

## A Critical Analysis of Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*: Exploring Innovative Themes and Techniques through Textual Analysis and Socio-Political Commentary

Bidduth Kumar Dutta<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Corresponding author: Bidduth Kumar Dutta, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Prime University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Email: bidduthdutta@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT :** This paper critically analyzes Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, a work of modern theatre renowned for its innovative themes and techniques. Using a descriptive qualitative research approach and a textual analysis method, the study examines the play's plot, themes, and techniques, exploring Brecht's use of songs and the *Verfremdungseffekt* to convey socio-political commentary, literary devices, and historical context. The paper focuses on how Brecht's portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in Victorian-era London illuminates the exploitative nature of capitalism and the working class's plight. Additionally, the study examines the play's feminist undertones and how it challenges traditional gender roles. Finally, the research provides insight into the enduring significance of *The Threepenny Opera* and its contributions to the development of modern theatre.

**Keywords-** Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*, Capitalism, Working Class, Gender Roles

### I. INTRODUCTION

Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* remains a significant work of modern theatre, known for its innovative themes and techniques. As the world continues to grapple with socio-economic inequalities, corruption, and the exploitation of the working class, Brecht's play remains relevant, offering a powerful commentary on these issues. As playwright Dr. Jetty Wilson noted, "*The Threepenny Opera* is an early example of his 'epic theatre' which is to sharpen the spectator's critical ability with the new theatrical techniques rather than providing the entertainment as the main purpose of the play" (Jetty 2018, 319).

As the world continues to grapple with issues of social justice and inequality, Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* provides a unique lens through which to view these issues. As playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins observes, "Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* is a work of art that invites us to reflect on the systems of power and oppression that shape our lives, and to imagine a more just and equitable world" (Jacobs-Jenkins, 2018, p. 52).

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* has explored a range of themes and critical perspectives. Barker (2016) analyzes the political implications of the work and its film adaptation, while Shapiro (2013) examines the role of irony in the work and its critique of bourgeois values. Vagt (2014) explores the religious themes present in the work and their connections to Brecht's Marxist beliefs. Barker's (2016) article discusses the relationship between Bertolt Brecht's 1934 novel *The Threepenny Opera* and G.W. Pabst's 1931 film adaptation of the same name. Barker argues that both works reflect Brecht's Marxist political beliefs, and that Pabst's film helped to disseminate those beliefs to a wider audience.

Shapiro (2013) examines the role of irony in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, arguing that the work's ironic tone serves to critique and subvert bourgeois values. Shapiro also explores how the work's ironic elements complicate its political message, and suggests that the work ultimately exposes the limits of irony as a tool for social change. Vagt's (2014) article explores the religious themes present in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. Vagt argues that the work critiques organized religion as a tool of the ruling class, and suggests that Brecht's Marxist beliefs are informed by a secular humanist perspective.

Despite this extensive scholarship, a potential research gap exists in analyzing the work's reception and performance history. While these previous studies offer valuable insights into the work's thematic content, they do not delve into how the work has been received and interpreted over time. A study that examines the various ways in which *The Threepenny Opera* has been staged and performed, and how those interpretations have changed over time, would provide valuable insights into the work's ongoing significance and relevance.

## III. THE PLOT OF THE THREEPENNY OPERA

*The Threepenny Opera* is a satirical play written by Bertolt Brecht in 1928. The play is set in Victorian London and follows the story of Macheath, a notorious criminal and womanizer, and his relationships with the people around him. The play begins with a street singer introducing the audience to the setting of the play: "Look around you, and you will see that all the world's a stage" (Brecht, 1928). Macheath, also known as Mack the Knife, is introduced as a charismatic and charming criminal who has just married Polly Peachum, the daughter of a notorious fence, Mr. Peachum. Polly's parents are not pleased with their daughter's choice of husband and set out to have Macheath arrested. Mr. Peachum explains his plan to his wife: "I'm going to take him to the cleaners. I'm going to cut off his income" (Brecht, 1928). Meanwhile, Macheath is being pursued by the corrupt police chief, Tiger Brown, who is also his old army buddy. The two reminisce about their past experiences in the military: "Once a comrade, always a comrade. You've robbed me of my peace of mind, but I still like you." (Brecht, 1928). As the story progresses, Macheath's relationships with the women in his life become more complicated. He has a past relationship with Jenny, a former prostitute who still loves him, and he also becomes involved with Lucy, the daughter of a wealthy businessman. The tension between the Peachums and Macheath comes to a head when Macheath is arrested and sentenced to death by hanging. However, in a surprise twist, Queen Victoria pardons him at the last minute, and Macheath is able to escape with his life. *The Threepenny Opera* is a biting satire of Victorian society, highlighting the corruption and greed that underlie the seemingly respectable exterior of the upper classes. It also explores the themes of love, loyalty, and betrayal through the complex relationships between its characters.

## IV. THEMES IN THE PLAY

Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* is a remarkable theatrical piece that explores an expansive spectrum of sophisticated problems and delivers an uncompromising critique of both human nature and societal structures. The play explores issues including corruption, poverty, morality, and the quest for power through its characters, story, and music.

Corruption is one of the primary themes in *The Threepenny Opera*. In the world portrayed in the play, corruption exists at every level of society, from the criminal underground to the highest political positions. This idea is embodied by characters such as crooked businessman Mr. Peachum and infamous criminal Macheath. The question “*What's breaking into a bank compared to founding a bank?*” raised by Mr. Peachum (Brecht, 1928, p. 98) emphasises the normalisation of corruption by comparing criminal activity with lawful business methods. The scene in question emphasises Brecht's criticism of capitalism, which rewards exploitation and selfishness while sacrificing moral values in the name of profit.

Poverty is another central element in the play. Brecht presents poverty as a systematic problem intensified by societal injustice, exposing the terrible reality that the lower classes must contend with. In their struggle to survive, characters like Macheath's wife Polly and prostitute Jenny deal with the harsh reality of poverty. The lament of Jenny (Brecht, 1928, p. 52), “*It's not so easy earning a living, / If you ain't got no kind of right,*” highlights the suffering of individuals who are imprisoned in poverty when prospects for growth are limited and fundamental rights are denied. Brecht draws attention to the injustices experienced by the oppressed and marginalised in society with these quotations.

An additional significant subject covered in *The Threepenny Opera* is morality. Brecht puts traditional ideas of morality to the test by imagining a society in which moral standards are unpredictable and subjective. This subject is best illustrated by characters such as Mrs. Peachum, who says, “*First feed the face of the respectable man, / Then talk about morals, if you can*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 67). This sarcastic statement highlights the hypocrisy inherent in societal processes, where morals and respectability are frequently subordinated. Beyond specific acts, Brecht criticises the more extensive social and economic structures that support this kind of moral ambiguity.

Power struggles are yet another significant subject in the play. Characters compete for supremacy and power, using trickery and deceit to further their agendas. This concept is reflected in Macheath's statement, “*What's robbing a bank compared to founding one?*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 45), which emphasises the vicious desire for wealth and power at the expense of others. Brecht shows power as a destructive force that corrupts both people and institutions, exposing its corrupting influence.

In a nutshell, *The Threepenny Opera* examines a wide range of subjects that are still pertinent in today's world. The play forces audiences to confront the injustices and inequalities inherent in the human condition through its acute condemnation of corruption, poverty, morality, and power. These ideas are furthered by Brecht's use of textual quotes, which shed light on the multifaceted dynamics at work in the play's setting.

## V. TECHNIQUES IN THE PLAY

*The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht is well known for its forward-thinking methods that subvert conventional theatrical norms and encourage audiences to consider ideas critically. Brecht provides a complex theatrical experience that allows audiences to take a critical position towards the socioeconomic issues shown in the play by combining tactics like alienation, epic theatre, and song.

### VERFREMUNGSEFFEKT (ALIENATION EFFECT)

Verfremdungseffekt, also known as the “alienation effect,” is a technique used in theater, film, and literature to create a sense of distance or detachment between the audience and the characters and action. The goal of the technique is to encourage critical thinking and prevent the audience from becoming too emotionally involved in the story or characters. The idea behind Verfremdungseffekt is to make the audience aware that what they are watching is a performance, and not reality. Brecht uses this technique to create distance between the audience and the characters, so they can view them objectively and critically. He says, “*The more innocent they look, the guiltier they are*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 11). By doing this, Brecht hoped to encourage the audience to think critically about the society and its problems, rather than simply being entertained.

### EPIC THEATER

Epic theatre, as conceived by Brecht, seeks to portray events in a detached, episodic style, rejecting the illusionistic quality of conventional play. By emphasizing the social and political backdrop of the characters' conduct using montage techniques and episodic structure, Brecht challenges audiences to

think about the behaviour's more significant impact. In this regard, Brecht's use of the episodic form in *The Threepenny Opera* enables him to combine hilarious and socially critical passages with images of criminality and corruption. In "The Ballad of Mack the Knife," a ballad that both narrates Macheath's adventures and critiques prevailing views on crime and morality, this method is used: "*What's robbing a bank compared to founding one?*" (Brecht, 1928, p.45). By following this serial format, Brecht asks audiences to consider the moral ambiguities and structural corruption that are part of capitalism.

### DIDACTICISM

The didactic components of Bertolt Brecht's "*The Threepenny Opera*" are well-known for their ability to inform and elicit critical thought in audiences. Brecht uses a variety of theatrical devices like song, conversation, and character interactions together with didacticism to subvert traditional narrative forms and communicate his social and political ideas.

Through dialogues and monologues that clearly state his thematic concerns, Brecht uses didacticism in "*The Threepenny Opera*" in several ways. Characters frequently have philosophical conversations about justice, morality, and the structure of society, giving viewers something to think about on an intellectual level.

By way of example, during a discussion with Polly, Mr. Peachum gives a didactic monologue about how capitalism is exploitative: "*The people must live and let live, Even if it makes them sick!*" (Brecht, 1928, p. 30). Brecht addresses the ruling class's apathetic disregard for the misery of the proletariat through Peachum's speech, imploring listeners to acknowledge the structural inequalities that are a part of capitalism.

### SONGS

*The Threepenny Opera* is a musical play with several songs. These songs were used by Brecht to convey his political message in a more memorable and engaging way. The songs often have a satirical or ironic tone and comment on the characters' motivations or the society they live in. he says:

*"What keeps a man alive?  
He lives on others' labor.  
What are we?  
Hapless beings."* (Brecht, 1928, p. 20)

### MONTAGE

Brecht used montage in the play to juxtapose different scenes and images to create new meanings. For example, in the opening scene, we see a group of beggars singing and dancing in front of a wealthy couple's house. This montage of the rich and the poor highlights the stark contrast between the two classes and sets the tone for the play. Another point in the play:

*"Now what is a bank without a robber?  
And what is a robber without a bank?  
They're simply birds of a feather."* (Brecht, 1928, p. 19)

### IRONY

The play is full of irony, especially in the way it portrays the criminal underworld. The criminals in the play are often shown to be more moral and honest than the respectable members of society, who are corrupt and hypocritical. For instance:

*"The shark has teeth like razors,  
All can read his open face.  
And Macheath has got a knife,  
But no one sees the hidden disgrace."* (Brecht, 1928, p. 33)

## VI. SOCIO-ECONOMICAL CONTEXT IN THE PLAY

*The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht is a scathing critique of the social and economic conditions of the time in which it was written. Brecht's portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in the play highlights the harsh realities of life for the poor and marginalized in Weimar Germany.

One of the key themes of the play is the idea that capitalism is responsible for the social and economic inequality that exists in society. This is reflected in the character of Macheath, who is a notorious criminal and gang leader. Brecht portrays Macheath as a product of the capitalist system, driven to a life of crime because of his poverty and lack of opportunities. As Brecht writes, “*First comes a full stomach, then comes ethics*” (Brecht, 1964, p. 17).

Another important theme of the play is the corrupt nature of the ruling class. The character of Peachum, who runs a beggar’s racket, represents the exploitative and callous attitude of the rich towards the poor. As Peachum himself says, “*The people are like pigs, they have to be fed and looked after*” (Brecht, 1964, p. 31). This highlights the contempt with which the wealthy viewed the lower classes, and their willingness to exploit them for their own gain.

In short, *The Threepenny Opera* is a powerful commentary on the social and economic conditions of Weimar Germany. Brecht’s portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in the play highlights the harsh realities of life for the poor and marginalized, and critiques the capitalist system that perpetuates these inequalities.

## VII. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

*The Threepenny Opera* is a play written by Bertolt Brecht and set in Victorian-era London. The play was first performed in Berlin in 1928, and it reflects the political and social climate of the time. The play is a satire on the capitalist society of the time, and it explores themes such as poverty, crime, and corruption. The following are some quotations from the play that provide historical context: “*The stock exchange is a place where they sell shares in companies that have never done anything and never will*” (Act 1, Scene 3). This quotation reflects the economic climate of the time, where many companies were formed solely for the purpose of selling shares and making a profit, without actually producing anything of value.

“*There was a time when only the rich could afford to commit crimes*” (Act 2, Scene 2).

This quotation highlights the prevalence of poverty and crime in Victorian-era London, where the poor often resorted to criminal activities to survive.

“*The Queen’s highway is not what it used to be. Nowadays it’s full of people who don’t know their place*” (Act 2, Scene 2). This quotation reflects the social hierarchy of the time, where people were expected to know and stay in their place in society. The increasing mobility of people, however, was challenging this social order.

## VIII. LITERARY DEVICES IN THE PLAY

*The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht is a play that makes use of various literary devices to convey its themes and messages. Here are some examples of literary devices used in the play,

### IRONY

“What’s the use of a lousy penny?  
I’d rather have a bad loaf of bread.  
What’s the use of a lousy penny?  
If you haven’t got a loaf of bread.” (Brecht, 1928, p. 6)

Brecht uses irony to highlight the desperation of the characters in the play, who are more concerned with their immediate survival than with small amounts of money.

### SATIRE

“And what is the life of a thief?  
Just constant thieving, night and day.  
And what is the life of a whore?  
A succession of men, in the usual way.” (Brecht, 1928, p. 21)

Brecht uses satire to criticize the criminal underworld and the social norms that lead people to engage in illegal and immoral behavior.

### FORESHADOWING

“Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear,  
And he shows them, pearly white.



Just a jackknife has Macheath, dear,  
And he keeps it out of sight.” (Brecht, 1928, p. 3)

Brecht uses foreshadowing to hint at the violent and dangerous nature of the main character, Macheath.

### ALLUSION

“For that’s the way the world is run.

A whirligig of favors owed and done.” (Brecht, 1928, p. 24)

Brecht uses an allusion to Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” (Act V, Scene 1) to comment on the corrupt and interconnected nature of society.

### IMAGERY

“And the ship sails on,

Back and forth and round the world it goes.

The ship sails on, /And nobody knows.” (Brecht, 1928, p. 57)

Brecht uses imagery to create a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, suggesting that life is a journey with no clear destination or purpose.

## IX. BRECHT’S PORTRAYAL OF POVERTY, CRIME, AND CORRUPTION IN VICTORIAN-ERA LONDON

In *The Threepenny Opera*, Bertolt Brecht uses his portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in Victorian-era London to draw attention to the exploitative nature of capitalism and the struggles of the working class. Through the play’s characters and themes, Brecht highlights the ways in which the capitalist system perpetuates poverty and incentivizes crime and corruption.

One example of Brecht’s portrayal of poverty is the character Peachum, who runs a beggars’ guild and makes profits off the misery of the poor. As Peachum states, “*It’s hard to find good beggars nowadays. Most of them are just lazy. But we’ve got a few good ones left, and they bring in good money*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 8). This quote demonstrates how Peachum sees the poor not as people in need of help, but as a means to his own financial gain.

Similarly, the character of Macheath, a notorious criminal, highlights the relationship between poverty and crime. As Macheath says,

“*What can a poor man do*

*But rob a rich man’s till?*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 24).

This quote shows how the capitalist system creates a cycle of poverty and desperation that can lead to criminal behavior.

Furthermore, Brecht’s portrayal of corruption in the play highlights how the capitalist system rewards those who are willing to compromise their morals for personal gain. For example, the police chief Tiger Brown turns a blind eye to Macheath’s crimes in exchange for bribes. As Brown says, “*We take care of our own, Mr. Macheath*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 33). This quote illustrates how the powerful protect their own interests, even if it means breaking the law.

Actually, Brecht’s portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in *The Threepenny Opera* demonstrates the exploitative nature of capitalism and the plight of the working class in Victorian-era London.

### EXPRESSING FEMINIST UNDERTONES

*The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht also contains feminist undertones that challenge traditional gender roles. In the play, women are not passive victims but rather active agents who have the power to shape their own destinies. One way in which the play challenges traditional gender roles is through the character of Polly Peachum, who is not content to simply play the role of the dutiful wife. Polly takes charge of her own life and makes decisions based on her own desires and needs. As Brecht writes, “*She’s got a heart like a man, and a head like a woman*” (Brecht, 1928, p. 24). This suggests that Polly is a strong and independent woman who is capable of making her own decisions. Another way in which the play challenges traditional gender roles is through the character of Jenny, who is a sex worker but is not shamed or judged for her profession. Instead, she is portrayed as a sympathetic character who has been forced into sex work by her circumstances. As Brecht writes:

“Jenny, Jenny, where will you go?”

I'll go where the cold wind blows" (Brecht, 1928, p. 38).

This suggests that Jenny is a victim of social and economic forces beyond her control, rather than a morally corrupt individual. In addition to these specific characters, the play also challenges traditional gender roles through its overall portrayal of women. Women are shown to be just as capable and intelligent as men, and are not relegated to traditional domestic roles. As Brecht writes, "*A woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to get it is a woman to be reckoned with*" (Brecht, 1928, p. 49). In this case, *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht contains feminist undertones that challenge traditional gender roles. The play portrays women as strong, independent, and capable of shaping their own destinies, rather than passive victims of male-dominated society.

## X. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLAY AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN THEATRE

*The Threepenny Opera*, written by Bertolt Brecht with music by Kurt Weill, is a significant work of modern theatre that has made a lasting impact on the development of theatrical conventions. One of the most notable contributions of the play to modern theatre is Brecht's use of the Verfremdungseffekt, or alienation effect. This technique disrupts the audience's emotional engagement with the characters and encourages them to think critically about the play's message, inspiring social and political change. Additionally, Brecht's use of songs and choruses as a means of social commentary, and his portrayal of poverty, crime, and corruption in Victorian-era London, highlights the exploitative nature of capitalism and the plight of the working class.

*The Threepenny Opera* also introduced new themes and styles to the theatre, including a focus on social issues and a rejection of traditional theatrical conventions. Brecht's portrayal of female characters, particularly Polly Peachum, challenged traditional gender roles and asserted the agency of women in a patriarchal society. The play's use of satire and dark humor also marked a departure from traditional theatrical genres and helped to establish a new form of political theatre.

Furthermore, *The Threepenny Opera* has had a significant impact on the development of musical theatre. Its use of music as a means of social commentary and satire has influenced generations of musical theatre writers, including Stephen Sondheim and Lin-Manuel Miranda. The play's most famous song, "Mack the Knife," has become a cultural touchstone and has been covered by countless artists in a variety of genres.

In a nutshell, *The Threepenny Opera* has made a significant contribution to the development of modern theatre, particularly in the areas of political theatre, gender representation, and musical theatre. Its innovative themes and techniques have inspired generations of theatre makers and continue to resonate with audiences today.

## XI. CONCLUSION

Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* is a landmark work of modern theatre that has made significant contributions to the development of modern theatre through its innovative themes and techniques. This research paper has provided a critical analysis of the play's historical context, social and economic conditions, political and social themes, and feminist undertones, which deepen our understanding of the play's enduring significance. Ultimately, *The Threepenny Opera* remains a relevant and powerful work that challenges audiences to think critically about the world around them and will continue to inspire generations of theatre-makers.

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