

**GOOD VERSUS EVIL IN BERTOLD BRECHT'S  
THE GOOD PERSON OF SETZUAN and MAX FRISCH'S  
THE FIRE RAISERS**

By

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Although I had read Brecht's play quite some time earlier, it kept coming to me as I was reading *The Fire Raisers*.<sup>1</sup> The contrast was striking and direct. *The Good Person of Setzuan*<sup>2</sup> is about three gods' laboured search for good, *The Fire Raisers* about three devils' easy discovery of evil. We can say that in Brecht's play the traditional "morale de l'histoire" is that one should not judge by appearances, and that there is a great deal of goodness in the worst person. Such a person, in the eyes of the society in which she lives, is a prostitute, Shen Teh. In spite of that, however, she is the only one selected by the gods to stand for the ideal they are searching for. It is a very Christian ideal, that of sharing and giving. She gives all she has of the very little she possesses.

*The Fire Raisers*, on the other hand, is "... a Morality without a moral."<sup>3</sup> This is why we are left suspended at the end of the play. Biedermann and his wife give little of their immense wealth, and what they give they do so under pressure. The arsonists Schmitz, Eisenring and the Doctor of Philosophy — in fact Beelzebub and his mates — are also testing Biedermann. The latter refuses to put Schmitz up for the night but gives in because the man imposes himself in the most pushing manner. There is sarcasm here too:

Schmitz : ... Unfortunately there ins't a bed free that's what all say—  
but you I believe, Herr Biedermann ... (sic) Where shall we

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1. Translation by Michael Bullock, 1962 & 1965.
  2. Translation by John Willet, 1962.
  3. Author's subtitle. Op. cit.

end up if nobody believes anyone else any more ? That's what I always say, where shall we end up ? Everybody thinks everybody else is a fire raiser, there's nothing but distrust in the world. Don't you agree ? The whole pub could feel that, Herr Biedermann : you still believe in the good in man and in yourself. Don't you agree ? You're the first person in this town who hasn't simply treated me like an arsonist — 4

The two plays start in a very interesting fashion. Wang, in *The Good Person of Setzuan*, is a water seller, a symbol of life. If we wish to take the image further, his water can be made to stand for faith — not necessarily religious, as in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but simply faith in human beings, in morality in general. Wang gets his water free when the rains fall, and yet he sells it. He refuses to give any to Shen Teh's newfound friend, Sun, when the latter is on the verge of committing suicide. Shen Teh, however, disregards Wang's greed in her goodness, and buys his water, standing there in the rain. She does not wish to cheat the water seller of an opportunity to make a little money.

When the three gods arrive on the scene Wang is the first to greet them. They feel that he may be the good person they have been looking for for so long. Their search has been fruitless so far. Some hope is kindled in the third god :

The third god : The resolution says : the world can go on as it is if we find enough good people, able to lead a decent human existence. The water seller himself is such a person, if I am not deceived.

The second god : He is always deceived. When the water man let us drink out his measure I saw something, look.

*He shows it to the first god.*

The first god : It has got a false bottom.

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4. Id., p. 9.

The second god : A swindler <sup>5</sup>.

The first god decides to strike him out, and decides also, that no one can remain on earth and remain good. Shen Teh's goodness had got buried under the rubble of life's harshness. All it needed was unearthing, and this was what the gods were hoping to do for her. She offered them both shelter and the opportunity to help. To take in the three gods she had to give up her room for the night and go without a customer, and consequently the money for her rent. They repaid her with a small fortune of a thousand silver dollars which enabled her to buy a shop and be her own mistress.

When we meet Gottlieb Biedermann and his wife in *The Fire Raisers*, they are already corrupt because they have never, like Shen Teh, known want. The knock at his door evokes no charity as Biedermann sits sipping his burgundy and smoking his cigar.

Anna : He's still there.

Biedermann : Who ?

Anna : The hawker who wants to speak to you.

Biedermann : I'm not at home !

Anna : That's what I told him; Herr Biedermann, an hour ago.

He says he knows you. I can't throw that man out, Herr

Biedermann, I simply can't .

Biedermann : Why not ?

Anna : He's far too big and strong ...

*Biedermann draws the cork.*

Biedermann : Tell him to come and see me in my office tomorrow.

Anna : I have told him, Herr Biedermann, three times, but he isn't interested.

Biedermann : Why not ?

Anna : He does not want any hair tonic.

Biedermann: What does he want ?

Anna : Humanity ...

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5. Op. cit., pp. 5-6.

*Biedermann sniffs at the cork.*

Biedermann : Tell him I shall come and throw him out with my own hands if he does not beat it immediately.

*He carefully fills his Burgundy glass.*

Humanity !...

*He tastes the wine.*

Tell him to wait in the hall.

I'll be there in a minute ... <sup>6</sup>

On the surface, the pretext which he himself ends up believing, is that he is afraid of arson. Deep down, however, he does not wish to give of what he has : at this moment, his Burgundy and cigars which symbolise all he possesses of comfort and wealth—burgundy and cigars as opposed to Shen Teh's cheap wine and cigarettes which she hands out to the parasites around her, not to mention the daily bowl of rice. Even when she disguises herself as Shui Tah, an imaginary male cousin, her conscience pricks her for having turned out a former landlady and her entire family who flocked to seek shelter under her very small roof. It was that very same landlady who had threatened to throw out Shen Teh if she did not pay her rent just at the time the three gods came to Setzuan. Shen Teh's conscience is alive, The bowl of rice which she continues to dole out is symbolical of her inner spiritual wealth. There is the tiny room, and also the cigarette she gives to the old woman who wishes to offer it to her husband in celebration of their fortieth wedding anniversary. The old couple's happiness is payment enough. She is later repaid (and so perhaps are the three gods) when the old people lend her two hundred silver dollars to help her marry her pilot, Sun, whom she saves from suicide.

Sharing and giving in Brecht's play are made noticeable by their almost constant absence. The old people smile happily at each other and give her the money — a rare glimpse of hope for Shen Teh.

Shen Teh, *to Wang, holding up the envelope;*

This is six months' rent. Isn't that a miracle ? <sup>7</sup>

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6. Op. cit., p. 5.

7. Op. cit., p 44.

Brecht, the atheist, talks of miracles. He too, could emerge, in rare moments, from his despair, to let the language of the Bible overwhelm him, like a spark of light in a night forest. He himself admitted it to be the strongest influence. Expecting incredulity, he said, "you will laugh : (it is) the Bible." <sup>8</sup>

To do good, Shen Teh is even prepared to perjure herself. All the witnesses present when Shu Fu, the fat, opulent barber, smashes Wang's hand with his curling tongs, pretend they have seen nothing. Mrs. Shin provides Shen Teh with the information when the young woman arrives on the scene, full of the new shawl she has just bought to wear for Sun.

Shen Teh, *alarmed* : What's the matter with your hand ?

Mrs. Shin : The barber smashed it with his curling tongs *in front of our eyes.* <sup>9</sup>

(Later) :

Shen Teh, *to Mrs. Shin* : You yourself saw it — didn't you ?

Mrs. Shin : I don't want to get mixed up with the police.

Shen Teh, *to the sister-in-law* : What about you then ?

The sister-in-law : Me ? I wasn't looking !

Mrs. Shin : Of course you were looking. I saw you looking ! You're just scared because the barber's got too much pull. <sup>10</sup>

Pot calling the kettle black.

Shen Teh wishes to help Wang, but ironically enough, the one who warns her about not using the lord's name in vain is Mrs. Shin. Wang is not too reluctant to let Shen Teh commit that sin either.

In *The Fire Raisers* a similar point is raised by Max Frisch when, in the "Afterpiece" the Monkey announces the arrival of the lord of the underworld.

*A Fanfare of Trampets* :

Monkey: He's been on a visit to heaven and he may be very bad-tempered. We expected him yesterday. There seems to have been some tough negotiating again.

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8. *Die Dame*, Berlin, 1.10.1928.

9. Op. cit., p. 44 (The underlining is my own).

10. Id., pp. 44-45.

Biedermann : About me ?

Monkey : About the last amnesty ...

*The monkey whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

Biedermann : So I read.

Monkey : What do you say to that ?

*The monkey whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

Biedermann : I don't follow you.

*The monkey whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

How do you mean ?

*The monkey whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

Do you think so ?

Monkey : If heaven doesn't keep the Ten Commandments —

Biedermann : H'm.

Monkey : Without heaven there can be no hell !

Biedermann : H'm.

Monkey : That's what the negotiations are about.

Biedermann : About the Ten Commandments ?

Monkey : About the principle.

Biedermann H'm.

Monkey : If heaven thinks that hell is going to put up with absolutely anything —

*The monkey whispers in Biedermann's ear.*

Biedermann : Strikes — !<sup>11</sup>

Hell is going to strike because Heaven keeps going back on its word and forgiving all those who have broken the Ten Commandments. Beelzebub's old customers are too fine to come to hell.<sup>12</sup> The figure (that of Eisenring in disguise) rails against what he saw in heaven.

Figure : ... I doubt whether what I saw was the true heaven; they said it was, but doubt it !

... (sic) They wear medals and decorations and there's

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11. Op. cit., p. 76.

12. Id., p. 85.

a smell of incense coming from every loud speaker. I saw Milky Way of decorations, a gala performance that was enough to make the Devil's blood run cold. I saw all my clients, all my mass-murderers, and the little angels circle round their bald heads; people greet one another, they wander round drinking and crying Hallelujah, they giggle over all this clemency — the saints are strikingly silent, because they are made of stone or wood, gifts on loan, and the Princes of the Church (I mixed with the princes of the church to find out where god lives) are so silent, although they are not made of stone and wood ... (sic) <sup>13</sup>.

The only one creature which does not "change its slogans" <sup>14</sup> is a parrot, "a faithful bird" <sup>15</sup>. Very significant this, since it implies the shattering accusation that a parrot is the only creature which does not need to be brainwashed; <sup>16</sup> that the mind should not exist. The parrot's reward is that Beelzebub will take him on his trips down to earth.

This entire section of the play reveals a gross irony and a very harsh realism :

Beelzebub : My childhood faith ! My childhood faith !  
Thou shalt not kill, ha, and I believed it.  
What are they making of my childhood faith !

*The figure cleans his finger nails.*

I, the son of a charcoal burner and a gypsy woman, who couldn't read but knew the Ten Commandments off by heart, I'm possessed by the Devil. Why ? Simply because I scorned all the Commandments. Go to hell, Joe, you're possessed by the Devil everyone said to me, and I went to hell, I lied, because then

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13. Id., p. 78.

14. Id., p. 80.

15. Ibid.

16. Brecht also showed interest in this subject in *Man is Man* (1926).

everything went better, and I became possessed by the Devil. I stole whatever took my fancy and became possessed by the Devil. I whored with whatever came my way, married or unmarried; because I had the urge to, and I felt fine when I gave way to my urge, and became possessed by the Devil. And they feared me in every village, for I was stronger than all of them, because I was possessed by the Devil ... — Thou shalt ! thou shalt not ! Because we had no newspapers and no radio out there on the forest; we had only a Bible, and therefore I believed that one became possessed by the Devil if one killed and ravished and murdered and mocked every Commandment and destroyed whole cities — that's what I believed ! ... 17.

The positions are reversed. The devil does not trust God in heaven. On earth God has disappeared in the wake of people's submission to animal instincts. Perhaps that is why God is no longer to be seen in a world riddled with evil-doers. The fireraisers take it upon themselves to spread evil where Shen Teh makes it her responsibility to put a stop to it. Her counterpart, Simone Machard in *The Visions of Simone Machard*, also by Brecht, unlike the fireraisers, actually makes use of violence to do good when she burns an entire gasoline station to save her country. There is no evil there, just as there is basically none in Shen Teh's perjuring herself. The intention is a good one, inspired by a benevolent emotion.

The themes of disillusionment in both the plays in question are directly opposed. Beelzebub's disappointment with repenting evil-doers coincides and contrasts with Shen Teh's disappointment with Sun, the man she was willing to give up so much for. Disguised as her cousin Shui Ta, she unveils Sun's deceitfulness. But then, she goes out of her way to unravel the latent goodness in him when she offers him the chance of a job at the factory.

I would like to digress briefly here, and point out a similarity in theme in Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard To

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17. Op. cit., pp. 84-85.

Find”<sup>18</sup>. Here the Misfit can be said to represent Beelzebub’s counterpart on earth with the exception that, despite mass murders and other evil deeds, he like all the characters in Brecht’s *The Good Person of Setzuan*, (Shen Teh included) is aware that wrongdoing ultimately brings no joy. The Misfit is a murderer on the loose who resists the temptation, unlike Beelzebub’s customers, to repent when the grandmother urges him to pray. He kills her too, just as he killed the rest of her family before her. She hears the shots :

“Do you ever pray ? ” She asked. He shook his head. All she saw was the the black hat wiggle between his shoulder blades. “None,” he said. There was a pistol shot from the woods, followed closely by another. Then silence. The old lady’s head jerked around. She could hear the wind move through the tree tops like a long satisfied insuck of breath. “Bailey Boy” ! She called.

“I was a gospel singer for a while, ” The Misfit said. “I been most everything, been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a madhouse, seen a man burnt alive once,” ... “I even seen a woman stogged,” he said. “Pray, pray,” the grandmother began, “Pray, pray ... ”

“I never been a bad boy that I remember of,” The Misfit said in an almost dreamy voice, “but somewhere along the line I done something wrong and got sent to pentientary. I was buried alive...”

“Turn to the right, it was a wall,” The Misfit said, looking up at the cloudless sky. “Turn to the left it was a wall. Look up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor. I forget what I done, lady...”

“You must have stolen something,” she said.

The Misfit sneered slightly. “Nobody had nothing I wanted, he said.” It was a head-doctor at the pentientary said what

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18. *The Complete Stories of*, New York, 1976, pp. 117 - 133.

I done was kill my daddy but I knew that for a lie ...<sup>19</sup>.

This is again something like Beelzebub's harangue in *The Fire Raisers*.<sup>20</sup> Again there is the bitterness of want and neglect both physical and emotional. The outcome is also bitterness and lack of faith. Yet underneath it all, the goodness is still there only waiting to be drawn out, and even the Misfit "without his glasses"<sup>21</sup> and having shot the old lady, seemed "pale and defenceless-looking"<sup>22</sup> as he tried to fight back the tears.

Whether Brecht and Max Frisch were friends who possibly influenced each other's work, or whether Flannery O'Connor ever read *The Good Person of Setzuan* or *The Fire Raisers*, makes little difference. The issue is a universal one dealt with in different ways. One writer feels at home using one form, another, a different one. The theme is close to the heart of each regardless of nationality or religion. Real art has no boundaries, and each of the three works I have referred to deserves to rank as imaginative art of the first water for mastery of technique, depth of understanding, sincerity as well as a simplicity which has the strongest power to move.

Since good must prevail Shen Teh must be given the final word. She fights for it but cannot help feeling resentful that she has to do so. As Shui, Te, she can give vent to this bitterness :

The good  
Cannot remain good for long in our country  
Where cupboards are bare, housewives start to squabble.  
Oh, the divine Commandments  
Are not much use against hunger.<sup>23</sup>

...

And again Shui Te goes on to sing,

In order to win one's mid-day meal  
One needs the toughness which elsewhere builds empires.

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19. Id., pp. 129-130.

20. See above p. 10-11.

21. Op. cit., p. 132.

22. Ibid.

23. Op. cit., p. 48.

...  
 So why can't the gods make a simple decision  
 That goodness must conquer in spite of its weakness ?  
 ... 24

The bitterness is still there when he pulls off his mask in court and decides to make a full confession to the magistrates, no other than the three gods. The monologue here is a dramatic one of self-defence, very much in the nature of Fra Lippo Lippi's in Browning's poem where the monk explains to the guard who has arrested him, why he likes chasing the girls at night. He was hungry one day and going up the abbey he there and then renounced the flesh, the world and the devil, all at eight years old, for a morsel of bread. Shen Teh's self-defence is equally convincing. We forgive her deceitfulness.

Shen Teh :     Yes it is me. Shui Ta and Shen Teh, I am both of them.  
                   Your original order  
                   To be good while yet surviving  
                   Split me like lightning into two people. I  
                   Cannot tell what occurred : goodness to others  
                   And to myself could not both be achieved.  
                   To serve both self and others I found too hard.  
                   ... The load of commandments  
                   Forced me into the sludge. Yet if I broke the rules  
                   I strode proudly around, and could eat myself full !  
                   Something is wrong with this world of yours. Why  
                   Is wickedness so rewarded and why is so much suffering  
                   Reserved for the good ? ...  
                   Condemn me : each of my crimes  
                   Was committed to help my neighbour... (25)

Shen Teh cannot resist emerging as herself because she has to overcome the hardness of the Shui Ta within her; goodness has to conquer hardness and cruelty. But she is terrified. She begs the gods not to desert her as they prepare to leave on their cloud. As it vanishes she cries out for help. They wave and smile. After many voyages they have at last found their good person in Setzuan. They no longer need to stay, confident in the faith that Shen Teh is capable of carrying out the fight on her own. They know that she will not give in, no matter how often she feels the burden of the Ten Commandments.