

Aidan Peter

Mr. Hanlon

Modern European Drama

1 November, 2023

Class Structures and the Human Condition Illustrated by Brecht

In a recent viral and controversial short video, a young woman complains about her 9-5 life, where she spends hours commuting and working with little time for leisure and insufficient pay during inflationary times. Some argued that she was privileged and spoiled for denouncing the hard labor associated with a 9-5 while others empathized with her opinions on the difficulties of working-class life. When first viewing this video, I immediately thought back to Brecht's Mr Puntila and his Man Matti. How has this socioeconomic conflict gone on for hundreds of years without resolution? Through his creation of an Epic Theater, Brecht converts the melodramatic "experience" driven by sensational effects and stock, unrealistic characters to a theater where the audience "is made to face something" that "arouses his capacity for action" (37). Brecht boldly highlights the insufferable divide between the working class and the aristocracy through extensive character development and fleshed-out character dynamics. He nudges viewers to consider the benefits of a socialist society and makes them compelling by starkly contrasting them with the realities of capitalism. When exiting the theater after viewing *Mr. Puntila and his Man Matti*, the audience will be lucidly aware and observant of the subtle and obvious ways class differences affect their everyday lives.

The problems of life under capitalism become crystal clear through Matti, who is a medium for the harsh truths of society under capitalism to shine through. Even in his parting lines, Matti makes the audience aware "that oil and water cannot ever blend" (93). This is a

strong analogy to how the working class and gentry cannot ever mix equally. Matti is portrayed as an endearing man whom Eva, Puntila's daughter, takes a liking to from the start. However, in the first conversation in the play between the two, Matti exclaims, "When I talk to the gentry, I imply nothing and have absolutely no opinions, as those are something they can't abide in servants" (16). Drawing parallels to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, it is obvious that a relationship cannot be healthy or fruitful with such a power imbalance, dooming any genuine romance between Eva and Matti. This point gets further elucidated when Matti sets Eva up to roleplay a day in the life of a working-class family, where she demonstrates "failure all along the line" (76). On the other hand, Matti is so casual and effortlessly romantic with Fina that they need not even have a conversation to engage with each other. The simple actor notes like "Matti beckons to Fina and she sits on his knee" (45) and "Meanwhile, Matti has put his arm around Fina and gone dancing off with her" (79) illustrate the simplicity and mutual understanding of a relationship within a social tier. Matti mocks the gentry on their sophisticated way of life, but by doing so, he is further reinforcing these divides. This goes to show how imposing the barriers of class are, as a working-class man like Matti does not even desire to marry into a wealthy family like Mr. Puntila's because of the night-and-day differences in their way of life.

The flip side of this issue is on display when viewing the story from the lens of Mr. Puntila's interactions and dynamics with other characters. When drunk, Puntila is a lovable and generous man, but when sober, he is unashamedly a cold-hearted aristocrat and capitalist waiting to take advantage of the next laborer. At his home, Puntila initially treats the prospective laborers he brought from the Hiring Fair with surprising respect, declaring, "These gentlemen are staying. Get them an aquavit, Laina. I'm taking them on to work in the forest" (31). However, after he takes a few swigs of coffee and gradually sobers up, his true nature emerges as he callously

remarks, “I’m taking nobody at all” to the laborers (35). This behavior towards the working class lies in contrast to his interactions with the Attaché as Puntila compliments him as a “bright fellow” and praises his potential in the field of diplomacy before discovering Matti and Eva suspiciously exiting the bath hut. In this instant, Puntila curses the two and yells to Matti, “As for you, trash [...] you can pack your stinking socks and go” (43). This flip in personality is representative of the gentry's attitude towards the working class and further illustrates the class divide this play seeks to highlight and denounce. Another significant aspect of character dynamics is Puntila's attitude towards the women from Kurgela. In the Puntila Song from Scene 7, he expresses a willingness to engage in amorous activities with them in his inebriated state, even contemplating marriage (94). However, his sober self reveals a distinct shift, as he dismisses these lower-class women from his daughter's engagement party, making them walk all the way back to their homes. The Puntila Song for this scene, which states, “I’ll sleep with you, yes, but you’re only dirt in the house of a gentleman,” sheds light on the dual nature of the gentry's relationship with the lower classes (95). Historically, members of the gentry have been known to have affairs with lower-class workers on their property, but when these women seek to enjoy the engagement party, they are turned away. This emphasizes how the gentry sees the lower classes as useful for labor and pleasure, but nothing more – they are treated as property in the end. This intricate interplay of respect, condescension, and class division within Puntila's character dynamics offers a compelling portrayal of the societal divisions prevalent in the play.

While Brecht projects the intense class divisions throughout *Mr. Puntila and his Man Matti*, he also elegantly poses alternate ways of being to contrast the cut-throat nature of capitalism where the essence of life lies in external progress rather than seeking inner joy and satisfaction. He washes this text with conflicting examples of Puntila’s horrific actions when

sober. However, these moments of Puntila's humanity are a silver lining and point to a reality where lower-class workers are treated as humans and equal. For instance, he ponders the idea of opening his bank account for all his employees when drunk and denounces prevailing inequality: "That sort of inequality shouldn't be allowed. Left to myself I'd put all the income from the estate in a single fund, and if any of my staff wanted money they could help themselves because if it weren't for them there'd be nothing there. Right?" (73). His words have traces of socialism because Puntila is expressing an intent to collectivize his resources for the working class. In another revealing moment, Puntila urinates alongside Matti, an act that challenges societal norms, highlighting a more primal, genuine connection between humans. Puntila condemns those "porcelain affairs" (toilets) and expresses his deep desire to be set free and have a deeper connection with nature (73). Similarly, when he is drunk, Puntila commands Matti to build Mount Hatelma in his estate's library. Matti instantly sets off to work, fabricating a mountain by destroying furniture. He "kicks a valuable grandfather clock and a massive gun locker to pieces," both expensive installments in the Puntila estate. As they trek the "mountain," Puntila remarks about his drunken desire to leave "behind us buildings and structures put up by human hands" to "enter the pure realm of nature, which adopts a more austere countenance" (89). Through these lines, Brecht underscores the importance of valuing nature, humanity, and relationships over material goods. Just as Matti demonstrated by destroying all the furniture, material items bring temporary satisfaction while aligning with nature, and "the mighty sensation" can bring true joy to anybody. The bounds of nature are not restricted by wealth, while the easily destroyed material goods are. These moments in the play that spotlight Puntila's humanity and socialist leanings act as a beacon of hope in a world driven by materialism and restrictive class structures. Brecht underscores the timeless importance of cherishing nature, valuing our shared humanity,

and nurturing genuine relationships over fleeting material possessions. As Matti's actions illustrate, it is the authenticity of these connections that can bring lasting joy, transcending the limitations imposed by wealth and easily disposable material goods.

The Lehrstücke style of drama is designed to push questions into the audience's minds: Are we really living like this? Brecht uses this educational style of drama to pinpoint specific struggles of the working class and bring the gentry into moral questioning. Brecht appeals to both upper and lower-class audiences by urging the lower class to be aware of their condition and to follow Matti's advice to unionize with the goal of eventually becoming "masters of their own affairs" (93). The vivid images and contrasts of the Epic Theater will further this message in numerous ways, not only through dialogue but also through setting and props. For example, the image of the Grand Puntila Hall which the gentry parties in compared to the Farm Kitchen in Scene 6 further pushes the message of class differences and shows life from the perspective of both classes. Though written nearly 100 years ago, this play remains as relevant as ever as people are still roughly divided with different opportunities and experiences. Mr Puntila and his Man Matti provides thought-provoking comments on the state of rigid class structures and forces us to examine, question, and reconsider our humanity and materialism. In the end, we are all humans, united by our birth and demise. Should we not stand together to make the short time we have to live, a time of love and peace? When drunk, Mr. Puntila would certainly agree.

Works Cited

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*. Translated by John Willet, Hill and Wang, 1964.

Bertolt, Brecht. *Mr. Puntila and His Man Matti*. Translated by John Willet, A & C Black Publishers Ltd, 1987.