

## Questions and Answers in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechwan*

1. 1

### **How do the gods define "goodness"?**

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

The gods reveal a bit more about their definition of "goodness" in Scene 1a, during their interaction with Wong. They ask him to find Shen Te and "show interest in her goodness - for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." This reveals that they recognize how difficult it is to be good without support from others.

In Scene 6a, the gods cite goodness as a strength, telling Wong that they cannot intervene in Shen Te's life because "The good man finds his own way here below! The good woman too." However, when the gods appear to Wong in Scene 9a, they reveal how little goodness they have found in the world. Shen Te is the only person who has "stayed good," and Wong draws attention to the fact that she hasn't even done that. The third god concludes that, "Good intentions bring people to the brink of the abyss, and good deeds push them over the edge." The gods have discovered that it is impossible to be "good" in accordance with their rulebook.

2. 2

### **How do the characters in the play besides the gods view the idea of "goodness"?**

Shen Te provides her own support, in the form of her invented cousin, Shui Ta. When the carpenter asks him to call Shen Te because "she's good," Shui Ta answers, "Certainly. She's ruined."

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

"Goodness" as a theme is addressed in Scene 6 by Yang Sun. The Song of St. Nevercome, sung by Yang Sun, reveals that he believes it is futile to try to be "good." He sings sarcastically, "Oh, hooray, hooray! That day goodness will pay!" and

describes the day that will never come as when "all men will be good without batting an eye." To him, this day is unachievable.

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

3. 3

**What is historical materialism and how is it relevant in the play?**

*The Good Woman of Setzuan* suggests that a society's morality is determined by its economic systems. This theme is introduced in the prologue. Shen Te complains to the gods, "But everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!" The second god responds, "That's not our sphere. We never meddle with economics." However, the first god immediately contradicts him and they decide to give her some money to make it easier for her to be good. This irony blurs the distinction between the morality of "goodness" that the gods are searching for and economics.

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

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

4. 4

**How is the theme of patriarchal capitalism addressed in the play?**

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

5. 5

**What role does gender play in determining Shen Te's fate?**

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

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

6. 6

**How does Brecht alienate the audience in the epilogue?**

Brecht is known for his creation of what he called the "alienation effect," which forced the audience to view a play objectively rather than experiencing its content emotionally. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, the epilogue calls upon the audience to decide for itself how goodness can exist in a world that is inherently not good. The epilogue, which was added after the Viennese premiere of the play, implores the audience to write their own ending. It acknowledges that the current ending of the play is not quite satisfactory, since nothing is fixed. The gods are unable to accept that their rulebook must be changed in order to make it possible to be good in the world, and they leave in denial of Shen Te's situation. This technique of addressing the audience directly is an example of alienation, which forces the audience to see the play for what it represents rather than get caught up in it as an analogy for real life.

7. 7

**How is greediness commented upon by music in the play?**

In Scene one, Shen Te sings, "The little lifeboat is swiftly sent down. / Too many men too greedily / Hold on to it as they drown," is a commentary on the greediness of the characters around her and how impossible it is to help everyone in need. In Scene 1a, the gods sing to Wong in his dream as a way of chastising him for having no faith in Shen Te.

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

8. 8

**How is music used to comment upon the economic situation in the play?**

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

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In Scene 8, music is used as encouragement to work. After he is promoted to foreman, Yang Sun directs the workers to sing to make them work faster. They sing The Song of the Eighth Elephant, which is about how the world values power over hard work. The eighth elephant is lazy but is rewarded even though his seven brothers do all the work; he is the one with tusks, so they are at a disadvantage. The song concludes, "Seven are no match for one, if the one has a gun!"

9. 9

**In the play, is "love" equated with "goodness"? Why or why not?**

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

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

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

#### 10.10

##### **Are the gods in this play omniscient and wise? Why or why not?**

The gods do not act as all-knowing, necessarily wise beings in this play. They have to be told by Wong what is happening with Shen Te, and often they are intentionally ignorant to avoid conflict. In Scene 10, the gods use music to drown out reason. They sing "The Valedictory Hymn" ironically, since there is no victory to be celebrated. They have not fixed anything about Shen Te's life. While they make their final exit, they sing "The Trio of the Vanishing Gods on the Cloud" in which they admit that "If we watch our find too long / It will disappear." They do not want to stay in case Shen Te proves not to be good after all; they would rather be ignorant of that change if it does happen, so they will not have to change their rules.