

TEACHER'S GUIDE

AMIENS
BRITISH
5th ARMY

BRUSSELS

BUT BY THE CHANCE Of WAR

PARIS

Includes:

- Author Interview
- Character Descriptions
- Plot Summary by Scene
- Discussion Questions
- Summary Questions per Part

About the Style and Historical Settings

Believing that the density of poetical expression best “funnels” creative talent and thought, Mr. Lyons deliberately chose this complicated medium as the best means of giving his idea the most appropriate artistic path.

Dramatically, each play is a stand-alone entity and has its own story to tell, but is also intimately related to the sister plays to foster the growth of the works ultimate philosophical message. Therefore, the construction of the four plays was interdependent. It is also true that each play has its own evolution in setting, as with “Amiens,” which occurs during World War I: it was initially to be an examination of the horrors of the United States Civil War. After careful deliberation, however, of the settings of each conflict, Amiens was chosen as the most effective vessel at that point in the tetralogy to carry through the philosophical theme of the whole, from a pin-point of time in history.

Themes

But By the Chance of War develops some core themes that appear with frequency and interweave and interact, in a helix manner, throughout its four plays.

TIME, CHANCE, AND CHANGE

Time is an inexorable force, one that can serve humanity’s interests if used wisely or be to our detriment should we run out of this, humanity’s most valuable resource. Time exists in order that effective and progressive change can occur. Change and chance are the inevitable children of time. How humanity responds to change and chance is a central theme of the work, whether expediently or mercifully, with the sacrifice of the self for others through altruism, or with the sacrifice of others for the self through human weakness.

In nature and society, time and change challenge balance (stasis) through the dynamics of creativity and destruction. But By the Chance of War treats the issue of human ethics through time, and in the scope of the forces of change and chance. Time affords the opportunity of change; opposition, evolution and natural selection determine the character and outcome of change.

OPPOSITION, EVOLUTION, AND ADAPTATION

Opposition is a constant force that either edifies or destroys. Our lives reflect the dynamics of opposition through perceptions of identity, race, geographic origin, tribal custom, or philosophy. Difficulties result from our tendency to divide our common virtues over different material values rather than reconciling material differences for the sake of a common virtue.

The conflict between the martial and the spiritual occurs through the work. There are constant tensions between survival of the fittest in the physical and spiritual worlds. Our capacity to create and innovate, a

quality that invariably advances our physical civilization, comes with a cost: the scope of innovation includes the development of weaponry that exceeds our previous moral experience and compels an excruciating moral choice. Our success at evolution's biological imperative has engendered a concomitant spiritual imperative. If we do not adapt spiritually, we will not survive physically: In our technological world an individual evil can be overwhelming; for if one has the power and desire to achieve an end, that goal may be realized, and if that power goes unopposed, humanity's common spiritual weakness will provide opportunity.

Nevertheless, the failure of societies to evolve and adapt litters history. The second and third plays reflect people and cultures that fail to evolve even though such change is necessary for their survival. The fourth play most dramatically demonstrates this unfortunate inability to adapt.

RELATION, VIRTUE, AND VICE

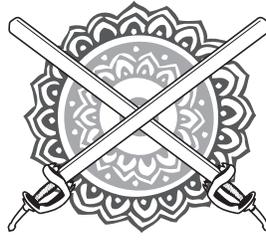
Relation or the idea of covenant is indestructible, ungoverned by time or change or chance. Relation can stand above, like those permanent forces that govern the physical world, which means that opposition may always govern us, or that reconciliation may, it depends on human volition and human relation.

Relativity, as in relationships between and among people, reflects the spectrum of virtues and vices that contribute to spiritual fitness or weakness. In the self, as in societies, the flaws of moral and physical character create fissures and vacuums within or between societies. Loyalties and appetites become spiritual tests, resulting in human victory or failure. The core question involving relativity focuses on our ability and willingness to sacrifice properly for family, culture, faith, and the highest common human law. Are we able to transcend our vices, our inner opposition, for the single virtue possible and common to all humanity? How can virtue (courage, fidelity, sacrifice, and mercy) stand up to vice? In each of the four plays that comprise the work, adhering to rightful relationships competes with their relative opposites.

Finally, But By the Chance of War delves into the discernment of the difference between lesser laws or customs of distinct peoples and the greater universal or higher common laws of humanity and asks, are we fighting for a lesser law in contravention of the highest law? The work ultimately investigates how we may or may not abandon humanity's highest common law and philosophy's highest common calling.



“In the crucible of this uncertain hour.”



Mathura

Story Introduction

The Gupta Empire of India, under duress from a Hun invasion from the north, faces a challenge for survival. To wage war, the empire depends on Prince Chandra Gupta, Prince to the current emperor, Bhamn. As Chandra confronts the death of his father and the demise of his state, he also faces some crucial questions about empire and war. The act of abandoning Ghandhara, in direct violation of a covenant based relationship between the Gupta and the provinces is based on a delusional policy of appeasement and leads to the abandonment of Chandra by crucial parts of his own army, leading to his fall. A gathering of circumstances: the noble but misguided pacifism of Madhu, combined with the delusional hopes of the Gupta and the aggressive vices of the Hun, eventually destroy the Gupta Empire.

There are numerous thematic questions the play attempts to answer. Why is a successful empire, one that has placed great value on faith, erudition, and culture, on the verge of extinction? To what extent (materially and ethically) do political leaders have towards the preservation of the state? What dimensions should the relationship between heads of state and the armed forces have? How do we adapt to war, and at what costs do these adaptations come? What is the nature of heroic action? What are the responsibilities of an heroic character to the self, the family, and the country? In what manner does the Gupta Empire abandon its own values? What does it mean to break a covenant, with a geopolitical entity or with a people or with God? Is it ever correct to appease an enemy, and to what extent does appeasement lead to the abandonment of a virtue or a covenant, and lead to a mortal disunity?

Principal Characters

Prince Chandra Gupta

As the protagonist, Prince Chandra Gupta faces the imminent destruction of his empire. The barbaric Huns have invaded India from the northwest, and his attempts to hold together an allied coalition is failing. He faces dissent within his own war council, and his beloved brother, Samudra, has advised some form of surrender to the enemy. Not only must he find the internal emotional resources to rally elements of his rebelling army, Chandra must shoulder these responsibilities with the knowledge that his wife, Princess Sita, is pregnant. A wise and learned man, Chandra must coarsen himself in the enclosing crucible of war. This coarsening necessarily erodes his moral compass, and he makes several ethically dubious decisions, which further divides his forces.

Princess Sita

Sita is a loyal, and devoted wife and Princess. She takes her pregnancy seriously, fully conscious that within her grows not only a child, but the very hope of a renewed India. Sita proves to be a moral compass for her husband, and quietly instills resolve, strength, and dignity as much as she manifests tenderness and compassion. She becomes the leader of the leader of Gupta India.

Bhamn

Though good willed, the ruler Bhamn becomes beguiled by a false promise of peace that leads him to discount reality, moving him toward a suicidal appeasement policy. This central character flaw results in the weakening of the Gupta Empire and its ultimate demise.

Darshan

One of the generals of Chandra Gupta's military council, Darshan serves as a philosopher/soldier whose knowledge of history and conflict places the current conflict in historical perspective. Darshan also discourses on the invincibility of virtue and the necessity of unity within a principle.

Ashara

Another general of Chandra Gupta's military council, Ashara serves as a loyal friend and soldier whose calm reason and realistic assessment of military circumstances greatly aids his Prince, Chandra Gupta.

Tukarem

The betrayed leader of an allied province of the Gupta Empire, Tukarem is a character who embodies the just friend who is abandoned through a policy of appeasement.

Tomara

The aggressive and bellicose Ephthalite Khan, Tomara represents the ascendant military prowess of the invading Huns. As a commander, he is a brutal military leader capable of participating with genuine intellectual enthusiasm in sophisticated dialogue with his enemies. Rapacious, uncouth, and driven by dreams of world rule and lasting fame, Tomara symbolizes the character of the megalomaniac conqueror. Schooled in the necessity of exploiting the weaknesses of others, he voluntarily appeases his own insatiable appetite for power.

Madhu

Madhu, is an ethereal Hindu Priest, and offers religious and moral instruction to Prince Chandra Gupta. A longstanding sage, Madhu has counseled Prince Chandra's father, King Bhamn Gupta as well. He represents the hope of pacific resolution of problems, and his articulate critique of aggression and the false fruits gained through war ring with contemporary truth. His often-elliptical comments serve to invite the reader to consider what obligations ethical leaders have in giving direction to an empire.

Act One Scene One

On the Outskirts of Mathura

Summary

Prince Chandra Gupta gathers his armies near the provincial capital of Mathura in 515 C. E., at the onset of the annual Monsoon. Meeting with General Ashara, Chandra must determine the best strategy to defeat the invading Huns, led by the warlord Khan Tomara. The town of Eran becomes a symbol of abandonment, and the actions of the town foreshadow future events, like a haunting ghost through the play. The town of Eran feels no threat from the Huns given their distance from the front. Therefore, Eran abandons the Empire and its covenant. We soon find that the Gupta have abandoned Tukarem and Ghandhara, and so will the council abandon Chandra. Chandra also receives a dispatch from his brother Samudra detailing events at the front.

Discussion Questions

1. Analyze Ashara's comment: "Our generosity is thought weakness." (p. 9)
2. What are the purposes of Chandra's commentaries about Eran? What possible outcome does Eran foreshadow?
3. Explain the use of the metaphor "They do move like a vigorous cancer." (p. 10)
4. What qualities of character does Prince Chandra Gupta demonstrate in this scene? How well do these personality traits serve a war-time leader?
5. What significance does the advent of Monsoon have? What forces does the Monsoon represent?
6. What is meant by "God keeps his mind on timeless designs, scarce gazing on mortals with careless eyes."

Act One Scene Two

Mathuran Sentinels

Summary

Two Mathuran sentinels discuss the oncoming presence of the monsoon season. The monsoon serves as an important symbol of one of the themes of the play. The monsoon is a regular and predictable force of change and renewal, that is both destructive and creative. It is a monument, serving to symbolize the invariable, seasonal changes that all life is heir to.

Discussion Questions

1. What symbolic purpose does the monsoon serve?
2. What occurs with the passage of regular seasons? What is predictable? What is unpredictable?
3. What is meant by “The seasons are always fairest as they leave us?”