The Threepenny Opera Study Guide

The Threepenny Opera by Bertolt Brecht

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Introduction

Bertolt Brecht's 1928 play *The Threepenny Opera* was his most financially successful play and the work with which he is most closely identified. The play is an early example of his "epic theater," consisting of theatrical innovations designed to awaken audiences to social responsibility. Epic theater uses "alienating" devices, such as placards, asides to the audience, projected images, discordant music and lighting, and disconnected episodes to frustrate the viewer's expectations for simple entertainment. This "theater of illusions" (as anti-realists such as Brecht termed it) allowed the audience to comfortably and passively view a production without being changed by it. It was Brecht's intention to use drama to invoke social change, to shake his audiences out of their complacency and expect more from the theater than entertainment.

The disruptive capacity of Brecht's drama was designed to awaken the theater-goers critical mind and galvanize them into political awareness and action. *The Threepenny Opera,* which he produced with the aid of his secretary (and lover) Elisabeth Hauptmann (who had just translated John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* [1728] into German) and composer Kurt Weill, is a satire of bourgeois society, containing many of the major elements of epic theater: placards announcing the ballad singers, discordant music, and a plot that frustrates expectations for romantic resolution. *The Threepenny Opera* is very closely based on Gay's eighteenth-century play, another social satire. Brecht and Hauptmann borrowed ballads from Francois Villon, and Weill turned them into darkly twisted cabaret songs for this version of the play.

Brecht also made some stylistic changes, transforming the protagonist, Macheath, into a morally ambiguous hero, emphasizing the parallels between Polly and Lucy, and creating the character of Sheriff Jackie Brown, a former army buddy of Macheath's who protects his friend's criminal activity in exchange for a percentage of his spoils. Brecht's play places blame on capitalist society for the criminal underworld that Gay presented merely as a mirror-image satire of eighteenth-century aristocracy. Weill's discordant mesh of jazz, folk, and avant-garde music adds to the play's popular appeal, which was the polar opposite of what Brecht wanted: he designed his "epic theater" to awaken the audience's critical judgement, not its empathy. Despite Brecht's designs, *The Threepenny Opera* has become one of the hallmarks of musical theater and his most popular play. While it is regarded in modern drama as a significant political work, it is equally revered for its unique music and darkly engaging characters.

Author Biography

Born Eugen Bertolt Friednch Brecht on February 10,1898, in Augsburg, Germany, Bertold Brecht is regarded as a founding father of modern theater and one of its most incisive voices. His innovative ideas would prove to have a profound effect on many genres of modern narrative, not the least of which are novels, short stories, and cinema. Brecht is considered a pioneer of socially conscious theater— especially in the subgenre of anti-reality theater, which sought to debunk the illusory techniques of realistic drama. His work reflects his commitment to his political beliefs. By the time he was a young adult he had firmly embraced the communist doctrines of Karl Marx, a German philosopher who authored the seminal texts *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital.*

Brecht began life as the intellectually rebellious son of a bourgeois (middle-class) paper factory director. His mother was Catholic, his father Protestant; Brecht disavowed any religious affiliation, and his first play, written when he was sixteen-years-old, exposes the conflicting lessons of the Bible— early evidence of his life—long effort to erode the infrastructure of complacency in his society. During World War I, he was unable to avoid conscription into the German army (by studying medicine) and so served as an orderly in an army hospital. The meaningless suffering he witnessed there embittered his already pessimistic worldview.

Always fascinated by dualities and cultural opposites, Brecht sought to expose the ridiculousness of either extreme, while never offering any kind of transcendent alternative, thus earning many critics' condemnation as a nihilist (one who believes that traditional values have no foundation in reality and that existence is pointless). Often his plays and poems depict situations that seem naturally aimed toward romantic conclusions yet avoid such easy resolutions. By the time he reached adulthood, Brecht had already established himself as a lady's man, often juggling wives, ex-wives, and lovers who lived within blocks of each other and bore his children—often at the same time.

One of Brecht's many significant others, Elisabeth Hauptmann, collaborated with him on his adaptation of John Gay's eighteenth-century play *The Beggar's Opera,* which he debuted in 1928 as *The Threepenny Opera.* The work featured music by renowned composer Kurt Weill and became one of the playwright's best-known dramas (thanks in large part to singer Bobby Darrin's popular cover of the play' s song "Mack the Knife"). Recent biographers speculate that Brecht ran a veritable writing sweatshop, using the talents of his harem of women, who stood little chance of literary success without his paternalistic shepherding or his political and intellectual inspiration.

Prior to the political ascension of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party in the 1930s, Brecht fled Germany and lived in exile in Europe and the United States. In 1947, he was unsuccessfully interrogated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities for his outspoken communist sympathies. He returned to Germany in 1948, where he established the Berlin Ensemble, a theatrical production troupe dedicated to political

and artistic reform. In this latter period of his life, he produced what is regarded as some of his best work, including the plays *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949) and *The Good Woman ofSzechuan* (1953). He died of coronary thrombosis on August 14, 1956, in the then-communist country of East Germany.

Plot Summary

Act I

The Prologue of *The Threepenny Opera* presents Fair Day in Soho (a suburb of London), where beggars, thieves, and whores ply their trades. A ballad singer steps forward to sing a macabre ditty about Mac the Knife. Peachum, proprietor of "The Beggar"s Friend Ltd." strolls back and forth across the stage with his wife and daughter. At the close of the song. Low-dive Jenny says that she sees Mac the Knife, who disappears into the crowd.

In Scene One, it is morning in the Peachum business emporium, where the proprietor outfits beggars for their swindling careers. The scene opens with Peachum singing his morning hymn to the glory of human betrayal and deception. Peachum appeals to the audience to consider the complexities of his business: raising human sympathy often necessitates counterfeit misery, because the public has become so jaded that it's donations diminish over time. He interprets the Biblical saying, "Give and it shall be given unto you" as meaning, provide new reasons to give to the poor.

A young man, Charles Filch (the word "filch" is slang for stealing), enters the shop. He reports that a beggar gang have beat him up for begging on their territory. Peachum offers him a district and an improved beggaring outfit in return for fifty percent of his take. Filch does not inspire Peachum's confidence because he succumbs too easily to pity; begging requires sterner stuff, less of a conscience. Mrs. Peachum enters and discusses the whereabouts of their daughter, Polly, with Peachum. The couple sing a brief satirical duet on love.

In Scene Two, beggar gang member Matthew (a.k.a. Matt of the Mint) enters a stable to ensure that it is empty. Macheath brings in Polly, dressed in a stolen wedding dress. Moments later large vans appear, containing luxurious—and certainly stolen—furniture and tableware for the wedding. The rest of the beggar gang also arrive. In a comedy of grotesque decorum, the gang critiques the wedding appointments while Polly and Macheath cling to the semblance of a dignified ceremony. Realizing that a wedding song is conventional, Macheath orders three of the boys, already considerably drunk, to sing one, to which they lamely comply.

Polly reciprocates with her own, rather hostile tune about a barmaid named Jenny, which Macheath pronounces art, wasted on trash. A Reverend, actually one of the gang, arrives to perform the ceremony. The party is nearly dispersed by the arrival of a special guest, Macheath's old army buddy, Jackie Brown, the High Sheriff of London. He and Macheath drink together and sing an old army tune, "The Cannon Song." While Macheath makes maudlin comparisons to classical friendships such as Castor and Pollux and Hector and Andromache, Brown notices the wealth around him and grows pensive. Macheath has succeeded in life in a way that Brown has not. Before Brown leaves, Macheath confirms that Brown has kept his record clean at Scotland Yard.

Finally, the gang displays the crowning glory of their stolen goods: a new bed. The scene closes with a cynical duet ("love will endure or not endure. ..") between the newly "married" couple.

Scene Three takes place back at Peachum's place of business, where Polly sings a song to her parents revealing her new marriage. Her parents are appalled that she has married a notorious criminal. A group of beggars enter, one complaining about the poor quality of his false stump. Peachum grouses about the beggar's lack of professional deportment and then turns back to the problem of his daughter's bad marital match. Peachum lands upon a solution: turn Macheath into the police, get him hanged, and earn a forty-pound ransom at the same time. The family sings a trio on' "The Insecurity of the Human Condition" containing the refrain "The world is poor and man's a shit." Then, Peachum exits to bribe Low-Dive Jenny to betray Macheath to the police.

Act Two

Scene Four (the scenes are numbered sequentially through the whole play) takes place in the stable, now Polly and Macheath's home. Polly begs Macheath to flee, because she has witnessed Brown succumbing to her father's threats; Macheath will be arrested. Macheath puts Polly in charge of the accounts and preps the gang for the upcoming coronation, a huge business opportunity for thieves and beggars. Macheath departs. In an Interlude, Mrs. Peachum and Low-Dive Jenny step in front of the curtain to sing "The Ballad of Sexual Obsession" after Celia bribes Jenny with ten shillings to reveal Macheath's whereabouts to the police.

Scene Five takes place at the whorehouse in Highgate. It is Thursday, the day Macheath normally visits but the proprietor and the whores don't expect him; they are ironing, playing cards, or washing. Macheath enters and cavalierly throws his warrant for arrest on the floor. Jenny offers to read his palm, predicting treacherousness at the hand of a woman whose name begins with "J." Macheath makes ajoke of it, as Jenny slips out a side door. As Macheath sings "The Ballad of Immoral Earnings," Jenny can be seen beckoning to Constable Smith. She joins in a duet with Macheath, describing her battered life with him. As they end, Constable Smith takes Macheath away to the Old Bailey (the prison).

In Scene Six, Brown is wringing his hands at the Old Bailey, in fear that his buddy has been caught. Macheath enters, tied heavily in ropes and accompanied by six constables. Mac writes a check to Constable Smith in return for not applying handcuffs and sings "The Ballad of Good Living." One of Macheath's lovers, Lucy, enters, too enraged by jealousy to care about Macheath's fate. Polly then enters and the two women sing the "Jealousy Duet." Macheath denies that he has married Polly, accusing her of masquerading to get pity. Mrs. Peachum comes to drag Polly away. Now Lucy and Macheath make up, and he elicits her promise to help him escape. He does so, but talks her out of going with him.

Mr. Peachum arrives to enjoy the sight of his triumph over Macheath, only to find Brown sitting in his cell. Peachum convinces Brown to go after Macheath or imperil his reputation. The lawman departs. The curtain falls, and Macheath and Low-Dive Jenny appear to sing the duet, "What Keeps Mankind Alive?," the answers to which are: bestial acts and represssion.

Act Three

Scene Seven opens on the Peachum Emporium in preparation for their grand plan of disrupting the coronation ceremony with "a demonstration of human misery." This is a massive campaign: nearly fifteen-hundred men are preparing signs. The whores traipse in for their payoff, which Mrs. Peachum refuses to pay because Macheath has escaped. Jenny lets it slip that Macheath is with the whore Suky Tawdry, so Peachum sends word to the constables. Mrs. Peachum sings a stanza from "The Ballad of Sexual Obsession." Brown enters and threatens to arrest the lot of the beggars, but Peachum blackmails him by insisting that they are busy preparing a song for the coronation. The boys sing "The Song of the Insufficiency of Human Endeavor." As Brown disconsolately leaves to arrest Macheath, the curtain falls and Jenny sings a ballad about sexual urges.

Scene Eight takes place in the Old Bailey. Polly and Lucy compare notes on Macheath and befriend one another. Lucy hears a commotion and announces that Mac has been arrested again. Polly collapses, then changes mto widows garb.

Scene Nine finds Macheath shackled and led by constables into his death cell. The police are worried that his hanging will draw a bigger crowd than the coronation. Smith is willing to help Macheath escape for one thousand pounds, but Macheath cannot get his hands on his money. Brown comes in to settle his accounts with Mac. Through all of this, visits from Lucy, Polly, Peachum, the gang, and the whores, Mac is notably casual about his impending doom. He sings a song asking forgiveness and proceeds to the gallows. Peachum presides, but his speech begins as a eulogy and ends as an announcement that Brown has arrived on horseback to save Mac Brown announces that because of the coronation, Mac has been reprieved and raised to peerage. They cheer, sing, and the bells of Westminster nng.

Act 1, Prologue and Scene 1

Act 1, Prologue and Scene 1 Summary

The Threepenny Opera, a play with music, tells the story of the street criminal Macheath and his involvement with Polly, the virtuous daughter of a fellow street criminal, Peachum. Betrayed by his own sexual desires and by the women with whom he indulges them, Macheath is sentenced to be executed, but he is saved from the hangman's noose by a sudden twist of fate. The play's musical interludes serve various purposes. They comment on the action, illuminate character and make socially conscious points relating to the play's theme of the struggle of the poor for justice and freedom.

Prologue - Against a background of lower-class street life in mid-18th century London, filled with beggars, thieves and prostitutes, a ballad singer sings about Macheath. The singer tells the audience how Macheath wears white kid gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints at the scenes of his crimes. Several people have disappeared after encounters with him, and his nickname is Mack the Knife. At the end of the song, a man emerges from the crowd of street people and quickly exits. Jenny, the prostitute who later betrays Macheath to the police, identifies the man to us as Mack the Knife.

Scene 1 - A narrator introduces Peachum, who explains that he's in the business of "arousing human sympathy," saying that human beings have the habit of quickly becoming immune to the sufferings of others. He offers the example of a beggar who gets a good sum of money from a rich man one day, less the next and none the day after that. He also refers to the Bible's teachings about mercy, saying they wear thin after a while.

A young man comes into the shop, and conversation reveals the nature of Peachum's business. He controls which beggar begs on which corner, charges money for the privilege of working for him, takes a percentage of what each beggar earns in a day's work and controls which method of begging each beggar uses. He lists the various methods for the young man, including "The Pitiful Blind Man" and "The Young Man Who Has Seen Better Days." During conversation with Mrs. Peachum, whom he berates for not doing her job of preparing the beggars' clothes properly, Peachum decides the young man is to work in Outfit D (which is never defined) and tells him to get changed.

While the young man is gone, the Peachums discuss the man who keeps coming by to visit their daughter Polly, referring to him as the Captain. Conversation reveals that both Polly and Mrs. Peachum hope he'll propose marriage, but Peachum says he'll never let Polly marry, adding that business at the shop would become non-existent if she were no longer around for the men to look at. He then asks what the Captain's real name is, but Mrs. Peachum says nobody ever refers to him by name. She also mentions that the Captain always wears white kid gloves, leading Peachum to ask whether the Captain has other habits of the man with white gloves. They're both referring to Macheath.

The young man comes back in, having changed, and he asks Peachum for advice on how to make more money. Peachum tells him to come back later in the evening, and the young man goes out. After he's gone, Peachum tells Mrs. Peachum that the Captain is Mack the Knife, and he runs upstairs to check on Polly. Mrs. Peachum utters a brief prayer that sounds like a grace said before dinner. Peachum comes back down, saying that Polly's bed hasn't been slept in. Mrs. Peachum says that means she's gone to dinner with a wool merchant. Peachum says he hopes that's who she is with.

Lights change, and the setting changes. The Peachums step forward and sing. Peachum's lyrics refer to the difficulties of retaining control over children, while Mrs. Peachum's song cynically refers to romance, moonlight and the smooth words of lovers.

Act 1, Prologue and Scene 1 Analysis

This play is based on an earlier play, *The Beggar's Opera*, written by John Gay and first performed in the early 1700s. It tells essentially the same story told in essentially the same way, with one significant difference. In this version, there is a clear and vivid sociopolitical subtext. Understanding that subtext, and the playwrights' intentions in developing it, is vital to understanding the play and its intent.

In brief, the playwright was a vocal and prolific advocate of socialist philosophy and practice. His intent in adapting *Threepenny Opera* was fundamentally the same as that in writing most, if not all, of his many plays - to point out the flaws of capitalist society and thinking and to advocate for the rights of the poor and working classes. To this end, he develops the character of Macheath as an anti-hero, a character type that has always been present in theatre (such as in *The Beggar's Opera)* but which has appeared with increasing frequency since the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 20th Century.

An anti-hero is a character in a play or story that doesn't embody the characteristics of more traditional heroes - moral values and virtues like honesty and integrity and respect. The anti-hero's behavior is nonetheless held up as an ideal. Anti-heroes are generally rebels against the established order, struggling for rights, freedoms and respect in the face of societal and personal oppression. Generally angry and often appearing selfish, anti-heroes are prepared to do anything to achieve that freedom - lie, murder, steal, speak hurtfully or do whatever it takes. They have no regard for rules, and they are interested only in breaking those rules down in the name of gaining acceptance and understanding for their beliefs. By contrast, traditional heroes function within the generally accepted and broadly defined boundaries of good behavior. If they break the rules, they only do so in order to achieve their higher goals.

Macheath, the central character in *Threepenny Opera*, is a typical anti-hero. He's a thief, a killer, a seducer of women and as corrupt as they come in terms of his dealings with the police. Given the play's sociopolitical context, however, and the attitudes of its creator, it becomes clear that the audience is intended to see him as heroically struggling for the rights of the poor and oppressed. The blatantly political speech he

gives in the moments before he's scheduled to be hanged makes this clear, as does the way his struggle to remain free occurs at the same time as the coronation of Queen Victoria. In life and in the play, Queen Victoria is a symbol of traditional moral, financial and ethical values. In other words, the plot of *Threepenny Opera* (Macheath's struggle to evade arrest and execution) is an illustration of its theme, the struggle of the oppressed to make a living free of the dominance of capitalism and snobbery and the restrictions of class.

In turn, the character of Peachum embodies oppressive capitalist values. In spite of the fact that his business is an unusual one, he is still at his core a profiteer. This means that a second way the play makes its anti-business, anti-corporate and anti-exploitation thematic point is through its vivid depiction of how Peachum runs his business, exploiting and manipulating those who work for him. The play's point, again made in Macheath's pre-execution speech, is that all business and indeed all society are run in the same way and to accomplish the same ends. The goal is to make as much profit as possible for the head of the business regardless of the people who actually do the work.

The music in this play functions in two different ways. The first is similar to the way music functions in more traditional, American-style musicals, revealing characters' emotions within a scene. On other occasions, however, music in *Threepenny Opera* is clearly intended to exist outside the scene, commenting on emotions and situations rather than exploring them. This intention is manifest in stage directions that indicate a setting and lighting change before each song and the appearance of notice boards showing the songs' titles. This presentational style is carried through into the appearance of a narrator, who introduces and identifies the various scenes in the same way as the songs are identified. This approach is another common characteristic in much of this playwright's work.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Summary

The narrator tells the audience that this scene is set in an empty stable, where Macheath and Polly are celebrating their wedding. As a thug named Matthew makes sure it's empty and safe, Polly complains about spending the biggest day of her life in such an unsuitable place. Macheath tells her that no matter where she lives, she'll have everything she wants. A truck is heard, and a moment later, several thugs appear, bringing in furniture and decorations to make the stable more hospitable. As the furniture is placed, the thugs comment on what the pieces of furniture are, how they were stolen and how they either subdued or killed their owners. Macheath becomes angry, saying he told the men to avoid bloodshed. He also points out that the furniture doesn't match, with a sofa from one period being placed next to a table from another. Polly sympathizes with the people whose belongings were stolen. When one of the thugs tries to comfort her, Macheath loses his temper and accuses him of sleeping with her. Polly protests. Another thug says he'll go back and fetch anything she thinks is missing, and Macheath orders him to saw the legs off the harpsichord they have brought in so that it's the right height for Polly to sit and play. As the thugs saw at the harpsichord, they sing a rude song about the wedding night of a couple named Bill and Mary.

Macheath tells the thugs to change into nicer clothes as befits the occasion. While they're out getting changed, Macheath asks Polly to put together their "wedding feast." She asks whether the furniture and the food were stolen. When Macheath tells her it was, she wonders what would happen if the police came to the door. Mac says he'd be happy to show her, but the returning thugs comment that all the police are too busy providing security for the coronation of Queen Victoria to bother with the likes of them. In mockery of upper class habits and styles, the thugs return dressed in formal clothes and offer formal congratulations to Polly and Macheath on their marriage. One of them makes a rude joke. Macheath shoves him to the floor and tells him to save that kind of filth for a woman named Kitty, "the kind of slut that appreciates it." The thug tells him he's one to talk about filth, referring to things that a woman named Lucy said Macheath told her. For a moment it looks as though Macheath is about to become violent, but then he remembers that he's at his wedding and calms down. The thugs give Polly their wedding present, a pretty nightgown, and then they show her more of the furniture they stole. Polly says it's a shame they don't have a nice apartment to put it all in, but Macheath says everyone has to make a start somewhere and orders the food to be brought out.

As the food is placed on a makeshift table, one of the other thugs lists the restaurants and hotels that the dishes, cutlery and food were stolen from. Polly comments on how good the food is, leading one of the thugs to say she'll eat like that every day now that she's hooked up with Macheath. When he suggests that he said exactly the same thing to Lucy just the other day, Polly asks who Lucy is. Following a look of warning from

Macheath, the thug becomes silent. Macheath comments on the thug's poor table manners, telling Polly it's going to be difficult for her if she intends to turn any of the thugs into gentlemen. He again becomes angry with the thugs, and one of them goes out resentfully, but then rushes back in with a warning that police are on their way in. It turns out to be a false alarm when the Reverend Kimball comes in, commenting on the lowliness of the stable. Macheath makes a joke, and Polly greets Kimball politely. Macheath orders the thugs to sing for him. The thugs get up and uneasily sing the rest of the song about Bill and Mary.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 1 Analysis

This scene raises two interesting possibilities about additional symbolic values in the character of Macheath. Firstly, this scene is set in a stable, and the word "stable" carries a lot of Christian resonance (given that Jesus Christ was, according to the Bible, born in a stable). It's possible that the audience is intended to see Macheath as a Christ figure, or a messiah. This idea is developed further through the previously discussed way he protests the treatment of the disadvantaged, something similar to what Christ did. Christ was, among other things, an advocate for women, lepers, the poor and the ill, the disadvantaged of his time.

Another symbolic possibility emerges when the furniture appears, and the audience learns that Macheath has arranged to have it all taken from the wealthy. There are echoes here of Robin Hood, himself a legendary anti-hero who stole from the rich to give to the poor. Granted, Macheath's bride is on the receiving end of Macheath's generosity in this case, and in terms of his general career, his fellow crooks are the ones who benefit. The play's perspective, however, is that Macheath and his gang steal because they have to. As Macheath indicates, it's the only way they can make a living. The fact that they steal from the rich indicates that we are intended to not only sympathize with their desperation, but see their actions as just.

A key element of foreshadowing appears in this scene in the repeated references to Lucy, the woman who turns out to have just as much claim on Macheath's affections as Polly does. Meanwhile, the song about Bill and Mary takes place within the context of a scene, but it is still more of a comment rather than an illumination, making observations about the situation in phrases filled with innuendo.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Summary

After the thugs have finished singing, Macheath says their effort was pretty feeble. Polly volunteers to sing a song that she first heard sung by a girl working as a dishwasher in a seedy bar, and she explains to Macheath and the others how they should pretend to be customers. As they start playing their roles, the lights and setting change in the same way as they did for the Peachums' song. Polly sings about a girl working in a seedy bar who smiles to herself as the hotel in which she works is saved from bombs being lobbed into the town from the harbor. She tells the invading soldiers which of their prisoners to kill.

After Polly has finished, the thugs talk about how pretty the song was, but Macheath says that it wasn't just pretty - it was art. He also says it was wasted on the thugs, and he adds that he doesn't like Polly "play-acting." He only wants her to be herself. As he's commenting again on the bad manners of the thugs, Brown appears. Conversation reveals that he's the sheriff. He and Macheath are friends, and Brown is there unofficially. He tells the ready-to-be-arrested thugs to relax, says he's glad to meet Macheath's wife and sits down to join the feast. Macheath talks about how even though Brown has been elevated to a high rank, he's still a good friend. The lights and setting change, and Macheath sings about the friendships between three soldiers who in spite of their loyalty to each other and to the army nevertheless behave with great brutality towards their enemies. The song concludes with references to how the three friends died and to how the army continues its destructive ways no matter what. After Macheath has finished, he talks again about the enduring power of his friendship with Brown, saying that Macheath has never stolen anything without giving a share of profit. Brown has always tipped him off whenever there was danger of his being arrested. He tells Brown he's glad he stopped by, and Brown says he can't stay long because of his coronation security duties. Macheath asks whether there's anything on record against him that his father-in-law, Peachum, might use against him. Brown says there's no record at all, and Macheath says he was sure that that was the case. He and Brown walk out.

The thugs prepare to present Polly with a surprise. Macheath comes back in as the thugs sing the song about Bill and Mary again, lifting up a carpet and revealing a bed. As Macheath thanks them, the thugs go out. Macheath and Polly speak exactly the romantic lines and phrases referred to so negatively by Mrs. Peachum at the end of Act 1, Scene 1. They sing a romantic song about how their love will endure no matter what.

Act 1, Scene 2, Part 2 Analysis

This play can be perceived as being extremely cynical in its negative views of human nature. People sell each other out, such as the Peachums and Jenny. People act

without integrity, such as Brown, and people have no scruples about doing what they have to do to get what they want, including Macheath, the Peachums and the thugs. The only character who seems to have any integrity at all is Polly, who comes across as strangely napve given her father's business but who nevertheless behaves with a unique honesty and openness. The thematic value to her character, however, lies not in her more positive values but because she ultimately she ends up victimized. She is manipulated deliberately by her parents and emotionally damaged by Macheath's thoughtlessness and sexual recklessness. The thematic point here is that innocence, strength and courage like Polly's are too easily overwhelmed by cynicism, greed and the capacity for deception in other people, particularly her capitalistic father and the opportunistic Macheath. Meanwhile, her song foreshadows Jenny's eventual betrayal of Macheath. In the same way as the girl in the song betrays her townspeople to the invaders, Jenny betrays Macheath to the police.

Macheath and Peachum both, at different points in the play, make reference to art and artists. Macheath refers to Polly's song as art, and at the end of the play, he refers to himself as an artist. Peachum refers to art in the following scene. In all cases, art seems defined as something more than simply ordinary, bringing transcendence and increased understanding to the everyday. This is a secondary theme of the play, and it is part of the playwright's sociopolitical agenda. As an artist himself, he's making a plea for support of all artists, like him and like his characters.

The two songs in this scene are contrasts in style, but not necessarily in intent. Macheath's song about the soldiers is performed in the same presentational way as the other songs, commenting on the nature of the friendship between himself and Brown and defining it as being similar to that of soldiers in the trenches. Taking into consideration the sociopolitical context of the play, it becomes possible to see the war fought by the soldiers as a metaphor for the war for justice and revenge on the rich being fought by Macheath. Meanwhile, the song at the end of the scene seems at first to be the most "traditional" of all the songs in the play, since it clearly reveals the inner feelings of the characters. However, it's also deeply ironic, as the action of the play eventually reveals that Macheath is incapable of truly loving anyone. This sense of irony, of saying one thing but actually meaning another, is an inherent part of Macheath's character and, therefore, of the play. In other words, the audience thinks it's watching the story of a crook, but we're clearly intended to change our perspective and come to believe we're watching the story of a hero.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The narrator comments that Peachum believes Polly's marriage is a great loss that will destroy his business. Polly, dressed to leave her parents' home, is getting ready to go as Mrs. Peachum crudely accuses her of throwing herself away. Lights and setting change, and the narrator tells the audience that Polly is about to sing. Polly sings about how she used to believe that marrying for love was something she would never do because life can't be ruled by feelings or romance. She fell in love anyway, though, and couldn't say no once the feelings took control.

Once Polly has finished, Peachum and Mrs. Peachum angrily take her to task for marrying a criminal, with Peachum saying that the marriage is going to lead to his ruin. Mrs. Peachum faints because she's so upset. Polly fetches some wine to revive her. As Mrs. Peachum is recovering, a group of beggars comes in complaining about the poor quality of the equipment Peachum is supplying them with and saying they're not making enough money. Peachum gives one of them new equipment (a new false leg) and then complains that they're all too picky. They're not working hard enough and looking too well fed to make money. Finally, he says he needs artists, not just beggars, and he fires all the beggars but the one with the false leg.

As the beggars go out, Polly tries to convince Peachum and Mrs. Peachum that she understands what she's getting into. She knows Macheath is a criminal, but she also knows he makes good money and can provide for her. She mentions her hopes for a house in the country. Peachum tells her to get divorced, and Polly refuses. Mrs. Peachum threatens to beat her, and Polly says it won't matter because love is stronger. Mrs. Peachum says Macheath is involved with several women and that when he's hanged for his crimes there will be more than half a dozen widows and children at the funeral. Peachum sends Polly out, having realized that if they turn Macheath over to the authorities for trial and hanging it will mean a substantial reward. They realize they'll kill two birds with one stone. They will make money and at the same time free their daughter, so they plot to get the women Macheath is hiding out with to turn him over to them.

Polly reappears, having overheard their entire plot. She tells Peachum and Mrs. Peachum that Macheath's days of being with loose women are over. He and the sheriff, Brown, are good friends, and there's no record Macheath has committed any crimes. Peachum tells her he plans to accuse Macheath of luring his daughter out of her home under false pretenses by pretending he has plans to marry her. Mrs. Peachum says he won't be able to bring it off, referring to how powerful Macheath is. Peachum prepares to go to Brown and tells Mrs. Peachum to visit the prostitutes, instructing her to offer a share of the reward if they tell him where Macheath is. Polly says defiantly that she's looking forward to seeing Brown again.

Lights change, and the setting changes. Another song begins. In her lyrics, Polly wonders whether she's fooling herself about how much Macheath loves her. In his lyrics, Peachum refers to the Bible and says he's got his rights for happiness and pleasure, but the world seems to be set against him achieving those rights. Mrs. Peachum, in her lyrics, protests that she just wants the best for Polly. Again referring to the Bible, Peachum says it's all well and good to try to be nice, but even those closest to you will turn on you just like everyone else in the human race. All three sing about how the world is a lousy place and "man's a shit," saying God has us all in a trap.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

The confrontation between Polly and her parents is the climax of the first act, defining the highest point of emotion of the play so far. Specifically, Polly's passionate declaration of her love creates direct conflict with her parents, who view her as something to be exploited.

Herein lies the key difference between the Peachums and Macheath, a difference reinforced by the way Peachum treats his beggars. As a result of the confrontation between Peachum and the beggars, it becomes vividly clear that on a fundamental level Peachum and Macheath are the same. In their own ways, they both run criminal organizations. Both profit from them, and both are unafraid of being hard on the people working for them. Later in the play, however, the audience sees that Macheath has a different, and somewhat more appealing, agenda. Where Peachum just wants to accumulate money and power, Macheath is attempting to empower not only the thieves working for him but other beggars and poor people as well. This contrast is another manifestation of the playwright's intention to define Macheath as a kind of hero.

Another element defining this scene as climactic is the way the action changes direction. Up to now, the content of the play has been mostly exposition, explaining and defining character and situation. From this moment on, a plot develops, focusing on the ways various characters struggle to get Macheath in and out of prison. A key element of that plot, the bribing of the prostitutes to turn Macheath over to the Peachums, is put in motion through the plotting between Peachum and his wife. This increases the play's dramatic tension and draws the audience into the story as we wonder whether their plot will actually succeed.

The music in this scene again functions on two levels. Polly's song at first glance comes across as a typical song about falling in love. It also functions as a comment on human nature. No matter how careful or determined we are, our human souls will eventually win control over our minds. This secondary thematic point is made again when the audience sees Macheath's inability to control his sexual urges, leading to his legal betrayal in the same way as Polly's inability to control her feelings of love leads her to emotional betrayal. The song at the end of the scene, however, moves interestingly from being another exploration of inner feelings and circumstances to a philosophical comment on the nature of human existence. Once again, the play's essentially cynical view of human nature is revealed. We are directly challenged to examine ourselves and

learn whether we're the loving Polly we'd like to be, the avaricious Peachum we're afraid to be or the roguish but well-intentioned Macheath society needs us to be.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

The narrator appears and says that Macheath is preparing an escape from London. Macheath lies in bed as Polly rushes in with the news that her father has visited Brown and threatened him. Now Brown thinks it would be a good idea if Macheath disappeared for a while. As she shows him the list of charges against him that has suddenly appeared and begs him to never commit another crime, Macheath tells her sharply that it's now up to her to run his business. He shows her his records of which criminal has done what, instructing her on how to handle each man. At first Polly is reluctant, but then she realizes and accepts what she has to do. When he tells her to send all the profits to a particular bank in Manchester, she asks whether she should rent out Macheath's rooms so there will be more money coming in. He accuses her of not believing he'll be back. She protests that she loves him, but then she asks whether he'll be faithful while he's away. He says he will and that he loves her, and then he abruptly returns the conversation to her duties running the business.

The other thugs come in, excited because people are going to be so busy with the coronation that there will be lots of opportunities for robbery. Macheath tells them he's got to disappear for a while, that the robberies are up to them and that management of the business is up to Polly. The thugs express their doubts that Polly is up to it, and with Macheath encouraging her, Polly speaks crudely and violently to assert her control. The thugs applaud her. Macheath tells them they have to start pulling their weight as robbers once he's gone, and he sends them out. He bids a fond farewell to Polly, telling her to put on her makeup and make sure she's as pretty when he's gone as she is when he's there. Polly asks him again to not look at another woman, and Macheath promises again that he'll be faithful. She begs him to stay, but he says he has to go. She tells him of a strange and frightening dream she had. They kiss and bid each other goodbye, and as he goes out, Polly sings a short song about the pain of farewell and how useless it is to be upset, since women have always had the same pain.

Mrs. Peachum and Jenny appear, with Mrs. Peachum saying that if she sees Macheath and reports him, there'll be a reward. Jenny tells her that since the police are looking for him, it's not likely that she or any of the other prostitutes will see him. Mrs. Peachum cynically tells her that even a man on the run has his needs and sings a song about how men are all sexually obsessed in spite of their struggles to be otherwise.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

This scene essentially serves to move the plot forward, sending Macheath into his escape and showing how Mrs. Peachum is able to bribe Jenny to turn him in. An interesting secondary element is Polly's outburst of crudity and emotional violence, something the audience hasn't seen from her to this point and something that indicates

she's not quite the innocent flower we believed her to be. She's more her father's daughter than we thought.

A secondary element of interest is Macheath's insistence that Polly continue to wear makeup, perhaps suggesting that he desires to control her even when he's gone. This idea is reinforced by the instructions he gives her on how to handle the business, one of which is a key piece of foreshadowing. His instructions to send money to a particular bank foreshadow the moment in the play's final scene in which she tells him she's done what he asked, which means there's no money for him to bribe his way into freedom. A second piece of foreshadowing occurs in both Polly's insistence that Macheath be faithful and Mrs. Peachum's very cynical song about men's sexual desires, both of which foreshadow Macheath's almost instantaneous infidelity after he leaves. The song, in the same way as most of the other songs, is as much a comment on human nature in general as it is on the specific situation. It suggests that human beings are overwhelmed by their feelings and impulses in the same way as Polly's song in Act 1, Scene 3 about falling in love.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

The narrator introduces the next scene, which takes place in a brothel, where Jenny and other prostitutes are waiting for customers. A crook named Jake comments that there's no chance Macheath will show up, but a moment later Macheath appears. When Jake expresses his surprise, Macheath says it's his regular day to visit. Then, he casually tosses the list of crimes shown to him by Polly to the floor. Jenny reads it, and Jake asks whether he's listed on it as well. Macheath tells him that all the members of the gang are on it.

Jenny looks at Macheath's palm and reads his fortune. Macheath asks her to tell him only the good things. Jenny refers to a narrow dark place, a woman's treachery and a name beginning with J. Macheath tells her she's got the name wrong, saying that it begins with P. The audience understands him to believe that he's going to be betrayed by Polly. Jenny warns him he's heading for trouble, saying when the bells marking the end of the coronation start ringing it'll be worse. Macheath laughs her off. He continues to laugh as he shows the warrant to Jake and chats with the other prostitutes about their underwear. Jenny goes out and joins both Mrs. Peachum and a police officer, Smith, as Macheath talks about how he's always loved Jenny best of all the prostitutes in his life. He sings about how much he misses their life together, and the audience learns that he was her pimp and made his living off her. Jenny sings to the same tune about how much he has hurt her. Together they sing about how she became pregnant, how they aborted the baby and how Macheath still longs for their old life.

At the end of the song, Jenny comes back into the brothel, followed by Smith. Macheath shoves him aside and escapes out a window, encountering Mrs. Peachum, who's waiting outside with other officers. They greet each other with exaggerated politeness. Macheath is arrested and led away, and Mrs. Peachum tells Jenny and the other prostitutes that if they want, they can visit him in prison. She says she'll pay any bills he left outstanding and goes out. When she's gone, Jenny wakes up Jake, who has fallen asleep, and gives him the news of Macheath's arrest.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

The key point of this scene is the dramatization of the way Macheath's sexual desires, as foreshadowed in Mrs. Peachum's song and comments at the end of the previous scene, lead him into trouble. There are echoes in this situation of heroes of classic tragedy, such as Oedipus, Macbeth or Hamlet. In the same way as these potentially great men are each brought to destruction by their so-called tragic flaw - arrogance, ambition and indecision respectively - Macheath is brought down by his uncontrollable sexual desire. The suggestion made by these echoes is that on some level Macheath is the same sort of tragic hero as these other characters, an idea that carries with it the

implication that he is ultimately a great man. In other words, this scene reinforces the heroic side of his anti-heroic nature.

At the same time, however, there is also the ironic suggestion that no matter how noble a man may seem, underneath he's still animalistic and brutal. This is illustrated most vividly in his song about his life with Jenny. His career as her pimp reveals his exploitative nature, a nature similar to Peachum's. The juxtaposition of this aspect of his character with the previously discussed echoes of tragic heroism suggests that the play is telling us Macheath is both a great man and a monster. This is another manifestation of the play's view of human nature. It is complex, and ultimately no one is only one thing or another. No one is perfect. Whether this view is a cynical or realistic one might well be up for discussion. On another level, Jenny's words support the interpretation that Macheath issues his commands to Polly because he likes control. He seems to have controlled Jenny in the same way.

Jenny's palm reading is a clear, and some might say overly obvious, foreshadowing of Macheath's eventual downfall. Primarily, Jenny's vision of a narrow dark place refers to his prison cell. It might also be a symbol of the birth canal. When he's released from his cell into the light, he's reborn as a free human being by a sudden twist of fate. The woman whose name begins with J is a reference to Jenny herself, who turns Macheath over to the police. Finally, her reference to the coronation bells foreshadows the timing of his execution, which in the play's final scene is slated to take place by the time the coronation bells have finished ringing.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

The narrator says that in this scene the audience will see how Macheath is freed from prison by the love of another woman. Brown appears, saying that he hopes Macheath isn't captured. He fears what he'll see in Macheath's eyes when they meet. Macheath is brought in by Smith, sees Brown and glares at him. Brown says he did everything he could to keep this from happening. He pleads with Macheath to not be angry and begs him to say something. Heartbroken and weeping at his friend's angry silence, Brown goes out. Macheath speaks in soliloquy about how angry he is with Brown and about how he decided that being silent would cause him more pain than shouting at him.

Smith comes in. Macheath bribes him to put him in a pair of more comfortable handcuffs and says that the worst part of the whole situation is that his affair with Brown's daughter Lucy is probably going to be revealed. The setting changes, and the lights change. Macheath sings of how life can only be fully lived if it's lived well.

At the end of the song, Lucy comes in angrily. Macheath suggests that under the circumstances she should be nicer to her husband. Lucy refers angrily to his relationship with Polly, and Macheath says he isn't married to her and wants to be married to Lucy. Lucy says she just wants to be an honest woman. At that moment Polly comes in, looking for her "dear husband." Lucy reacts angrily, and Polly sadly refers to Macheath's promise to see no other women. She becomes even sadder when he doesn't respond to her and then becomes angry when Lucy calls her a slut. Lucy asks whether he's got two wives, and Polly begs to know the truth. She says that she's run the gang in exactly the way he told her to. Macheath tells them both to "shut their traps." They both refuse and argue with each other over who has more right to his attentions. Lights change, and the setting changes. Their argument continues in song, as they bicker over whom Macheath finds prettier, who's his only bride and whom he loves more.

After the song, Macheath tells Lucy to calm down, saying Polly's just playing games because she wants to be seen as a grieving widow. As Polly tearfully protests, Macheath and Lucy both suggest she's behaving badly. Polly insists that as Macheath's wife, she deserves some respect. She and Lucy argue over who should stay and who should go, and they call each other names, speaking more and more crudely. Finally Lucy tells Polly she's pregnant and that that should settle everything. Just as Polly is saying she doesn't know what to do, Mrs. Peachum comes in, speaking angrily about Macheath's lack of morals. She insists that Polly come home at once. Polly says she's got something to say, but Mrs. Peachum strikes her and drags her off.

Macheath tells Lucy she was wonderful, saying he wasn't more firm with Polly because he feels sorry for her. Lucy says she loves him so much she'd almost rather see him hanged than in another woman's arms. They talk briefly about running away together,

but Macheath says he has to escape and find somewhere to hide on his own, promising to send for her as soon as he's safe. Lucy brings him his hat and walking stick and goes out. Smith comes in, leaving the cell door open. He demands that Macheath hand over the walking stick. Macheath refuses. They struggle, and Macheath escapes.

Brown comes in, and he is relieved to see that Macheath is gone. Peachum comes in, claiming the reward for Macheath's arrest. When he sees Macheath is gone, he realizes there will be no reward and becomes frustrated. He then notices that Brown is sitting in the cell in Macheath's place, and he makes pointed comments about their friendship. Brown talks about how helpless he feels, and Peachum mocks him by saying he needs to lie down and rest. He then pointedly refers to how the public always blames the police when a prisoner escapes. He tells a story of how a police chief who allowed the coronation of an ancient Egyptian queen to be disrupted was executed. He is referring metaphorically to the coronation of Queen Victoria. As Peachum goes out, Brown jumps to his feet and starts issuing orders to his officers.

Lights change, and the setting changes. Macheath and Jenny appear, singing a song about how people with high ideals and dreams of how the world should be run need to become aware of what people really need in their lives. The society is able to function because of the daily oppression of millions of people, and those who preach morality and try to define sin are hypocrites. The song concludes with the suggestion that "mankind is kept alive by bestial acts."

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

This scene contains several climaxes. The first is the confrontation between Polly and Lucy, the high point to date of what might be called the secondary or sub-plot focusing on Macheath's complicated love life. It might well be asked at this point why both women are so attracted to him. One possible explanation is the almost stereotypical idea that "good girls," which Lucy and Polly both are, are attracted to "bad boys," which Macheath undoubtedly is. There is also the possibility that they desire escape, Lucy from her father the sheriff and Polly from her father the exploitative monster. A third possibility is the mysterious and impulsive love sung about by Polly at the end of Act 1, Scene 3, the kind of love that can't be understood but must be surrendered to. Whatever the reason, there can be no doubt that both women feel passionately about him. Both women feel compromised by both him and by their passion, and both women are prepared to go to extremes to win even more of his love and attention. Meanwhile, their confrontation here foreshadows their confrontation at the end of the play, in which they each agree to let the other have Macheath for herself.

The second climax in this act is Macheath's escape, an even higher point in the action than the climax at the end of Act 1 because the stakes are raised considerably. All the characters have a lot more to lose. The level of the stakes at a given point in a dramatic story, like the level of emotion, is a common way in which a play's climax is defined. From that perspective, a third climax can be found in the confrontation between Peachum and Brown, which again raises the stakes even further. Peachum is telling

Brown that unless he does his job and brings Macheath in, Peachum will go to the higher-ups and tell them all about the real relationship the two men have. This raises the stakes not only for them but also for Macheath and the women involved in his life, even though they're not in the scene. This is an example of the way that whatever affects the main character of a play affects the lives and actions of everyone involved with him or her.

The music in this scene functions on both previously described levels. Macheath's song about living well is ironic, in that people who live well (i.e. the rich) are, for the most part, the targets of both his thievery and the play's thematic attack. Meanwhile, his duet with Jenny reinforces the idea that at heart, Macheath has noble aims - a commitment to justice for those for whom justice is elusive. This is another example of the play's sociopolitical agenda. The reference to bestial acts indicates the acts that the poor perpetrate on each other in order to survive and the acts that the wealthy and exploitative (like Peachum) perpetrate on the lower classes to make their profits. It's this aspect of existence that the play protests.

Both the duet and the "living well" number are sung presentationally, meaning that they focus on commenting on society and human nature rather than on illuminating character or relationship. By contrast, this latter stylistic choice is made for the duet between Lucy and Polly. The intensity of their feelings and their rivalry is both illuminated and heightened by the music, suggesting that their reactions are more important than the casual way Macheath treats them.

Act 3, Scene 7

Act 3, Scene 7 Summary

The narrator introduces the following scene, telling us that Peachum plans to disrupt the coronation by staging a demonstration of human misery. In Peachum's shop, his staff of beggars appears as Peachum and Mrs. Peachum tell them to start making placards to carry on their march. Jenny and the other prostitutes appear, asking for the money promised them by Mrs. Peachum at the end of Act 2, Scene 2. Mrs. Peachum tells them they should be ashamed of themselves and that they won't be getting any money, referring to thirty pieces of silver. This is a reference to the fee paid to Judas for betraying Christ to the Romans. Mrs. Peachum explains that Macheath has escaped custody and that no reward has been issued. Just as she and Jenny are about to get into an argument, Peachum comes in and asks whether Macheath is in jail or not. Jenny tells him to not mention Macheath's name, saying she's been crying herself to sleep over what she did to him. He sought comfort in her arms the night before, and he's probably at that moment in the arms of another prostitute, Suky Tawdry. Peachum tells one of his beggars to run to the police and tell them where Macheath is. As the beggar goes, Peachum tells the prostitutes that the reward will be paid eventually, and he tells Mrs. Peachum to make them all some coffee. Mrs. Peachum goes out, singing another verse of the song about the sexually obsessive nature of men.

Peachum tells the beggars to get ready to march, talking at length about how there's no rich man alive who can stand the guilt of seeing a beggar on his doorstep. Mrs. Peachum returns with coffee and says the prostitutes can pick up their money the next day. Peachum calls the beggars into line for their march. The beggar sent for the police comes back, saying the police are already on the way. Peachum tells the beggars to hide and then tells Mrs. Peachum to get the band of musicians together and start playing the minute she hears him say the word "harmless." Mrs. Peachum goes out. The beggars and the prostitutes hide, and Peachum greets Brown, who comes in with other officers.

Brown orders that Peachum be arrested, but Peachum says Brown should go after Macheath instead, suggesting that he's free because he's friends with Brown. He talks about being a fully law abiding citizen, but then he says laws have been created solely for the purpose of exploiting those who don't understand them. There is the sound of drums from offstage, and Peachum says that that signals the departure of the soldiers for the coronation parade, adding that a parade of beggars will soon follow. Brown says the beggars will soon be marching into prison. Peachum shouts that they're harmless. A band starts playing offstage, and lights and scenery change. Peachum sings a song about how any struggle for success by anyone on any level is doomed to failure.

When the song is finished, Peachum tells Brown that his plan for arresting the beggars is useless. There are hundreds of beggars in London, many of whom are already standing outside the abbey where Queen Victoria is about to be crowned. They will

make the police look bad if they're arrested. Brown realizes he's got no choice but to arrest Macheath, and Peachum gets Jenny to reveal where Macheath is. Brown issues orders for Macheath's arrest and goes out. Peachum issues orders that the beggars are now to march on the prison where Macheath will be held prisoner, and he sings another verse of the song about the inevitable failure of man's struggle for success.

Lights change, and scenery changes. Jenny sings about Solomon, Cleopatra and Caesar. Their wisdom, beauty and courage eventually brought about their downfalls. She then sings a verse about Brecht, the author of *The Threepenny Opera*, and how his career was destroyed by his inquisitiveness. Finally, she sings a verse about Macheath, and how he was destroyed by his sexual appetites.

Act 3, Scene 7 Analysis

The most important element of this scene is the highlighting of the contrast between Peachum and Macheath. At first glance, it seems that Peachum is going further in his protest against the treatment of the disadvantaged than Macheath, who is not after all organizing a march of protest. However, Peachum is only using the march as a tool to blackmail Brown into doing what he wants, arresting Macheath so he will be executed and Polly will be freed to return to her exploitative home life. Macheath's motives, however, are clearly portrayed as purer. He's interested in gaining freedom for the poor for its own sake. Here, Macheath is portrayed as a hero through contrast with a character who clearly is not. Meanwhile, Peachum's song about the futility of the struggle for achievement is deeply ironic. On the one hand, there's truth in what he's saying, simply because the struggle of the disadvantaged seems so insurmountably difficult. The irony comes from the fact that Peachum is exactly the kind of capitalist exploiter his song is supposedly protesting against.

The second song in this scene functions in the same way as the references to tragic heroism in Act 2, Scene 5. Solomon, Cleopatra and Caesar are all "great" individuals brought to destruction by their tragic flaws. Macheath's inclusion at the end of the song reinforces the previously discussed idea that the audience is intended to regard him as the same kind of tragic hero. The reference in the fourth verse to Brecht, the author of *Threepenny Opera,* suggests that the author sees himself as having been destroyed by a tragic flaw in the same way as the other characters in the song. The reference also reminds the audience that we're watching a play, taking us for a moment out of the emotions of what's going on and reminding us that we're meant to observe, think and act as a result of what we've seen. We're not simply supposed to feel.

Act 3, Scene 8

Act 3, Scene 8 Summary

This scene is set in Lucy's bedroom above the jail. She lives there because her father is the sheriff, and he needs to live where his job requires him to live. Polly visits Lucy and apologizes for the way she behaved previously, saying she was upset because of the way Macheath treated her. Lucy says she won't be seeing him, and they argue politely over who has the right to see him. Polly says men are always afraid of women who love them too much. She goes on to tell how she and Macheath only met ten days previously. They were married only five days previously, and she only recently found out his criminal history. She has no idea what will happen next, and she can't understand how she fell in love with such a man. Lucy says she understands, referring to Polly as Miss Peachum. Polly corrects her, saying she's Mrs. Macheath and adding that she envies the loving way Lucy was treated. Lucy suggests that Polly should have stuck to her own class of people, referring to her again as "Miss." Polly again corrects her, saying sadly that she should have done what her father always advised her to do and kept her relationships on a strictly businesslike level. Lucy comforts her and fetches some food. In an aside, Polly refers to her as a "hypocritical strumpet."

Lucy returns, and Polly eats the food she's brought. They talk briefly about a photograph of Macheath that Lucy has, and they accuse each other of spying. The two women admit that neither of them knows where Macheath is, and they laugh sadly about how ironic it is that Macheath has two commitments and is unable to keep either of them. They talk about how unworthy men are in general of the fuss women make, and Lucy confesses she's not really pregnant. Polly laughs, and she says Lucy can have Macheath if she can find him. Voices are heard outside. Lucy looks out a window and comments that Macheath has again been captured. Polly collapses. Mrs. Peachum comes in and tells Polly to collect herself and get changed into the widow's clothes she's brought. As Polly puts on the clothes, Mrs. Peachum tells her she'll be a lovely widow, but she'll have to cheer up a bit.

Act 3, Scene 8 Analysis

The most noteworthy element of this relatively brief scene is the way that both Lucy and Polly behave hypocritically. They seem to be attempting to be civilized, but their words and actions give them away. Lucy's repeated references to Polly as "Miss," when she knows Polly thinks of herself as "Mrs.," are clearly attempts to get her angry. Polly's reference to Lucy as a "hypocritical strumpet" reveals that in truth, she's less tolerant of the rival for her husband's affections than she is pretending to be. It may be that another important truth revealed in this scene is the depth of Polly's love. She, after all, and not Lucy faints as it becomes clear that Macheath's execution is going ahead. Perhaps this means that Lucy is simply better at handling extreme shock, but it may also have a deeper and more metaphoric significance.

Because Polly has such a desperate need to escape her capitalistic and exploitative father, it's possible to see her as symbolic of the similar need for the poor and disadvantaged to escape the capitalist system. Because Macheath is symbolic of the struggle for freedom from that system, his execution can be seen as a symbol of the death of hope in the poor. Polly's collapse can therefore also be seen as symbolic of that death. Mrs. Peachum's comment that Polly will look good in black reinforces this idea. Polly will be a widow and grieve the loss of her beloved, but as a symbol of the poor and oppressed, she also is grieving the loss of her inspiration and hope for freedom.

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 1

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 1 Summary

The narrator introduces the scene. Early in the morning, Macheath, again betrayed by prostitutes, is again in prison and is about to be hanged. The scene changes to Macheath's cell as bells toll, and this is the fulfillment of Jenny's prophecy in Act 2, Scene 5. Smith comments that Macheath is to be hanged by the time the bells chime six. Another officer reports that the streets around the prison have been packed with protestors for the last fifteen minutes. More are arriving, and if the trend continues, there will be nobody in the streets to watch the newly crowned queen pass. Brown appears, and Smith asks whether he wants to see Macheath. Brown says he doesn't and quickly goes out again. Macheath quietly suggests to Smith that there's the possibility of a bribe if he will consider letting him go, adding that anybody who wants to see him is to be let in so they can give him the money. Smith says Macheath is talking nonsense and goes out. Macheath sings a short song about his longing to not be alone and un-mourned when he dies.

Two thugs appear, and after questioning them briefly, Smith allows them to pass. Macheath quietly asks them to empty their savings accounts so that he can bribe Smith. The thugs say they need money, and Macheath reminds them who's being hanged. They remind him who got caught with a prostitute. Macheath tells them that whoever told them that is a liar. The thugs agree to get the money, just as Smith returns and asks what Macheath would like for his last meal. Macheath says he wants asparagus. The thugs run out, saying they'll have to fight the crowd to get through and might not be back in time. Macheath offers Smith four hundred pounds, but Smith just shrugs and goes out. Macheath demands to speak to Brown, but he is ignored. He then sings another verse of the lonely song, referring to how he needs his followers to appeal to the queen.

Polly appears, insisting that she be given priority for seeing Macheath because she's his wife. Smith allows her five minutes. She and Macheath greet each other, and she assures him the business is doing well and that she'll be fine. Then, she admits when he asks for money to give the guard that she sent it away to the bank in Manchester as he told her to. She makes a joke about how she might even ask the queen for money, but then she starts to cry. Macheath pushes her away, demanding to know whether there's any chance of getting the money. She says there isn't, bids him goodbye and goes out.

Smith brings in a dish of asparagus. Brown appears and takes it in to Macheath, who tells him he shouldn't have bothered. He sits down to eat as he asks Brown to show him the list of the money Macheath owes. He is referring to the percentage of the criminal profits Brown has been receiving. Brown protests that he doesn't want to have that conversation, but Macheath insists. As they go through the list, Brown becomes more and more upset, and Macheath becomes more and more angry. Finally, Macheath sings a furious song about how when he's hanged, his neck will learn how heavy his ass is. Brown shouts to Smith to allow anyone who wants to see Macheath to come in. As

they're waiting, Brown asks whether Macheath has collected the money. Macheath says the money will be returning with the thugs, but Brown says they're going to be too late. The deal is off.

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 1 Analysis

The key element of this scene is the way the symbolic value of money is defined. On one level, it's clearly portrayed as freedom, with Macheath's increasingly desperate demands offering a clear example of this definition. This meaning is also enforced when Smith refuses the bribe, since Macheath clearly believes that money will buy freedom. Smith's reaction makes the secondary thematic point that money, in fact, will not buy freedom. When Polly has no money available and the thugs are unable to get any, the point is defined even further.

A secondary symbolic value to money is developed in the conversation between Brown and Macheath. Here, money on some level defines and cements friendship. Macheath's bribes are in fact at the core of the relationship rather than Brown's belief in the feeling and connection between the two of them. It may be that Macheath's angry insistence on living up to his financial responsibility is a response to what he sees as Brown's betrayal of that friendship. Within the play's sociopolitical context, however, defined by a position against the capitalist system and its foundations on purely financial transactions, it seems more likely that Macheath truly did see the relationship in purely financial terms. It cost him a little profit to maintain the relationship with Brown, but he did gain freedom to make even more money. This aspect to the symbolic value of money reinforces the first aspect, since in the relationship between Brown and Macheath, money cannot ensure Macheath's liberty in the way he thought it did.

Macheath's song about loneliness functions both as an illumination of his state of mind and as a commentary on the larger issue of how the poor and disadvantaged are treated. In his specific situation, the general situation is reflected. Macheath stands for all those who have been oppressed in the way Macheath clearly believes himself to have been, and as the audience is meant to believe him to have been. Perhaps we are meant to see ourselves in Macheath, as well.

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 2

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 2 Summary

Peachum, Mrs. Peachum, Polly, Lucy, the prostitutes, the thugs and a priest come in. Peachum speaks with pompous regret that the occasion of his first meeting with his son-in-law is in such awkward circumstances. Macheath comments on how pretty Polly looks. The thugs reveal that they couldn't get through the crowd to get the money, and the rest of the gang sends their best wishes. Mrs. Peachum wonders aloud who would have expected this outcome when she, Polly and Macheath first met. Brown recalls his first meeting with Macheath when they were both soldiers. Jenny talks about how desperately upset all the prostitutes are. Then the bells chime the hour of six, the hour of Macheath's execution.

Macheath says the party shouldn't keep the public waiting, and then he speaks about himself as a representative of a group of disadvantaged artists being destroyed by large corporations, saying that similar acts of destruction are devastating all humanity. He then bids his friends and allies farewell. He is amazed that Jenny betrayed him, and he says that what she did is proof that the world, and humanity, never changes. Lights change, and the setting changes. Macheath sings a long song in which he asks for forgiveness and compassion from the people of the future, from all people and from God. The song concludes with an angry demand that those who arrested and betrayed him be punished and that he be forgiven for feeling the way he does.

Lights change, and scenery changes. The setting is again the prison. Smith arrives, and Mrs. Peachum tells Lucy and Polly to stand on either side of their husband. Macheath begins to ask their forgiveness, but Smith interrupts and tells him to get moving. A procession leads Macheath to the gallows, but just before he puts his head in the noose, Peachum steps forward. He tells the audience that instead of taking the risk of offending the audience, and since this is an opera, rather than real life, the ending is being changed. Justice is giving way to humanity. Brown then appears with a message from the queen, pardoning Macheath and granting him a title, a castle and a pension of ten thousand pounds. She also offers her good wishes to any bridal couple that happens to be present. Macheath rejoices at being reprieved, and Polly also rejoices. Mrs. Peachum comments on how nice it would be if such messengers appeared any time they were needed.

Peachum steps forward and urges all the actors to join in singing a hymn to the poorest of the poor, saying that the stories of those people have just been played out. He says saviors on horseback are extremely unlikely to appear in the lives of such people and that wrongdoing by the poor shouldn't be too heavily punished because they're so desperate. The actors join together and sing, their lyrics suggesting that there's so much darkness and bitterness and pain in the world that their wrongdoings should be forgiven.

Act 3, Scene 9, Part 2 Analysis

There are two key elements to this scene, one defining the reason for the existence of the other. The first of these is the reiteration of the idea that Macheath is to be seen as a hero. He is both a representative of the poor and disadvantaged and a leader in the protest against the way in which they're treated. This reiteration appears in his speech and song just before he's led to his execution, in Peachum's speech prior to the singing of the "hymn," and in the hymn itself. It appears most dramatically, however, in Macheath's reprieve, the second key element of the scene.

The suddenness and unexpectedness of the reprieve is a clear example of what is known as a "deus ex machina," a term used to define a reversal of fortune or a change of fate that seems unrelated to the rest of the action. It was first used in relation to classical Greek theater, in which the sudden appearance of a god or gods defined the way in which the story being played out was to be resolved. In many cases, the god would issue a decree, dispense justice or cause a change in heart for the characters, and in almost all cases the god's actions appeared to dispense with narrative logic and came across as arbitrary and whimsical. Such is the case with Macheath's reprieve here. Logic would appear to dictate that he be punished for his crimes. Because of the play's sociopolitical agenda and because he is intended to be a hero, the deus ex machina is employed to give him his life, his freedom and all the wealth and position he could ever want. In other words, he is rewarded for being what the play's agenda needs him to be. The nature of his character and of the play's message defines the reason for the existence of the device.

The irony, of course, is that all the things Macheath is given are symbols of everything he's protested - money, social position and power. The irony is compounded by Peachum's final comments about the poor continuing to be disadvantaged and layered even further by the fact that Peachum is still a capitalist. He is in fact pleading for support of a cause that if realized would ruin his life. Ultimately, however, the point of the play is driven home in the final, brief musical selection. Anything that alleviates the suffering of humanity must be forgiven, or at least viewed with tolerance.

Bibliography

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Characters

Ballad Singer

The unnamed Ballad Singer serves as a kind of' Greek chorus, commenting and explaining the play's action as it unfolds. He opens the story with a grotesquely playful tale of Mac the Knife, an actual historical character who murdered prostitutes in London. Although John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* (the source material for Brecht's work) included ballads about the thieves in his dramatic world, the songs were not as outrageous as those sung by Brecht's narrator—a credit to the musical talents of Brecht and his composer, Kurt Weil. Throughout *The Threepenny Opera,* the Ballad Singer punctuates the action with distastefully mordant commentaries on the seamy action of the play, sung to a discordant tune. He sings the play's best-known musical number "Moritat" (or "Theme from the Threepenny Opera")—more commonly known as "Mac the Knife"—which was popularized by singer Bobby Damn in 1959.

Sheriff Jackie Brown

Brown is the crooked High Sheriff who takes a portion of the beggars' earnings in return for tip-offs about planned police raids. He is a long-time friend of Macheath, having served with him as a soldier in India. Brown attends Polly and Mac's wedding and is taken aback by the wealth that surrounds his friend. When cornered by Peachum, who cites a list of Macheath's crimes, Brown is forced to send Constable Smith out to arrest his former pal. He is a weak-willed and greedy man who expresses sorrow upon seeing Macheath in jail at the Old Bailey but nevertheless accepts (he money from Peachum. Finally, as Macheath stands at the gallows, Brown rides up on horseback with a reprieve.

Lucy Brown

Lucy is the Tiger Brown's daughter. Mac has been having an affair with Lucy, deceiving both his friend and Polly. Lucy appears to be pregnant—the father presumably Macheath—but she reveals to Polly that she has faked her pregnancy by stuffing a pillow under her dress. Lucy at first treats Polly with haughtiness but later agrees with Polly's assertion that Macheath loves her more. Lucy finally befriends her lover's wife.

Charles Filch

Filch comes innocently enough into Peachum's beggar's outfitting emporium, hoping to obtain Peachum's permission to beg on a certain street corner. Filch proves himself singularly unsuited for the career of begging, however, being naturally inclined to pity—he expresses guilt over accepting money from people.

The Gang

With fellows such as Bob-the-Saw, Crook-fingered Jake, Jimmy, Matthew (or Matt of the Mint), Ned, Robert, and Dreary Walt, the Gang consists of thieves, cutpurses, prostitutes, pimps, and beggars. All of them are supplied costumes for the trade of begging by Mr. Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum, and they forfeit a percentage of their earnings to Macheath, who uses the money as a payoff to Sheriff Brown for protecting their racket. There is no honor among these thieves; all are ready to turn on their brothers if it will buy them an evening of food and pleasure. They give stolen gifts to Mac and Polly at their wedding.

Reverend Kimball

Kimball performs the impromptu wedding between Polly and Macheath. He is more than likely not a real priest, as he is also one of the thieving Gang.

Low-dive Jenny

Low-dive Jenny is a former lover of Mac's and now just one of the whores of the gang. Like the Biblical character of Judas (who deceived his leader Jesus Christ), Jenny betrays Macheath. She pretends to read Macheath's palm, hinting at a dismal future event, then she informs Constable Smith of the thief s whereabouts.

Mac the Knife

See Macheath

Macheath

A former war hero turned master thief, Macheath is the dark hero, the grotesque Christ figure of *The Threepenny Opera.* His name alludes to the murderer Mac the Knife in Brecht's play; he was merely an underworld criminal and womanizer in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera.* His mother-in-law, Mrs. Peachum calls him a horse-thief and a highwayman (one who robs travelers). Much like Brecht, Macheath is also a womanizer who conducts simultaneous affairs with a variety of women; he plays the attentive husband to Polly while also pursuing an affair with his friend Tiger's daughter, Lucy.

Macheath is the kingpin of the beggar gang, a jaded criminal, and a slave to his "sexual urges." He appears to pursue his lifestyle with little emotion or regret. He whistles nonchalantly when Polly reads him the list of charges the police have against him: "You've killed two shopkeepers, more than thirty burglaries, twenty-three hold-ups, and God knows how many acts of arson, attempted murder, forgery, and perjury, all within eighteen months. In Winchester you seduced two sisters under the age of consent."

Macheath's only response to the entire list of charges is that he thought the girls were twenty.

His father-in-law, Peachum, turns Macheath over to the police to rid his daughter (as well as his own business interests) of him. In the father's eyes, Macheath is not a desirable match. Despite facing a sentence of death for his crimes, Macheath is tough and practical, brusquely ordering Polly to watch over his interests. He accepts his fate like the soldier he once was, although he persists until the last minute in trying to bribe his way out of jail.

Celia Peachum

Polly's mother and Peachum's wife, Celia assists her husband at the emporium by bossing the beggars. She faints when she learns that Polly has married Macheath because she sees this as a good investment gone bad: In her mother's eyes, Polly had the potential to be a society lady and could have raised the family's status by marrying a wealthy man.

Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum

Peachum is the proprietor of "The Beggar's Friend, Ltd." He runs the begging in London like an efficient business, outfitting the beggars, training them to perfect their methods (especially the art of swindling suckers), and assigning them districts in which to work. Peachum, like Fagin in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist,* takes a percentage of each of the Gang's earnings, slowly getting rich while his employees live hand-to-mouth. Peachum needs Polly around his business to attract customers with her good looks. This exploitation of his daughter's charms is disrupted when she falls in love with Macheath, marrying the thief without her father's permission. True to his greedy and ruthless ways, Peachum solves the problem by selling Macheath out to the police.

Polly Peachum

Polly is the daughter of the beggar king, Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum. She is referred to by her father as "a lump of sensuality"—a fact that he shamelessly exploits to increase his business. Polly marries her lover, Macheath, in a makeshift ceremony in a stable. During the proceedings, she learns that Macheath has also been sexually active with Lucy.

When Lucy and Polly meet they accuse each other ruining their respective relationships with Macheath. They sing a duet in which they trade lines berating each other. While Polly and Lucy are very similar characters, it is Polly who prevails in a sustained union with Macheath. While she does not like her husband's sexual promiscuity, she accepts it as a fundamental part of his nature.

Constable Smith

Smith is the police officer who arrests Macheath, though he accepts a bribe to leave the handcuffs off. He later offers to help Macheath escape for a one-thousand pound bribe.

Tiger

See Sheriff Jackie Brown

Themes

Betrayal and Moral Corruption

Like the "greatest story ever told," the story of Jesus, the protagonist of *The Threepenny Opera* is betrayed by a former intimate, But there the similarity ends, or rather, diverts to mirrored opposites. Macheath is not a savior like Christ but a moral corrupter, not a paragon of virtue but a f ountainhead of sin, not the archetypal human ideal but a base man of bestial instinct. In contrast to Jesus, he mames the woman with whom he has been sleeping in a stable rather than being born of a chaste woman in a stable. The wedding gown and gifts are not humble attire and ritual offerings but stolen goods.

Despite these oppositions to one of the best-known symbols of purity, Macheath is not a completely evil figure. He has some appeal, especially to the whores and women of low virtue. He is gallant in his way, cuffing his gang members for not displaying enough gentility to his new bride; he has courage—or at least disdain for his fate; and he has a loyal friendship with his army buddy Jackie Brown. He has a roguish charm but his personality is presented not as a role model but as a warning against the seductive quality of such a dishonest life.

Nor is Macheath the only false idol in the play. Peachum is in the business of guiding beggars to larger profits falsely earned in the name of charity. He preys upon the generosity of the public, justifying his use of false wounds and artificial limbs with his own twist on the biblical homily "Give and it shall be given unto you." Peachum argues that people are jaded and must be prodded to charity by ever newer and more ghastly representations of poverty. Yet the proprietor takes a whopping fifty percent of his beggars' earnings, betraying the very purpose of begging through his swindling.

Peachum also betrays his own daughter by having her new husband arrested. The whores are the chorus of this play, and they are as corrupt as the main characters. Low-dive Jenny (J as in Judas), a former lover of Macheath's, betrays him for a handful of money, which she is denied when Macheath escapes. In fact, Macheath has escaped due to the betrayal of the jail guard, whom the robber king has bribed. Furthermore, the whores know Macheath has escaped, and effectively are betraying Peachum when they demand payment for a job that was not satisfactorily completed. The list could go on, including Jackie Brown, who seesaws morally as he wrestles with remaining loyal to Macheath versus saving his own reputation and livelihood. The ubiquity of the corruption and betrayal in *The Threepenny Opera* goes beyond social criticism to a kind of macabre, black humor.

Art and Experience

The purpose of Brecht's plays (as they were originally staged by the author) was to create an experience that would force audiences out of their common perceptions of bourgeois theater (as merely a means of entertainment). His plays sought to instill a willingness to work for social change. Thus, ultimately, Brecht's plays were designed as tools of moral and social propaganda, yet they strangely lack what most propaganda, by definition, carries with it: a design for a Utopian social paradise that social reform might achieve. Brecht's plays are largely pessimistic: they offer what biographer Martin Esslin chose as the subtitle to his book *Brecht,* a "choice of evils" rather than the choice between a right and a wrong way to live.

This aspect of Brecht's work has garnered much critical attention and warrants further contemplation. In *The Threepenny Opera,* the opera format—already stretching the viewer's sense of realism—is made even more alien through constant reminders-of the artifice of the play. Placards announcing the events and songs, asides to the audience, and lyrics incongruent with the action disrupt and sully any positive sentiments being expressed. For example, when Brown and Macheath reminisce about then* days in the army, the ditty they sing cynically celebrates the fate of all soldiers to be chopped into tartar (ground meat). When Peachum complains about his lot in life, he sings that God has humankind in a trap that is a "load of crap." In both cases, what might be profound social commentary is turned into a sick joke. In places, Brecht does address seriously the social ills he wants his audience to face and be moved to change. But he does not offer answers or a rectifying course of action. Rather than offer pat solutions to complex social problems, Brecht forces the spectator to ponder these issues and arrive at their own remedy.

Style

Opera or Musical?

An opera is a play that contains music (instrumental and/or vocal) as well as dialogue, and the music is just as important to the piece as is the action and spoken words of the characters. The style of singing is known as *recitative,* which means that the sung words are slightly modified from normal speech, just enough to make them melodic. In operas, the characters sing in the recitative mode during the action of the drama, occasionally launching into a more definitive song, during which the action temporarily stops. It is not a true opera if the lines are spoken instead of sung.

In a musical, the players do not sing their lines but rather speak them normally. The players do, however, break into song and dance at certain points in the play. The action is punctuated by these musical interludes. In an opera, the songs are somewhat more integrated into the recitative singing in the rest of the drama (for the most part, the vocal activity in opera takes the form of singing). In addition, the artistry of an opera lies in the virtuoso singing performances of the performers, not in their qualities as actors or dancers. By contrast, the songs of a musical, while they may showcase the musical abilities of the actors and actresses, are not the *raison d'etre* (justification for existence) of the musical. The musical is a composite of song, dance, music, and drama in which each element contributes equally. In some cases (particularly cinematic musicals) one performer will record or "dub" the vocals while an actor (who may have no musical ability but can act) performs the speaking parts and lip-synchs to the pre-recorded singing. This practice would be unheard of in an opera, where the performance of the singers is paramount.

Following these guidelines. *The Threepenny Opera* is an opera in name only; its form of spoken *and* sung vocal parts defines it as a musical not a traditional opera. The musical was an American invention of the early twentieth century, a natural outgrowth of vaudeville, in which unrelated acts of singing, dance, jazz, juggling, mime, and stunts were performed. American musicals were pure entertainment. Jazz music and the "cabaret" style of entertainment were hugely popular in Germany during the 1920s. Brecht transformed the musical comedy and cabaret music into an instrument of satire, which is not unlike what John Gay did with opera when he wrote *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728.

Gay fused together a satire on Italian opera (the form which is most commonly identified with the definition of opera) and the common ballad that had been popular on London streets for many decades. Thus, his invention was called a *ballad opera.* The ballad opera took the music from familiar ballads and set new words to them, incorporating dozens into the fabric of a loose plot. Gay's work playfully ridicules the pretensions of society, aristocracy, and Italian opera. Brecht, on the other hand, intended his play to effect actual social change, but the extraordinary music by Kurt Weill led many viewers to perceive the work as entertainment.

Epic Theater

Epic theater (sometimes called "open" theater) was the unique invention of Brecht. He designed epic theater as a "dialectical" (educational) experience: to deviate from the theater's base goal of entertainment to turn the spectator into a judge. Brecht's drama is designed to stir the audience into action. He attempts to accomplish this by disrupting the viewer's passive stance toward the play in order to generate a mode of "complex seeing," wherein the viewer follows the action, but also thinks about the construction of the play and the fabrication of its characters at the same time. Brecht wanted to develop the viewer's critical consciousness, the part of the observing mind that holds the drama at arm's length and judges not the action of the story but the reasons for presenting the characters.

Brecht frustrates the viewer's usual passive stance toward the drama in a number of ways. One is through the performers' direct asides to the audience, where the character steps out of action momentarily to address the audience with his or her own observations about the proceedings. For example. Peachum asks the audience "what's the use" of touching Biblical sayings if people are going to become jaded by them. The songs also serve to disrupt a complacent reading of the story, because they amplify or deny the themes presented by the action. The song Macheath and Polly sing after their wedding is a stinging cynical commentary that taints any shred of romanticism in the couple's marriage ceremony when it says that "love will endure or not endure / no matter where we are."

Although Brecht's ideas about theater had a profound influence on later playwrights, his immediate effect on audiences was not as successful. Spectators sometimes developed empathy for his characters in spite of his "alienating" techniques.

This initial failure was due in large part to Weill's music, which many theatergoers found alluring; the intoxicating music often gave viewers the impression that the play's events were a fantasy and thus removed from their own world. Critics have also pointed to the characters' rakishly amusing behavior, the love story—albeit twisted—between Macheath and Polly, and Macheath's happy ending as reasons for audiences to misinterpret the play as light entertainment.

Historical Context

Germany After World War I

Just prior to World War I, Germany, more dramatically than any other country in Europe was undergoing a transformation from an agrarian economy to an urban, industrial economy. An abundance of wealth, generated by a more productive work force, contributed to a growing sense of national power. Thus Germany magnanimously offered unlimited aid to Austria-Hungary when it came into conflict with the Balkans, portions of which it was attempting to overtake. Out of this conflict arose World War I.

Germans believed that they had the manpower and the technological superiority to put a quick end to the conflict. They did not bargain, however, for the involvement of Germany's greatest European rivals, and after three years of bitter losses, Germany suffered utter defeat at the hands of the Allied forces (Russia, France, Great Britain, and towards the end of the war, the United States).

German leader Kaiser Wilhem n, after forcing the more politically astute Chancellor Bismarck to resign, had aggravated European politics to the point where Germany faced a hopeless two-front war against the countries (France and Russia) that enjoined its East and West borders. The arrogant sense of honor with which most Germans initially undertook the battle to back neighboring Austria-Hungary was completely overturned by the time that the German republic's representatives were forced to sign a humiliating treaty at Versailles, France, in 1919. This treaty was signed in the same Hall of Mirrors in the Palace at Versailles where Germany had in 1871 forced France to accept a humiliating treaty ending the Franco-Prussian War.

The financial demands (Germany was forced to pay $31 billion in war reparations), the emotional price of the 1919 Versailles Treaty, the decimation of the country's civilian and military population, and the crippling of its newly developed industrial machine seriously compromised Germany's ability to repay the war debt or to reestablish its economy until, in 1924, an American businessman arranged for the United States to loan money to the faltering republic. Thereafter the spiraling inflation of the immediate postwar years and accompanying sense of pessimism and bitterness at having lost the war, was quickly followed by a period of heady economic growth and hedonism constrained by a clinging and pervasive sense of shame. The sharp decline and sudden rebound of the economy only served to exacerbate existing class conflicts.

During Germany's involvement in the war, Brecht had avoided conscription for a time but finally had to serve as an orderly in an army hospital in 1916. His experience left an indelible cynicism about the effectiveness of armed combat. He found solace in the ideas of Karl Marx's 1848 *Communist Manifesto,* as did other German Social Democrats. This political party envisioned a classless society as a solution to the ills of capitalism and the remnants of feudalism inherent in Germany's political system. Brecht, along widi other writers and artists of the period, produced *Expressionist* works that

captured the revulsion of newly converted pacifists. While recognizing the moral obligation to effect social change, these artists also felt deeply the horrors of war, and the conflicting feelings were expressed in emotionally charged works of drama, literature, and perhaps most effectively, painting. Brecht's plays continued to explore the gut-wrenching choices that faced Germany as it proceeded toward the rise of the Third Reich (Adolf Hitler's Germany) and its second great defeat in World War H.

German Decadence

Out of the increasing hedonism that followed Germany's defeat in World War I sprung the cabaret culture, a nightclub scene that came to personify German decadence. Adopting a nihilist philosophy (one that posits that life is ultimately meaningless), young Germans would indulge in excessive drinking, carousing, and sex. Believing that an individual's actions made little difference whether a temperate or libertine lifestyle was followed, they indulged their every whimsy. Both in accordance with this philosophy and in reaction to it, a wealth of arts arose, notably the music of composers such as Kurt Weill and writers such as Brecht.

Decadence would continue to influence German arts throughout the twentieth century. The concept pervades the literary works of such authors as Thomas Mann *(Buddenbrooks, Death in Venice*) and filmmakers such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder *(The Marriage of Maria Braun)* and Werner Herzog *(Aguirre, Wrath of God, Fitzcarraldo).*

Critical Overview

A study of the cntical reception of Brecht's plays must include references to his political and aesthetic ideology. More so than with most playwrights, it was Brecht's dynamic personality that generated his reputation. His charisma as a director and thinker made him the leader of a faithful group of artists and intellectuals.

Brecht had three opportunities with which to establish his notoriety under the adverse condition of being on the side of the wrong political party. In Germany prior to the Nazi takeover, he supported the Socialist Democrats; in the United States, he actively supported communism during the height of the McCarthy era (Senator Joseph McCarthy headed the hearings on Un-American Activities designed to root communism out of American society); upon his return to East Germany, he criticized the communists, once again embracing the ideals of a classless society as promoted by Socialist Democracy. Through all of this, Brecht's very peculiar form of drama elicited ever-widening circles of interest, first among the international intellectual elite, and then, slowly and inevitably, to a wider audience by way of his profound influence on other writers.

The Threepenny Opera opened at the Munich Schiffbauerdamm Theater on August 28, 1928. It ran there until Hitler banned it; early praise and the notoriety of the ban made Brecht an overnight success. The tunes were whistled on the street and a Threepenny Opera Bar opened in Berlin, featuring music exclusively from Brecht and Weill' s work. In 1933 the play was produced at New York's Empire Theater, where it ran for a dismal twelve performances before closing. Audiences in the United States, beyond a small group of writers, artists, and avant-garde thinkers, would not recognize Brecht's genius for another thirty years.

Just as *The Threepenny Opera* was being produced in the main centers of culture across Europe (to considerable acclaim), Brecht was worrying about how he might survive at all, let alone write. He and a group of other writers persecuted by Hitler met frequently to decide where to go. By 1923, his works were on the Nazi "burn" list (Hitler frequently ordered any books that contradicted or undermined his philosophy to be destroyed), and his own safety was questionable. He fled to Vienna in 1933 and then to Denmark, where he published antifascist tracts. In 1939 he was forced once again to move, this time to Sweden and then almost immediately again to Finland, from where he obtained passage to the United States. Finland became an ally of Germany ten days after he left.

In 1941, after a long land trip across the Soviet Union, Brecht arrived in California, where he was virtually unknown. He proceeded to search for a market for his work, forming a circle of intellectual German refugees. He met Eric Bentley, then a graduate student of German who would later become a renowned drama critic. Bentley offered to translate Ms works; it was the beginning of a long and productive relationship. Actor Charles Laughton, himself quite an intellectual, also joined the playwright's coterie, and by 1943, Brecht's works were beginning to be produced in small but important avant-

garde theaters. His work, however, earned no public acclaim and he had no Broadway productions during his lifetime, although several of his plays were big hits in New York during the 1960s.

Unfortunately for Brecht, the United States was going through a period of hysteria over the fear of communism. The House Committee on Un-American Activities subpoenaed Brecht in 1947. The committee was snowed by Brecht's charm and intellecrualism. He affirmed that he had studied Karl Marx but only as a student of history, and he flatly denied his membership in the communist party. The committee let him go without further questioning. The result was a small leap in the popularity of his plays. In 1948 he returned to East Berlin and established there the Berliner Ensemble, which enjoyed the support of the intellectual elite in East Berlin and of audiences in the European cities where they visited.

In that troupe and in the work he did with his coterie of young German actors and writers, he left his indelible mark. Having left his country in exile, he had returned triumphant and remained so until he died in 1956. His political followers continued his penchant for attacking the establishment (now the communist regime in East Germany) after his death, while his literary successors still attribute their theatrical innovations to the ideas he planted with his own work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she examines the social constructs of Brecht's revisions to The Beggar's Opera *and how these revisions played into his political ideals.*

When a writer revises and adapts an earlier work, as Bertolt Brecht did with John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), they make revisions that are consistent with a particular aesthetic and ideology. These shifts are part and parcel of the thinking of that writer's age—an attempt to bring the older work into a contemporary frame and make it meaningful to modern audiences. For example, some late-twenueth-century adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* emphasize the tangled feelings between Hamlet and his mother Gertrude, indicating this age's acceptance of Freudian Oedipal concepts (sexual attraction between mother and son). Much of the criticism written on *The Threepenny Opera* has centered on Brecht's modifications to Gay's staging: the asides to the audience, the placards announcing events, the songs that belie the often somber action taking place, and the harsh white lighting (elements identified with "epic theater"). However, Brecht also made small but significant changes to the storyline itself and these changes reveal his ideological leanings.

The Beggar's Opera is about Macheath, a smalltime criminal who marries one of his mistresses while continuing his relationships with other women. Two of the women in his life, his wife, Polly, and lover Lucy, discover each other and vie for the right to claim him. As a way to rid himself of an unprofitable match (he had previously used his daughter's looks to attract customers to his business), Polly's father turns Macheath in to the police. After a couple of escapes, Macheath is led to the gallows but receives a last minute reprieve (and considerable rewards) just before he is hung.

Brecht's secretary (and one of the playwright's own lovers), Elisabeth Hauptmann, translated Gay's play into German for Brecht, who then added his inimitable stylistic changes. He transformed it into "epic theater," but he changed more than the presentation. Gay's version makes no reference to Jack the Knife, does not include a wedding scene, has no counterpart to Sheriff Jackie Brown, and makes only one tiny reference to the coronation.

Jack the Knife was a nickname for the London serial killer more commonly known as Jack the Ripper Jack targeted prostitutes and was never caught. The victims were each knifed in a characteristic style, with precise, surgical wounds that led many to suspect the murderer was a doctor or had medical training The story of Jack the Knife has fascinated and horrified the world. Numerous theories have been proposed to reconcile his grisly methods with a psychological make-up and motive. By shortening Macheath's name to Mac and adding the words "the knife;" Brecht alludes to the famous serial killer and transforms Gay's protagonist.

As he is revised by Brecht, Macheath of *The Threepenny Opera* is already a more ruthless criminal than Gay's character. Yet the association with Jack the Ripper cloaks

him with such an aura of dark menace that Gay's Macheath pales in comparison. In *The Beggar's Opera,* Macheath is a womanizer and a scoundrel but not a murderer. Both characters bribe their prison guard in hopes of escaping and both go gallantly to the gallows when recaptured. But Brecht's Macheath is cynical and jaded; murder and death are inescapable elements in his world, and he has learned to make peace with them. In *The Threepenny Opera,* he and his army buddy (now sheriff), Jackie Brown, sing a ditty about the inevitability of dying on the battlefield, of being chopped into human "tartar" by the enemy. They have seen the worst of war and they have made it into a joke. Mrs. Peachum says of Macheath, "There goes a man who's won his spurs in battle / The butcher, he. And all the others, cattle."

Macheath's attitude towards war has its roots in Brecht's personal military experience. He had done light duty as an army orderly during part of World War I, and he wrote poetry about the butchery of war. Macheath represents the macabre side of Brecht, who expresses his revulsion with war in grotesque poems that reek of forced machismo. His "The Legend of the Dead Soldier" tells of a corpse that is revived and re-enlisted with gruesome details— such as a canister of incense swinging over the marching cadaver to mask its putrid odor. Brecht's experience was by no means unique, nor was it extreme—anti-war feelings such as his were pervasive throughout Europe. In his version of *The Beggar's Opera,* Brechthas transforaied Macheath into a member of the "lost generation" of the postwar years, like Brecht and his peers. The playwright revised the eighteenth-century play to address his era's prevailing state of mind: numbed and cynical.

When Macheath states his nihilistic case in the "Ballad of Good Living": "Suffering ennobles, but it can depress / The paths of glory lead but to the grave," he spoke for a large majority of the European audiences who first viewed the play. This nihilist philosophy justifies licentiousness; Macheath has a "live for today" attitude that closely resembles the decadent cabaret world of Germany in the 1920s. In fact, the lighting, staging, songs, and music all evoke the atmosphere of cabaret. No wonder mat Brecht's early audiences loved the play instead of recognizing it as an admonishment to their bourgeois lifestyle.

Oddly enough, the connections to war and to Jack the Knife are made but not emphasized. In a way, Macheath is a lovable rogue whose vocation sometimes requires that he kill people, a career criminal who wants full credit for such acts as setting the Children's Hospital on fire. At the end of the play he is reprieved and given a high station, a manor, and a generous pension. He is not unlike those leaders who had actually profited by the war while Germany as a whole was devastated; men who were made heroes for their battleground butchery.

In Brecht's version of London's criminal underworld, Macheath marries Polly on stage, whereas Gay had this event occur offstage. The ceremony is made into a travesty of traditional marriage, with its stolen bridal gown, furniture, and food, all taking place in an abandoned stable. The stable element recalls Jesus Christ, who was born in such a humble setting. Macheath, however, tries to transform this setting into a palace, fooling himself that he is surrounded by luxury and becoming irritated by any notice of failure.

None of the furniture matches, and the thugs saw off the legs of a harpsichord to use as a table. The former owners were innocent victims of Macheath's bungling cohorts, who panicked while robbing the family and killed them. Polly cries, "Those poor people, all for a few sticks of furniture." In another twisted allusion to the Bible, Brecht has Macheath dragging stolen tables into his sanctuary (Christ overturned tables in the temple). In war-devastated Germany, the sight of valuable household items being sullied by the incompetence of thieves would have been especially distressing.

Jackie Brown is another intriguing revision implemented by Brecht. Brown, in some ways, is even more despicable than Macheath, for he has no redeeming charisma or sexual charm, and he equivocates endlessly over whether or not to turn in his friend Macheath. The shifting tides of German politics and power during these years must have unearthed many such creatures, who were more determined to be on the winning side—insuring their own survival at any cost—than to maintain their integrity. It is Brown who arrives on horseback to announce Macheath's gifts of a reprieve, elevation to peerage, castle, and a sizable annual pension from the Queen; with his questionable moral fiber, Brown is the instrument of authority and a symbol of a corrupt system.

The final telling variation from the Gay version involves the coronation ceremony. Brecht has Peachum plan a demonstration of "human misery" to coincide with the royal proceedings. John Gay would not have dreamed of having a character in his play put on such a demonstration—the eighteenth century did not have such a phenomenon. But demonstrations staged by political parties were standard fare in twentieth-century Germany. As the labor party factions evolved and disputed, marches and rallies were held to gamer support. A group of beggars staging a demonstration would burlesque a common occurrence in postwar Germany, with its continuing contention between socialist democracy (which would become fascism) and communism. Brecht's comment upon this phenomenon seems to be that the political rallies are no more effective than a parade of "human misery" put on by the miserable themselves.

Brecht has been accused of failing to take a political stand in this play. Robert Brustein in his *The Theatre of Revolt* found *The Threepenny Opera* a complex of ambiguities that are never solved. The *deus ex ntachina* ("God from the machine") he finds especially obscure: "With the whole play inverted, and the whole world seen from its underside, even Brecht's positive affirmations seem to come out backwards." Yet the final lines literally bespeak an ironic or sarcastic solution: spare injustice from persecution. Brown spares the unjust Macheath from persecution by arriving on horseback to grant him a reprieve, and goes one step further by ennobling and enriching the criminal.

Brecht is saying that Brown's act, sanctioned by the highest authority in the land (the queen) makes no less sense than to allow any injustice to be tolerated. His ironic comment, along with the theatrical innovations of "epic theater" are designed to provoke the viewer to think; Brecht said that it "arouses his [sic] capacity for action, forces him to make decisions." Brecht believed that humans adapted to the social settings in which they lived, that "social being determines thought." Therefore, he adapted Gay's eighteenth-century play to better portray the social milieu that he was questioning. He set the play in London to provide a comfortable thinking distance, to avoid the

politicization of his German audience's response. He wanted to appeal to his viewers' rational side (not the empathic response) so that they could revise themselves and their society.

The social elements that Brecht inserts into the play—a ruthless criminal (and possible serial killer), a wedding of thieves, an unjust reprieve—zero in on the very societal flaws he urged his audiences to correct. Brecht explained why he included certain social structures: "The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical). It works out scenes where people adopt attitudes of such a sort that the social laws under which they are acting spring into sight." *The Threepenny Opera* questions the social laws that were leading Germans, inevitably, to a second World War.

Source: Carole Hamilton for *Dramafor Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

Dukore points out several Biblical references in The Threepenny Opera, citing both obvious allusions and ones that are cloaked in metaphoric language. Of the latter, Dukore argues that there are numerous examples that compare the character Macheath to Jesus Christ.

Several critics have quoted Brecht's statement that the work which made the greatest impression on him was the Bible, Although Martin Esslin discusses the biblical quality of Brecht's language, and although Von Thomas O. Brandt cites a number of biblical quotations in Brecht's plays (without, however, identifying their exact sources), Brecht's use of the Bible has, so far as I have been able to discover, been given only cursory notice. In this article, I should like to examine biblical references in *The Threepenny Opera.*

Brandt refers to *The Threepenny Opera's* "Bibelcollage"; his term is accurate. Following the Prologue, the play begins with the Bible-carrying Peachum singing a Morning Hymn and closes with a chorale that has a nagging resemblance to German Easter chorales. Not only are there such general biblical references as Judgment Day (Peachum's opening song, 1,1) and basking in divine grace (first-act finale), but there are numerous specific references as well. For example, Peachum (first-act finale) sings of the desirability of "Being given bread to eat and not a stone," referring to *Matthew,* 7:9 ("Or whatman is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?"). In 1,1 there are such direct quotations as "It is more blessed to give than to receive" *{Acts,* 20:35) and "Give and it shall be given unto you" *(Luke,* 6:38). And the famous "whither thou goest, I will go" *from. Ruth,* 1:16 is referred to three times: by Mr. and Mrs. Peachum in their song in 1,1; by Polly when she introduces the duet with Macheath at the end of 1,2; and by Polly when she tells her parents of the friendship between Macheath and Tiger Brown in 1,3.

However, the major biblical references are those which relate Macheath to Jesus. Martin Esslin has called attention to the biblical parody in *Threepenny Opera,* citing the betrayal of Macheath on a Thursday. This is not the only point of resemblance. Like Jesus, Macheath may be called "a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" *(Luke,* 7:34). Very early in the play (1,1) alink between them is made obliquely. When Mrs. Peachum learns that the man who has been courting Polly, and whom Polly intends to marry, is Macheath, she exclaims, in a *double entendre* whose significance she does not realize, "For God's sake! Mackie the Knife! Jesus! Come, Lord Jesus, abide with us!" In the wedding scene too (1,2) there is a hint at this connection. The beginning of the "new life," as Polly calls it, between herself and Macheath, takes place in a stable. As soon as they enter he commands her to sit down on the crib ("Krippe," which can be translated not only as "crib" but also as "manger"). Then Macheath's gang bring gifts— stolen gifts, to be sure, but gifts nonetheless.

But the most significant parallels, as well as the most extended, concern the Crucifixion Like Jesus, Macheath is betrayed on a Thursday. And he is betrayed by his own kind,

his own people: Jenny and Brown. Jenny's treachery is explicitly related to that of Judas: "A female Judas has the money in her hand," Mrs. Peachum sings in 111,1. Peachum resembles Caiaphas, for just as Peachum's business is in danger of being taken over by Macheath (" *He'd* have us in his clutches. I know he would! D'you think your daughter would be any better than you at keeping her mouth shut in bed?" says Peachum in 1,1), so was Caiaphas' in danger of being superseded by Jesus', and Peachum hires Jenny to betray Macheath, as Caiaphas paid Judas to betray Jesus. Moreover, it is to be inferred that Tiger Brown carries the role of Peter, for he—in effect—denies his friendship with Macheath. This is made explicit when Macheath is brought to jail in U,3:

BROWN *(after a longpause, under the fearful gaze ofhis former friend)* Mac, I didn't do it ... I did everything I could don't look at me like that, Mac I can't bear it . Your silence is too terrible. *(Shouts at a policeman*) Don't pull him with that rope, you swine' Say something, Mac. Say something to your old friend.. Give him a word in his dark... *(Rests his head against the wall and weeps)* He doesn't think me worth even a word *(Exit*)

MACHEATH That miserable Brown That evil conscience incarnate. And such a creature is made commissioner of police. Lucky I didn't bawl him out At first I thought of doing something of the sort. But then I thought a good$_t$ piercing, punishing stare would send the shivers down his back The idea found its mark I looked at him and he wept bitterly. That's a tnck I got from the Bible.

The biblical passage to which Macheath refers in the last sentence may be *Luke,* 22:61-62.

And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.

Brown's request for a word for his dark (state? place?—he does not complete the sentence) recalls a number of biblical passages in which a godly word lightens darkness. There is the famous

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God

In him was life, and the life was the light of men And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. *[John,* 1:1,4-5]

There is also, for example, "Christ shall give thee light" *(Ephesians,* 5:14), and the prophecy of Jesus is spoken of "as ... a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 *Peter,* 1:19).

In addition, Macheath, like Jesus, is to be executed on a Friday. The precise time is fixed: he is to be hanged at six o'clock (HI,3). This was the hour when there came a darkness over the entire land that lasted until the ninth hour, at which time Jesus quoted the beginning of the twenty-second *Psalm,* "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Macheath's cry as he is about to be killed (III, 3)— "Beware lest you go down as

well as he!"—is reminiscent of "Remember the word that I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" *(John,* 15:20). Finally, there is a biblical parallel to the circumstances during which Macheath is released. Matthew tells us (27:15) that during the feast of Passover "the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would." Macheath is pardoned by the Queen because it is Coronation Day.

In *The Threepenny Opera* we have a satiric retelling of the Crucifixion in a manner which is in harmony with other satiric thrusts in this play. Brecht brings onstage many familiar elements. But he presents them through an unfamiliar angle of vision (thus making them appear strange—"alienating" them, as it were) and in so doing calls them into question. For example, Macheath's gang steal expensive furnishings and bring them to an empty stable (1,2). Brecht could have had the gang break into an unoccupied mansion for the wedding ceremony. However, by making the furnishings stolen goods, Brecht calls into question the manner by which their "legitimate" owners acquired them. Similarly, by presenting the prostitutes as not unlike the respectable bourgeoisie—the stage directions at the beginning of 11,2 read: *A brothel in Wapping. An ordinary early evening. The girls, mostly in their underclothes, are ironing, playing draughts, washing themselves; a peaceful bourgeois idyll.*—he emphasizes by implication the prostitution underlying the business and domestic dealings of the bourgeoisie. And by having the crook Macheath confide to Polly that it is only a matter of weeks before he devotes himself exclusively to banking (11,1) he calls into question the morality of the legal business of banking. Occasionally, this practice of casting a critical light on traditional values and attitudes is made explicit, as when Macheath asks (HI,3), "What is a picklock to a bank-share? What is the burglary of a bank to the founding of a bank? What is the murder of a man to the employment of a man?"

Relating the story of Macheath to the story of Jesus enables Brecht to use each to comment on the other. The actions of men under capitalism, Brecht appears to be saying, are direct reversals of the actions advocated by Jesus. We would all like to be good, Peachum sings in the first-act finale, but circumstances (presumably economic) prevent us. In HI, 1 he sings that man is not wicked enough for the (presumably capitalist) world we live in. And at the end of the play (HI,3) he reminds us that if you kick a man he will not turn the other cheek but will kick you back. The immoral Macheath is therefore a more appropriate god than the humane Jesus, for while we pay lip service to the code of conduct of Jesus, we actually follow the actions and subscribe to the code of conduct of Macheath. In addition, there is the implication that Brecht is mocking the concept of salvation through divine grace. By making his Christ-figure a scoundrel, he is deriding Christianity. I think that Brecht would want us to infer that social regeneration must precede individual, religious regeneration.

However, Brecht is not simplistic. The biblical parallel does not make this play a simple anti-religious document. There is one essential difference between Macheath and Jesus: Macheath is released, not executed. Certain aspects of the story of Macheath may parallel that of Jesus, but Macheath's fate is—fittingly—the fate of Barrabas.

Macheath's knife, so to speak, cuts both ways. Brecht's mockery of religion is not a blanket condemnation of religious ideals. He may cast doubt on some biblical concepts, but he upholds others. Just as his *Verfremdungseffekt* does not banish emotion utterly but adds thought and detachment, so his Bible-chopping does not banish the Bible utterly. Brecht's vision appears to me to be essentially a Christian vision: he would like a world in which man could be good to his fellow man, and in which survival would not necessitate—as his characters state in the second-act finale that it presently does—cheating, exploiting, and forgetting one's humanity. However, such a world is not easily come by. When Brecht tells us, just before the arrival of the Mounted Messenger at the end of the play, that "in the whole of Christendom/There's nothing granted free to anyone," he is not making a cynically anti-Scriptural comment, but in fact the reverse, for the Bible offers numerous statements concerning the economics of redemption, *e.g.,* "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made your overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" *(Acts,* 20:28) and "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission" *(Hebrews,* 9:22). There is no vicarious redemption, Brecht implies. Macheath does not save mankind by his death; he does not purchase redemption with his blood. Salvation—social salvation—remains to be achieved, presumably by the audience.

Source: Bernard F Dukore, "The Averted Crucifixion of Macheath," in *Drama Survey,* Volume 4, no 1, Spring, 1965, pp. 51-56.

Critical Essay #3

In this brief review, Clurman finds in The Threepenny Opera an appeal that audiences can trace to historic events such as the Great Depression as well as more personal themes such as regret and loss.

Kurt Weill's and Bert Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* is a masterpiece; in its present production at the Theatre de Ly s it very nearly misses fire. Such is the paradox of the theatre: the presentation is almost as much part of a play as the material itself.

The Threepenny Opera—called that because it is so oddly conceived that it might be a beggar's dream and so cheaply done that it might meet a beggar's budget—sums up a whole epoch and evokes a special state of mind. The epoch is not just the Berlin of 1919-1928; it is any epoch in which a lurid rascality combined with fierce contrasts of prosperity and poverty shapes the dominant tone of society. The state of mind is one of social impotence so close to despair that it expresses itself through a kind of jaded mockery which mingles a snarl with tears. Such in a way was the England of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), from which the Brecht "book" derives, and certainly the Germany which preceded Hitler. No wonder the one period produced Hogarth and the other George Grosz.

We do not live in such a time—though people who remember the depression days between 1930 and 1935 will appreciate the mood of *The Threepenny Opera* most readily—but it makes the mood irresistibly present and, strangely enough, induces us to take it to our hearts with a ktnd of pained affection. There is, despite the sharp sense of period that permeates it, a universal quality in *The Threepenny Opera.* It fosters a bitter sense of regret that we live so scabbily in relation to our dreams and also a kind of masochistic attachment to our wounds, as if they were all we have to show as evidence of our dreams.

This effect is achieved through Brecht's brilliant lyrics rendered with remarkable intuitive insight and witty skill in Marc Blitzstein's adaptation—and through the one score Weill composed which places him on the level of an Offenbach. What bite and tang, what insidious irony, in the clean thrusts of Brecht's verses; what economy and lightness in Weill's songs and orchestration! How poignant is the sullied lyricism of this work with its jeering bathos, its low-life romanticism, its sweetly poisonous nostalgia, its musical profanity, and its sudden hints of grandeur, godliness, and possible greatness! Here in contemporary terms and with a strange timelessness is the ambiguous, corrupt seduction of a submerged half-world akin to that which Francois Villon sang of long ago.

How disappointing, then, to have so unique a work—acclaimed practically everywhere since its premiere in 1928—reduced to a minor event by so ill-prepared a performance as the one we now see! Except for Lotte Lenya, who appeared in the original production, the cast ranges from the amateurish to the adequate. Lenya's nasally insinuating whore is superb for its ineisiveness and triple-threat innuendo. But the fault is not the actors'—most of whom could do much better—but the director's. Everything

seems labored and awkward instead of sprightly and bright. The miracle is that the inherent superiority of the material survives all hazards.

Source: Harold Clurman, *"The Threepenny Opera"* in his *Lies like Truth: Theatre Reviews and Essays,* Macimllan, 1958, pp. 113-15.

Adaptations

Brecht wrote *The Threepenny Opera* as a novel in 1934 *(Dreigroschenroman,* translated by Vesey and Isherwood *as A Penny for the Poor,* R. Hale, 1937; reprinted as *Threepenny Novel,* Grove, 1956); but it was his play that received the most attention. He revised the script for a 1931 film version to be more politically oriented than the original 1928 play script. The black and white German film *(Die Dreigroschenoper* with English subtitles), directed by G. W. Pabst and starring Antonin Artaud, is available on video from Embassy Home Entertainment.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) released a 1954 recording of Kurt Weil's music for *The Threepenny Opera.*

Marc Blitzstein revived *The Threepenney Opera* in the 1950s and his revision of the "Mack the Knife" song became a worldwide hit for singer Bobby Damn.

A 1989 film version, alternatively titled *Mack the Knife,* was released by Columbia. Directed by Menahem Golan, the film features Raul Julia as Macheath and rock star Roger Daltrey (of the Who) as the Ballad Singer.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the plot of *The Threepenny Opera* with the plot of John Gay's 1728 *The Beggar's Opera.* Macheath is more villainous in Brecht's version, and Lockit (a Newgate prison chief in Gay's play) has transformed into Jackie Brown, a corrupt sheriff and old army buddy of Macheath's. Consider also the differences hi language and staging. What is the significance of the changes Brecht made to Gay's work?

The "alienating effects" of Brecht's staging have become standard fare in modern drama. Does this lessen their impact on contemporary audiences? Why or why not?

Brecht was becoming a committed Marxist when

he produced *The Threepenny Opera.* In his play, what evidence do you find of Marxist concepts such as dialectical materialism (that change occurs as problems are resolved through conflict), distrust in capitalism, and desire for a classless society?

In the final scene, Brown enacts a "deus ex machina" ending by granting a pardon to Macheath at the last minute before his hanging. Such endings, where the hero is saved at the last minute, are common to drama, but seldom found in novels, short stories, or poems. Think of other deus ex machina endings and develop a theory of their significance in theatrical works.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Germany transforms from pre-war optimism to a state of cynicism and violent class conflict in a matter of less than ten years. Political, economic, and social turmoil plunges Germans into a state of psychological shock, as evidenced in "Black Expressionist" art and in plays and literature expressing similar feelings of pessimism and bitterness.

Today: The 1990 tumbling of the Berlin Wall (erected in 1961 to further defend the political demarcation between East Germany and West Germany following Hitler's defeat in World War II), marks a new era of unity for Germany.

1920s: Class conflict exacerbatedby the war and rampant inflation make the country ripe for the rise of Hitler's "Third Reich" and its promise of a new society.

Today: Germany holds a strong position in the world economy as well as the respect of fellow members of the United Nations.

1920s: Naturalist or Realist theater predominates in German drama. Brecht and others rebel against naturalism hoping to replace the "theater of illusion" with a theater for thinking and social change.

Today: Like theater in the United States, Brecht's previously daring dramatic frameworks, characters addressing the audience directly, and open, symbolic rather than realistic staging and costumes are standard fare in German drama. While no longer shocking, these techniques are still effective ways of preventing theatergoers from viewing the production passively; modern theatergoers expect to be made to think.

What Do I Read Next?

John Gay's 1728 comic opera, *The Beggar's Opera* was Brecht's source material and offers a good source for comparison. The differences between the two works illustrate the ideologies of the authors who produced them.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* give an imaginative sense of the futility and nameless anxiety of the pre-World War I years in Europe. For a British perspective, T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" (1922) expresses a sense of spiritual vacuity, with imagery recalling the devastation of World War I.

The 1972 film *Cabaret* directed by Bob Fosse and starring Liza Minnelli, Joel Grey, and Michael York presents a vivid and compelling picture of the hedonism, decadence, and spiritual longings of post-World War I Germany (circa 1931) in which Hitler began his ascent to power.

Brecht had a profound influence on the literary artists who succeeded him. His epic theater gave rise to the "theater of the absurd," which takes

his idea of alienation to a new realm. In Samuel Beckett's 1952 *Waiting for Godot* (which Brecht had seen and to which he had planned to write another play in reply just before his death) four characters await salvation in the form of the arrival of Godot, who never appears; like Brecht, Beckett raises issues of expectation and fulfillment.

Jean Genet's 1956 play *The Balcony* is another modernist play; it is about a brothel that transforms into a law court, battleground, and a slum, while the characters undergo similar transformations.

Harold Pinter's 1957 drama *The Birthday Party* concerns the disruption of normal daily life by the bizarre and examines the sanctuaries that people build to protect themselves from reality. Pinter's fragmented and illogical plot causes theatergoers to question their assumptions of "normality."

Further Study

Bentley, Eric. *The Brecht Memoir,* PAJ Publications, 1985. Bentley was Brecht's first English translator. In this book he chronicles his experiences working with the paradoxical playwright, generally concluding that despite Brecht's oddities and personal failings, he was a gemus.

Brustein, Robert. *The Theatre of Revolt. An Approach to Modern Drama,* Little, Brown, 1962

Brustem presents the thesis that modern theater consists of a rebellion against the classical norm wherein plays uphold a sense of community or communion By contrast, the theater of revolt seeks not to reinforce community values to but to question and overturn them.

Esslin, Martin. *Brecht: A Choice of Evils,* Methuen, 1985. Esshn has written three major treatments of Brecht This one explains the dualities in his plays and in his nature, emphasizing that Brecht presented no transcendent Utopia but exposed the evil in both sides of political and social issues

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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