

Mother courage and her childre



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children" is a play with a great political and social context. Brecht was a bitter commentator in the devastating effects of war on politics and the human spirit and a masterful black comedian.

Brecht wrote Mother Courage to demonstrate that it is the great entrepreneurs as a result of capitalism that make war inevitable. "Mother Courage" comments on the socio-economic aspects of war and criticises the pragmatism and bourgeois ideology within the ranks of people.

Brecht uses the unusual situation of War to highlight the faults in human characters and the unjust nature of society, favouring the bourgeois and exploiting the proletariat. Mother Courage is set in the Thirty Year War, and instead of concentrating on the battles of the war but presents the every-day war life with the inherent "Businessman" Mother Courage and her three children, whom she inadvertently sacrifices one by one. Mother Courage is an ambiguous figure. She embodies a clash of contradictions and ideals, she is a dialectic; both fearless and feckless, wise and uneducable, maternally caring and emotionally aloof.

A self-serving trader, she picks the bones of a war-withered economy to feed her fatherless children. She unconsciously subscribes to a capitalist system and does not realise the consequences of it; Mother Courage disagrees with war, but continues to exploit the commercial aspect of it, through selling her products. Brecht is creating a world intensified by war; Mother Courage is trapped in a system driven by greed, self-interest, war and profiteering, Mother Courage adheres to the rules of the capitalist system and as a result she both succeeds and fails.

Although she gains in terms of profit, she loses all of her children to the war. A life-long pacifist Brecht wrote "Mother Courage" in 1939 at the onset of World War II. Brecht uses the character of Mother Courage as a demonstration of his criticism "that in wartime the big profits are not made by the little people" Mother Courage does not represent an individual but an archetype to highlight the communist philosophy of Brecht. Brecht believed in the philosophy of Karl Marx, that the capitalist system was corrupt and immoral, and if a country subscribed or adhered to it then war would be inevitable.

Mother Courage represents the capitalist system which acts as a catalyst for war; Brecht's point in Mother Courage is that profit motive keeps the war going, it's the price that we pay; "Takes a war to get proper nominal roles and inventories- shoes in bundles and corn in bags, and a man and beast properly numbered and carted off, cause it stands to reason: no order, no war" The shoes in the bundles and the corn bags are for Mother Courage stock items that lead to orders, and thus capitalist. War according to the Sergeant and Mother Courage, is just 'business'- no war no orders.

War therefore is a continuation of business, that makes the human virtues fatal to even their possessors. The capitalist system is based upon exploiting the majority; the proletariat for the benefit of personal gain of a few individuals of the bourgeoisie. A system like capitalism which was not based upon equality for all classes is an impending doom and will lead to war. From dialectic portrayal of Mother Courage the audience fail to empathise with her, instead he wanted a play that evoked social change, it needed to be clear that the audience learnt something from their time in the theatre.

Brecht is symbolising his anti-war message through the presentation of Mother Courage, whom despite her motherly status he makes a criminal. Brecht is highlighting his communist message that war makes criminals out of everyone even mothers. This is done through the alienation technique, whereby Brecht wanted to distance his audience from the play and to concentrate on its social meaning and the issues raised, and that through his plays that the audience actively seeks to improve the problems proposed.

Alienation techniques include the various didactic devices such as posters with historical context and cabaret style songs with immediate identification. Brecht was attempting to contrast against the ideals of Aristotelian theatre which relied on catharsis to evoke sympathy for the characters on stage. Brecht objected to this soporific attitude and passive viewing, wanting his audiences to analyse what they saw. Mother Courage's thoughts and feelings are irrelevant, Brecht instead used Mother Courage as a caricature to explain social issues.

Mother Courage is often described as a "war play", when really it is a "business play" in the sense that all of the scenes are about a business transaction; scene one with the deal of the belt, scene two with the deal with the capon, scene three with the wagon and scene five with the bullets and the shirts until the economic funeral arrangement of Kattrin in the final scene.

Brecht is firm in wanting to use his characters to demonstrate his political message of war being a 'continuation of business' and 'the human virtues (are) fatal even to those who exercise them. This suggests that Mother

Courage is not powerless in the hands of fate or our purely reactionary but she is left free to choose. To suggest that Mother Courage has adapted may mislead the audience into thinking that she cannot do anything about her situation, and would therefore give the audience a chance to empathise with the character, and create a theatre of illusion which is a feature of Aristotelian theatre, which Brecht was opposed to. Brecht uses episodic structure, the audience see various episodes in the war, the play does not represent the play as a whole.

Therefore the play does not represent the whole war but randomly picks out points of Mother Courage's journey in her individual career. According to the Aristotelian definition Mother Courage represents a tragic hero. She demonstrates the ability to survive, through which the audience recognise the strength of her character and instinct of self-preservation.

This is linked to the ideology of capitalism, Mother Courage is a parasite of war through her socio-economic status; she is simply trying to provide for her children but is doing so in a system which exploits the 'little people'. Mother Courage's capitalism is her tragic flaw, which eventually leads to the protagonist's downfall. Mother Courage's tragic flaw is constantly exhibited, and leads to her three children's deaths, as she is absent conducting business on all of the occasions where her children die.

However despite the initial attachment from her children, it is clear to the audience that Mother Courage harbours genuine consideration for her children: in a discussion with Cook over the fate of her children she states: "all I'm after is (to) get myself and children through all this and with my cart.

In the juxtaposition of the reluctant roles of both mother and merchant. Yet although her single-mindedness to support her children is sympathetic, it becomes a mere aggrandisement in relation to her fourth child- the wagon.

The wagon is a visual reminder to the audience that war is the same as trading. Like a investor, she builds profits on the fluctuations and requirements of the war, buying and selling the lives on men QUOTE.

Alternatively, this contrast could be interpreted as an indication that Mother Courage is morally "neither all good nor all bad", a quality which Aristotle states as necessary in a tragic hero.

Her intention of and attempt at providing for and protecting her family by her existence as a "hyena of the battlefield" is essentially good, yet it is in fact this very existence which brings about the deaths of her children and her own downfall. "Mother Courage" is essentially the tale of a woman for whom wars mean the opportunity to make money out of shortages and how loses her children in business. The irony is not that she is a bad mother, but that business takes her away at crucial times in the play.

She needs the war for capital to support her children but the war takes her children away: "Either way, victory or defeat is a disaster for the little people." Although "Mother Courage" shows to an extent the horrors of war and the polemic for pacifism. The play is essentially a criticism of materialism, the making of money at the expense of humanity. Mother Courage represents this criticism of materialism as a result of the capitalist system; because money keeps her away from her children, when they need her most.

Brecht tries to convey his anti-war message through the characterisation of Mother Courage, there is the focus that as a 'little person' representing the proletariat she can only conduct a small business. The Sergeant is a narrator expressing Brecht's point of view, observing that Mother Courage is wasting her time trying to "get fat off war" but give "nothing in return." Eventually she will have to sacrifice her children to the war, to keep the business going; this is a parallel to how the bourgeois continue to conduct the business of war through the sacrifices of the lower classes.

This is a critique of how the government exploits the lower masses and how the capitalist and democratic system favours the elite group of the bourgeois and oppresses the proletariat. At the end of the play, Mother Courage continues in trading despite the consequences that have arisen due to her submission to the capitalist system. Her survival is based on the banal- she has limited imagination and cannot understand her own madness, and so continues her life as a merchant QUOTE.

Mother Courage has no consideration for the causes or consideration for what the war is about; swapping sides in the middle of the war and only thinking about her own profit QUOTE. Her outlook on life is simple and basic, she is not so much a war profiteer villain but is a political representative of a small business buffered by circumstances and clinging to what dooms it; capitalism and war "I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must get back to business." Brecht wanted the audience to question why she learns nothing about war and business.

She is aware of how the capitalist system works and how the lower classes suffer at the expense of the proletariat; the common people she says need to overcome the incompetence of generals and kings and the poor "need courage" because the leaders "cost" them their lives. Therefore the play could be considered to be more instructive than reality, because the war situation has been chosen to highlight Mother Courage as a political figure of capitalism and the connection between war and commerce: the proletariat as a class can end all wars by ending capitalism.

Through the ending of the play Brecht is suggesting to the audience that in peace and war, no virtue will triumph. There is no noble courageousness without motive, no spirited rebellion or outrage, merely an over-riding desire whatever the consequences; Mother Courage keeps her business going; she hasn't learnt from the experiences of war, humanity goes on despite the consequences, if they can find the courage. From didactic portrayal of Mother Courage the audience fail to empathise with her, instead he wanted a play that evoked social change, it needed to be clear that the audience learnt something from their time in the theatre.

Brecht is symbolising his anti-war message through the presentation of Mother Courage, whom despite her motherly status he makes a criminal. Brecht is highlighting his communist message that war makes criminals out of everyone even mothers. Brecht presents a political figure through Mother Courage because she is an antithesis to his ideals of communism and war. Her do-or-die pragmatism poses philosophical questions about a proletariat struggle to survive in a world gone mad and the price for her survival.

Her philosophy is summed up in the refrain that concludes the prologue and several of the accompanying songs " And though you may not long to survive/Get out of bed and look alive! ". Kattrin is different to any other character in the play. She is the only true virtuous child of Mother Courage, a kind and positive figure in the play. Kattrin's personality and her qualities of humanity and compassion, could be regarded as an antithesis of Mother Courage and when juxtaposed against Mother Courage her qualities are elevated.

Her compassion and humanity are poignantly demonstrated in scene five, where Kattrin selflessly " dashes" into the ruins of a house to rescue a baby, while Mother Courage refuses to donate linen to help the injured peasant " I got to think of myself... " Kattrin's personality is antithetical to Mother Courage's she is selfless and generous rather like Grusha from the " Caucasian Chalk Circle", whilst Mother Courage repeatedly prioritizes the interests of her business and herself over anything else.

The qualities of Kattrin are more heroic than any which Mother Courage could possess, which make Kattrin the genuine heroine of the play. Kattrin is " generally good... and fine", which is specified by Aristotle in the " Poetics" as the criteria for a tragic hero. At the climax of the play, she becomes a martyr as a result of her death in an attempt at alerting others that their lives are in danger. This is Kattrin's " noble and complete action"; a deed that we could never expect from Mother Courage.

She dies for a cause that is worthy in her eyes, yet her goodness and generosity pass by largely unnoticed by anyone other than us, the mere

observers. Katrin is a familiar form of Katherine which means 'pure' and the etymology of the word reflects the purity of her character. Katrin represents the suffering of war; Katrin's muteness is due to an unknown incident with a soldier but yet despite her muteness makes expressive and gestural responses.

Katrin's dumbness is even equated to the terrors of war, "a soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little" and she is attacked and mutilated by some vicious marauders while collecting supplies for her mother. This induces a change in Katrin, and possibly a reversal of her fortune, as is indicated by her sudden lack of interest in Yvette's red boots. It appears that Katrin accepts that she will now never be desirable to men and therefore will never be married and have a family of her own.

From this moment, she is dedicated to protecting others with a refreshed selflessness, and is highlighted in the following scene when she risks her life to save the children's. The political message of Katrin is that intelligent people are born into the world and then crippled by the war, as represented by her dumbness. With the exception of her final act, Katrin does precisely as she is instructed, despite the consequences. This is demonstrated in her resistance to her assailant after Mother Courage warns her "don't let them steal now": Katrin returns with the articles but has been assaulted as a consequence.

This is the first glimpse of Katrin's sense of duty to others as a flaw that will lead to her downfall. Mother Courage's "Song of Solomon", relating the danger of the virtues of her and her family, foreshadows Katrin's death

through “ unselfishness”. A sharp contrast is made between the two women in Mother Courage’s notion that virtues are simply “ wickednesses” and the increasing effect of Kattrin’s strengthening morals on her actions. This builds up to the climax of the play, where Kattrin’s selflessness is realized as her tragic flaw.

Kattrin represents the political ideal of Jeremy Bentham and his utilitarian ideals that believed in ‘ the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Kattrin is agitated by the likelihood of the soliders attacking the nearby village and attacking and killing the civilians in it, she climbs on the roof of the farm house, taking a soliders drum with her, and using this “ instrument of war” she ‘ speaks’ to the inhabitants of the town with a gesture. The soliders shoot her, but by this time it is too late Kattrin has already warned the local town of the danger and has paid the action with her life.

The political message is that she allows her self to suffer to a great extent, for the greatest number of civilians in the local town. No doubt the audience would be stirred by this scene, and Brecht states that “ epic theatre is in a position to portray” events that can be emotional. As this scene successfully juxtaposes the apt contradiction in the play of the different approaches to life that both Mother Courage and Kattrin represent, an essential woman and Mother Courage who is socially constructed one which has the power to make her own business-as-usual choices.

The real struggle in “ Mother Courage” is about money, food and clothing. These were the basic communist ideals, which can be reflected in the promise of Lenin “ Bread, Peace and Land. “ Through “ Mother Courage”

Brecht examined the relationship between capitalism and crime, his Marxist ideology examined through the crimes of history themselves. If the businessman is identified with the gangster in the "Threepenny Opera" then he is identified with the war-maker in "Mother Courage."

Brecht is inferring that property is not only theft, but the murder of Elif, the rape of Katrin and pillage are too; war may be the extension of diplomacy but it is also the extension of free enterprise. Mother Courage and Katrin's characterisation demonstrate how religious pity, piety and bourgeois respectability are just synonyms for greed, acquisition and self-advancement. Through Mother Courage the theme of war as business is highlighted, thus demonstrating that war is just 'the same as trading', and the morality which justifies war must be considered an evil sanction.

"Mother Courage" represents the fact that the war keeps the profit going and there will always be those who take advantage of it. The characterisation of Mother Courage, whom is often perceived to be anthesis to Brecht's own philosophy, demonstrates Brecht's anti-capitalist and anti-war philosophy. Through her characterisation Mother Courage wanted to demonstrate the unfairness of the capitalist system and encourage the audience to change their attitudes, their fixation of materialism, which has overshadowed and confused their basic principles and morals to life.

Katrin is the opposite to Mother Courage, although she never speaks she has suffered a great deal of personal set-backs due to the war, she is still prepared to save people. The juxtaposition of the different approaches to life that both Mother Courage and Katrin represent, an essential woman and

Mother Courage who is socially constructed one which has the power to make her own bussiness-as-usual choices.