

The Good Woman Of Setzuan Summary & Study Guide

Plot Summary

German playwright Bertolt Brecht began writing *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in 1938 but did not finish the play until 1941, when he was living in exile in the United States due to Nazi rule and World War II. The play first opened in Switzerland in 1943 with a score by Huldreich Georg Früh, but the most commonly produced and studied iteration of the play featured music by German

composer Paul Dessau. Brecht's career came to prominence during the Weimar Republic, a brief period (1918-1933) in Germany following World War I in which there was a flourishing of art, science, and democracy. When Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich seized power in 1933, the Weimar Republic was replaced with dictatorship and much of its art and artists were marked as anti-German. Like many German artists,

Brecht fled Germany in 1933 to avoid persecution.

Like most of Brecht's plays, his Marxist ideals heavily influenced *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. The play is about a young prostitute named Shen Te in the Chinese city of Setzuan. When a trio of gods appear in the city, they are on a journey to find a good person to demonstrate that humanity is worth saving. Shen Te shows that she is good by being the only person willing to take

them in for the night. In return, the gods pay her for the room. She uses the money to buy a tobacco shop. Immediately, the poor and unemployed begin to take advantage of Shen Te's kindness and charity. About to lose her store, Shen Te disguises herself as a shrewd and ruthless cousin named Shui Ta. Shui Ta makes all the unpopular decisions so Shen Te can remain good. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* questions whether it is possible

to survive as a good person in a capitalist society.

Brecht called his work epic or dialectical theatre, which does not refer to the size or scale of the productions, but to his style of engaging with the audience.

Rather than encouraging audiences to suspend disbelief or become immersed in the story, Brecht's plays push audiences to think and comprehend. He endeavored to show the world as it is to spur audiences to take social action. To this

end, Brecht popularized the concept of
Verfremdungseffekt, which translates as
“alienation effect” or “estrangement
effect.” This means that to discourage
viewers who might otherwise lose
themselves in the story, he incorporated
conventions that would constantly
remind them that they are at the theatre.
These conventions include speaking
directly to the audience, showing the
mechanisms behind the design and
effects, and using music to make the

production feel less realistic.

Additionally, actors were required to

play characters without “becoming”

them, and the design elements were

minimalist to avoid a realist aesthetic.