share her room for the night after they are turned away from every other home in Setzuan, the gods tell Shen Te that she is a good person and has proved to them that good people still exist on Earth. Their mission to Earth has been focused on determining whether there are any good people and whether the earth is thus worth saving, and Shen Te has helped them make their decision. Shen Te, however, protests against what the gods are saying. In this passage, she discusses all the ways in which she feels she has failed to be good and asks the gods to tell her how one can live a truly good life. This quote is thematically significant because it interrogates what it means to do a good deed yet still live a less-than-perfect life. For a woman like Shen Te, who must prostitute herself to get by, it seems as if no single good deed has the potential to render her a wholly good person—yet the gods are so desperate to encounter goodness on Earth that they'll take what they can get. The play's endeavor is to explore the ways in which women must often create dual identities to satisfy society's ideals of goodness and propriety, and here, Brecht shows Shen Te wrestling with those very things.

THIRD GOD: Good-bye, Shen Te! Give our regards to the water seller!

SECOND GOD: And above all: be good! Farewell!

FIRST GOD: Farewell!

THIRD GOD: Farewell!

SHEN TE: But everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!

SECOND GOD: That's not in our sphere. We never meddle with economics.

THIRD: One moment. Isn't it true she might do better if she had more money?

Related Characters: Shen Te, The First God, The Second God, The Third God (speaker), Wong

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

As the gods bid Shen Te farewell and thank her for allowing them to spend the night with her, they inform her that her goodness has given them faith in humanity. Shen Te protests that she isn't very good at all, but the gods will not hear otherwise. They congratulate Shen Te on her goodness and urge her to keep it up. Here, the gods ignore Shen Te's entreaties as she begs them to tell her how to be good until she suggests that being good would be easy if things were less expensive. The gods, who don't normally "meddle with economics," nonetheless take a moment to pause and consider the weight of Shen Te's words. This passage is important because it investigates the intertwined themes of the pursuit of goodness and greed, capitalism, and corruption. In a world where everything is expensive and one's quality of life revolves around money, living a comfortable life means doing whatever it takes to get by—even if what it takes is a sacrifice of one's morals or

scruples. The gods realize that it would, of course, be easier for Shen Te to be good if she had some money—and so they decide to give her a large sum to help tip the scales in her favor.

Scene 1 Quotes

SHEN TE: The little lifeboat is swiftly sent down.
Too many men too greedily
Hold on to it as they drown.

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After Shen Te receives a large sum of money from the gods as a thanks for having let them stay the night in her room, she uses the money in order to rent a tobacco shop in town. As soon as Shen Te moves into the shop, however, her destitute neighbors begin swarming the shop hoping to take for themselves a slice of what Shen Te has been given. A family of eight who once provided Shen Te with a couple of nights of shelter moves into the back room; a greedy carpenter threatens to take away shelves he installed for the previous owner unless Shen Te pays him for them again; a greedy landlady seeks to get Shen Te to pay six months' rent in advance. At the end of her busy, chaotic first day, Shen Te speaks these lines. This passage is significant because it shows Shen Te learning to recognize, for the first time, how desperately the poor must cling to any nearby "lifeboat" of wealth in order to survive. Shen Te wants to help her neighbors—but she can't help sense their greed as they seek to save themselves from "drown[ing.]" Shen Te wants to live life for herself—but she knows that to be good, she mustn't turn away those in need.

Scene 1a Quotes

FIRST GOD: Do us a favor, water seller. Go back to Setzuan. Find Shen Te, and give us a report on her. We hear that she's come into a little money. Show interest in her goodness—for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand. Meanwhile we shall continue the search, and find other good people. After which, the idle chatter about the impossibility of goodness will stop!

Related Characters: The First God (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, Shen Te, Wong

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the gods appear to Wong, the water seller, in a dream. They entreat him to keep tabs on Shen Te and report back to them about how she's doing with the money they've given her—and whether she's been able to remain good. The gods worry that if goodness is not demanded of a person, that person will have no impetus to remain morally upright. The gods are personally invested in making sure Shen Te upholds the mantle of goodness they have thrust upon her—they need for "the idle chatter about the impossibility of goodness [to] stop" so that they can abscond back to heaven and leave the human world as it is. This passage demonstrates the intertwined nature of the impossibility of goodness and the demands of life under capitalism, and it also showcases how reluctant the gods are to be in the world of humans—a species they do not trust at all—in the first place.

Scene 2 Quotes

SHUI TA: Miss Shen Te has been delayed. She wishes me to tell you there will be nothing she can do—now I am here.

WIFE (*bowled over*): I thought she was good!

NEPHEW: Do you have to believe him?

HUSBAND: I don't.

NEPHEW: Then do something.

HUSBAND: Certainly! I'll send out a search party at once.

[...]

SHUI TA: You won't find Miss Shen Te. She has suspended her hospitable activity for an unlimited period. There are too many of you. She asked me to say: this is a tobacco shop, not a gold mine.

Related Characters: The Husband, The Nephew, The Wife, Shui Ta (speaker), Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te's alter ego—her "cousin," a man named Shui Ta—appears for the first time. Dogged by her greedy neighbors, unable to stick up for herself in the face of debtors, and resentful of the ways in which society underestimates and ignores women, Shen Te disguises herself as Shui Ta. She does so in order to do the things that the good, kind, and meek Shen Te cannot do herself. As Shui Ta, Shen Te feels emboldened to tell her lodgers off and kick them out, to stick up for her own business interests, and to reveal her own deepest, darkest thoughts. Throughout the play, Brecht will use the dual role of Shen Te and Shui Ta to explore the ways in which women—especially women living under the stultifying system of capitalism—often feel compelled to create dual identities for themselves to survive in the professional world or to simply get by with relatives and neighbors. While not all women go as far as creating an alter ego of the opposite sex, Brecht suggests that all women, to some extent, engage in the practice of hiding their true selves in order to survive.

Scene 3 Quotes

SHEN TE: I want *your* water, Wong
The water that has tired you so
The water that you carried all this way
The water that is hard to sell because it's been raining.
I need it for the young man over there—he's a flyer!
A flyer is a bold man:
Braving the storms
In company with the clouds
He crosses the heavens
And brings to friends in faraway lands
The friendly mail!

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker), Yang Sun, Wong

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38-39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te purchases a cup of water from Wong even though it is raining hard. She wants to purchase the water for Yang Sun, an out-of-work pilot with whom she's fallen deeply, quickly, and hopelessly in love. This passage illustrates Shen Te's goodness—or at least her attempt at being good to her friends and neighbors by sharing her newfound wealth. While no one in their right mind would buy water from a water seller in the rain, Shen Te is moved by Yang Sun's sad tale of being unable to achieve his dreams—she wants to help him and comfort him while also supporting Wong's business. Water (and particularly the exploitation of the natural resource into a commodity) is a major symbol of capitalism's greed and oppression throughout the play. Additionally, this passage introduces the idea of planes and flying as a symbol for the dreams and hopes which capitalism makes impossible. In this scene, as the two symbols enter into conversation with each other, Brecht shows Shen Te desperately trying to outmaneuver the system in which she is, as a newly wealthy woman, complicit—a system which makes true and pure goodness, in spite of one's good deeds, impossible to attain.

Scene 3a Quotes

THIRD GOD: Forgive us for taking this tone with you, Wong, we haven't been getting enough sleep. The rich recommend us to the poor, and the poor tell us they haven't enough room.

Related Characters: The Third God (speaker), The Second God, The First God, Wong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as the trio of gods once again visit Wong the water seller in his dreams, they lament how difficult their continued search for more good people throughout the world has been. No matter where they go, no one will accept the gods in their shabby disguises and agree to shelter them, thus passing their test of a person's "goodness." As the third god explains their struggles to Wong, Brecht indicts the systemic greed, corruption, and distrust which thrive under capitalism. The rich don't want to shelter the poor, and while the poor might want to help their fellow man, they simply don't have the resources. Thus, the destitute truly have nowhere to go. The gods are distressed by the cruelty and apathy they have found in humans—all of whom seems to have been inspired by the great disparity in wealth and resources which plagues humanity, and which is only getting worse.

Scene 4 Quotes

SHEN TE: Your brother is assaulted, and you shut your eyes?
He is hit, cries out in pain, and you are silent?
The beast prowls, chooses and seizes his victim, and you say:
"Because we showed no displeasure, he has spared us."
If no one present will be witness, I will. I'll say *I* saw it.

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker), Shui Ta, Shu Fu, Wong

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

When a group of villagers witness the wealthy barber Shu Fu assault Wong with a curling iron, burning and mangling the poor water seller's hand, none of them offer Wong any help. Shen Te is perturbed and offended by her neighbors' resistance to helping Wong and, in this passage, accuses them of willfully ignoring Wong's suffering. The "beast" Shen Te refers to in this passage is an abstract ideal—she might be referring to the "beasts" men become when they accrue a measure of wealth and power which makes them invincible in the face of the law, the "beast" of violence against the poor, or even the "beast" of simple bad luck. Shen Te declares that she intends to stand up for Wong, even though it means she will perjure herself. Though Shen Te has had reservations about her own capacity for goodness, this passage proves that she truly is a good woman—she decries injustice in her community and tries to fight it whenever she sees it. It is possible that living under the false persona of Shui Ta has emboldened Shen Te, even when going through the world as herself, to be more vocal and more assertive.

Scene 4a Quotes

SHEN TE: In our country
A useful man needs luck
Only if he finds strong backers
Can he prove himself useful.
The good can't defend themselves and
Even the gods are defenseless.

Oh, why don't the gods have their own ammunition
And launch against badness their own expedition
Enthroning the good and preventing sedition
And bringing the world to a peaceful condition?

[...]

She puts on SHUI TA'S mask and sings in his voice.

You can only help one of your luckless brothers
By trampling down a dozen others.
Why is it the gods do not feel indignation
And come down in fury to end exploitation
Defeat all defeat and forbid desperation
Refusing to tolerate such toleration?

Related Characters: Shui Ta, Shen Te (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, The First God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te sings "The Song of the Defenseless," a dirge in which she laments the miserable financial straits in which much of her country finds itself, the failure of the gods to make the world a better place, and the cruelty required even of those who ultimately wish to help a "luckless brother." Brecht's plays often feature songs and music—often as a way for characters to connect directly with the audience—and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is no exception. This song is one of the moments in which Shen Te is her most vulnerable with the audience—she shows herself transforming into Shui Ta, a private ritual, and she continues to sing even after she has placed his mask upon her face. This demonstrates that even when Shen Te is masquerading as Shui Ta, she does not abandon her frustration with the cruel state of the world and of humanity, her desire for help and answers from the gods, and her fears about her own complicity in the "trampling" of the poor and needy that life under capitalism necessitates. Shen Te laments that without her "backer"—Shui Ta—she is unable to get by on her own, yet that even while operating as a ruthless man, she is still unable to "defeat all defeat" and truly help those who need her.

Scene 5 Quotes

SHUI TA (*a slight outburst*): She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!

YANG SUN: 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.

Related Characters: Yang Sun, Shui Ta (speaker), Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Shui Ta and Yang Sun meet alone to discuss Shen Te's finances—and her promise to help Yang Sun afford to bribe his way into a position as a flyer at an airfield in Peking. As the two talk, Yang Sun makes it clear to Shui Ta that he cares very little for Shen Te and is really only using her for her money. As Shui Ta reaches a breaking point and attempts to stand up for Shen Te, warning Yang Sun that "common sense" will soon save Shen Te from Yang Sun's machinations, Yang Sun retorts that as a woman, Shen Te has no common sense—love is the most powerful thing in the world to her and she is easily bamboozled by it. While Shui Ta is offended by Yang Sun's words—and Shen Te, beneath the disguise, is devastated by her lover's cruelty—Yang Sun is correct in his assertion that Shen Te wants so badly to be loved that she will give up everything else in pursuit of it.

This passage is important because it demonstrates the ways in which women must always be on the lookout for those seeking to deceive them. Additionally, it demonstrates Yang Sun's belief that Shui Ta will show allegiance to him over Shen Te on the basis of their shared gender, prioritizing that over his familial connection to Shen Te, a woman. Brecht includes this scene to show how impossible it is for women to be "good" in a patriarchal world that seeks to take advantage of society's dictums that women be more kind, more accommodating, and more open than their male counterparts. Shen Te has created a male alter ego to try to shield herself from these things—but even behind the guise of Shui Ta, she is forced to confront the unfairness of society's pressures upon women.

Scene 6 Quotes

YANG SUN: On a certain day, as is generally known,
One and all will be shouting: Hooray, hooray!
For the beggar maid's son has a solid-gold throne
And the day is St. Nevercome's Day
On St. Nevercome's, Nevercome's, Nevercome's Day
He'll sit on his solid-gold throne

Oh, hooray, hooray! That day goodness will pay!
That day badness will cost you your head!
And merit and money will smile and be funny
While exchanging salt and bread
On St. Nevercome's, Nevercome's, Nevercome's Day
While exchanging salt and bread

Related Characters: Yang Sun (speaker), Shui Ta, Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Yang Sun and Shen Te's botched wedding ceremony comes to a conclusion. Their union is contingent on Shui Ta's ability to pay Yang Sun the amount that Shen Te promised him before the start of the ceremony, but this impossible given that Shen Te and Shui Ta can never be in the same place at the same time. Here, Yang Sun sweeps the disgraced Shen Te up in a dance and sings of their marriage, which is to take place on "St. Nevercome's Day"—a made-up holiday when the por will become rich, when "goodness will pay," when badness will be punished, and when "merit and money" will be related to one another. Yang Sun's cruel waltz actually reflects Brecht's genuine frustrations with the world—a place where those who are deserving of dignity and prosperity are forced to live in gutters while the rich often cruelly profit off their neighbors' suffering. Though Yang Sun is the ostensible villain of the play, and though his cruelty to Shen Te is undeniable, Yang Sun is an impoverished out-of-work dreamer just like so many of his neighbors. His concerns about the state of the world, his cynicism about society's capacity for improvement, and his indignation about the systems of labor and capitalism which keep so many men and women down are all palpable and genuine.

Scene 6a Quotes

FIRST GOD: Our faith in Shen Te is unshaken!

THIRD GOD: We certainly haven't found any other good people. You can see where we spend our nights from the straw on our clothes.

WONG: You might help her find her way by—

FIRST GOD: The good man finds his own way here below!

SECOND GOD: The good woman too.

FIRST GOD: The heavier the burden, the greater her strength!

THIRD GOD: We're only onlookers, you know.

Related Characters: The Second God, Wong, The Third God, The First God (speaker), Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the gods appear to Wong in a dream yet again. They report that they have found no other "good people" in the world—they have been refused from doorsteps around the globe and have been sleeping in the streets. The more disappointed they've grown with the rest of the world, the more their investment in Shen Te's continued goodness has grown. Wong, however, reports that Shen Te is struggling, and that she could use a little help from the gods. The gods protest that Shen Te, as a "good woman," will only grow stronger as the burdens on her shoulders increase. This passage represents Brecht's contempt for the idea that if gods did exist, they would likely be reluctant to actually help the human world thrive. Brecht portrays the gods as entities with infinite power and resources—much like the wealthiest percentage of society—who only deign to visit the human realm when they need something from them. The gods are reluctant to give too much back to humans or to serve as anything but "onlookers" to the decay of human dignity. Brecht's frustration with the world is evident—as is his contempt for the idea that poverty, struggle, sexism, and other systems of denigration and exploitation might make an individual more of a "good" person.

Scene 7 Quotes

WONG: It's about the carpenter, Shen Te. He's lost his shop, and he's been drinking. His children are on the streets. This is one. Can you help?

Related Characters: Wong (speaker), The Carpenter's Son, Mrs. Shin, Shui Ta, The Carpenter, Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, as Shen Te does laundry alongside Mrs. Shin, Wong leads one of the children of the carpenter (whom Shui Ta refused to pay for the shelves hanging in her tobacco shop) into the yard by the hand. When Shen Te first moved into the shop, the carpenter attempted to extort money from her for the shelves which he'd already hung for the last tenant; Shui Ta showed up on the scene and badgered the carpenter into abandoning his claim. Now, as Wong arrives with one of the carpenter's impoverished children, Shen Te witnesses for the first time the concrete consequences of her actions as Shui Ta. By making things better for herself and by resisting one kind of corruption, Shen Te has thrown a whole family into homelessness and destitution. Brecht uses this scene to show that under capitalism, someone is always inevitably suffering regardless of others' intentions. He also hammers home just how impossible it is to be good while also pursuing one's own self-preservation—taking care of oneself, he argues, always comes at the expense of another's safety and security.

Scene 8 Quotes

YANG SUN: And the seven elephants hadn't any tusks
The one that had the tusks was Little Brother
Seven are no match for one, if the one has a gun!
How old Chang did laugh at Little Brother!
Keep on digging!
Mr. Chang has a forest park
Which must be cleared before tonight
And already it's growing dark!

Smoking a cigar, SHUI TA strolls by.

Related Characters: Yang Sun (speaker), Shen Te, Shu Fu, Shui Ta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Scene 8 of the play is a flash-forward several months into the future. After stealing a huge stock of tobacco and

cashing a blank check from Shu Fu, Shui Ta has become the owner of a huge tobacco conglomerate based out of Shu Fu's unoccupied cabins on a stretch of rural land. By taking advantage of Shu Fu's love for Shen Te (and his belief that if he supports her and her cousin's business he'll one day be able to marry her), by exploiting the family of eight by stealing their stolen tobacco stock, and by turning all of his neighbors into workers, Shui Ta has seized control of Setzuan's economy with an iron fist. With Yang Sun as his foreman, Shui Ta forces the villagers of Setzuan to labor for him.

In this passage, Yang Sun sings "The Song of the Eighth Elephant," a parable in which Yang Sun describes a cruel capitalist named Chang who employs an elephant named Little Brother to oversee seven other elephants as they toil in the fields, wearing their tusks down to nubs as they do Chang's work for him. The song reflects Brecht's contempt for systems in which cruel bosses exploit their workers—and as Shui Ta, smoking his own product leisurely, strolls through his factory taking stock of his workers' progress, Brecht shows how Shen Te has allowed her dream of owning a humble tobacco shop to turn into an all-out capitalist nightmare. Shen Te has abandoned her morals and her scruples—as Shui Ta, she has consolidated wealth and power and abandoned the humble "goodness" for which the tobacco shop was her initial reward.

Scene 9a Quotes

WONG: Illustrious ones, at last you're here. Shen Te's been gone for months and today her cousin's been arrested. They think he murdered her to get the shop. But I had a dream and in this dream Shen Te said her cousin was keeping her prisoner. You must find her for us, illustrious ones!

Related Characters: Wong (speaker), Shui Ta, Shen Te, The Third God, The Second God, The First God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wong tells the gods—as they visit him, once more, in a dream—that Shen Te is missing. The only good person the gods have encountered so far is gone, and many of the villagers of Setzuan fear the worst. As Wong describes his dream in which Shen Te divulges to him that her cousin, Shui Ta, is "keeping her prisoner," his words are even more portentous than they seem to be at first glance. Wong is describing the internal conflict which Shen Te has been facing for so much of the play—she feels that the good part of her is being kept under lock and key by the intimidating and ruthless Shui Ta. Shen Te doesn't want to let Shui Ta take over her life—but the increasing demands on her wealth, her time, and her capacity for empathy have made Shui Ta's ruthless presence needed more and more often. In a way, Shen Te is being kept prisoner by the alter ego she's created—but Brecht also implies that systems of wealth, greed, patriarchy, and divine expectation are also complicit in Shen Te's imprisonment from the world.

THIRD GOD: The place is absolutely unlivable! Good intentions bring people to the brink of the abyss, and good deeds push them over the edge. I'm afraid our book of rules is destined for the scrap heap—

SECOND GOD: It's people! They're a worthless lot!

THIRD GOD: The world is too cold!

SECOND GOD: It's people! They're too weak!

FIRST GOD: Dignity, dear colleagues, dignity! Never despair! As for this world, didn't we agree that we only have to find one human being who can stand the place? Well, we found her. True, we lost her again. We must find her again, that's all! And at once!

Related Characters: The First God, The Second God, The Third God (speaker), Shen Te, Wong

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

As the gods visit Wong in his dreams one final time, they are in a state of dishevelment: they are cold, tired, weary, and they've been turned away from countless homes in countless realms as they've continued to search the world for good people. Frustrated by their mission—and frightened by the idea that the one good person they did manage to find in their travels, Shen Te, has disappeared—the gods cry out in anger against the "worthless" race they've spent months trying to understand.

This passage is significant because it interrogates the struggle between the world of humans and the world of the divine. The gods want to believe that good people exist—but they have failed to pay enough attention to the human world over the years to recognize that goodness is impossible to truly attain, and that even the mere pursuit of

goodness requires several conditions: wealth, patience, and support. The gods declare that Shen Te is their last hope—they must find her again and make sure she's continued to be good. Again, as the gods name an ostensible solution to their problems, they fail to see that in their haste to crown Shen Te "good," they were blind to the pressures that having the expectation of goodness thrust upon her would create for Shen Te—and how those pressures would come to affect her capacity for goodness.

Scene 10 Quotes

POLICEMAN: The evidence, in short, my lord, proves that Mr. Shui Ta was incapable of the crime of which he stands accused!

FIRST GOD: I see. And are there others who could testify along, shall we say, the same lines?

SHU FU rises

POLICEMAN (*whispering to GODS*): Mr. Shu Fu—a very important person.

FIRST GOD (*inviting him to speak*): Mr. Shu Fu!

SU FU: Mr. Shui Ta is a businessman, my lord. Need I say more?

Related Characters: Shu Fu, The First God, The Policeman (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, Shen Te, Shui Ta

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the judges in Shui Ta's case—who are really the three gods in disguise—ask to hear evidence for and against Shui Ta as they seek to determine whether he is guilty of the murder or imprisonment of the missing Shen Te. The wealthy and powerful members of Setzuan's society, such as the policeman and the rich barber Shu Fu, leap to Shui Ta's defense in a show of class solidarity. The rich and powerful don't want to believe that one of their own could perpetrate such terrible crimes—or even if they do believe deep down that Shui Ta is guilty, they don't want to admit that a wealthy, prominent member of the community could be "capable" of such things, given the doubt such a truth would then cast doubt upon themselves. While the wealthy stand up for Shui Ta, the poor and downtrodden decry him for making their lives more difficult and for refusing them the goodness and charity which Shen Te always showed them. Brecht thus highlights the ways in which capitalism creates strong divisions along class lines, polarizing the wealthy and the poor against one another.

SHUI TA: I only came on the scene when Shen Te was in danger of losing what I had understood was a gift from the gods. Because I did the filthy jobs which someone had to do, they hate me. My activities were restricted to the minimum, my lord.

Related Characters: Shui Ta (speaker), Shen Te

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te—in disguise as Shui Ta—reveals the truth about why Shui Ta first "came on the scene." Shen Te created Shui Ta to do "the filthy jobs which someone had to do"—she knew that Shui Ta would be hated by all, and yet the necessities of running a business and making money would be accomplished, leaving Shen Te herself to continue enjoying a reputation for goodness and charity. Though Shen Te tried to restrict Shui Ta's activities "to the minimum," there is no denying that Shui Ta has slowly taken over and become more dominant as his bad deeds have been rewarded while Shen Te's good ones have only been met with cruelty, apathy, or even more demands on her time and resources. Throughout the play, Brecht uses Shen Te's dual identity as an example of an extreme way that one woman—seeking to maintain her reputation of goodness, charity, and empathy—tries to cope with pressures to be both feminine and masculine, both accommodating and fierce. Though Shen Te has, as Shui Ta, gotten herself into quite the conundrum, she maintains that Shui Ta has ultimately served his purpose—he has protected Shen Te from her neighbors' ire while providing her with an emotional outlet to vent her frustrations, take decisive action for the first time in her life, and make her voice heard.

SHUI TA: Shen Te... had to go.

WONG: Where? Where to?

SHUI TA: I cannot tell you! I cannot tell you!

ALL: Why? Why did she have to go away? [...]

SHUI TA (*shouting*): Because you'd all have torn her to shreds, that's why!

Related Characters: Wong, Shui Ta (speaker), Shen Te

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

When Shui Ta is brought to trial because the villagers of Setzuan believe that he is responsible for the murder—or at least the disappearance—of Shen Te, Shui Ta knows he cannot reveal the truth without shattering both his and Shen Te's reputations, as intimately entwined as they are. In the middle of the trial, as the citizens of Setzuan demand to know where Shen Te is in a cacophonous roar, Shui Ta reaches a breaking point and screams that if Shen Te had stayed, her neighbors would have "torn her to shreds." This passage exemplifies Shen Te's frustration with her neighbors demands upon her—and with the fact that she's only able to vent her anger about having to be "good" all the time only when disguised as Shui Ta. Brecht uses this passage to illustrate how even when assuming a dual identity in order to cope with the demands and stresses of femininity, it is impossible for a woman to escape those demands. Shen Te assumed the disguise of Shui Ta in order to save herself from her neighbors' greediness, cruelty, and disloyalty—but though she tried to outrun these demands, her neighbors will not rest until Shen Te's time, energy, and resources are available for them to leech off of once again.

> SHEN TE: Your injunction
> To be good and yet to live
> Was a thunderbolt:
> It has torn me in two
> I can't tell how it was
> But to be good to others
> And myself at the same time
> I could not do it
> Your world is not an easy one, illustrious ones!
> When we extend our hand to a beggar, he tears it off for us
> When we help the lost, we are lost ourselves
> And so
> Since not to eat is to die
> Who can long refuse to be bad?

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, The First God, Shui Ta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te rips off her disguise as Shui Ta and reveals to the gods that she has, for many months, been inhabiting a dual identity. She has used the persona of Shui Ta in order to say and do the "bad" things that she, as the titular "good woman of Setzuan," felt prohibited from doing in order to keep herself and her business afloat. When Shen Te says that the gods' "injunction to be good" while pursuing a life lived on her own terms has split her in two, she is being literal since she had to become two different people in order to serve both herself and others. She goes on to entreat the gods to answer her questions about the conundrum of living in the difficult world they themselves have created. She wants to know how she can "refuse to be bad" in the face of the systems of capitalism and patriarchy—systems which make life difficult for women, for the poor, and for those who sincerely try to be good in the face of goodness's inherent impossibility.

> SHEN TE: It was when I was unjust that I ate good meat
> And hobnobbed with the mighty
> Why?
> Why are bad deeds rewarded?
> Good ones punished?
> I enjoyed giving
> I truly wished to be the Angel of the Slums
> But washed by a foster-mother in the water of the gutter
> I developed a sharp eye
> The time came when pity was a thorn in my side
> And, later, when kind words turned to ashes in my mouth
> And anger took over
> I became a wolf

Related Characters: Shen Te (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, The First God, Shui Ta

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 102-103

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shen Te continues her impassioned lament to the gods as she unravels and interrogates the things that being "unjust" and "hobnob[ing] with the mighty" as Shui Ta afforded her. She questions the unfair way the world

operates as she indicts her own capacity for apathy and cruelty while at the same time questioning how she can ever go back to being "good." Through Shen Te's emotional speech, Brecht indicts the systems which inspire greed, corruption, and self-preservation in the face of human suffering. As Shen Te describes the "water of the gutter" in which she grew up, she invokes one of the play's central symbols for the unfair and corrupt systems which force individuals to profit off their fellow human beings in order to sustain themselves. Shen Te laments having fallen into capitalism's trap and abandoned her goodness in so doing—yet at the same time, she admits that living in a world in which "good deeds [are] punished" doesn't incentivize her to continue pursuing an identity as the "Angel of the Slums" when only badness and selfishness are rewarded with anything tangible.

SHEN TE: What about the old couple? They've lost their shop! What about the water seller and his hand? And I've got to defend myself against the barber, because I don't love him! And against Sun, because I do love him! How? How?

[...]

FIRST GOD (*from on high*): We have faith in you, Shen Te!

SHEN TE: There'll be a child. And he'll have to be fed. I can't stay here. Where shall I go?

FIRST GOD: Continue to be good, good woman of Setzuan!

SHEN TE: But I need my bad cousin!

Related Characters: The First God, Shen Te (speaker), The Third God, The Second God, Shui Ta

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

After revealing her disguise as Shui Ta and lamenting to the gods the wolf-like ferocity her alter ego inspired within her, Shen Te asks the gods what she should to do make things right and become "good" again. The gods, however, decide to quickly flee back to the heavens rather than help Shen Te confront the complex moral situation in which she has found herself. The gods' mission to find someone good on Earth has, with Shen Te's confession, failed for all intents and purposes. Shen Te admits that while there is a part of her that's good, there's also a part of her that's greedy, power-hungry, and "bad." The gods, however, have no wish to aid Shen Te in her navigation of such a complicated emotional landscape. Shen Te, however, is desperate for guidance. Her life is in shambles and her entire moral compass has been skewed—she knows that as Shui Ta, she can act virtually with impunity, or without facing any consequences. At the same time, she knows that the gods and the neighbors are counting on her to continue to be the "good woman of Setzuan." Brecht uses this passage to indict the ways in which society and religion alike demand goodness of people without providing them with the emotional, ideological, or financial reasons to make good choices and do good deeds.

Epilogue Quotes

"How could a better ending be arranged?
Could one change people? Can the world be changed?
Would new gods do the trick? Will atheism?
Moral rearmament? Materialism?
It is for you to find a way, my friends,
To help good men arrive at happy ends.
You write the happy ending to the play!
There must, there must, there's got to be a way!"

Related Characters: Shen Te

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In an epilogue, Brecht supplies several lines but attributes them to no single actor. The epilogue, like the play's unfulfilling and oblique ending itself, is left up to the interpretation of the actors and audience members alike. In the play's final lines, Brecht suggests that it is up to the people sitting in the audience to decide on a "better ending" for Shen Te—and thus for all the people like her who struggle to be good in the face of wealth inequality, sexism, and unfair expectations. Brecht breaks the fourth wall and entreats his audience not to seek the answers to their society's problems in something as fleeting and artificial as a piece of theater—he wants to move and inspire them to consider deeply what would actually change the world and make it a better place. "There's got to be a way," Brecht says, for the world to work for everyone—and to support the possibility of goodness. It is a matter of finding what will "do the trick" together rather than relying on poets, gods, economists, or anyone else—regular people must rise up and write their own "happy ending."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

Wong, a **water** seller standing by the gates of the city of Setzuan, addresses the audience and he introduces himself. In Setzuan, Wong says, water is often scarce—when this is the case, he must travel long distances to find it, but when water is plentiful, he laments having no income. Poverty is not unusual in Setzuan, and many locals believe the gods are the only ones who can "save the situation" there. Wong has heard a rumor from another traveling merchant that the gods are due to arrive soon. Every day, he has been standing out at the city gates in order to welcome the gods—he wants to be the first to greet them.

By introducing Wong, a poor water seller, as the play's narrator, Brecht demonstrates the central dilemma which will drive the action. Like Wong, who only profits when his neighbors are suffering, the characters in this play will struggle with the impossibility of goodness in the face of capitalism. In other words, this is a world in which one must betray one's fellow people in order to survive.

Three people dressed shabbily and traveling barefoot approach. Wong realizes they must be the "illustrious ones" he has been waiting for. He throws himself at their feet, promising to do for them anything they might need. The first god speaks up and states that the trio is in need of a place to stay for the night. Wong asks what kind of place they'd like to stay in. The first god says that Wong should simply lead them to the nearest house. Wong leads the gods to the home of Mr. Fo. He knocks, but Mr. Fo calls out "No!" without even opening the door.

Wong's struggle to find the gods a place to stay reflects the self-serving narcissism and greed that is rampant in Setzuan. People are so focused on taking care of themselves and their families that they reject strangers—even strangers who come bearing divine gifts.

As Wong leads them from door to door, the gods find themselves refused time and time again. The gods eventually step away from Wong to talk among themselves. The second god laments that this is the third village from which they've been turned away. The first god insists that a "good person" might be just around the corner. The third god, unfurling a scroll and reading from it, reminds the others of the mission—to determine whether the world can "stay as it is." The world will remain untouched only if enough people are found to be living "worthy" lives. The third god suggests Wong is a good person, but the second god points out a false bottom in the cup of water Wong gave them to share. The first god insists that they'll be able to find someone who "can *be* good and *stay* good."

The gods, it turns out, are on a very important mission. They are putting the citizens not just of Setzuan but of the entire earth to the test in order to determine whether there is any part of humanity worth saving—or, the text implies, whether the world should be destroyed and remade anew. The search for a truly good person—and the high stakes behind it—forms the entire crux of the play and it demonstrates just how desperate the gods are to find just one ounce of goodness and kindness so that they can be on their way.

Wong returns to the gods and he sheepishly admits he hasn't found a place for them to stay. As a villager passes, Wong asks the man if he'll seize the "rare opportunity" to shelter a trio of gods for the night. The man laughs off Wong, whom he believes is trying to swindle him into hosting "a gang of crooks." Wong, defeated, announces that there is only one person left in the village—a prostitute, Shen Te, who can never say no to a guest.

This passage shows that everyone in Setzuan is distrustful—society here is structured so that everyone must be out for themselves, with no room in their hearts for kindness toward strangers.

Wong approaches Shen Te's building and he calls out to her. She comes to the window. Wong tells Shen Te that the gods have arrived and they need a place to stay. Shen Te protests—she is expecting a gentleman soon and she needs the money. Wong begs Shen Te to take the gods in. She relents and she tells Wong that she'll hide until her gentleman has come and gone—then she'll take in the gods.

Shen Te is initially reluctant to take in the gods because doing so will mean she loses out on business for the night—and the money she needs to survive. Brecht shows how capitalism creates systems of greed and desperation—and how good people, through no fault of their own, find themselves swept up in the rat race.

Wong returns to the gods, who have not overheard his exchange with Shen Te. Wong excitedly tells the gods that he has found them a room but that they'll need to wait a moment while it's cleaned and tidied. While the gods take a rest and they sit down in a doorway, Wong excitedly tells them they'll be staying with the "finest human being in Setzuan." The gods ask Wong what life is like in Setzuan. He tells them that good people and no-good people alike have a hard time getting by.

The gods can tell that life in Setzuan is hard. Rather than judging those who have turned them away or hesitated to take them in, the gods seek to learn more about what makes people in this place so wary of helping others—and what systems tie them to isolation, greed, and distrust.

Shen Te's gentleman approaches her building and he whistles for her. She does not come to the window and so he leaves. Shen Te calls for Wong. When Wong, who is hiding in the doorway with the gods, doesn't answer, Shen Te goes off down the street looking for him. Wong sees her leaving the building and he runs after her, lamenting quietly that he has "failed in the service of the gods" yet again. Ashamed, he runs away to his den in the sewer pipe down near the river to hide from them. Shen Te returns and she finds the gods sitting in the doorway. She introduces herself to them and she invites them to share her "simple" room. The gods, noticing that Wong has left and abandoned his carrying pole, deduce what must have happened. They bring the pole in so that Wong can retrieve it from Shen Te later.

Wong laments being unable to be the one the gods singled out as a "good" person—he is ashamed of his failure and he seeks to hide from their sight. Little does Wong know that the gods have another purpose for him—one that will be crucially important to their mission as it moves forward.

The lights dim and then rise again—it is morning. Shen Te leads the gods outside. They thank her for her hospitality and they call her a "good human being." Shen Te insists that she isn't good and she reveals that she hesitated at first when Wong asked her to shelter the gods. The first god tells Shen Te that it's okay to hesitate on the way to completing a good deed. He tells her that she has proved to all three of them that good people still exist.

This passage demonstrates that while the gods want to complete their mission with integrity, they are also getting a little desperate to find a "good human being" and they're perhaps bending their own rules for what constitutes someone truly "good." Even the gods are perturbed by how bad things on Earth have gotten.

The gods all bid Shen Te goodbye, but before they can leave, she stops them. Shen Te tells the gods that she's not sure they're right about her being a "good" person. She says she'd like to be good but she must sell herself for a living in order to make ends meet. She doesn't honor her mother and father, she often lies, she sometimes covets her neighbors' things, and she sleeps with many men. The first god nervously insists that Shen Te's thoughts and reservations are nothing but "the misgivings of an unusually good woman."

This passage introduces the idea of how women are often forced to adopt dual identities. Shen Te is, to the gods, a good and generous person—but she has doubts about her own goodness which stem from the ways in which she's had to compromise her morals and put on a persona as a prostitute in order to survive under capitalism. The gods are unable to handle the moral gray areas Shen Te brings up, so they brush them off entirely.

The gods again bid Shen Te farewell and they urge her to "be good." Shen Te says she doesn't know how she'll be good when everything is so expensive. The second god insists that gods don't "meddle with economics." The third god, though, suggests that maybe Shen Te would have an easier time being good if she had more money. The gods huddle together for a minute in discussion. The first god then approaches Shen Te, thrusts money into her hands, and insists on paying for the room. Shen Te accepts the money, and the gods leave.

This passage hammers home that goodness is, perhaps, impossible under capitalism. When so much revolves around wealth and greed, it's hard to be truly kind. The gods are willing to accept that perhaps money is an important part of one's journey to goodness, and they bend their usual rules in order to help Shen Te continue being good. They don't want their assessment of her to have been wrong—or for her pursuit of continued goodness to fail, proving them wrong.

SCENE 1

Shen Te stands in an empty tobacco shop. She tells the audience that three days ago, the gods paid her over a thousand silver dollars for their stay. She has used the money to rent a tobacco shop and the attached rooms. She says she hopes to "do a lot of good" in her new store—starting with being kind to Mrs. Shin, the previous owner, who stopped in the night before to ask for rice for her sick children. Mrs. Shin enters. She and Shen Te greet each other kindly, but Mrs. Shin quickly begins griping about how Shen Te took over her and her "innocent children['s]" home. Shen Te sheepishly goes to get more rice for Mrs. Shin.

Even when Shen Te comes into money, she wants to use her newfound wealth not to hoard joy and capital for herself but to help her fellow villagers. Shen Te can't say no to someone in need—even when that person is coarse and acts as though Shen Te, by virtue of her newfound wealth, owes that wealth to others.

An older husband and wife, along with their nephew, enter the shop and they congratulate Shen Te on coming into money. As their nephew looks around, the couple ask if they can spend the night as they have no home of their own. Mrs. Shin asks who these people are. Shen Te tells her that the couple sheltered her when she arrived from the countryside. In an aside to the audience, Shen Te adds that the couple threw her out on the street when she couldn't pay them. Nevertheless, Shen Te turns to the couple and she happily offers them to share the little room behind the shop.

Even though the couple now asking for refuge at Shen Te's store were once cruel and petty toward her, she can't help but offer them help. The challenges Shen Te faces as she wrestles with her newfound wealth call into question her "goodness"—is she truly good, or simply browbeaten by the masses? As the play continues, Brecht seeks to push Shen Te to the limit in order to examine the relationship between wealth, greed, power, and the human capacity for goodness and empathy.

A shabby, old, unemployed man enters. He asks Shen Te if there are any damaged cigarettes he can take for free. The wife scoffs at the unemployed man for seeking out cigarettes rather than bread. Shen Te, however, gladly gives the man a pack of cigarettes. She thanks him for being her first customer and she says she hopes he will bring her good luck as a business owner. The man lights up a cigarette and leaves without thanking Shen Te. Mrs. Shin and the couple gossip about the man as soon as he is out the door. The husband and wife tell Shen Te that she is "too good"—if she wants to stay in business, they advise her, she'll have to "learn to say no."

This passage shows how Shen Te's goodness and generosity will be tested by the ways in which others seek to take advantage of her wealth. Though Shen Te wants to believe the best in people and share her good fortune, the others warn her not to let herself be taken advantage of. In order to be savvy in business savvy and to maintain one's wealth, they warn her, one needs a certain measure of austerity and self-preservation. They advise Shen Te to cultivate a more ruthless part of herself—advice which will become increasingly important as the play goes on.

A carpenter enters and he chastises Shen Te for filling up the shelves without paying for them. Shen Te insists that when she took the shop, she was told furnishings were included. The carpenter, however, demands a hundred silver dollars. Shen Te begs the carpenter to be patient with her—after all, starting a new business is hard. In response, the carpenter starts ripping shelves off the wall. The wife tells Shen Te to let her relative—pointing out her own husband—settle the affair. The carpenter is suspicious of the man really being Shen Te's relative but he agrees to put his claim in writing, nonetheless. He puts the shelf down, sits, and begins writing up a bill. Shen Te worries what the gods will have to say about her failure to pay the carpenter.

As the carpenter tries to extort money from Shen Te for no reason other than the fact that he knows she has it, it becomes clearer and clearer how greed, capitalism, and corruption fuel relations between neighbors in the village of Setzuan. This passage also shows how the only people who can really settle financial debts and disagreements are men—women are, in Setzuan, seen as unable or unqualified to take part in the economy or in the complicated social aspects of negotiations and deals.

A man and a woman enter the shop. They are cross with the husband and wife for "hiding out" away from them. The elderly woman states that the man is her brother and the woman is her pregnant (and moody) sister-in-law. Shen Te welcomes the couple warmly.

More and more people come to Shen Te's shop seeking shelter and a piece of her good fortune, demonstrating how financially desperate people in Setzuan are and how willing they are to take advantage of others.

Mrs. Mi Tzu, the landlady, enters the shop. She introduces herself to Shen Te and she says she hopes that their relationship will be a "happy one." She hands Shen Te a lease to look over and she asks if Shen Te has any references. Shen Te is about to say she doesn't have any, but the husband speaks up and he claims that he is "Ma Fu, tobacco dealer." He claims he has just sold his successful shop. Mrs. Mi Tzu, however, says that Shen Te will need more than one reference. Shen Te says slowly, with downcast eyes, that she has a cousin who can vouch for her. She claims he lives far away and that his name is Shui Ta. The various members of the large family promise the landlady that "Shui Ta" is an upstanding man. Mrs. Mi Tzu says she looks forward to making Shui Ta's acquaintance and bids Shen Te goodbye.

Mrs. Mi Tzu, like the carpenter, wants to take advantage of Shen Te's wealth—yet she doesn't trust Shen Te to handle her own business or finances and demands male references. Shen Te lies about having a cousin named Shui Ta—but given all the pressure to explore a new, tough identity and to do whatever must be done to keep control of her shop, Shui Ta will become an increasingly important presence in Shen Te's life.

A very old man—the grandfather of the large family—enters the shop along with a young boy and the niece of the elderly couple. The wife asks Shen Te for the key to the shop—they must protect themselves from anymore "unwanted guests." The nephew jokes that he hopes "the strict Mr. Shui Ta" doesn't come by tonight. Everyone laughs, knowing there is no Shui Ta. The members of the family begin opening bottles of wine and taking cigarettes down from the shelves to smoke. Shen Te, holding the carpenter's bill and the landlady's lease, looks on, too exhausted and overwhelmed to say anything.

Once all the members of the family of eight arrive, the mother seeks to keep anyone else from entering the shop and leeching off of Shen Te. This speaks to the greed and desperation that pervade Setzuan—everyone is out for themselves and those closest to them, but most people are unwilling to help their neighbors and fellow citizens. Shen Te is logistically and emotionally overwhelmed by what just one day of her new life has taught her.

The sister-in-law suggests a song to lift Shen Te's spirits. The grandfather begins singing "Song of the Smoke," a song in which he laments that smarts are not enough to make a poor man rich—just as "smoke float[s] free into every colder coldness," he, too, has been forsaken. The husband joins in and he laments that although he's tried to live both good and "crooked" lives, both have turned him into "smoke" as well. The niece chimes in and she says that the younger generation, too, is as evanescent as smoke—their "future[s are] a blank."

The "Song of the Smoke" illustrates the feelings of discontentedness, smallness, and invisibility that so many of these characters share. For different but equally valid reasons, everyone in the play feels that their lives are as fleeting as smoke. Brecht suggests that the pursuit of wealth and the impossibility of ever attaining enough material comfort makes people feel worthless.

As the family grows drunk and happy, they begin arguing and fighting. Soon, they are toppling Shen Te's sparse displays. Shin Te begs them not to "destroy a gift from the gods." The sister-in-law laments that when the rest of the family arrives, they will find the shop too small. A knock at the door announces the arrival of an uncle, an auntie, and more children. The wife asks Shen Te if she can let the rest of the family in, and Shen Te, as if in a trance, states that even when a lifeboat is sent down, men "greedily / Hold on to it as they drown."

Shen Te is unable to stop what's happening all around her. She can only marvel at how the "lifeboat" of her wealth has inspired her neighbors to cling "greedily" to her good fortune, even as their own circumstances continue to worsen. Shen Te is overwhelmed by the cruelty and desperation that wealth creates.

SCENE 1A

Wong, crouched in his sewer pipe den, curls up and goes to sleep. The audience sees Wong's dream. In his dream, the gods appear to him. Wong apologizes to them for failing to find a single room in Setzuan for them to use. The first god, however, says that Shen Te took them in. Wong laments his stupidity. The gods sing a song in which they chastise Wong for his "hasty judgment" of others. Wong apologizes. The first god bids Wong to return to Setzuan, find Shen Te, and give the gods a "report" on how she's doing. The first god suggests that Wong should show interest in Shen Te's goodness—as "no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." The gods declare their intent to carry on their search for more good people elsewhere and then they vanish.

Wong's debt to the gods is not paid—they need to use him to determine whether they were right about Shen Te, and whether her goodness can hold up when it's wealth and capital—not goodness—that's "in demand." The gods are not done with their search, but at the moment, it is all hinging on Shen Te. They are determined to keep tabs on her, as her behavior will influence the rest of their journey.

SCENE 2

Someone knocks at the door of Shen Te's shop. The wife opens the door. Shui Ta enters with the carpenter. The wife asks who Shui Ta is and he replies that he is Shen Te's cousin. The niece and nephew are flummoxed—they thought Shen Te had made up having a cousin. The brother and nephew heckle Shui Ta, urging him to prove his identity—but Shui Ta ignores them and he calls to the rest of the family, waking up the house and ordering everyone to get dressed so that he can open the shop. The husband points out that the shop belongs to Shen Te, but Shui Ta simply shakes his head.

Shen Te disguises herself as Shui Ta in order to perform the actions and say the words she herself cannot. As Shui Ta, Shen Te is able to control others, make demands, and have her voice be heard. Shui Ta is not concerned with goodness—he is only concerned with running a business and getting things done. Through this dual identity, Shen Te is able to maintain her goodness while letting Shui Ta do all the dirty work required to maintain her wealth and keep her business afloat.

The sister-in-law demands to see Shen Te. Shui Ta tells her that Shen Te wishes for him to open the shop for her today. Shen Te, Shui Ta says, wants the family to hear a message: "This is a tobacco shop, not a gold mine." The family is scandalized. Several of them go out to look for Shen Te while the young boy goes to steal breakfast for them all from a nearby bakery. Shui Ta begins tidying up the shop. The carpenter hands Shui Ta the bill for 100 silver dollars. Shui Ta laughs at the bill and offers the carpenter 20 dollars. The carpenter says the shelves are real walnut. Shui Ta replies that if that's the case, they cost too much; he urges the carpenter to take the shelves away. The carpenter starts pulling shelves off the wall, asking the husband and his wife to help him as he does.

Shen Te uses Shui Ta to give herself a voice. When Shui Ta reports the things Shen Te has said—even when those things are coarse—others listen to him in a way they wouldn't listen to her directly. As Shui Ta begins making business negotiations, his ability to say and do the things that Shen Te cannot becomes clearer and clearer still.

While they work, Shui Ta repeats his offer of 20 silver dollars. As the husband and the wife clumsily move the shelves, the carpenter chastises them, pointing out that the shelves were custom and are "no use anywhere else." Realizing he has caught himself in a trap, the carpenter gives up. He accepts Shui Ta's 20 silver dollars and he leaves, embarrassed. The husband and wife rejoice. Shui Ta, however, tells them to get out—he calls them "parasites." The husband and wife, indignant, refuse. In response, Shui Ta goes to the door and opens it. A policeman is waiting outside. The husband and wife begin to panic, knowing that if the young boy returns with the stolen breakfast tucked up under his shirt, they will all be done for.

When dressed as Shui Ta, Shen Te knows she has nothing to lose. No one is expecting the "goodness" Shen Te embodies from this man—she is free to say and do whatever she needs to do to keep her business running. This emboldens Shen Te to call people on their bluff, to stick up for her own interests, and to manipulate those around her somewhat ruthlessly as she looks out for herself above all others for the first time.

Shui Ta invites the policeman in. He tells the officer that as a small business owner, he feels it's important to be on good terms with the local cops. As the policeman steps inside, the husband and wife realize that Shui Ta has set a trap for the young boy. Soon enough, the boy runs inside, his shirt bulging with stolen pastries. The policeman grabs the boy by the collar and asks if Shui Ta can "clarify" what's going on. Shui Ta declares how sorry he is that his establishment has been wrapped up in the "theft." The policeman orders the boy, the husband, and the wife to accompany him down to the station.

Shui Ta is sick of the cavalier, entitled way in which the family of eight has glommed onto him. Though framing them for theft is cruel and not "good," it is an act that will allow Shen Te to continue thriving—and for once in her life, Shen Te feels she deserves to look out for herself.

Free of his lodgers, Shui Ta tidies up the shop. Mrs. Mi Tzu enters—she is scandalized at the sight of having seen thieves being dragged out of her property. As the landlady continues railing against Shen Te and the suspicious means by which she came to lease the shop, Shui Ta asks Mrs. Mi Tzu how much the rent will be. Mrs. Mi Tzu demands 200 silver dollars—six months' rent in advance.

Shui Ta's tasks are not over—there are legions of people to deal with as he tries to smooth out all the wrinkles in the tobacco shop business. More and more people continue making demands upon Shen Te's wealth.

The policeman returns to offer Shui Ta his "official felicitations" for his help in catching the thieves. In spite of the officer's good word on Shui Ta's behalf, Mrs. Mi Tzu refuses to adjust the rent. She leaves in a huff. Seeing the predicament before him, Shui Ta admits to the policeman that Shen Te did not earn a "respectable" living until very recently. To keep Shen Te from returning to a life of sin—and to help her find a way to pay the rent—the policeman declares that it is time to find Shen Te a husband.

Shui Ta, too, begins to get overwhelmed by the ruthlessness of other people and the financial demands upon Shen Te. Though Shui Ta doesn't want to admit that the best course of action is to marry Shen Te off, he believes deep down that Shen Te must find a solution to her own problems—and use her femininity, not her other identity, to do so.

A little old woman enters the shop hoping to buy cigars for her husband for their fortieth anniversary. The policeman continues going on about his plan to find Shen Te a suitable match. He asks if the old woman thinks he should put an ad in the paper advertising Shen Te's marriageability—before she can answer, he takes out a pad and pen and gets to work on the ad for a respectable man "with small capital" who wants to marry into a "flourishing" tobacco shop. The policeman hands the completed ad to Shui Ta. Shui Ta is horrified by "how much luck we [all] need to keep our heads above water," but he thanks the policeman for making the "way clear."

Shen Te believed that by embodying Shui Ta, she would be able to solve all of her own problems by masquerading as a man. Shui Ta now realizes, though, that there is much involved in the equations of balancing wealth and keeping one's head "above water."

SCENE 3

It is evening in the local park. Yang Sun, a young man dressed in rags, watches as a **plane** flies overhead. He removes a rope from his pocket and he moves toward a tall tree. Two prostitutes enter. One is old and the other is the niece from the family of eight. The niece tries to pick up Yang Sun, but the old whore tells the niece that she shouldn't waste her time on him because he's unemployed. The women move on. Yang Sun throws a noose over a branch of the willow tree—but the women return again, hurrying through the park and announcing that it is about to **rain**. Shen Te enters. The old whore points out the "gorgon" who threw the niece's family out into the streets. The niece, however, insists that Shen Te's cousin Shui Ta was the one who threw them out.

This passages offers a glimpse into the many kinds of desperation and hopelessness which poverty inspires. Yang Sun is suicidal, while the niece of the family of eight is out on the streets to support herself and the rest of her kin. Brecht laments that so many suffer while so few profit—and as Shen Te walks onto the scene, it seems that she is now regarded by her fellow villagers as someone who's firmly in the latter camp.

Yang Sun urges the women to move on. After cursing him, the old whore and the niece leave. Shen Te notices Yang Sun's rope and she tells him he mustn't kill himself. Yang Sun tells Shen Te to mind her own business. Suddenly, it starts **raining**. Yang Sun softens and he asks Shen Te to take shelter with him beneath the tree. Shen Te asks Yang Sun why he was trying to die. He tells her that he is a "mail **pilot** with no mail"—the government has enough "flyers" and he is not needed.

Because water serves as a symbol throughout the play for the inequality, greed, and corruption which thrive under capitalism, the rain that begins to fall in this scene underscores Yang Sun's lament that although he wants to work, he is barred from his dreams. Both symbols—water and flying—underscore aspects of capitalism's failed promises, and Yang Sun is most certainly a victim of those failures.

Shen Te says she understands Yang Sun's predicament. Yang Sun says she couldn't possibly understand him. Shen Te tells Yang Sun about a beautiful crane that came to her when she was little—it had a broken wing. It became her playmate for a long time—but every spring and autumn, when the other cranes flew overhead, the crane became restless and sad. Shen Te begins crying. Yang Sun helps comfort her and he wipes her face with a handkerchief. Yang Sun asks why Shen Te saved him. Shen Te tells him that he only wanted to die because of the bad weather. Shen Te addresses the audience and she states that "with all the misery" in the world, "a very little [more] is enough" to make men throw their lives away.

Yang Sun dismisses Shen Te's inability to understand him—perhaps on the grounds of her having recently come into money, of her being a woman, or a combination of both. Shen Te, however, proves herself a good person as she empathizes with Yang Sun by relating a sad, poignant story from her youth. Shen Te knows how difficult it is to live in the world—and how hopeless things can feel under the constraints of capitalism.

Yang Sun asks Shen Te about her life. Shen Te says that there's nothing interesting about her other than the fact that she owns a shop. Yang Sun asks if Shen Te walks the streets, and she replies that she stopped walking the streets when she opened the shop. Yang Sun ironically declares the change "a gift of the gods." Shen Te tells him that that's exactly what happened—but Yang Sun doesn't believe her. Shen Te says she plays the zither and she imitates men well. Though she made a vow of celibacy when she opened the shop, she's now going to marry soon.

Shen Te doesn't share her full story with Yang Sun—but as pieces of it emerge, it becomes clear that she sees herself as an average woman who has been pulled all her life between goodness and desperation.

Yang Sun asks Shen Te what she knows about love. "Everything," she says. Yang Sun asserts that she knows nothing and he reaches out to stroke her cheek. The two share an intimate moment before Yang Sun breaks away from her. The two share more about their lives. Yang Sun says he has friends but they're all sick of him complaining about being unemployed. Shen Te says she has only one friend: a cousin who only came to town once and who will not return.

As Yang Sun and Shen Te explore their feelings of intimacy, they air their insecurities. Shen Te seems to relinquish Shui Ta in this passage—the feelings of love she has make it seem like she'll never need him again.

Yang Sun asks to hear more. Shen Te tells him a story about receiving a penny from a poor man as a little girl. It is remarkable, she says, how those who have very little seem to be the most generous. Shen Te notices a drop of **rain** hit her head. Wong enters singing "The Song of the Water Seller in the Rain." He laments that when it rains, no one will buy his water. He wishes there was lovely weather and no rain for half a dozen years—then everyone would "go down on their knees before [him.]"

As Shen Te muses about the ways in which people strive to be good to each other even in the face of suffering, Wong enters singing his lament about the nature of his work. Brecht is continually contrasting a sense of hopefulness for change with a sense of doom and overwhelm over capitalism's vice grip on society.

Shen Te spots Wong and runs to him, telling him that his pole is at the shop. Wong thanks Shen Te for keeping it. Shen Te asks to buy a cup of **water** for Yang Sun. Wong suggests Yang Sun simply tilt his head back and open his mouth. Shen Te, however, insists that she wants Wong's water—she knows how hard he's been working and she wants to help him out. She tells him about Yang Sun, the "bold" and generous **flyer** who can't find work. After buying a cup of water, Shen Te runs over to Yang Sun—but he has fallen asleep.

Shen Te patronizes Wong because she wants to do something good. By buying water even when it's raining, she shows that she wants to support her neighbors and share what she has. Shen Te is a good person who wants to share her resources—but Yang Sun falling asleep as she returns to him with a treat symbolically demonstrates how often her good deeds go unseen and unappreciated even as the "bad" deeds she perpetrates as Shui Ta are more and more noticeable.

SCENE 3A

Back in Wong's sewer pipe, the gods come to Wong in a dream once again. Wong tells them that he has seen Shen Te—she is in love and she's "doing good deeds all the time." She is kind to everyone, he reports, and she often gives away tobacco to customers who can't pay. In addition, she is once again housing the family of eight. The cherry on top, Wong says, is that Shen Te bought a cup of **water** from him even when it was raining. Shen Te, Wong reports, has earned the nickname "the Angel of the Slums." The only person in town who doesn't like Shen Te, Wong reports, is a carpenter who claims that Shen Te's cousin, a businessman, refused to pay him for some shelves. The first god admits that he doesn't know what is "customary" in the "unintelligible" realm of business.

Wong is impressed by how charitably Shen Te has continued to behave toward everyone around her since her meeting with the gods. Her goodness has earned her a reputation as an "Angel" throughout town, which equates her with the realm of the divine. Shen Te's good deeds, however, have been enabled by the fact that she received a gift of money from the gods. Brecht calls into question whether the Shen Te readers met at the beginning of the play would have come to this kind of "goodness" on her own.

The gods tell Wong that they've been turned away quite often lately—the rich send them to the poor, but the poor don't have enough room to house them. No one is "heroic" anymore, the first god says. As the gods depart, Wong calls out to the "illustrious ones," suggesting that they refrain from asking too much of people at one time.

This passage points out the disparity between the rich and the poor. While the rich can help others, they often refuse to; while the poor cannot help others, they often wish they could.

SCENE 4

It is morning on the square outside of Shen Te's shop. There are two other shops nearby: a carpet shop and a barber. The grandfather, the sister-in-law, the unemployed man, and Mrs. Shin wait outside Shen Te's. The sister-in-law remarks that Shen Te has been out all night. Mrs. Shin laments that Shen Te is "carrying on" with a man. The barber, Shu Fu, angrily kicks Wong out of his shop for "pestering" his customers, burning Wong's hand with a hot curling iron. The unemployed man tends to Wong while Mrs. Shin and the sister-in-law lament that if Shen Te were present, she'd give Wong a bandage.

When Shen Te begins living life for herself and she stops attending to the needy at all hours, her neighbors and dependents begin seeing her actions as selfish. Again, the other characters feel that Shen Te owes them her time, attention, and resources.

Shen Te comes walking down the street. She addresses the audience directly. Shen Te tells them that she has a new lease on life and that she attributes the change in her point of view to being in love. As Shen Te approaches the people gathered outside her shop, she distributes rice to each of them and then she ducks into the carpet shop. Shu Fu, who has noticed Shen Te, remarks to the others how beautiful she is. He declares that he is in love with her and then he returns to his shop.

Shen Te's newfound love makes her even more generous and happy about taking care of her needy neighbors. Where she was previously overwhelmed and upset, she now feels she has enough time, energy, and attention to go around—even if her neighbors feel she owes them more.

The old man and the old woman, proprietors of the carpet shop, walk outside with Shen Te. They offer to give her a discount on a shawl—they know her many good deeds "eat [her earnings] all up." They ask her if her new lover can help her pay her rent, but Shen Te replies that Yang Sun is broke. The old woman offers Shen Te 200 silver dollars to make rent for the next several months. In exchange, she asks that Shen Te pledge her tobacco stock. Shen Te declares that the old woman and her husband are good people—she wishes the gods could overhear their offer.

Shen Te encounters goodness and generosity from her neighbors, the carpet shop owners. She wishes she could repay them by offering them the recognition which she feels the gods may have wrongly bestowed upon her.

Shen Te goes over to the people gathered outside the tobacco shop and she shows them the huge sum of money. Mrs. Shin points out Wong's injury. Shen Te apologizes for not seeing it sooner. She suggests taking Wong to a doctor, but the unemployed man suggests Wong visit a lawyer instead—he can sue the "filthy rich" barber. All he will need is a witness. None of the others, however, are willing to testify. Shen Te decries the others for ignoring Wong's suffering. She declares that she herself will act as witness. Mrs. Shin warns Shen Te against perjuring herself. The sister-in-law says that Shen Te can't change the world. Shen Te orders everyone to leave her alone and then she laments to the audience that nothing moves her fellow citizens to action anymore.

Even as Shen Te comes into more and more money, she continues to be involved in her neighbors' problems and concerned about their well-being. She is willing to put herself on the line for them—but even these actions, good deeds in and of themselves, inspire nothing but suspicion and judgement among her neighbors. Shen Te laments that people are so self-centered that they're not willing to help one another.

Mrs. Yang, Yang Sun's mother, comes rushing into the square. She declares that Yang Sun has just gotten an offer to work as a pilot—but the director of the airfield wants 500 silver dollars. Shen Te gives Mrs. Yang the old couple's loan, stating that she can repay them with her tobacco stock. Shen Te declares that she knows "someone who can help" them to come up with the other 300. A **plane** flies overhead. Shen Te is delighted, declaring that soon her lover will be able to start "bringing to friends in faraway lands / The friendly mail!"

Shen Te continues doing good deeds for others—she is genuinely hopeful that she can make the lives of her friends, her neighbors, and her lover a better place. She doesn't care much for her own wealth—she just wants to unburden others. Given other people's greed toward Shen Te, however, it seems that her good deeds are likely to be punished rather than rewarded.

SCENE 4A

Shen Te comes onstage carrying Shui Ta's mask. She sings "The Song of the Defenseless." The song declares that one can only "prove himself useful" through "strong backers." The good—and even the gods—are "defenseless" in this day and age. She wishes the gods could launch an "expedition" against the badness of the world and bring peace, calm, and plenty to all. Shen Te puts on Shui Ta's mask and she finishes the song in his voice. The imposing "Shui Ta" declares that one "can only help one of [one's] luckless brothers / By trampling down a dozen others." He asks why the gods don't feel more anger at the state of the world or work to make things right.

Shen Te knows that she can't keep up with all the demands on her alone—she needs Shui Ta's strength as a "backer" to keep making ends meet. Shen Te sees Shui Ta as a necessary evil: a mere stepping-stone on her path to doing more and more good deeds for others. At the same time, Shen Te laments that in order to help those she wants to help, others must suffer needlessly.

SCENE 5

Inside Shen Te's tobacco shop, Shui Ta is behind the counter. Mrs. Shin works to tidy the shop, talking idly the whole time. Mrs. Shin advises Shui Ta to figure out what is going on between Shen Te and Yang Sun—and to remember that the wealthy barber next door, Shu Fu, is interested in marrying Shen Te. When Shui Ta doesn't answer Mrs. Shin, she leaves. Yang Sun's voice is heard on the street—Shui Ta runs to the mirror and he begins primping, only to remember the disguise and laugh.

Even though Shui Ta is supposed to be a man of practicality and business savvy, at the end of the day, he is still just Shen Te in disguise—and Shen Te is so in love with Yang Sun that she can't see anything beyond her feelings.

Yang Sun enters and he asks Shui Ta if Shen Te is in the shop. Shui Ta says that she isn't. Yang Sun inspects the tobacco stock and he asks if Shui Ta thinks he can "squeeze" 300 silver dollars out of it. Shui Ta tells Yang Sun to be patient while Shen Te gathers the money. Yang Sun crassly declares that he doesn't know Shen Te to be the kind of woman to "keep a man waiting."

This passage shows that Yang Sun doesn't really care for Shen Te—he is a cruel, rude man who is only after Shen Te for her body and her money. Yang Sun has no problem disclosing all of this to Shui Ta—he believes that Shui Ta's loyalty will be to another man before it will be to a woman, even a woman of his own blood.

When Shui Ta asks more about the sum Yang Sun needs to get the airfield job, Yang Sun reveals that he is bribing the airfield master into firing a **pilot** so that Yang Sun himself can take the job. Shui Ta asks if Yang Sun plans to marry Shen Te after asking her to give up her possessions, leave her community, and move elsewhere so he can work. He points out that 200 silver dollars covers six months' rent at the shop—Shen Te might be better off staying here and running her business with Yang Sun at her side. Yang Sun, however, disdains the idea of being a tobacco salesman. Shui Ta replies that he is prepared to liquidate the stock into cash since Shen Te wants to follow her heart and have "the right to love."

Yang Sun is involved in a dirty plot to wring Shen Te dry in pursuit of his own dreams. Because flight is, throughout the play, a symbol of the dreams which life under capitalism makes impossible, Yang Sun's desire to work as a pilot no matter the cost shows that he will stop at nothing to further his own agenda. Yang Sun doesn't know love or goodness—he only knows deception, greed, and striving for self-aggrandizement above all else.

Mrs. Mi Tzu enters, asking after the rent. Shui Ta tells her that Shen Te's plans have changed—she is moving to Peking with her lover and she'll be selling the stock. Shui Ta asks for 500 silver dollars in exchange for everything. Mrs. Mi Tzu offers 300. Yang Sun urges Shui Ta to take the deal, but Shui Ta insists it is not enough. He pulls Yang Sun aside and he states that the tobacco stock is pledged to the old couple who lent Shen Te the initial 200. Yang Sun asks if the deal is in writing. Shui Ta replies that it isn't. Yang Sun tells Mrs. Mi Tzu that 300 will do. She promises to come back with the money the day after tomorrow.

Shui Ta is now torn between pursuing the business interests which he was created to protect in light of the revelations of Yang Sun's cruelty and upholding Shen Te's loyalty to Yang Sun himself. Shui Ta is meant to be an imposing presence who can stand up to anyone—but in the face of Shen Te's burning feelings, even Shui Ta is helpless.

Yang Sun asks where they could raise more money in the meantime, but Shui Ta says that there isn't anywhere they can do so. He asks if Yang Sun has enough to provide for Shen Te for the first few weeks in Peking. Yang Sun says he will "dig it up" or "steal it." Shui Ta suggests that Yang Sun will need to cover the cost of travel for two. Yang Sun reveals that he is leaving Shen Te behind—he doesn't want a "millstone" around his neck. Shui Ta asks how Shen Te will live. Yang Sun tells Shui Ta that Shui Ta will come up with a way to support her. Shui Ta asks if Yang Sun will leave the 200 dollars here until he can show proof of two tickets to Peking—his cousin may not want to sell the shop anymore. Yang Sun, however, insists that Shen Te will do anything he asks.

In this passage, Shui Ta receives further proof of Yang Sun's cruelty and disloyalty. Shui Ta realizes that Yang Sun has been playing Shen Te like a fiddle, getting her to do his bidding by pretending to care for her and love her. Again, Yang Sun presumes that Shui Ta's loyalty will be to him, another man, over Shen Te, a woman.

In a sudden outburst, Shui Ta declares that his cousin is a woman with common sense. Yang Sun argues that as a woman, Shen Te is "devoid of common sense"—she is easily fooled by the promise of love and the joys of sex. Yang Sun takes a cigar of the shelves and he tells Shui Ta to tell Shen Te that Yang Sun wants to marry her—and then he asks Shui Ta to bring along the 300 dollars when it's there. He leaves. Mrs. Shin sticks her head out of the back room, having overheard the whole thing, and expresses her disbelief in Yang Sun's cruelty. She pops into the back again.

Shui Ta attempts to stand up for Shen Te, but Yang Sun sinks even lower as he insults the woman he is swindling while pretending to love. The entire affair is an outrage even to Mrs. Shin.

Shui Ta runs around the shop in a fury, declaring "I've lost my shop! And he doesn't love me!" over and over again before stopping and calling out to Mrs. Shin. Shui Ta declares that he "grew up in the gutter" and that he has that hardness within him still. Love is "the deadliest" threat to that hardness. Mrs. Shin comes out of the back and she declares that Shui Ta should talk with Shu Fu and arrange a marriage between the barber and Shen Te. She goes off to get him.

Shui Ta breaks his disguise for a moment and he speaks and moves as Shen Te, realizing just how deeply and totally she has been deceived. Shui Ta resolves to preserve Shen Te's dignity by marrying her off the barber and adopting the "hardness" needed to make her abandon Yang Sun.

Mrs. Shin returns with Shu Fu. Shui Ta tells Shu Fu that Shen Te is in "grave danger"—she has lost her shop through too much "goodness" and she needs the money to get it back. Shu Fu, however, declares that it is Shen Te's goodness which makes her so attractive to him. Shu Fu says that he knows how charitable and giving Shen Te is and so he wants to help her open a homeless shelter using a set of "humble cabins" he has nearby. Shui Ta declares that Shen Te would be "honored" to hear Shu Fu's proposal.

Shui Ta is determined to help pull Shen Te's good name and reputation out of the scandal she's embroiled herself in—even if it means marrying her off to a wealthy man whom she doesn't love. Shen Te's goodness makes her adored by all—which makes Yang Sun's deception even more despicable.

Wong and the policeman enter looking for Shen Te. Shu Fu pretends to be busy looking at the shelves. Shui Ta tells the officer and Wong that Shen Te isn't present. Seeing that Wong's hand is still hurting him, Shui Ta runs to the back and he fetches Shen Te's shawl. He offers it to Wong, insisting Shen Te doesn't need it. The policeman asks Shui Ta if Shen Te really saw the conflict between Wong and the barber. Shui Ta declares that Shen Te wasn't present. Wong, desperate, declares that she was. Shui Ta tells Wong that Shen Te has enough troubles—surely, he says, Wong wouldn't "wish her to add to them by committing perjury." Wong throws the sling to the ground. The policeman leaves, telling Wong not to go around libeling his neighbors. Wong, distraught, follows him.

In this passage, Shui Ta does a kind deed for Wong by giving him Shen Te's shawl to use as a sling before sealing the man's fate by refusing to perjure himself and declare Shen Te as a witness to Wong's suffering. This passage represents the admixture of good and bad deeds that one must often perform to keep oneself afloat in a cruel world.

Shui Ta apologizes to Shu Fu for the commotion. Pointing to the shawl, which Shen Te bought to impress her lover, Shu Fu asks if Shen Te will be ready to move on. Shui Ta replies that Shen Te may need some time to heal. Shui Ta suggests Shu Fu take Shen Te to a nice supper to propose and discuss everything. Shu Fu agrees that Shen Te deserves to eat at a "high-class" establishment. Shui Ta goes into the back to "find" Shen Te.

In this passage, Brecht shows Shen Te—as Shui Ta—glumly accepting her fate and resigning herself to a life of commitment to a person she does not love in order to save herself and her business. Shui Ta is the one to make the arrangement, as he is the one who handles the things that Shen Te herself cannot bear.

Shu Fu addresses the audience. He declares that he will be nothing but proper during his dinner with Shen Te—he will not touch her and he'll only exchange ideas with her over the beautiful white chrysanthemums that will adorn their supper table. He hopes to woo Shen Te with "understanding" and care.

Shu Fu clearly cares for Shen Te and he wants to make her happy. He loves her because she is good—he does not want to take advantage of that goodness like Yang Sun does.

Mrs. Shin comes out of the back, and Shu Fu asks what she knows about Yang Sun. Mrs. Shin declares he is a "worthless rascal." Yang Sun enters. Mrs. Shin threatens to call Shui Ta out of the back. Shu Fu declares that Shui Ta and Shen Te are having an important meeting. Yang Sun tries to go into the back, but Shu Fu stands in his way. Shu Fu declares that he and Shen Te are to be engaged. Yang Sun, disbelieving, tries to push past him—but Shen Te emerges from the back room.

As the two men in Shen Te's life fight, argue, and push toward the back of the shop, threatening to uncover Shen Te's clever ruse, Shen Te offers herself up between them to stop the fighting. While adopting the persona of Shui Ta helps Shen Te navigate certain situations, this moment shows that Shen Te must sometimes fend for herself.

Yang Sun asks Shen Te what's going on. Shen Te declares that she intends to hear Shu Fu's plans to help the poor. Yang Sun cannot believe that Shen Te has agreed to her "cousin's" plans. Yang Sun begs her to remember the day they met. Shen Te gets lost in memories and then she declares to Shu Fu that she wants to be with Yang Sun and go to Peking. Yang Sun demands that she give him the key to the shop, and she does so. Yang Sun puts it down on the counter and tells Mrs. Shin to leave it under the mat when she's done cleaning.

In the end, Shen Te follows her heart rather than her head. By appearing as herself, she drops the front of imposing savvy and self-preservation that Shui Ta has come to represent for her. She allows herself to be cajoled into returning to Yang Sun in spite of what she knows of his cruelty and disloyalty.

As Yang Sun leads Shen Te from the shop, Shu Fu shouts for Shui Ta. Shen Te begs him to stop—her cousin doesn't agree with her, she says, but he is "wrong." Addressing the audience, Shen Te says that she wants to go be with the man she loves without "count[ing] the cost," considering if she's making a "wise" move, or even interrogating whether he really loves her back. Yang Sun hears her and he declares, "That's the spirit."

Shen Te has decided that Shui Ta doesn't always know best. Though she created him to handle her problems, in this moment she declares that he is unable to make all of her decisions for her.

SCENE 5A

Shen Te emerges in front of the curtain dressed in wedding clothes. She addresses the audience and she tells them that something terrible has happened. As she left the shop with Yang Sung, she saw the old carpet dealer's wife on the street—the old woman told her that the old man had taken ill after all the "worry and excitement" over the money they'd lent her. The old woman, with tears in her eyes, politely asked for it back. Shen Te promised the old woman she'd give it back to her.

Shen Te wants it all: she wants to be able to help her lover to whom she is devoted while also being good to her neighbors. But as Shen Te is learning, it is nearly impossible to be good and to be true to one's own desires all at once. This is a different kind of dual identity that Shen Te must learn to embody: that of neighbor and lover wrapped up in one, rather than the split consciousness of Shen Te and Shui Ta.

Shen Te laments having let Yang Sun sweep her away "like a small hurricane" and having forgotten her promise to the carpet dealers. Shen Te declares that Yang Sun plans to work in a cement factory rather than "owe his **flying** to a crime." She is on her way to her wedding, she says, and she cannot stop wavering "between fear and joy."

Shen Te is cautiously optimistic about her future but she knows what a dangerous situation she's gotten herself into both financially and morally.

SCENE 6

In a private dining room of a cheap restaurant in town, Shen Te and Yang Sun celebrate their wedding with a number of guests. A priest sits in the corner alone. Yang Sun, wearing a dinner jacket, talks with his mother Mrs. Yang. He tells her that Shen Te has told him she cannot sell the shop—"some idiot" is requesting the 200 dollars back. Mrs. Yang suggests that Yang Sun postpone the wedding, but Yang Sun tells her it'll be okay—he's sent for Shui Ta to settle the matter by bringing the money to the wedding anyway. Mrs. Yang goes outside to wait for Shui Ta's arrival.

Yang Sun has no empathy for anyone other than himself; he denigrates Shen Te for being a good person and staying on top of her debts rather than devoting her life and her finances all to him. Yang Sun hopes to use Shui Ta for his own purposes—but little does he know that Shui Ta and Shen Te are the same person.

Shen Te addresses the audience. She tells them that she believes she has made the right choice—Yang Sun has given up **flying** for her. She calls for Yang Sun to drink a toast "to the future" with her. Mrs. Yang returns to the room and she states that Shui Ta has not arrived. Shen Te, hearing that Mrs. Yang expects Shui Ta to come to the wedding, is flummoxed. Yang Sun says they will all wait another 15 minutes.

Even though Shen Te tries to look on the bright side of things and enjoy her wedding, she remains paranoid and frightened as she struggles to balance her present identity with her alter ego.

Mrs. Yang excitedly tells her guests that she, Yang Sun, and Shen Te are moving to Peking so that Yang Sun can be a **pilot**. Shen Te is taken aback by the fact that Yang Sun hasn't told his mother he's giving up the job. Yang Sun says he still wants to use the money to secure the job. Shen Te is upset, but Yang Sun declares that he needs to get out of Setzuan. Shen Te points out that she's promised the old woman the money back. Yang Sun says it's lucky that Shui Ta is on his way—Shen Te always does "the wrong thing."

Shen Te continues to be shocked and baffled by Yang Sun's indiscriminate dishonesty. When she tries to confront him about her fears, Yang Sun tells her she's a bad businesswoman and a poor decision-maker. Yang Sun wants Shen Te to think only of him and to ignore everyone else's wants and needs—even her own.

Shen Te replies that her cousin isn't coming—he "can't be where [she is.]" She reveals that Shui Ta told her that Yang Sun only bought one ticket to Peking. Yang Sun pulls two tickets out of his pocket and he says he sold his mother's furniture to afford the second—he doesn't want his mother to know she's getting left behind. Shen Te asks what will become of the old man and old woman. Yang Sun asks what's to become of himself.

Yang Sun is a relentless two-timer and liar. He cares about no one but himself and he's willing to leave even his own mother high and dry in pursuit of his own wants and needs. He represents the very worst of humanity—the kind of person motivated only by greed and corruption.

A waiter enters and asks Mrs. Yang to pay for the party. Mrs. Yang insists that someone is coming with the money. The priest leaves to officiate another engagement. Mrs. Yang assures the guests that the priest will return. Yang Sun, however, tells the guests to go home—the priest is gone, and Shui Ta is nowhere to be found. The others leave. Shen Te asks if she should go home too. Yang Sun drags her across the room, tearing her dress.

The wedding is a disaster—and the cruel, violent Yang Sun blames Shen Te for everything. As Yang Sun creates a cruel farce, he attempts to shame Shen Te for thwarting his opportunity to marry her and take her money.

Yang Sun sings "The Song of St. Nevercome's Day," in which he talks of all the things that will "never come": the day a beggar maid's son will sit on a solid gold throne, the day "badness will cost you your head," the day "men will be good without batting an eye," the day he himself will "be a **flyer**." As the song concludes, Mrs. Yang declares that Shui Ta is not coming.

Yang Sun's cruel, self-pitying song is suffused with meanness but also with real anxiety. Yang Sun knows that certain things will never happen—and just as he knows that corruption will always rule and the poor will always be poor, he knows that his own dreams will never come true.

SCENE 6A

Back in Wong's den, the gods again come to him in a dream. Wong tells the gods that Shen Te is in grave trouble—she has taken "the rule about loving thy neighbor" too seriously. Wong suggests Shen Te is too good for this world and he asks the gods to intervene. The first god declares that they are done intervening in human matters—he points out a black eye that the third god received from meddling in a fight the other day.

Wong knows just how deeply Shen Te is embroiled in her bad situation with Yang Sun, the old couple, Shu Fu, and Shui Ta. The gods, however, have learned their lessons about helping humans—it never turns out well.

When Wong declares that Shen Te may lose her shop, however, the third god asks if they should help after all. The first god insists that "the gods help those who help themselves." The second god says they should try to help anyway. The third god admits that they have not found any other good people on Earth. The heavier the burden on Shen Te, the first god suggests, the greater her strength will become—and the better she will prove herself to be. The first god promises that everything will turn out all right. The gods disappear.

Even after Wong begs the gods, they remain unwilling to help Shen Te. They perhaps do truly believe that adversity will make her stronger and better—but it's just as likely that they're simply exhausted by humanity and they're eager to be done with humans once and for all.

SCENE 7

In the yard behind Shen Te's shop, Shen Te and Mrs. Shin do laundry. Mrs. Shin tells Shen Te to "fight tooth and nail" to keep her shop. Shen Te replies that she must sell the tobacco to pay the old couple back today. Mrs. Shin declares that without a husband, tobacco, and a place to live, Shen Te is going to be destitute. Mrs. Shin pulls a pair of pants off the line—she declares that they are Shui Ta's. Shen Te says that Shui Ta has many pairs of pants and he must have left these behind after his last visit. She collects them hurriedly from Mrs. Shin.

Shen Te is drowning in debt and worry. Not only that, but she is becoming sloppy about keeping up her dual identity—when Mrs. Shin finds the pants on the line, Shen Te realizes that her disguise is perhaps not as foolproof as she believed it to be.

Shu Fu enters. He tells Shen Te that he has seen her sacrifice her own happiness so as not to hurt the old carpet sellers—Shen Te truly is "the Angel of the Slums." Shu Fu declares that he cannot let Shen Te lose her shop. Every morning, he has watched her give food to the poor. He cannot let "the good woman of Setzuan" disappear. He pulls out his checkbook and he gives Shen Te a blank check. He instructs her to fill out "any sum in the world," and then he hurries away.

Shu Fu really cares for Shen Te and he deeply admires her goodness. He wants her to be happy—unlike Yang Sun, who only ever wanted to take her money and leave her high and dry.

Mrs. Shin urges Shen Te to hurry up and cash the check for s thousand silver dollars. Shen Te, however, has second thoughts. She is still hung up on Yang Sun. As she gathers up the washing, she staggers beneath its weight. Mrs. Shin asks if Shen Te is dizzy because she's pregnant. If Shen Te is pregnant, Mrs. Shin suggests, Shu Fu will never let her have the money. Shen Te caresses her stomach and she excitedly declares that she is going to bring a blessed son into the world who will conquer mountains and become a **flyer** on his own one day. She takes the imaginary hand of a small boy and she pretends to show him around the town, introducing him to his neighbors.

Though Shen Te knows that Yang Sun is cruel and terrible, she can't seem to let him go. When she realizes that she is pregnant with his child, she begins thrusting Yang Sun's own dreams upon the unborn baby. When Shen Te invokes flying here, Brecht symbolically signals Shen Te's fears that her child will not be able to pursue his dreams should Shen Te fail to keep herself afloat right now.

Wong enters with a real little boy. He tells Shen Te that the carpenter has lost his home and his business—his three children are out on the streets. Wong introduces the little boy to Shen Te as the carpenter's youngest son. Shen Te takes the little boy by the hand and she declares that he can live in Shu Fu's cabins. She may have to go there herself, she says, as she is expecting a child of her own.

Though the sleazy carpenter did try to swindle Shen Te out of some money, there are consequences to her and Shui Ta's refusal to pay him—now, he is on the streets. This suggests that people can't support themselves without stepping on others.

Shen Te asks Wong to go find Shu Fu. Before sending him off, though, she asks about his hand. Wong shows Shen Te his mangled hand—but he insists he can get along just fine. Shen Te begs him to take a cartful of tobacco, sell it, and go see a doctor. Wong quietly delights in the fact that Shen Te is "still good." He goes off to get the carpenter, assuring Shen Te that he'll take some tobacco to sell when he returns.

Even in the midst of her own problems, Shen Te is still worried about the well-being of others. Wong is relieved to realize that Shen Te is still good in spite of her recent struggles—he believes that there is hope not just for Shen Te, but for the world.

The husband, wife, and nephew enter, each dragging a large sack. They ask Shen Te if she's alone. She says she is. They ask if Shui Ta is coming back. Shen Te says he isn't—she's giving up the shop. They ask if they can store their sacks in her new home. Shen Te says she'd be happy to let them. The husband says if anyone asks about the sacks, Shen Te should say they're hers. When they ask where they should put them, though, Shen Te expresses nervousness about getting into trouble. The wife declares that "the good woman of Setzuan" is perhaps no longer good. The husband tells Shen Te that there is enough tobacco in the sacks to start a whole tobacco factory. Shen Te helps them bring the sacks to the back room. Alone on stage, the carpenter's son eats scraps from a garbage can nearby.

Shen Te doesn't want to have to bring Shui Ta back. She would rather lose everything than continue living a dual life and betraying her friends and neighbors with the cruel, ruthless Shui Ta's words and actions. This passage shows, though, that without Shui Ta around, Shen Te's neighbors continue picking on her the moment she shows any hesitation about doing whatever they ask of her, leveraging her reputation as a "good woman" against her and adding to the pressures she's facing already.

Shen Te and the others return, making a plan to meet up at Shu Fu's cabins soon. When Shen Te sees the carpenter's son eating garbage, she shoos the others away and runs to the child. She declares that she will be a "tigress" if she has to in order to defend her own son from ever experiencing such a thing. She picks up Shui Ta's trousers and she declares that her cousin must come back for one final visit. She goes inside.

Shen Te knows that she must return to living as Shui Ta—perhaps for a while—in order to save not just her own reputation but indeed her future child's well-being. Shen Te is willing to be ruthless and to put her own desires on the backburner in order to ensure a better future for her unborn baby.

Mrs. Shin, the sister-in-law, and the grandfather all enter. They lament that the shop is closing down and that they will have to move to Shu Fu's terrible cabins. The unemployed man enters and, upon seeing the shop is closing, suggests Shen Te call upon Shui Ta to save them all. Wong, the carpenter, and the carpenter's other children enter; as they do, Shui Ta arrives and he asks what has brought the crowd together. Wong says that the shop is closing and that they are all headed to Shu Fu's cabins. Shui Ta, however, declares that they can't go there—the space will be "needed for other purposes." The group can stay in the cabins if they agree to work for Shen Te making tobacco. The carpenter and the unemployed man, willing to take up the offer, go in for the sacks.

Shen Te (as Shui Ta) has a plan to turn things around. The means through which she plans to do so are tricky and nefarious—and the plan wouldn't have come about had she not, moments earlier, witnessed the family of eight dragging the illegally-begotten tobacco into the shop.

Mrs. Mi Tzu enters with 300 silver dollars for Shui Ta. Shui Ta, however, declares that he's decided not to sell—he will sign the lease. Mrs. Mi Tzu asks if Shui Ta can pay rent in advance. Shui Ta pulls out Shu Fu's check and he writes it out for 10,000 silver dollars, assuring Mrs. Mi Tzu that she will have six months' rent by tonight. Mrs. Mi Tzu expresses amazement at how quickly Shen Te has moved on from Yang Sun to Shu Fu. She leaves.

Shui Ta declares his intent to use Shu Fu's money to save the business. To others, it appears as if Shui Ta has decided to sell his cousin to Shu Fu. Shui Ta's ruthlessness, it seems, knows no bounds.

The carpenter and the unemployed man drag the sacks of tobacco back across the stage. The carpenter begrudgingly says that he's unhappy to be doing so. Shui Ta reminds the carpenter that his children need to eat. The sister-in-law, spying the sacks, declares that they contain her family's tobacco. Shui Ta asks if he should "consult the police"—the sister-in-law, knowing the tobacco was obtained illegally, defeatedly falls silent. Shui Ta leads the carpenter and his children, the sister-in-law, the grandfather, and the unemployed man off to Shu Fu's cabins, leaving Wong and Mrs. Shin behind.

Shui Ta continues blackmailing and manipulating people in order to make ends meet for himself. He is playing everyone around him ruthlessly and indiscriminately with no remorse. Shui Ta, again, can do all of the things that Shen Te can't bring herself to do as someone struggling under the pressures to be "good" at all costs.

The old man and old woman enter. Mrs. Shin tells them that Shui Ta arrived wearing a pair of pants she found on the line just moments ago. The old woman asks where Shen Te is—Shen Te was supposed to give something to her and her husband. Wong declares that things will soon be okay—Shui Ta never stays long. Mrs. Shin, "approaching a conclusion," declares that Wong is right.

Mrs. Shin has figured out Shen Te's ruse—she knows that Shen Te has created Shui Ta as an alter ego who can do the things she can't do and to make things turn out "okay."

SCENE 7A

In Wong's sewer pipe, Wong dreams of the gods yet again. The gods seem tired from their travels. Wong tells the gods that he's been having a bad dream about Shen Te. In the dream, Shen Te is always down by the river in a spot where "the bodies of suicides" often wash up. Shen Te is staggering as she tries to carry something along the muddy bank. When Wong calls out to her, Shen Te declares she must get the gods' Book of Rules to the other side of the river without getting it wet. Wong asks the gods for "a little relaxation of the rules [...] in view of the bad times." The gods reply that their intervention would only create more problems—the rules, they say wearily, must stand.

Wong's dreams indicate to him very clearly that Shen Te is suffering as she struggles to uphold the mantle of goodness which the gods have thrust upon her. Their rules are too much for her to bear—yet the gods are not open to bending or changing them so that Shen Te can stop buckling under their pressure. The gods seem determined to learn more about humanity while remaining as removed as possible from humans and doing as little as they can to actually change or better human society.

SCENE 8

Shui Ta has established a tobacco factory in Shu Fu's cabins. Several families, mostly women and children, work together. The sister-in-law, the grandfather, the carpenter, and the carpenter's three children are among them. Yang Sun and Mrs. Yang enter. Mrs. Yang tells the audience that the Shui Ta, after opening the flourishing tobacco factory three months earlier, has transformed Yang Sun into a "model citizen." After threatening to bring a claim for "breach of promise of marriage" against Yang Sun on Shen Te's behalf, Shui Ta agreed to let Yang Sun repay his debt of 200 silver dollars by coming to work in the factory. The hard work, Mrs. Yang says, has made Yang Sun into an honest man—he is now foreman of the factory. As Yang Sun takes his place in front of the workers, he leads them in song.

In just a few months, Shen Te's enterprise has become unrecognizable. No longer a small neighborhood shop, the tobacco factory is now a veritable sweatshop where the needy of Setzuan must work tirelessly for low wages. There is no charity or goodness in the town anymore—Shui Ta rules all with an iron fist, turning everyone he can into a worker and demanding labor in exchange for the things Shen Te once doled out with no strings attached.

Yang Sun and the others sing the "Song of the Eighth Elephant." The song, a parable, tells of a man named Chang who had seven wild elephants and one tame one named Little Brother. Chang put Little Brother in charge of guarding and overseeing the work of the other elephants. Little Brother kept his tusks even as the other elephants wore theirs down through hard work—"seven are no match for one," the chorus sings, "if the one has a gun." As the workers sing, Shui Ta smokes a cigar and strolls among them. Mrs. Yang, addressing the audience again, calling Shui Ta a "real superior man."

Shui Ta has turned Shen Te's shop into a massive factory—a place that was meant to be a gathering place for the community has turned into a soulless enterprise. The "Song of the Eighth Elephant" is sung by the workers as a kind of anthem yet to Brecht's audiences is meant to be satirical, indicting the ways in which capitalism turns friends, neighbors, and workers against one another.

SCENE 9

Shen Te's shop is now a well-decorated office. Shui Ta, who has grown fat, sits in a chair talking with the old man and the old woman. Mrs. Shin looks on. Shui Ta angrily says he cannot tell them where Shen Te is. The old woman says she simply wants to thank Shen Te in writing—an envelope containing the 200 silver dollars she and her husband were owed arrived. Shui Ta says he doesn't have Shen Te's address and shoos them from the shop. Mrs. Shin tells him that the couple lost their shop while waiting for the money. Shui Ta declares they could have come to him for help. Mrs. Shin retorts that people dislike coming to Shui Ta.

Shui Ta has taken over, much to the dismay of the other villagers, who miss Shen Te's warm and generous presence. Other people are clearly afraid of Shui Ta or simply don't like him—a fact which Shui Ta, used to living as the beloved Shen Te, cannot seem to wrap his head around.

Shui Ta says he's dizzy. Mrs. Shin says he ought to be—he's "in [his] seventh month." Shui Ta says he's nervous that people will start noticing what's going on soon, but Mrs. Shin says that everyone will think Shui Ta is growing fat because he's rich. Shui Ta declares that when the child is born, it must never meet Shui Ta. Shui Ta asks Mrs. Shin if the neighbors are circulating any rumors. Mrs. Shin says that as long as Shu Fu doesn't learn the truth, there is "nothing to worry about." She offers Shui Ta a cup of tea.

Shen Te wants to bring a child into a kind world that sets a good example for her baby, so she doesn't want her child to know about Shui Ta or his bad deeds. Shen Te is committed to making the world a better place—even as she lives in disguise as the domineering Shui Ta to preserve her own reputation.

As Yang Sun enters dressed in a suit, Mrs. Shin puts on a pair of nice gloves and leaves. Yang Sun suggests Mrs. Shin is "fleecing" Shui Ta. Taking a paper from his briefcase, Yang Sun tells Shui Ta that because Shui Ta hasn't been "at [his] best," things at the factory are getting out of control. The police want to shut the establishment down for having twice the legal number of workers. Yang Sun offers to bribe Mrs. Mi Tzu into letting their company use her buildings for the overflow by offering her sexual favors. Shui Ta says he'll "never agree to that." Yang Sun suggests Shui Ta is irritable because it's **raining**.

Mrs. Shin is clearly blackmailing Shui Ta, even as she acts as his caretaker. This duality of a good deed and a bad deed wrapped up in one sums up Brecht's stance on the pursuit of goodness: there is no good deed without a bad one, and often, goodness and badness exist alongside each other.

Wong knocks at the door. He enters, stating that he's looking for Shen Te. It's been six months since she's been seen last, and "rumors" that something has happened to her have started cropping up. Shui Ta tells Wong to come back later. Wong says he's seen rice sitting out on the doorstep lately, just as it used to when Shen Te gave to the needy. Wong says there are rumors that Shen Te never left Setzuan after all—she is nearby, hiding a pregnancy. Yang Sun is shocked. Shui Ta calls Wong a liar; Wong replies that "a good woman isn't so easily forgotten," and he leaves.

This passage reveals that other neighbors are onto Shui Ta—and that Shen Te clearly hasn't been able to control her impulse to do good deeds even while maintaining the disguise which is her very lifeline. Shen Te's good deeds have made more of an impact on her fellow villagers than she ever accounted for.

Shui Ta goes into the back room. Yang Sun, alone, wonders whether Shui Ta sent the pregnant Shen Te away so that Yang Sun wouldn't get word of a son being born to him. Suddenly, Yang Sun hears sobbing is heard from the back room, which surprises him since Shui Ta never weeps. Yang Sun, too, admits that he's suspicious about the bowls of rice on the doorstep.

Yang Sun, like Mrs. Shin, is beginning to put together the pieces of what's going on. Shui Ta is barely holding things together in the face of such serious financial, legal, and emotional challenges—he is making himself vulnerable to his greedy, opportunistic neighbors and employees.

As Shui Ta steps out of the back and opens the front door, listening for something, Yang Sun asks what's going on. Shui Ta says that he's listening for the sound of a **plane**—he asks if Yang Sun has forgotten his dreams of flying. Yang Sun retorts that he hasn't "lost interest" in flying, or interest in Shen Te. He asks Shui Ta if Shui Ta is keeping Shen Te locked up somewhere and he implies that he'll cause havoc at the factory if Shui Ta is. Shui Ta offers to promote Yang Sun in exchange for him "drop[ping] the inquiry." Yang Sun demands Shui Ta's own position. Shui Ta is hesitant. Yang Sun says he'd "like to see more" of Shen Te.

Yang Sun is onto Shui Ta—though perhaps he's not necessarily as close to solving the mystery as he thinks he is. Nonetheless, Shui Ta becomes defensive and cagey as he begins to fear that the jig is up. Not only does he now have financial and legal problems to contend with, but also problems of his own making to unravel.

Yang Sun leaves. Shui Ta goes into the back room and returns with Shen Te's things. He wraps them in her old shawl. When he hears a noise at the door, he shoves the things away. Mrs. Mi Tzu and Shu Fu enter and ask why they've been sent for. Shui Ta says the factory is in trouble—unless he can prove he has more space for his workers, the police will shut them down. Shu Fu declares his displeasure with Shui Ta's use of the resources that were offered to Shen Te. Shui Ta assures him that Shen Te's return is "imminent."

Shui Ta is encountering many problems all at once. He's being forced to accept bribes and blackmail and to make dirty deals in order to keep his operation—and thus his cover—afloat. The pressure is mounting, and people's suspicions are deepening.

Mrs. Mi Tzu demands that Shui Ta give her Yang Sun. Shui Ta promises that Yang Sun will call on her tomorrow if she agrees to tell the police that Shui Ta is taking over her buildings. Shu Fu declares that it will be good to have Yang Sun employed elsewhere when Shen Te returns. Everything seems to be settled—but suddenly, voices from the street announce the arrival of the police. Yang Sun, Wong, and the policeman all enter the shop. The policeman says that Yang Sun has reported Shui Ta for keeping Shen Te locked up after hearing someone crying in the back room of the office. The rumor has spread quickly and the whole city is in an "uproar" over Shen Te's imprisonment.

Shui Ta cannot keep up with all of the bribes and demands his daily life now includes. On top of it all, his ruse is falling apart—and the villagers are misinterpreting his efforts to keep up his identity as evidence of a heinous crime against the very person he's trying to protect.

The policeman checks the back room but finds it empty. Yang Sun is baffled. He spots the bundle Shui Ta has stashed away and picks it up. Wong declares that Shen Te's clothes are here. A crowd has gathered outside the door—they declare that Shui Ta must have murdered Shen Te and hidden her body. The policeman asks Shui Ta to tell him where Shen Te is. Shui Ta says he cannot, so the policeman cuffs Shui Ta and leads him away.

As the village rallies around Shen Te, Shui Ta is faced with the impossibility of the situation he has created for himself. He cannot tell the truth—to do so would be to destroy Shen Te's reputation.

SCENE 9A

Back in Wong's den, the gods appear for the last time in the **water** seller's dreams. The gods look fatigued and shabby. Wong fills them in on Shen Te's disappearance and Shui Ta's arrest. Wong says that in another dream, Shen Te told Wong that Shui Ta was keeping her prisoner. Wong begs for the gods' help in finding Shen Te. The gods declare that in all their travels, Shen Te was the only good person they ever found—now that she has vanished, "all is lost." The first god decries the "misery, vulgarity, and waste" that defines human life. The third god is saddened by the fact that good deeds always harm the one performing them in the end. As the gods devolve into misery, the first god says that their only hope is to find Shen Te—the one good human they encountered in their travels.

The gods' desperation and frustration with their mission is evident in this passage. They have failed to find anyone good except Shen Te—and for this reason, they resolve to find her no matter what. The gods are determined to leave Earth and stop involving themselves in the degenerate world of humans—Shen Te is their last hope for being able to do just that.

SCENE 10

Many of the major characters have gathered in a courtroom. As they sit, they gossip about Shui Ta and his plans for expansion of the tobacco factory. They are certain that a man like Shui Ta will not be punished: rumor has it that he's bribed the judge already. On top of it all, the old woman says, Shen Te is still nowhere to be found. Wong laments that "only the gods" will ever know what truly happened to her.

Though many of the characters want to see Shui Ta punished, their gossip about him having bought his way out of the trial already reflects an understanding of the ways in which money lets the greedy and corrupt get away with anything while the good and virtuous suffer the consequences.

At that moment, the policeman announces the arrival of the judges. The three gods walk in wearing judges' robes. As they proceed to the bench, they whisper nervously amongst themselves about their badly-forged certificates and shabby robes. Wong alone recognizes the judges as the gods and smiles at them. They smile back.

The gods have returned to Setzuan once more to assess the situation for themselves—they are very desperate to find Shen Te and to make sure the one good person on Earth has not vanished.

The policeman brings in Shui Ta. As Shui Ta spies the "judges," he nearly faints. The first god asks Shui Ta how he pleads, and he says he is not guilty. The first god calls the policeman as a witness. The policeman takes the stand and describes Shui Ta as "a man of principle" who could never have harmed his cousin. The first god asks if anyone else will offer similar testimony. Shu Fu rises and declares that a fellow businessman could never be guilty of such a crime—Shui Ta is an upstanding member of the community. Mrs. Mi Tzu stands up and speaks out on behalf of Shui Ta, as well.

In this passage, as the policeman, Shu Fu, and Mrs. Mi Tzu speak up on behalf of Shui Ta, it becomes clear that the wealthy and powerful members of the community believe that he is innocent. To believe that someone of the same class could have committed a crime such as murder is unthinkable to them—they would then have to see that wealthy, influential people like themselves can be bad, too.

The first god then asks if there is any "less favorable" evidence. Wong, the carpenter, the old man and old woman, the unemployed man, the sister-in-law, and the niece come forward. The policeman whispers to the first god that only "riffraff" have anything bad to say about Shui Ta. The witnesses call him a cheat, a thief, a liar, and a murderer. The first god thanks them for their opinions and then lets Shui Ta himself take the stand.

The needy people of Setzuan clearly hate Shui Ta—he has profited off their labor but made their lives worse. Though the wealthy of Setzuan stand with Shui Ta in a show of class solidarity, it is clear that Shui Ta has negatively impacted the working people of the village.

Shui Ta defends himself by stating that many people hate him because he has done the "filthy jobs" needed to save Shen Te's shop. The others speak out against him again, pointing out his treachery and his favoritism of the crooked Yang Sun. As Shui Ta tries to defend himself, Yang Sun also leaps to the man's defense. He declares that he heard sobbing in the back room—Shen Te, he deduces, must still be alive, and Shui Ta must be innocent of her murder. Shu Fu says that Yang Sun recognized Shen Te's sobs because he himself made her cry so often. Yang Sun retorts that he made Shen Te happy—she was only going to be with Shu Fu after Shui Ta sold her to him.

Shui Ta finds himself dealing with the ruins of Shen Te's personal life on top of everything else. Shui Ta tries to point out that his ruthlessness was a necessary evil—but the majority of the other villagers cannot see things from his point of view.

Shui Ta defends himself, stating that the money he got in the exchange was for the poor—and for Shen Te, so that she could "go on being good." Wong accuses Shen Te of spoiling the "**fountain** of goodness" that the shop, a gift from the gods, was supposed to be all along. Shui Ta declares he did what he needed to do to stop the fountain from "run[ning] dry." Wong demands to know where Shen Te is, and the rest of the crowd echoes him. Shui Ta says that he cannot tell them. When the others ask why Shen Te had to go away, Shui Ta shouts that if she had stayed, the town would have "torn her to shreds."

While others declare that Shui Ta ran the shop—a gift from the gods—into the ground, Shui Ta argues that he was actually doing all he could to try to turn the place into a resource for everyone. By invoking imagery of water and fountains, Brecht again signals the failures of capitalism and the unfortunate ways in which "fountains" of wealth and plenty don't always serve the purposes they're meant to. Shui Ta laments being able to do enough for his neighbors—on his own, or as Shen Te.

Shui Ta asks for the court to be cleared—when only the judges remain, he says, he will make a confession. The policeman clears the court. Everyone exits. Shui Ta, addressing the shocked "illustrious ones," declares that he himself is Shen Te. He takes off his mask and tears away his clothes, revealing his true identity. The gods are astounded. Shen Te tells the gods that their entreaty of her "to be good and yet to live" has literally torn her in two—she could not be good to others and to herself at the same time. The gods, she says, have not built an easy world. Shen Te says that it is easy to become lost while trying to help those who are lost themselves—and it is hard not to become bad along the way, "since not to eat is to die."

In this passage, Shen Te admits that she created Shui Ta because she could not physically, emotionally, or logistically handle the demands of being good while still supporting herself and living her own life. There is so much suffering in the world that it is no wonder the wealthy don't help more—one can spiral down and become "lost" in trying to solve the problems of the needy, since there are so many in need and so few able to help. Brecht indicts the ways in which capitalism turns people against one another—often through no fault of their own.

Shen Te marvels at the fact that "it was when [she] was unjust that [she] ate good meat." She asks why good deeds are punished and laments having come to see her sense of empathy as only a nuisance. She apologizes to the gods but insists that she did all she did in an attempt to help her neighbor, to keep her lover, and to provide for her child. She was "too poor [and] too small," she says, for the gods' wishes.

Shen Te has come to realize that just like Wong the water seller, who profits off his neighbors' suffering, she too found herself enjoying life more as Shui Ta—a man who was capable of pushing aside his empathy and thinking only of himself and his own prosperity.

The first god begs Shen Te not to make herself miserable any longer—they are all relieved just to have found her. Shen Te asks how the gods can be happy to see her when she is the bad man who committed many crimes against his neighbors, but the gods point out that she is also the good woman who did many good deeds. The first god insists that Shen Te is just "confused" and then announces that the world should not be changed. The stage lights turn pink. Music begins to play. The gods ascend onto a cloud to return to heaven, and they ask Shen Te not to let her courage fail her.

Shen Te knows that she is not entirely good—she has done good deeds in her life, to be sure, but she's also done plenty of bad ones. Shen Te wants the gods' help in making sense of her life, her choices, and her future—but the gods would rather speak to Shen Te in easy platitudes than engage in the kind of moral reckoning she's trying to do.

Shen Te calls out to the gods as they ascend, asking for instructions as to what to do about the old couple who lost her shop, the **water** seller with the mangled hand, the barber to whom she is betrothed but does not love, the cruel man whom she does love, and the child she will soon bring into the world. The gods simply urge Shen Te to "continue to be good." She says she still needs her bad cousin, but the first god says that she should call on Shui Ta "once a month" at most. Shen Te begins shrieking as she begs for the gods to stay. The gods sing the "Valedictory Hymn," a brief song in which they declare what "rapture" it is to know a good thing—and then they flee. Shen Te continues screaming as the gods float away.

The gods are perturbed by the realization that there is, perhaps, no way for a human being to be entirely good. Rather than deal with the complicated moral questions Shen Te is asking—or even advise her as to how to alleviate some of the damage she's done to her own circumstances, her sense of self, and her community—the gods decide to flee Earth and ignore the things they have learned about humanity's capacity for goodness.

EPILOGUE

An epilogue—not attributed to any character in particular—addresses the audience directly. The epilogue points out the futility and insufficiency of the play's "nasty" ending. The players, too, feel "deflated" by the lack of resolution. The epilogue calls for the audience to decide what will change the world—whether new gods, atheism, materialism, or "moral rearmament" will do the tricks. It is up to the audience, the epilogue declares, to write the happy ending to the play—there must, Brecht himself declares, "be a way!"

This short monologue (often delivered by the actor playing Wong or the actress playing Shen Te) places the burden of solving humanity's problems on the audience. Brecht points out that if audiences have come to find a solution to questions of identity, greed, wealth, and religion in a play, they are sorely out of luck. Healing society is up to humans living within that society—not gods, not actors, and not fictional characters in a parable.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "*The Good Woman of Setzuan.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Mar 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "*The Good Woman of Setzuan.*" LitCharts LLC, March 13, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-good-woman-of-setzuan.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Good Woman of Setzuan* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Brecht, Bertolt. The Good Woman of Setzuan. University of Minnesota Press. 1999.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brecht, Bertolt. The Good Woman of Setzuan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1999.