

Der gute Mensch von Szechwan - Brief synopsis of the play

This is one of Brecht's major plays, and it poses the question of whether it is possible to be a morally good person in an immoral, corrupt world. The play shows the influence of oriental theatre on Brecht, and is set in the southwestern Chinese province of Szechwan.

The main character is Shen Te and her alter ego Shui Ta (both the same character). When three gods leave their celestial home and come to Earth in search of a good person, they conclude they have found one in the prostitute Shen Te. Her hospitality towards them and her general kindness makes them believe their mission has been successful. However Shen Te is too generous towards others and risks losing her newly acquired business. To help herself she reinvents herself in the shape of Shui Ta, her "cousin". He is in many respects the opposite of her as a hard-hearted business man.

The play was finished in 1943, and although over half a century old, is still of contemporary relevance due to its political and moral themes. As a mid-20th century play written by a hugely influential playwright (both in Germany and internationally) and still performed today this text fits into the second part of Theme 2 in the WJEC specification. Activities are furthermore designed to cover A04, where students are expected to: "Show knowledge and understanding of, and respond critically and analytically to, different aspects of the culture and society of countries/communities where the language is spoken"

When page references are used they apply to the Methuen's edition, 20th Century Texts.

Please note that the information contained in the second column "Suggested uses" in the grid below is in many cases applicable to more than one of the activities.

On Character – all three sections used for these activities were selected because they show different sides of Shen Te/Shui Ta's character. In two of them, we see more positive sides and in the remaining one a ruthless side. It is of course important to bear in mind that this is the same person. For Brecht a person's character was very closely tied to prevalent social and political conditions. Put simply, in order for people to be good and flourish, conditions had to be good too. This play can be seen as a challenge to the viewer to consider and find ways of improving overall conditions as the first priority.

	Description of activity and suggested uses	Skills covered
Activity 1	<p>The section on which this activity is based was chosen as it shows Shen Te's caring, generous side (e.g. trying to prevent a stranger's suicide), and at the same time illustrates a certain naivety in her character (e.g. ascribing suicidal feelings to bad weather).</p> <p>Students should initially identify the true and false statements, before correcting the latter. An extension exercise could be for students to make up their own set of ten sentences containing true and false information.</p> <p>A whole class discussion could follow to discuss the significance of the scene and what it tells the viewer/reader about Shen Te's character. This could be followed up by a piece of written work based on the discussion.</p>	<p>Students use their reading skills (and listening skills if the youtube clip is watched), and thinking skills to decide if statements are true or false.</p> <p>In the suggested follow up activities students will also practise writing and speaking skills.</p>
Activity 2	<p>As with Activity 1, the section used for Activity 2 was chosen as it illustrates Shen Te's loving side. She discovers that she is pregnant and muses on how life will be with her young child.</p> <p>The on-screen activity requires students to reorder words to create sentences associated with Shen Te's monologue. By way of extension students could create their own original sentences, jumble them up, and have other students unjumble them. As with activity 1, this could form the basis of a whole class discussion and/or written task.</p> <p>A more demanding task could be for students to select another short extract from elsewhere in the play, which illustrates Shen Te's "goodness". This could be used as the basis for a compare/ contrast discussion.</p>	<p>Students use their reading skills and develop their use of grammatical rules in the on-screen activity. In follow up activities they can also develop research, thinking, writing and speaking skills.</p>

Activity 3

By way of contrast, the extract used for this activity illustrates another side of the main character. Shui Ta is anything but naively generous. Activity 3 could (as with previous activities, especially Activity 1), be read/acted out in class, after watching the clip and/or reading the section. This would serve as a way into students writing their own summary. Once completed, summaries can be compared (in the group and with the suggested on-screen summary) and various strengths and weaknesses identified in class discussion. Students could then justify their versions, saying why they included certain points and/or omitted others. Furthermore this scene could be used in conjunction with the previous two, as a basis for class discussion.

Students use reading, processing and writing skills in this activity. If the other suggested activities are used as well speaking skills will also be developed.