

## 18PEL3 WORLD CLASSICS IN TRANSLATION

### Unit – III

Kafka : Metamorphosis

Brecht : The good person of Szechwan

### UNIT – III

#### ***THE METAMORPHOSIS FRANZ KAFKA***

#### **Critical Introduction**

Franz Kafka began writing in his early twenties while studying law at the University of Prague from 1901 to 1906. In 1908, he began publishing extracts from his novel, *Amerika* (1927; *America*, 1938; better known as *Amerika*, 1946), and *The Metamorphosis* was written in late 1912, appearing in print in 1915. His working career spans only sixteen years, and, when he died in 1924 at the age of forty-one, many of his major novels had not been published; his work was little known beyond avant-garde German literary circles.

Kafka is now regarded as a central figure in twentieth century literature. The commentary on his writings and his life is extremely large, including scores of books and hundreds of articles. Of all his publications, *The Metamorphosis* is undoubtedly his most famous. The novella has been widely anthologized and is available in several single-volume editions; in addition, the number of articles and portions of books about the story make it the most heavily analyzed of all Kafka's works.

Because the work has been so frequently discussed from so many different perspectives—psychological, sociological, political, philosophical, linguistic, and religious—it is difficult to summarize the responses to *The Metamorphosis*. Marxists, psychoanalysts, postmodernists, feminists, Zionists, structuralists, and poststructuralists

have all interpreted the story in different ways. However, there is some general agreement that such overall themes as guilt, judgment, retribution, alienation, and the place of the artist in society are contained in the core of the narrative.

Kafka's writings largely originated from the conflicted relationship he experienced with his family, especially his father. This biographical connection has been much discussed, and it is easily perceived in Gregor Samsa's reaction to his family. Although constrained by his obligations to support his father, mother, and sister, Gregor nevertheless seeks throughout the tale to be reintegrated into the family circle. Made aware of his alienation from them by his transformation, he vainly attempts to ignore the change at first and to maintain a semblance of normality, until he is finally abandoned by his sister, with whom he had had a close relationship. It is her firm rejection of him as a person that ultimately causes him to surrender his own sense of self, precipitating his death.

*The Metamorphosis* is constructed in three acts, each involving an escape by Gregor from his room and a return to it. With each retreat, Gregor becomes noticeably less human and more accepting of his transformative state. With each act, Gregor also becomes physically weaker. As his family abandons its denial of his insectlike appearance and their hope for his full recovery to a normal human condition, they gradually become indifferent to his fate and recognize their need to pursue their lives without him. His father returns to work, his mother learns to operate the house without the help of a maid, even adding the burden of taking in boarders, and his sister assumes the responsibilities of adulthood. Where once he was the center of their lives, he now becomes an unnecessary burden and an embarrassment.

The horror of a tale about a man who transforms into an insect is heightened by Kafka's literary style: a matter-of-fact tone laced with mordant humor. The fact that Gregor initially greets his metamorphosis with a chilling calm suggests that he previously saw himself as

verminlike, as somebody who was already less than human. This internal lack of self-esteem and the insecurities it produces are heightened by the change in his body. One of the major problems to reading *The Metamorphosis* is accepting Gregor's transformation as literal and not merely symbolic; he has really turned into an insect. The strangeness of this fact, along with his and his family's reactions to it, is what makes the narrative so fascinating and rich in interpretative possibilities.

The power of Kafka's fiction relies primarily on the uncanny ways he captures the alienation of twentieth century life. Denied the saving grace of religious belief, skeptical of the achievements of modern science, and leery of the significance of art, Kafka's characters are left adrift in a world of their own making over which they seem to have little control. *The Metamorphosis* captures all of the fear and doubt with which human beings face their future.

## CHARACTERS

### Charwoman

Hired by the Samsas to replace their live-in servant, the charwoman is a tough old woman who, unlike the other characters, is neither horrified nor frightened by Gregor's insect form. She even refers to Gregor affectionately as "the old dung beetle" and less affectionately threatens him with a chair. She is the one who discovers that Gregor has died and who cheerfully disposes of his body.

### Chief Clerk

The chief clerk from Gregor's firm comes to the Samsa house to find out why Gregor has not shown up for work. When Gregor delays coming out of his room, the clerk criticizes him for poor work performance and reports that the head of the firm suspects Gregor of embezzling funds. When Gregor finally emerges, the clerk flees in horror.

### Gregor Samsa

Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of the story, is a self-sacrificing, dutiful young man who is mysteriously transformed into a giant insect as the story begins. He lives with his parents and his sister, whom he has been supporting by working as a travelling salesman, a job he very much dislikes, but which he devotes his life to: he seems to have no close friends and no social life. There are hints of repressed resentment in Gregor's attitude toward his family; he seems to feel that his sacrifices for them have not been properly appreciated. And despite his dutiful nature, he does not seem very close to his family, except for his sister, whose musical studies he has been planning to finance.

After his transformation, Gregor's character changes somewhat: on two occasions, he puts his own desires ahead of what others want, first when he tries to defend his belongings in opposition to his sister's plan to remove them, and second when he seeks to obtain the mysterious nourishment associated with his sister's violin playing. In the end, however, he reverts to his self-sacrificing ways by willingly going to his death because his family wants to be rid of him.

### Grete Samsa

Grete Samsa, usually referred to in the story as Gregor's sister, is the family member Gregor seems closest to and is the one who takes care of him after his transformation. Even she seems disgusted by his new form, however, and she is the one who at the end demands that he be got rid of.

Before the transformation, the seventeen-year-old Grete leads an idle life and is regarded by her parents as "a somewhat useless daughter." After the transformation, she becomes a sales clerk as well as taking on the responsibility of caring for Gregor. Tired out by all these new duties, she begins to neglect Gregor, but is furious when her mother cleans Gregor's room, seeing this action as an invasion of her domain.

Twice Grete does things that lead Gregor to leave his room, for which he suffers serious consequences. First, her decision to remove Gregor's furniture leads to a confrontation in the living room that ends with Gregor being seriously injured. Later her violin playing lures Gregor into the living room again, provoking the conflict that leads to his death. She is also the one who argues the most strongly for getting rid of Gregor. After Gregor's death, Grete blooms, and her parents think she is ready for a husband.

### **Mr. Samsa**

Mr. Samsa, referred to only as Gregor's father until Gregor's death, is a failed businessman who has been idle for five years, living off what Gregor earns. He seems quite antagonistic to his son, fierce toward him, though at the same time weak: when he first sees the transformed Gregor, he shakes a fist at him, but then breaks down and cries.

It is the fierceness that dominates, however. The first two times Gregor ventures out of his room, his father forces him back in, the first time brandishing a walking stick and a newspaper at him, the second time bombarding him with apples. He does injury to Gregor both times.

After Gregor's transformation, Mr. Samsa is also transformed; before, he was a sluggish man who hardly ever got dressed and who could barely walk; now he is a bank messenger in a smart uniform who is reluctant ever to take it off. He is still weak in some ways, though, waiting cap in hand on the lodgers, for instance, until Gregor's death, at which point he becomes invigorated and is able to stand up to both the lodgers and the charwoman.

### **Mrs. Samsa**

Mrs. Samsa, who is referred to as Gregor's mother throughout except after Gregor dies, is perhaps the character most sympathetic to Gregor, and the most willing to come to his defense. When something first seems wrong with Gregor, she assumes he is ill and wants to send for the doctor. When the chief clerk is being critical of Gregor, she assures

him that Gregor is a very hard worker. When Mr. Samsa throws apples at Gregor, Mrs. Samsa rushes to intervene.

On the other hand, Mrs. Samsa cannot really stand to look at her son in his transformed state: the first two times she does so she screams and faints. She is also not strong enough to defend Gregor successfully: she allows Grete to overrule her on whether to remove Gregor's furniture; and when Grete and Mr. Samsa begin to discuss getting rid of Gregor, Mrs. Samsa has an asthmatic fit and is unable to intervene.

### **The Three Lodgers**

Arriving in the Samsa household near the end of the story, the three lodgers are serious gentlemen who acquire power over the household. They always act together, as if they were a single character, though they do have a leader ("the middle lodger"). It is their request that leads to Grete's violin concert in the living room. When they discover Gregor, they give notice and threaten to sue, but when Mr. Samsa orders them out they leave quietly.

### **Short Summary**

*The Metamorphosis* is a novella by Franz Kafka about a man who inexplicably transforms into a giant insect.

- Traveling salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to discover that he has transformed into a giant insect. His metamorphosis makes it impossible for him to work.
- When Gregor finally opens the door, his hideous figure frightens his family.
- Gregor's parents have trouble adjusting to his metamorphosis. One day, Gregor's father becomes so frustrated that he throws an apple at Gregor. The fruit becomes lodged in Gregor's back, where it rots and causes an infection that ultimately kills Gregor.

## Summary

Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, awakes one morning to find out that he has been transformed into a gigantic insect. From his bed, he looks around his room, adjusting physically and mentally to his new body and wondering if he hasn't been dreaming. But when he tries to turn over onto his right side and can't, he realizes that it is no dream, that indeed he is an insect, complete with a hard shell for a back, wriggling legs, and feelers.

He wants to go back to sleep, but he remembers that he has to get up for work and is already late. His thoughts turn to his job and to the work he does. He hates his job, and he dislikes the Chief of the company. Five years before, Gregor's father's business failed, and Gregor has been supporting his parents and his sister ever since. He has also been paying off his parents' personal debts to the Chief, and he hopes one day to quit his job, settle his parents' accounts, and send his sister to the Conservatory to study music.

While his parents are trying to find out why Gregor hasn't come out of his room, the chief clerk arrives to inquire about Gregor's lateness. When Gregor still doesn't emerge from his room, his parents become worried and send Grete and Anna to get the doctor and locksmith, respectively. The chief clerk threatens Gregor with the loss of his job if he doesn't come out and report for work. Gregor responds by saying that he hasn't been feeling well, but promises to report for work anyway.

When Gregor finally unlocks the door to his room and shows his face, the chief clerk, who is the first to see him, reacts with shock and horror and retreats to the staircase. Mrs. Samsa collapses to the floor at the sight of her son, and Mr. Samsa breaks down and cries. The chief clerk meanwhile is on the landing and wants to flee. Gregor tries to speak to him in order to give him some explanation for what has happened to him, but the clerk flies out of the house. Gregor's father

picks up the chief clerk's walking stick, which he left behind, and a rolled newspaper and drives Gregor back into his room. In his panic to escape his father, Gregor gets caught in the door of his room and sustains multiple injuries to himself. Shaken and bleeding, he lies dazed on the floor of his room.

When Part 2 opens, it is twilight of the same day, but we learn later that more time has really elapsed between the morning's events and the time Gregor wakes up again in his room. Grete has taken on the responsibility of feeding Gregor and cleaning out his room, since her parents seem unwilling or unable to cope with the new crisis. The cook implores Mrs. Samsa to let her go. Mrs. Samsa has no choice but to dismiss her, and now Grete must help her mother with the cooking chores as well.

Gregor is able to listen in on his parents' conversation, and he learns that the family has some money left over from his father's investments to live on for about a year. Grete decides that it would be best if much of the furniture is removed from Gregor's room to give him greater freedom of movement. To this end, she enlists her mother's help and the two women start to take out the chest and the writing desk from Gregor's room. When they come back for the picture on the wall, Gregor is clinging tenaciously to it, daring them to take it from him. When Mrs. Samsa sees Gregor spread out on the wallpaper, she shrieks with horror and faints. Grete rushes into another room for something to revive her with. Gregor worriedly follows Grete out, and when the two confront each other, Grete drops a bottle in alarm. The bottle shatters and a sliver of glass cuts Gregor's face. At this point, Mr. Samsa returns to the apartment wearing a blue bank messenger's uniform and cap. When he sees his stricken wife and learns from Grete what has happened, he begins to bombard Gregor with apples. One apple lodges in Gregor's back. Hurt, exhausted, and mortally wounded, Gregor loses consciousness.

Refusing to eat, Gregor is growing weaker and thinner as Part 3 begins. His eyesight is failing him and, because of his injuries—one leg is badly mangled—his movements are severely restricted. The family is now working: Mr. Samsa as a bank messenger, Mrs. Samsa as a seamstress for an underwear company, and Grete as a salesgirl. As Gregor's condition continues to deteriorate, Grete takes less interest in her brother's health and welfare.

Three men come to rent a room in the Samsa apartment. One night after dinner, when Grete is serenading them with her violin, Gregor, who is drawn to the music, sticks his head out his door and is spotted by one of the lodgers. The three men express their outrage and threaten to sue Mr. Samsa for damages. Soon after the men depart to their room, Grete sits down with her parents and urges them to get rid of Gregor.

That night, plagued by guilt, Gregor agrees with his sister that the only solution is for him to disappear. At three o'clock in the morning, he dies.

The new cleaning woman discovers his body. She alerts the Samsas, and then she quickly sweeps up Gregor's corpse. The Samsa family decides to take a ride in the country. They now pin all their hopes for the future on Grete who, despite her ordeal, has grown into a beautiful, prospective bride.

## **THEMES**

### **Alienation at Work**

One of the themes of the story is the unpleasantness of work. Gregor Samsa hates his job as a travelling salesman, but must continue doing it to pay off his parents' debts. There is no suggestion that he gets any job satisfaction; all he talks about is how exhausting the job is, how

irritating it is to be always travelling: making train connections, sleeping in strange beds, always dealing with new people and thus never getting the chance to make good friends, and so forth. Moreover, it turns out that Gregor works for a firm that does not trust its employees at all: because he is late this one day, the chief clerk shows up to check on him and begins hinting that he is suspected of embezzling funds and may very well be fired. It also seems that Gregor's co-workers dislike him because he is on the road so often; they gossip about him and the other travelling salesmen, making unfounded complaints such as that they make lots of money and just enjoy themselves. Work is hell, the story seems to suggest.

### **Father-Son Antagonism**

Life at home, according to the story, is no paradise either. In particular, Gregor seems to have a difficult relationship with his father. The very first time Gregor's father is seen he is making a fist, albeit just to knock on Gregor's door. Soon after, however, he makes a fist more in earnest: when he first sees Gregor in his insect form, he shakes his fist at him and glares at him fiercely. Later he attacks him with a newspaper and a walking stick, and, later still, bombards him with apples, causing him serious injury. He is also not above making sarcastic comments, suggesting for instance that Gregor's room is untidy. And it turns out that he has deceived Gregor about the family finances, thus needlessly extending the length of Gregor's employment at the hateful travelling salesman's job. Finally, he does not seem particularly appreciative of the money Gregor has been bringing in; he is content to live off his son's labor, but Gregor feels there was "a special uprush of warm feeling" about it.

Gregor's disappointment over the lack of appreciation is one of the few critical thoughts he thinks about his father. He also thinks briefly that the money his father hid from him could have been used to free him from his job sooner, but he quickly dismisses the thought by saying that no doubt his father knew best. In short, the antagonism as portrayed in

the story is mostly one-way: the father abuses the son, but the son suppresses his angry responses and accepts his downtrodden state.

### **Betrayal**

The one person Gregor feels close to is his sister, and she at first seems like the one most attentive to his needs. She brings him his food and cleans his room, and even her plan to remove Gregor's furniture, which he objects to, seems well-meant: she thinks he needs more room in his insect state to crawl around. After a while, she begins neglecting Gregor. When he tries to approach her one last time, she turns on him viciously, falsely accusing him of wanting to kick the rest of the family out of the house, saying that he is not really Gregor but a creature that must be got rid of. The story seems to be suggesting that no one is to be trusted.

### **Isolation and Self-Sacrifice**

Gregor seems to have no close friends at work or elsewhere, and no romantic attachments; he is not very close with his family, except for his sister who it turns out cannot be trusted; he seems to lead a lonely, isolated life even before his transformation, and the transformation reinforces his situation. As an insect, he cannot communicate at all, and he is forced to stay in his room; he is cut off almost entirely from the rest of humanity.

As an insect, he can still hear, however, so he knows what others want, but they cannot know what he wants. This seems an apt situation for Gregor to end up in, because his life even before his transformation seems to have been one of catering to others' needs while suppressing his own.

### **Escaping**

Although in some ways the transformation reinforces Gregor's situation, in other ways becoming an insect is a way for him to escape his unhappy life. No longer will he have to work at his burdensome job; instead, he can spend his days scurrying around his room, something he seems to

enjoy. One of the themes is the joy of escaping from one's responsibilities.

### **Seizing Power**

Although this is not a route Gregor is able to pursue successfully, the story does indicate that some people are able to reverse the power relations in their lives. Gregor seems able only to remain downtrodden or to escape to insectdom; but his father is able to overthrow the domination of the three lodgers and recapture the authority in his house.

Interestingly, he can only do this after Gregor himself, the self-sacrificing, downtrodden one, is dead, perhaps suggesting that the presence of a self-sacrificing person drains those around him.

### **In, *The Metamorphosis*, how do Gregor's feelings towards his family change over the course of the story?**

In the course of *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's feelings towards his family change less than his family's towards him. He retains mingled emotions of duty, love, and resentment towards them. However, by the time he is dying, love has come to predominate.

Gregor has a complex set of emotions towards his family. His feelings towards them, however, change far less than their feelings toward him.

Throughout the story, Gregor has a great sense of duty and concern for his family. He is willing to sacrifice his needs for their benefit. He also feels love towards them, mingled with resentment that he has to work in a dehumanizing job he loathes as a traveling salesman to help pay their debts.

This sense of mingled duty, love, and resentment does not change much during the course of the novella. However, his family does change toward him, including his beloved sister Grete. They all grow

increasingly to fear and resent him as a drag on their lives once he takes on an insect form and no longer can either work or speak to them. Grete expresses the family's feelings near the end when she says he is no longer their Gregor. If he was, she says, he would have realized how hard the situation was and left them already. Instead, she says, they have to face that they have to get "rid" of the insect that used to be their brother.

Gregor, however, is still himself inside. If anything, released from his exhausting job and the resentment it caused him, he feels more love than ever for his family. Injured and in pain from the apple lodged in his back, and weakened because of not eating, he willingly and easily lets himself die for his family, found not by his family members but the cleaning lady.

### **What does Gregor's death symbolize?**

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's death symbolizes the destructive impact of neglect, dehumanization, and lack of love. Gregor's family turns on him after he becomes an insect, perceiving him more as a burden than a family member.

Gregor dies slowly through the abuse and neglect of his family, who no longer have any use for him once he turns into an insect and no longer can work. His father injures him badly by throwing an apple at him, which lodges in his back. His back becomes inflamed and the apple rots, which weakens Gregor. As he realizes that his family—even his sister, Grete—dislike and resent him because he is a burden, he stops eating. He realizes that both he and his family would be better off if he died. When Grete locks him in his room, no longer leaving the door open so that he can see and hear what they are doing in the living room, Gregor realizes that he is unloved and that his life has no meaning.

Once he becomes an insect and therefore can no longer talk, his family gradually forgets that he is, on the inside, a sentient human being

who needs love and nurture. Only the charwoman still perceives this, and only she is not afraid of him.

Gregor's death symbolizes the way neglect and lack of love can destroy a person. This indifference on the part of the family is brought home when they don't even want to hear what the charwoman has to say about discovering his dead body. They also show their indifference when they are overjoyed to be rid of him, taking a trip to the country, realizing they can move to a different apartment, and feeling unburdened.

### **How does Gregor feel about his transformation?**

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor is not shocked at all when he wakes up and finds that he's been changed into a giant bug. He wonders, with mild curiosity, what has happened to him, but then his thoughts turn away to how tired he is and how difficult his job has made it for him to have a life outside of work.

Surprisingly, Gregor does not seem at all shocked or even surprised by his transformation into a giant bug. He notices that he has been changed into an insect, and his first thought is, "What's happened to me." However, his next thought is that he would really like to keep sleeping for a while longer, and his *next* thought is of how demanding his job is. Gregor registers a sort of mild curiosity regarding his physical transformation, but then he immediately moves on to thinking about his regular life and how exhausting it has been—how it has prevented him from getting good sleep, eating good food, forming intimate relationships, and so on.

To me, this seems like a good clue that Gregor isn't completely surprised by his physical transformation because he has already, in a way, sort of emotionally and socially transformed into a bug. The unreasonable demands of his job and the negative impact that the job has had on his personal life have essentially rendered him as inhuman as

a bug. He cannot do any of the things that would seem to make human life worth living. Gregor is simply a worker and nothing else, and so he doesn't seem very surprised when he turns into a creature that is simply a worker and nothing else.

### **What is the deeper meaning behind *The Metamorphosis*?**

The deeper meaning behind *The Metamorphosis* is connected to the themes of alienation, identity, the concept of compassion, and the absurd. While the story itself is about a man who randomly turns into a giant bug, deeper analysis shows the reader that Kafka is exploring the absurdity of life and the concept of human nature related to how one deals with their reality and the reality of others.

*The Metamorphosis* is a novella about a man named Gregor Samsa. He's an average guy who works a modest job and cares for his family. One day, Gregor wakes up and realizes that he's been turned into a giant bug. This absurd shift in narrative aims to reveal the monotony of Gregor's life and the fact that, upon first read, the change is seemingly meaningless. However, the reader realizes that changing into a bug says more about the human condition than meets the eye, exposing the concept of judgment and the meaning of happiness.

As readers peel back the layers of the text starting with the grotesque spectacle that becomes Gregor, they begin to realize that we are all Gregor. Gregor becomes a cockroach-like bug, but his mind is still the same. Deep down, he still identifies with his old life, and while he may look different (and terrifying), he's still Gregor.

We watch his family try to care for him, but at the end of the day, even his father's patience runs thin. There is simply no way for Gregor to relate to the world around him anymore, even though he shares the same thoughts, feelings, and life concerns. This could be related to anyone attempting to fit into society. Whether it's based on gender,

sexuality, religion, or ethnicity, we are all living in what we call the human condition.

Unfortunately for Gregor, his exterior, like many in this world, causes those around him to judge and close their hearts to his inner world. He is simply too different. In turn, Gregor becomes literally isolated in his room and existentially isolated in his mind.

One question still remains through this absurd tale: is Gregor happy in his new life? He hated his job and the lack of trust from his bosses, and it seems now that Gregor enjoys the lack of responsibility and care for a world that never really cared about him. Looking at this work through an absurdist lens, one could say that Gregor's misfortune is actually a gift, as it removes the burden of life and allows Gregor to accept the fact that life has no meaning. This radical acceptance of his new body can allow Gregor to find peace, as he is finally free from society's shackles as he no longer has to conform and play a role he so desperately wanted to escape.

### **What is the moral of *The Metamorphosis*?**

The moral of *The Metamorphosis* is that, in a capitalist economy, the worker's importance and experience is reduced to his or her work alone. Gregor must work so much to support his family that he has no time to sleep, eat good food, or form intimate relationships with anyone. Once he loses his position as a worker, he completely loses importance within his own family and society.

The moral of *The Metamorphosis* is that capitalism reduces workers to their economic status alone. Gregor is a worker, and he has been worked so hard that he has essentially had to forego all of the things that make human life worth living. He works so much that his mother even feels angry that he does nothing much outside of work and sit at home.



Gregor himself is aware that he has no real life. He is always traveling for work, and so he eats bland and unsatisfying food on the road—food from which he reaps no enjoyment. He feels completely exhausted and is frustrated with the fact that he has no time or opportunity to cultivate real, intimate relationships. This is evidenced by the fact that the beautiful picture frame on his wall contains a photo of a woman that he clipped from a magazine; he does not actually have a real-life person whose picture he can put in the frame.

He cannot even sleep enough to ever feel truly rested and has to get up at a ridiculously early hour just to be at work on time. The one day he doesn't make it there, the manager actually comes to his house to guilt-trip him into emerging from his room when it is clear that there is something very wrong with him. His only status comes from being a worker, and once he can no longer work and earn money, he completely loses relevance and importance in his own family.

### **How does each family member react to Gregor's transformation?**

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's father threatens him and physically abuses him. He throws an apple at Gregor, which becomes lodged in his back. Gregor's mother and sister are repulsed by his transformation but are initially kind to him. They de-clutter his room so he can crawl and climb comfortably, and his sister brings him food. Before long, these acts of kindness come to an end, and Gregor is neglected by his family and left to starve to death.

The protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a traveling salesman named Gregor Samsa. Gregor works hard every day to support his parents and sister. He hates his job and the loneliness and isolation that accompany it. He is cannot develop any meaningful relationships due to the nature of his job, and as a result, he has no friends or social life. Meanwhile, his family enjoys the fruits of his labor. They have extravagant breakfasts, multiple newspaper

subscriptions, jewelry, and a house staff. Gregor's family is not particularly loving towards him before his transformation, and their treatment of him becomes outright abusive after his metamorphosis.

After Gregor morphs into a bug, his father is cruel to him, threatens him with violence, and even attacks him. His mother and sister attempt to care for Gregor at first, bringing him food and clearing furniture out of his room so he will have more space to comfortably crawl and climb. Before long, these acts of kindness are replaced with revulsion and resentment. The Samsas are frustrated at having to work and support themselves now that Gregor is unable to financially provide for the family. They come to view him as a burden who has outlived his purpose. Their poor treatment of Gregor escalates after the three boarders are introduced.

In an attempt to alleviate their financial distress, the Samsas rent out parts of their house to three tenants. The Samsas take great measures to ensure the comfort and contentment of their new guests, often at Gregor's expense. Gregor's family uses his room for storage in order to make space for the boarders. They dump unwanted and unneeded items in his room, which is symbolic, as Gregor himself has become unwanted and unneeded in their eyes.

The Samsas neglect to bring food to Gregor but work hard cooking for the lodgers; Gregor says, "How these lodgers stuff themselves, and I am dying." Prior to the arrival of the three guests, the door to Gregor's room was often left open. Now the door is almost always closed to keep Gregor's existence a secret.

While the Samsas dedicate great time and effort to the comfort of the lodgers, Gregor deteriorates and starves. He is left dirty, uncared for, and neglected:

Because as a result of the dust which lay all over his room and flew around with the slightest movement, he was totally covered in dirt.

On his back and his sides, he carted around with him dust, threads, hair, and remnants of food.

### **What is the message about the value of human life as shown through *The Metamorphosis*?**

In *The Metamorphosis*, there are any number of interpretations that can be made about messages that might have been intended about people, life, and society. In terms of messages about the value of human life, Kafka seems to be saying that human life is valuable and that all humans should be treated as significant and important and should be good to one another. This is shown by the fact that Gregor Samsa is dehumanized (and literally turned into an insect), possibly due to the fact that his job as a traveling salesman provides him with little to no respect from his colleagues, supervisors, and customers, along with the fact that his family does not respect him and only expects him to support them. Before his metamorphosis, Gregor has no life of his own and only lives to work and take care of his able-bodied family (father, mother, and sister). He must work unreasonably long hours to support his family and pay back their debts while they spend their days in a carefree manner, not working. If these conditions are dehumanizing and show that Gregor and his life as a human are not valued by those around him, then the converse should be true: people should be treated with respect and valued as individuals and should be good to others, thereby affirming the value of human life. This seems to be the message about the value of human life that Kafka is showing in *The Metamorphosis*.

### **Discuss the symbols in *The Metamorphosis*.**

There are numerous symbols in Franz Kafka's story. If we look at Gregor Samsa's transformation in relationship to his normal daily life, then we can see the insect itself as a symbol of dehumanization that he suffers from his job and his indifferent family. Gregor's feelings of self-worth have declined so far that he can no longer think of himself as a human being.

Because Gregor has made many sacrifices for his family, he is often seen as a Christ figure. One detail supporting that interpretation is his mention of painful sensations:

he felt like he was nailed down and stretched out.

Other crucifixion-related symbols can be found in the apples that his father throws, which echo the crowd's abuse of Christ en route to Golgotha. In contrast, apples can be a symbol of knowledge, as in the Biblical Book of Genesis, so Gregor being bombarded with apples could symbolize his being forced to accept the knowledge of his father's antipathy toward him.

### **Interpret the significance of Gregor's last words: "What now, then?" (Kafka 48).**

In the moment that Gregor speaks his last words, "What now, then?" he seems to not be sure that death is really upon him. After speaking, he "looked around in the darkness. He soon made the discovery that he could no longer move at all" (71). He seems to be searching for his next step, or perhaps some salvation. And yet, as the text goes on, it becomes clear that Samsa is not surprised by his lack of movement: "He was not surprised at that. On the contrary, it struck him as unnatural that he had really been able up to this point to move around with these thin little legs" (71). To Samsa, his own existence has already become an unnatural thing. He is prepared for death, even if he had not expected it in that particular moment.

His last words also take on a deeper significance. He might have meant "What now" in regards to his family, who he will be leaving behind. Right before he spoke, his sister had checked in on him and shouted "Finally!" Gregor's care for his family's wellbeing does not change, even after his physical transformation. In his dying moments, "He remembered his family with deep feeling and love" (71).

Finally, Samsa's last words are a question about death. As a man who has undergone a surreal metamorphosis once already, he is about to change again, crossing over the plane of the living to the world of the dead. Perhaps Samsa views his earthly metamorphosis as a necessary step towards his own death. One possible reading of *The Metamorphosis* as a whole is as a metaphor for disease, with the industrious Samsa becoming a bedridden creature, unable to work. His last words demonstrate that he is resigned to seeing whatever next form his existence—or lack of existence—will take.

## ***THE GOOD PERSON OF SZECHWAN* BERTOLT BRECHT**

### **Critical Introduction**

The first full text of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* was offered for production in 1942. The play came from a mature writer who was in his ninth year of exile from his homeland, Germany. During his nomadic travels to avoid Nazi rule and certain death, Brecht was constantly in need of money. By the time he settled in California in 1941, he hoped to create a play that would have some commercial success. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is, for this reason, less strident in its revolutionary preaching and less concerned with the intricacies of Marxism than most of Brecht's earlier works.

Despite the softer approaches to revolutionary issues, this work raises the same economic question as earlier and later plays. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, as with his other plays, Brecht attacks the myth that human destiny is in the hands of gods. He replaces that myth with a call for human action to replace the social or political complacency that accepts things as they are rather than creating society as it should be.

*The Good Woman of Setzuan* is ranked as one of Brecht's greatest plays, along with *Leben des Galilei* (pr. 1943; *Life of Galileo*,

1947), *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (pb. 1949; *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1948), and *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (pr. 1940; *Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1941), all begun or completed in the difficult days of exile. Less political and not as obscure philosophically as his earlier works, these plays tend to be more accessible to theater artists and audiences steeped in the twentieth century Western dramatic tradition of domestic realism. All four are based on the premise that humankind is responsible for its own destiny and must structure society and the world in such a way as to dispense with the myths that contradict or discourage positive human action. In each play Brecht also confronts the moral issues involved in human action. Generosity in the face of poverty (versus the creation of more personal wealth), the containment and suppression of knowledge for what seems a greater good of society, the nurturing and use of resources, and personal responsibility in the advantageous economics of war are all strong themes in Brecht's great plays.

The sweep of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is both typical and unique in Brecht's work. He chooses the large issues of the modern world for his works, expressing them in everyday terms but setting them in either distant times or places. Often he uses extraordinary people as his characters, but in having them do ordinary things he brings their efforts to a level that encourages audience contemplation and criticism. With *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, he creates a play of China that is really about Western ideas and problems. What might be expected to be an exotic fairy tale is a grim confrontation with the realities of labor and poverty and the philosophies that propound the problems.

### **Characters**

#### **The Carpet dealer and his wife**

The Carpet dealer and his wife run a shop near Shen Teh's tobacco shop. When Shen Teh is joyous because of her relationship with Yang Sun, she buys a shawl from their shop. The couple is supportive of

Shen Teh, and when they learn, she does not have enough money to pay her rent, they lend her the funds. This loan becomes problematic for Shen Teh. She does not pay them back until after the carpet dealer has fallen ill, and the couple loses their shop when they cannot pay their taxes. Like many of the people who meet them both, they appreciate what Shen Teh has done, and are afraid of Shui Ta.

### **Elderly couple**

The elderly couple were Shen Teh's first landlords when she moved to the city from the countryside. They made her leave when she ran out of money. However, as soon as Shen Teh opens her tobacco shop, they appear at her door with six relatives and demand lodging. They take advantage of Shen Teh's generosity, though they also try to protect her. When creditors and beggars come into her shop, it is they who suggest making up a relative so that Shen Teh can put them off. Their suggestion leads to Shen Teh creating her "cousin," Shui Ta. Shui Ta later has them and their family arrested, and puts some of their family to work in her tobacco factory. For the most part, the elderly couple only likes Shen Teh because they benefit from her kindness, and dislike Shui Ta because he is tough on them.

### **Shu Fu**

Shu Fu is a wealthy barber who runs a shop near Shen Teh's tobacco business. Shu Fu has both good and bad points. He attacks Wang with curling tongs, breaking his hand. Shu Fu does nothing to help the man he injured. On the other hand, Shu Fu is enamored by Shen Teh. He donates several buildings on his property to her so that she can house the homeless. He offers to marry her to save her business, though she ultimately declines. Shu Fu suffers at the hands of Shui Ta, however. When Shu Fu gives Shen Teh a blank check, Shui Ta takes advantage of the situation and writes in 10,000 silver dollars. Shui Ta turns the buildings Shu Fu donated into his tobacco factory. Ultimately, Shu Fu is

a businessman, and as such, he is more like Shui Ta than Shen Teh would have liked.

### **Mrs. Shin**

Mrs. Shin is the woman from whom Shen Teh buys her tobacco shop. The sale makes Shin a pauper, and she demands rice and money from the prostitute. Shin is not fond of Shui Ta, and seems to like Shen Teh more after meeting him. Though Shin takes advantage of Shen Teh's goodness, Shin becomes Shui Ta/Shen Teh's confidant. Shin she figures out that they are the same person and that Shen Teh is pregnant. Shin keeps this secret as well.

### **Yang Sun**

Yang Sun is an unemployed pilot with whom Shen Teh falls in love. Yang Sun uses her feelings to better his own situation: he never really seems to love her, though he impregnates her. When Yang Sun needs 500 silver dollars to obtain a pilot's job, he convinces Shen Teh to give him the 200 silver dollars she just obtained from the carpet-dealer and his wife. He almost persuades her to sell her shop to get the other 300 silver dollars. However, Shui Ta learns that Yang Sun plans to leave her behind when he takes the job and does not really love her. Though Shen Teh still loves him and tries to marry him, the event is never consummated because Yang Sun and his mother only want the 300 silver dollars. Yang Sun eventually goes to work for Shui Ta to pay back the 200 silver dollars he owes Shen Teh, and thrives under the ruthless businessman. At the end of the play, he does seem to have some feelings for Shen Teh. When he believes Shui Ta has somehow hurt her, he gets the police to arrest him. Yet Sun stands up for Shui Ta in court. Yang Sun is only concerned with survival at any cost, and uses anyone he has to.

### **Shui Ta**

Shui Ta is the male persona Shen Teh takes on when she needs to be a tough businessman. Ostensibly her cousin, Shui Ta stands up to those Shen Teh cannot. He tells the carpenter, Lin To, that he will only pay 20 silver dollars for his shelving and fixtures instead of the 100 that Lin To demands. Shui Ta gets rid of the elderly couple and their relatives when they take too much advantage of her. As *Good Person* goes on, Shui Ta stays for longer and longer periods of time. After Shen Teh discovers she is pregnant, she becomes concerned with her child's survival and Shui Ta makes an extended appearance. He turns Shen Teh's charity into a business, a tobacco factory, and employs all those who Shen Teh helped for free before. Shui Ta is not without a heart however. He finally repays the 200 silver dollars Shen Teh borrowed from the carpetdealer and his wife, though the couple has lost their business by that point. After Shui Ta is arrested for Shen Teh's disappearance and appears in court, it seems this persona will not be used by Shen Teh in the future.

### **Shen Teh**

Shen Teh is the good woman (person) that the title refers to. She is a prostitute who give the gods lodging in her home when no one else will. Shen Teh gives up a job that would pay her much needed money. When the gods leave the next morning, Shen Teh tells them that it is hard to be good when poor. They give her a thousand silver dollars. She uses the money to buy a tobacco shop. As soon as she does, many people take advantage of her kind nature. Though she gives rice to people like Mrs. Shin, the woman also demands money. To save herself, Shen Teh invents a cousin, Shui Ta, who is a hard-nosed businessman. As the play progresses, she finds herself slipping into this persona more often and for longer periods of time.

In the second half of the play, one reason Shen Teh feels she has to be Shui Ta is because of her troubled relationship with Yang Sun. She is in love with him, but he is mostly using her. They do not marry because Shui Ta does not come to their wedding and pay out 300 silver

dollars. Shen Teh also becomes pregnant by Yang Sun, and feels she must provide for her child. The only way to do this is to be Shui Ta. At the end of the play, many people she has helped wonder where she has gone to. To that end, Shui Ta is arrested. Before the gods, who act as magistrates in the court, Shen Teh admits she is Shui Ta, and tells them it is next to impossible to be good and survive. The gods are happy that she is still good, but provide no solutions to her problems. Shen Teh is again alone and has to find her own way in the world.

### **Lin To**

Lin To is the carpenter who built the shelving and fixtures in Shen Teh's tobacco store. Though he built this woodwork for the previous owner, Lin To claims Shen Teh owes him 100 silver dollars for the work. Shen Teh does not have the money, and it is only when she becomes Shui Ta that she can force a lesser fee on him. This leads to bankruptcy for the carpenter, Lin To and his family move into the buildings that Shu Fu donates to Shen Teh, and later works for Shui Ta in his tobacco factory.

### **Mrs. Mi Tzu**

Mrs. Mi Tzu is the owner of the building which houses Shen Teh's tobacco shop. The landlady demands six months of rent (200 silver dollars) in advance when she learns of Shen Teh's reputation. This is another factor in the creation of the Shui Ta persona, though Shui Ta cannot talk Mi Tzu out of the price. At one point, Shui Ta considers selling the shop's stock to Mi Tzu so that Yang Sun can get his job, but it is then that Shui Ta learns that Yang Sun does not really love Shen Teh. Later, Shui Ta makes a deal with her to rent workshops and expand the tobacco factory. Mi Tzu is one of the only characters to stand up for Shui Ta in court at the end of the play.

### **Wang**

Wang is the impoverished water seller who helps the gods when they first arrive in the city. Realizing their importance, he goes from house to house, person to person, trying to find them lodging for the night. Wang finally leads them to Shen Teh, who takes them in. After the gods leave, they tell Wang to report Shen Teh's progress to them. Wang visits Shen Teh regularly, and like many characters, likes her very much and dislikes her cousin, Shui Ta. When Wang's hand is broken by Shu Fu, the barber, Shen Teh is the only one to stand up for him, even though she would perjure herself. Shui Ta will not do it for him. Later Shen Teh gives him her cart to sell so that he can go to a doctor. Wang is one of the characters who gets the police when Shen Teh is gone for a long time. He tells the gods that Shen Teh may have been killed by Shui Ta, ensuring the gods will finally come back to check on her.

### **Mrs. Yang**

Mrs. Yang is the mother of Yang Sun. She is the one who originally asks Shen Teh for the 200 silver dollars so that he can obtain his pilot job. Though she is not impoverished, she takes advantage of Shen Teh as well, though always for her son's benefit. Mrs. Yang prefers Shui Ta to Shen Teh. She holds up her son's wedding waiting for Shen Teh's cousin to arrive. When he does not, the wedding does not happen. Later, Mrs. Yang believes that Shui Ta saves her son when he hires Yang Sun to work in the factory. Mrs. Yang champions Shui Ta to the very end of the play.

### **The gods**

The three gods are prominent gods who have come to earth to find at least one good person, otherwise the world will not go on as it is. Their quest has led them to this city, the capital of Szechwan. Here, Wang finds them a good person, Shen Teh, who is only one to offer them lodging in her home for a night. They give Shen Teh a thousand silver dollars so that she can continue to do good. After they leave the city, they continue on their quest, but to no avail. They monitor Shen

Teh's progress via Wang, but refuse to help her when times get tough. At the end of the play, they serve as magistrates in Shui Ta's hearing over Shen Teh's disappearance. Though Shen Teh tells them how hard it is to be good, they leave her and the earth, content that she is trying. They offer no solutions to her problems.

## **SUMMARY**

### **Prologue**

Wang, an impoverished water seller, tries to find lodging for three prominent gods, who have come to Earth to find good people. Wang's request is refused by everyone. Wang himself lives under a bridge and has no home to offer. He finally asks the town's prostitute, Shen Teh, who agrees to take them in. The next morning, Shen Teh tells the gods that she cannot make a living though she tries to be good. The gods decide to pay her for lodgings when they leave.

### **Scene One**

Shen Teh uses the gods' payment of a thousand silver dollars to buy a small tobacconist business. She hopes to do good through her shop, but people start to take advantage of her. The former owner, Mrs. Shin, begs for rice and money. An elderly couple, who were the first people to take Shen Teh in when she moved to the city but who evicted her when she had no money, ask for shelter for themselves and six relatives. The elderly couple criticize Shen Teh for being too nice. They tell her she should put people off by saying a relative actually owns the store. She is forced to use this excuse several times, including when the landlady, Mrs. Mi Tzu, demands six months rent in advance. The elderly couple's relatives convince the landlady that Shen Teh's cousin, Shui Ta, is really in charge. The elderly couple believe that Shen Teh will soon be out of business, but they continue to take advantage of her hospitality. Shen Teh is worried that she will lose her shop.

### **Interlude**

The gods charge Wang with looking after Shen Teh and informing them of her progress.

### **Scene Two**

In the morning, the elderly couple's family wonders where Shen Teh is. In her absence, her cousin, Shui Ta, enters with a carpenter. Shui Ta says that Shen Teh will not be coming back and demands that they leave. Shui Ta disposes of several business matters and has the elderly couple's family arrested. When Shui Ta cannot convince the landlady to exempt Shen Teh from paying six months' rent in advance, a policeman suggests that Shen Teh marry to raise capital for the shop. A personal ad is composed to attract someone appropriate.

### **Scene Three**

In a public park, Shen Teh comes upon a young pilot, Yang Sun, preparing to hang himself. It starts to rain, and Sun and Shen Teh seek shelter together. Sun reveals that he cannot find a job, while Shen Teh reveals she has worked as a prostitute. Sun begins to appreciate Shen Teh, but he tells her that he could never love her.

### **Interlude**

The gods visit Wang for a progress report. Wang tells them that Shen Teh is in love with Sun, and has remained good. Wang mentions that Shui Ta has been uncharitable, and the gods are not pleased with the cousin's actions.

### **Scene Four**

Several people whom Shen Teh has helped wait for her outside her shop. Shen Teh had spent the night with Sun and forgotten that she needs to pay the rent on her shop. A carpet dealer and his wife lend her the 200 silver dollars that she needs. When she leaves the carpet dealer's shop, Wang shows her his hand, which has been broken by the rich barber, Shu Fu. Though there are many witnesses to Shu Fu's crime, none will corroborate Wang's story. Shen Teh becomes angry at those waiting and

tells them to leave. Sun's mother, Mrs. Yang, approaches her, because Sun needs 500 silver dollars to get a pilot's job. Shen Teh immediately gives her the 200 silver dollars that the carpet dealer gave her, and pledges to get the rest.

### **Interlude**

Shen Teh reveals that she is really Shui Ta.

### **Scene Five**

Shui Ta is running the shop when Yang Sun shows up. The young pilot wants the remaining 300 silver dollars so he can get his job. Yang Sun even says that he will marry Shen Teh. Shui Ta suggests that he give back the 200 silver dollars and help Shen Teh run the tobacconist business, but Sun insists that they sell the shop for 300 silver dollars instead. Shui Ta agrees until Sun reveals that he intends to leave Shen Teh behind with nothing to live on when he goes to his job. Shui Ta asks for the 200 silver dollars back, but Sun refuses. Shui Ta realizes that Sun does not love Shen Teh. Mrs. Shin brings the barber, Shu Fu, to the shop. Shu Fu has been admiring Shen Teh and offers the use of some empty buildings to house her homeless guests. When Wang and a police officer enter the shop, Shui Ta denies that Shen Teh witnessed the crippling of Wang. After they leave, Shui Ta tells Shu Fu that Shen Teh is no longer involved with Sun, and will be gone for a few weeks. Then Shui Ta goes into the back room. Shu Fu makes it known that he wants to become involved with Shen Teh, and when Yang appears at the shop, the barber informs him that he (Shu Fu) and Shen Teh will be married. But when Shen Teh emerges from the back room, Yang Sun manages to talk himself back into her affections, and Shen Teh admits she loves him, not the barber.

### **Interlude**

Shen Teh is in her wedding dress. She tells the audience that the carpet dealer is ill, and his wife desperately needs the money back. Shen Teh loves Yang Sun, who now has the money, but is torn over what to do.

### **Scene Six**

At the wedding, Yang Sun complains to his mother that Shen Teh has asked for the 200 silver dollars back. Mrs. Yang assures him that she has sent for Shui Ta. Shen Teh believes all is well until she realizes that Yang Sun and his mother are holding the wedding up for Shui Ta. Yang Sun does not have the 200 silver dollars she asked for, and he is angry that Shui Ta will not be bringing the 300 silver dollars. Shui Ta never comes and the couple do not marry.

### **Interlude**

The gods appear to Wang in a dream. Wang is worried that Shen Teh has lost love because she tried to be good, but the gods dismiss his concerns, believing that goodness will win out.

### **Scene Seven**

Shen Teh prepares to sell her business so she can pay back the carpet dealer. Shu Fu offers Shen Teh a blank check so she can stay in business, but Shen Teh refuses to use it. Shen Teh reveals that she is pregnant, and worries about her child's future. Still, Shen Teh gives Wang her cart, one of the last things she owns, so that he can sell it and go to the doctor.

Some members of the elderly couple's family ask if they can leave some ill-gotten tobacco in her back room. Shen Teh agrees. Later Shen Teh decides that if her child is to survive, she will have to become Shui Ta again. Shui Ta, her alter ego, takes charge of the situation, and puts an end to Shen Teh's charity. He decides to open a tobacco factory, using the elderly couple's tobacco for stock and the homeless guests as workers. Shui Ta uses the blank check to save the business.

### **Interlude**

Wang tells the gods that he has seen Shen Teh in distress in a dream, but the gods are not sympathetic.

### **Scene Eight**

Shui Ta's tobacco factory is thriving. Mrs. Yang tells the audience how Shui Ta saved her son, giving Sun a job in the factory and deducting the 200 silver dollars still owed to Shen Teh from wages. Although Sun does not like the work at first, he excels and eventually becomes the overseer.

### **Scene Nine**

Still running Shen Teh's shop, Shui Ta is very fat because of Shen Teh's pregnancy. Shui Ta/Shen Teh has repaid the carpet dealer and his wife, although they have already lost their shop. Mrs. Shin now knows that Shui Ta is Shen Teh. Sun enters, commenting on how moody Shui Ta has been, tries to get Shui Ta to talk about business, but is put off. Wang enters, asking about Shen Teh's whereabouts, because he is worried that she has met with an ill fate. When Wang inadvertently reveals to Sun that Shen Teh is pregnant, Sun becomes angry. Shui Ta has gone into the back room and cries like a girl. Sun overhears the weeping, believes that Shui Ta is holding Shen Teh prisoner in the backroom. The police come and arrest Shui Ta.

### **Interlude**

Wang tells the gods that Shen Teh is gone, and her cousin has been arrested. They decide to intervene.

### **Scene Ten**

Inside the courtroom, the three gods oversee Shui Ta's hearing. Everyone in attendance believes Shui Ta will get off because he is well-connected. All present tell the gods about how good Shen Teh is. While several people claim Shui Ta is a good and honorable businessman, most say he has ruined them. The merits of Shui Ta and Shen Teh are debated by all whose lives have been touched by them. Shui Ta decides to confess, but only if the courtroom is emptied of everyone but the gods. When they are alone, Shen Teh takes off the masks and clothing that makes her Shui Ta. She explains to them how hard it was to survive as Shen Teh because everyone took advantage of her. The gods are not



sympathetic, and wish her luck as they return to heaven. They tell her if she is good, all will turn out well. Shen Teh is left to go on alone.

### **Epilogue**

A player appears in front of the curtain and apologizes to the audience that the ending is not neat and tidy.

## **THEMES AND MEANINGS**

*The Good Woman of Setzuan* raises the question of morality in Western culture by enacting a dilemma of goodness versus survival. The issues are encompassed in the play in two basic philosophies: The Chinese yin/yang and Marxist dialectical materialism. The highly contrasting behaviors of Shen Te and Shui Ta illustrate the Asian philosophy of the yin/yang that says two sides of nature—the passive woman and the active man—make up the whole. The constant opposition between Shen Te and Shui Ta and their desperate need for one another, as well as the economic questions that their disparate behaviors raise, point to the Marxist underpinnings of this play. Out of Shen Te's need to survive despite her goodness and generosity comes the constructive manner in which Shui Ta uses the resources at Shen Te's disposal to multiply the wealth and thus create more for distribution. On the other hand, Shui Ta's tightfistedness and cruelty creates a need for more of the human warmth and aid that Shen Te brings to people in misery in the slums of Setzuan.

Both the yin/yang and Marxist philosophies are poetically realized through water imagery and are dramatically stated in terms of the economic situation in Setzuan. The poverty and drought which serve as the backdrop for this play unite the two sets of ideas. The gods do not bring water to everyone; they only bring a small amount of money to Shen Te. They frequently appear to Wang, the water seller, in his night's lodgings of a dry culvert. Wang dreams that the weight of the gods' moral precepts will drown Shen Te. Her shop, which she considers a gift from the gods, is an economic lifeboat. However, it may sink, because

too many drowning hands reach out for it. The name Shen Te, in Chinese, connotes gentle rain. The name Shui Ta suggests the rushing waters of a flood tide. The generous Shen Te rains her small gifts on those around her; Shui Ta, the unrelenting capitalist who washes away restraints in his rush to succeed in business, emphasizes the relationship between water and the economics of Setzuan, and between the yin/yang and the Marxist dialectic.

With the firm connection between water and economics poetically embedded in the text, Bertolt Brecht goes a step further for the philosophical education of his audience. Instead of creating a play steeped in Chinese tradition, he uses a fictive Chinese setting and Chinese names, exotic gods who become less so as the play progresses, and a sprinkling of tales to divorce the play from the everyday realities of his intended Western audiences. If the play had a less exotic setting, the audience could simply accept the problems and conditions as those of their society, too long ingrained to be solved, or even willed by God as the natural order of things. The critical distance that the Chinese setting provides is designed to let the audience recognize that human action is responsible for the conditions of poverty and can be marshalled to solve those problems.

### **Success and Failure**

Shen Teh wants to succeed at being a good person. The gods give her 1000 silver dollars, and she buys a small tobacco shop with it. Shen Teh hopes to help others through the shop by spending profits on such things as food for the hungry. But most of the people whom she is trying to help take advantage of her generosity. They want food, money, shelter, and constant service. Many of them do not care that their demands are causing the business to fail; they are only concerned with their short-term gain. Shen Teh finds it difficult to succeed at being a good person under these frustrating conditions.

To ensure the success of her business and to secure some hope of being able to do good, Shen Teh invents a male persona, a cousin named

Shui Ta. Shui Ta is unlike Shen Teh, less compassionate and more ruthless or hard-nosed. He kicks out the elderly couple's family who have been imposing themselves on her. He does not support Wang's claim against Shu Fu. He becomes a successful businessman by taking advantage of others. For example, he appropriates tobacco belonging to the elderly couple's relatives in order to start his tobacco factory business. However, Shui Ta does do some good. For example, he employs the previously jobless relatives of the elderly couple, albeit in unfavorable working conditions. By scene nine, in Shen Teh's absence, Shui Ta has paid her debts (to the carpet dealer and his wife) and has put out rice for the hungry, as Shen Teh used to do.

At the end of the play, Shen Teh is left to ponder whether being a successful business owner can succeed at being good as well.

### **Identity**

When the gods leave Shen Teh with 1000 silver dollars, they inadvertently create an identity crisis for her. At the beginning of the play, she is simply a local prostitute who is nice enough to turn down business so that the gods have a place to stay for the night. But after she receives money so that she can continue to do good, Shen Teh's identity changes. She is now a local businesswoman and a source of charity. She becomes known as the "Angel of the Slums" for her good deeds. The shift in identity brings a shift in expectations. Many of the poor make demands on her—from her old landlords, the elderly couple, and their extended family asking for shelter to the landlady, Mrs. Mi Tzu, who wants six months rent in advance. They nearly drive her into bankruptcy. Even the man she loves, the pilot Yang Sun, wants her money so that he can take a job as a pilot. Yang Sun does not care if she loses her business in the process, and Shen Teh is so in love with him that she almost gives the shop up for him. The only way to preserve her charitable ambitions and her family is to take on yet another identity.

Shen Teh invents a male cousin, Shui Ta. This male alter ego is essentially the opposite of Shen Teh. He is much more hard-nosed about

business and life. He is not above kicking out those who have taken advantage of Shen Teh's generosity. Shen Teh originally intends for Shui Ta to appear only when times are difficult. However, by the last third of the play, Shui Ta is present so much that other characters believe that he has somehow harmed Shen Teh. But the Shui Ta identity has had to remain prominent to ensure a future for Shen Teh and her unborn child. When Shui Ta is arrested for the disappearance of Shen Teh and appears in court before the three gods, the gods do not see how their generosity in support of her good side have forced her to create this alternate identity just to survive. She tries to explain how both Shen Teh and Shui Ta are part of her, but they will only accept the good. When the gods depart, they tell her to continue to be good, and to use the Shui Ta identity only once a month. Shen Teh is essentially left to resolve the crisis of her identity on her own.

### **Economic Circumstances/Wealth & Poverty**

Economic circumstances, primarily poverty, drive much of the action in *Good Person*. Only a few characters in the play have any wealth to speak of. Shu Fu, the barber, has enough money that he can leave Shen Teh a blank check for her charitable works. The landlady, Mrs. Mi Tzu, owns the building that houses Shen Teh's tobacco shop. The Yangs also seem to have some money, though not enough for Yang Sun to buy his pilot's job. But the other characters have suffered financial setbacks, and most are poor by the end of the play. Mrs. Shin has sold her shop to Shen Teh. The elderly couple and their extended family are homeless. At least one of them turns to prostitution to support the family. The carpenter and the carpet dealer and his wife lose their businesses during the course of the play. Wang cannot afford a home, and lives under a bridge. Shen Teh used to work as a prostitute, but becomes a member of the merchant class through a gift of money from the gods. Her newfound wealth attracts many who want her help. She has to become the consummate businessman Shui Ta to ensure a future for her business, herself, and her unborn child. Poverty drives them all to desperation, and the gods generally seem indifferent to how this affects both the good and the bad.

## **What is *verfremdungseffekt* in *The Good Person of Szechwan*?**

*Verfremdungseffekt* is a German word meaning “distancing effect,” a dramatic technique used extensively by the playwright Bertolt Brecht. In using this technique, Brecht wanted to prevent his audience from losing itself in the narrative. Instead, he wanted them to be aware at all times that they were watching a play, making them critical observers of the action rather than participants through emotional engagement with the characters on stage. In short, Brecht was insistent that the audience of his plays should always know that they were watching something staged, not real.

Brecht’s use of distancing can be observed in *The Good Person of Szechwan* in the character of Shen Teh. Alienated from the townsfolk, she is transformed by her change from an ordinary to an extraordinary character. To make it impossible for the audience to develop empathy towards Shen Teh, Brecht playfully changes her identity, allowing her to adopt the alter ego of her cousin Shui Tai. This fracturing of the self highlights the fact that we are watching something deliberately contrived and artificial. Once more we are reminded, in no uncertain terms, that we are watching a play and not observing real life.

The narrative structure of the play also illustrates Brecht’s alienating technique. He willfully disrupts the linearity of the narrative by way of poems and songs, which add a consciously theatrical degree of complexity to the action, keeping the audience at a critical distance from what’s happening on stage.

**Why does the character Shen Te turn to the audience for help at the conclusion of *The Good Person of Szechwan*? By ending the play in this way, how is the author, Bertolt Brecht, supporting his theory of “distancing effects”?**

At the conclusion of *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the character Shen Te turns to the audience for help because the gods have departed and asks the audience’s forgiveness for the presentation. By ending the play in this way, author Bertolt Brecht supports his theory of “distancing effects” by reminding the audience of the artificiality of the specific play and of theater in general.

The conclusion of *The Good Person of Szechwan* brings together the character Shen Te and the actor playing the character in an Epilogue directed to the audience. The gods have taken leave of Shen Te because they can be of no further assistance. Shen Te reminds the audience that what they have seen is a performance and hopes they will be indulgent and forgiving. Rather than neatly tie up all the loose ends, Bertolt Brecht wants to alert the audience that the substance of a play is like that of real life, but at the same time he wants to remind them of the artificiality of the presentation.

The idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* in German, usually translated as “distancing effect” in English, is central to Brecht’s philosophy of theater. He deliberately wanted to enforce the sense of alienation between the play and the audience, who should not be lulled into feeling that they were there to be passively entertained. This awareness was partly created by drawing the audience into the performance via the staging, which eliminated the “fourth wall” of proscenium theater. The epilogue of the play is consistent with the frequent monologues within it, which Shen Te directs at the audience to share her confidences and thereby reinforcing that the playwright does not aim for realism.

**Identify four ways in which Brecht’s notion of epic theatre separates the audience from *The Good Person of Szechwan*.**

Crucial to Brecht’s conception of epic theatre was his idea that the audience had to be alienated from the main action within the play so that they could focus more easily on the social messages and themes of the play. It is much easier to focus on issues such as injustice and

poverty when you are not overwhelmed with emotion which cloud your judgement and make it difficult to think clearly. Brecht therefore sought to alienate the audience from the main action of the play through the following strategies.

This play contains a number of monologues where the characters, sometimes in the middle of conversations with other characters, suddenly turn and engage the audience. Note, for example, the way in which Shu Fu talks to the audience about his courting of Shen Teh and how he plans to do it, asking their opinion:

What do you think of me, ladies and gentlemen? Could one do more? Could one be more unselfish? More delicate? More far-sighted?

The content of such moments tell the audience what is going to happen and reveal the character's feelings about these events, that help the audience focus on the messages behind those events. In the first and final monologues, the most important in the play, the audience is directly addressed again, with the final monologue featuring a metafictional apology as an actor apologises for the lack of a neat ending, focusing the fiction on itself. In the same way, the various songs in the play are used by Brecht to add a touch of the unreal to the play and to present his ideas and messages. All of these elements combine to form Brecht's notion of epic theatre as the audience is distanced from the action within the play and encouraged to focus on the message and themes.

### **Elements of expressionism in *The Good Person of Szechwan***

Expressionist works of art are characterised by extreme subjectivity and the use of mythic types in terms of characters, choral effects and heightened intensity in order to convey the awakening and suffering of the protagonists featured in the play. Brecht was a playwright who was certainly influenced by expressionism, even though he moved beyond this school of thought in his own work. In *The Good*

*Person of Szechwan*, expressionist elements can be seen in the way that the many monologues that are used focus on the thoughts and feelings of the characters about what they are experiencing, and particularly the dilemmas they face and the suffering they are enduring. In the same way, the frequent use of verse and songs in the text are used to explore the sense of suffering of the characters in the play and the unique situations they face. This is most apparent in the character of Shen Teh, who is trying to achieve an impossible task: to be good whilst not compromising her goodness. Note how she expresses her feelings about this in the final scene in verse:

Yes, it is me. Shui Ta and Shen Teh, I am both of them.

Your original order

To be good while yet surviving

Split me like lightning into two people. I

Cannot tell what occurred: goodness to others

And to myself could not both be achieved.

Such choric effects through the use of song and verse are key elements that hark back to expressionism and some of the techniques and strategies used by expressionist playwrights to communicate the suffering and realisations of their central protagonists.

### **In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, what is the status and nature of relation of the gods towards other characters?**

This question is answered most effectively by analysing the relationship that Shen Te has with the gods, and in particular what happens in Scen 9a when they appear to Wong. Having continued their search for goodness in teh world, they have returned to Wong and

reported that they have found precious little evidence of any goodness. They believe that Shen Te is the only person who has “remained good,” and it is this hope that sustains them, even though the Third God believes that the lack of goodness in humanity is the result of the harshness that humans face in the world. This god shows a much more understanding nature than the the First God, who, in response to this view, blames mankind for their lack of goodness, calling them “worthless.” When the gods finally see Shui Ta again, and discover how she was only able to be good through creating Shui Ta, Shen Te tells them:

Your original order

To be good while yet surviving

Split me like lightning into two people. I

Cannot tell what occurred: goodness to others

And to myself could not both be achieved.

In response to these words, the First God adopts complete denial, refusing to acknowledge the truth of what Shen Te says. He continues to believe that Shen Te has remained good, and therefore the world should not be altered: “Everything is as it should be.” The moral code that the gods choose to use in order to measure goodness remains the same, in spite of Shen Te showing beyond a doubt that it is impossible to be good in this world and look after yourself. Shen Te is left still facing massive difficulties as she desires to be good in a world where doing good is a weakness. They leave Shen Te with the words, “Only be good, and all will be well!”, even though Shen Te has shown them the falseness of this approach. It is clear therefore that the gods, although they are people to be respected and they are treated with great deference by the characters in this play, are also slightly out of touch with reality. The first god in particular is so fixated on finding and believing that one

good person exists that he will not accept any evidence that suggests this is not the case. He places more value in his moral code that judges whether a human is good or not than the humans in the world themselves, and the very real struggles and difficulties that they face.

### **What is the significance of Shui Ta being accused of Shen Teh’s murder in *The Good Person of Szechwan*?**

This accusation is made at the very end of Scene Nine, when Sun hears Shen Teh crying in the backroom and becomes convinced that Shui Ta has her locked up. When he fetched the policeman, the only thing that can be found is a pile of Shen Teh’s clothes. This leads members of the crowd to shout out the following accusation:

Shen Teh’s things have been found! The Tobacco King did the girl in and got rid of her!

The symbolic significance of this is clear, as it suggests that out of the two personas within Shen Teh, Shui Ta, and the kind of ruthlessness he represents, is dominating and “killing” Shen Teh. The play shows that in order to survive and do good, Shen Teh’s goodness, kindness and generosity is not enough, as these qualities are simply exploited and abused by those around her. She therefore is forced to create her alter-ego, Shui Ta, who is the opposite of her, and is able to provide for those around her through ruthless business approaches. The murder accusation suggests that Shui Ta is gradually swallowing up Shen Teh. Note what Shen Teh herself says about the situation in Scene Ten:

I

Cannot tell what occurred: goodness to others

And to myself could not be achieved.

To serve both self and others I found too hard.

Oh, your world is arduous! Such need, such desperation!

The hand which is held out to the starving

Is quickly wrenched off!

Shen Teh therefore discovers that she needs to harden up incredibly in order to survive in this world and to do good to herself and to provide for her son. The “death” of Shen Teh that is alluded to in the murder accusation therefore symbolises the loss of the qualities evinced by Shen Teh in the play: goodness, generosity and human kindness. In the world that humans live in, the play suggests, such qualities become a positive liability.