

The Image of the Soldier in Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* And Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*

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Abstract

The image of the soldier, as a hero who sacrifices everything to defend his country and values, is no longer depicted in modern drama. With two World Wars and many regional wars and civil wars, the soldier becomes a victim, not a hero. Authors present the character of the soldier as a man who suffers a lot as he is victimized by his own government and its politics that forces him to be in such a position. Dramatists express their views about race, oppression and war through their characters, such as the character of the soldier, as in the two selected plays for this research: *The Hostage* by Brendan Behan and *A Soldier's Play* by Charles Fuller.

The Hostage depicts, through its events, the Irish oppression which makes both the Irish and the English victims for this conflict. *A Soldier's Play* presents the oppression which the blacks face daily in their society, a matter which creates among them the oppressed and the oppressor.

An oppressed people demand that all their resources be put to the service of liberating them, no matter what these resources are. Certainly art and culture must be seen in such a light. Literature, as part of art is sometimes the mirror of its society and people. Dramatists, in general, and Brendan Behan and Charles Fuller, in particular, are aware of the value of the theatre as a tool for social discussion, therefore; their characters no more assume limited quality, as they assume a universal one.¹

Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*, which lies in three acts, was first presented by Theatre Workshop in 1958. It takes place in an old house in Dublin. It is owned by Monsewer, an Englishman by birth, who is more fanatically Irish than his entourage; Pat, who served with Monsewer in the civil war, is no longer fanatic.

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Pat runs the house with his spouse, Meg, as a lodging house and a brothel. The other characters who inhabit the house act a number of dance hall scenes to comic effect. It is this effect which makes the play a tragic-comedy. The main event of the play is about an eighteen-year-old-boy, who is sentenced to die in the next morning for killing a policeman, while he awaits execution in Belfast jail, the IRA (Irish Republican Army) take a hostage, an ordinary English soldier, who has been kidnapped while leaving a dance. The hostage is brought to this brothel as the last place anyone would dream of looking in. A love affair develops between Lesili, the hostage, and Teresa, one of the brothel's residents. This love is doomed by Lesili's death. In fact, Lesili is killed by a stray bullet in the climatic scene when the police come to rescue him.

Within the time of Behan writing *The Hostage* in 1958, Ireland would be immersed in massive historical and political changes. The violence and tragedy of troubles remain part of Northern Ireland. However; the most part of *The Hostage* is concerned with events in the recent past, particularly the Irish War of Independence in 1921, and the subsequent political changes in the IRA. Thus, the play dramatizes a waiting-on-death-scene, the hanging for political offences of an IRA volunteer in Belfast; it is a bargaining weapon against this execution that the British soldier, Lesili, is captured as hostage and ends up in the house. The idea that death is close at hand is never far removed from the action.²

The conflict between Britain and Ireland did not start in the late nineteenth century but rather in the original occupation by the Norman in the twelfth century. The IRA Officer declares that Lesili is a living proof that Ireland is at war, Pat, is an old Irish nationalist and IRA soldier, states that, "the days of heroes are over".³ Times have changed; the house that was once the refuge of the heroes-the lodging house was originally rented by Monsewer to be a safe house for IRA soldiers on the run-is now a brothel, the IRA has been taken over by fresh faced young men, the heroes kept on the run for more than twenty years.⁴ Meg points out that Pat's problem is in his pride of the past and his contempt for the present generation. Throughout the play, Monsewer, the fanatical Englishman converted to Irish nationalism which stands for the crazy delusion of a latter-day Republicanism frozen in time, still is in 1950s fighting out the battles of 1916-23. Thus, the degeneration of the Republican stronghold into a whore house, the antics of the new IRA offices, as being judged by the hard-bitten old IRA soldier Pat who

runs the whole house, all provide a skeptical view of the continuous struggle for freedom against Britain.⁵

In *The Hostage*, Behan seeks to create a drama which reflects the crises of his time. Behan implies that the Irish are the blacks of Europe; therefore they should have stronger ties to other oppressed people than to their oppressors. This is obvious in Behan's treatment of the British government, which he depicts as being run by and for the upper class, who oppress its own working class as it does its colonies. When Pat and Fergus, the Volunteer, try to reassure Lesili that the British government will release the boy in Belfast to save him from being executed by the IRA⁶, the young soldier states that:

You're as barmy as him if you think that what's happening to me is upsetting the British Government. I suppose you think they're al sitting around in the West End clubs with handkerchiefs over their eyes, dropping tears into their double whiskies. Yeah, I can see the Secretary of State for War now waking up his missus in the night: "Oh Isabel-Cynthia love, I can hardy get a wink of sleep wondering What's happening to that poor bleeder Williams". (217).

Behan portrays the character of Lesili, the nineteen-year-old English soldier, as so innocent of the national conflict in which he has been a pawn. In spite of Lesili's ignorance of the politics of the country in which he is fighting, his satiric scorn at the idea that the British government will change their minds about the execution of the Belfast prisoner because of the risk of losing an innocent person like himself reflects the fact, which is known by everybody, that the British government would not care about losing one of its soldiers.⁷ Brien, a critic, admired *The Hostage's* treatment of the force of the political illusions imposed by the ruling class on the oppressed and oppressor.⁸

The author unites colonial, racial, class, gender and even age discourse to divide the world into oppressors and oppressed, depicting the latter as victims of British imperial, American neo-imperial and international capitalist. Behan calls for unity against oppression through the image of a pure love which is unable to face the destructive effect of the divisive forces of false consciousness. The image of love is represented by Lesili and Teresa, who is a resident of this brothel and working as a maid. Their love is the major symbol of the possibility of unity; though divided by nationality. They are drawn together by their youth, class and status as orphans.⁹ In this way the indicated message of *The Hostage* is the

need to put life and love above the destructive effects of the past, and of the difficulty of doing so, it becomes even more pertinent.¹⁰

Lesili's and Teresa's love ends tragically by Lesili's death; he is killed accidentally during raids to save him. The author assigns the blame for the hostage's death to the sociopolitical forces that lead to his death, though it is unclear whether he has been killed by an IRA bullet or a rescuer's one. The soldier is shot after all. No point has been made, no victory won, the whole thing has been pointless and futile. There are different interpretations to his death: as evidence of British bungling, as an innocent slaughtered unjustly in a conflict about which he knew nothing, or as a dramatically just eye for an eye which is deeply ingrained within Irish culture.¹¹

The play's last unexpected song when Lesili gets up and sings:

The bells of hell,
Go ting-a-ling-a-ling,
For you but not for me (236).

It deliberately undermines the tragedy achieved in the emotional moment of the death, and to remind the audience that it is not in the play-world that people are dying, but out there in the real life of the audience and the county beyond. Through the character of the soldier, Behan criticizes the ridiculous loss of human life and attempts to establish the sanctity of all life, no matter what the nationality.¹²

From the oppressed Irish in Europe to the oppressed African-Americans in America as it is presented in Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* in 1981, at Theatre Four in New York City. The play is divided into two acts. The events of the play are in a camp in Louisiana during World War II. It begins with the murder of Sergeant Waters. Waters is drunk, immediately there are two shots, but the audience never sees who fires the weapon. An investigation is being conducted into what seems to be a racially motivated murder of African-American sergeant. An African-American investigator is initially convinced of a white conspiracy, eventually discovers the murderer to be an African-American soldier under the sergeant's charge. It seems that Waters was hated by his own troops, so as an African-American investigator, Captain Davenport, is assigned to the case. Through series of interviews, the audience sees the vicious Waters raving against whites and, even more strongly, against ignorant Southern African-Americans who give his

race a bad name. His most frequent victim in these tirades is the naive, blue-singing C.J., who takes the Sergeant's abuse in stride. Davenport discovers many layers of racism during his investigation and, just as the black troops are finally called to action in Europe, finds out that that the cool renegade Peterson murdered the drunken Waters in cold blood, hoping that the white folks would be blamed. Peterson is arrested and taken away, but the whole incident is brushed by the white Captain Taylor.

Fuller uses the mystery convention to analyze the central character, the murdered Sergeant Waters, a manipulation that actually draws attention away from solving the mystery and toward analyzing a complex and troubling character who is working to improve the image of his race, eventually does more to hurt that image. Waters really hates what he is; a black man, a black soldier in the army. He is consumed with self-hatred that he turns it upon the men in his company. He is given power over other men; it is a power given by whites and largely controlled by whites, but he thinks that if he can do the job well, that he can change the whites' perception of the black man. Thus, he is harder on his men and crueler than a white officer would be. In fact, Waters tries to be whiter than whites. Waters is a character who has taken upon himself the mission of refashioning the black image, assuming a missionary enthusiasm and adopting what he considers a self-justifying posture which is almost similar to an amore stance of declaring war, where anything goes¹³. In fact in World War I, he distinguished himself in a real fight, as did many African-Americans, but as he says, "The First War, it didn't change much for us."¹⁴, and he feels the time has come to have an alternate strategy for change. His intention of bringing about change is a noble one, but the strategy becomes obsessive to the point of near megalomania.¹⁵ Waters states one event that occurred during Word War I:

Do you know the damage one ignorant *Negro* can do?
We were in France during the First War, Wilkie. We had
won the decorations, but the white boys had told all the
French gales we had tails. And they found this ignorant
colored soldier. Paid him to tie a tail to his ass and
parade around naked making monkey sounds. And the
ohhh, the white boys danced that night- passed out leaflets
with the boy's picture on them- called him Moonshine, King
of Monkeys. And when we slit his throat you know that fool
asked us what he had done wrong? (96)

Fuller inserts this formative incident into the play and follows it up with descriptions of similar actions that lead to Waters own racial actions in the pay itself, which in turn lead to his murder. The audience clearly sees Waters' scheme of purifying his race and the methods used as being unethical at best. As waters' assault on the easy going C.J. He frames C.J. and has him imprisoned, thereby stingy succeeding in eliminating one more "geechee" from the republic eye.¹⁶ Waters triumphantly comments:

I waited a long time for you, boy, but I gotcha! And
I try to git rid of you wherever I go. I put two geechie
in jail at Fort Campbell, Kentucky- three at Fort Huachuca.
Now I got you- one less fool for the race to be ashamed of! (73).

One can understand more precisely the motives behind his actions when discussing his family; he wants to improve the world for future black generations, not necessary for himself: "When this war's over, things are going to change,... I want him [his son] to be ready for it-my daughter, too! I'm sendin' bot' of 'em to some big white college." (28). Although he appears evil in fulfilling his plan, Fuller refuses to present Waters as a pure source of evil, instead allowing him to be human and even eventually to express keen remorse upon the ultimate realization of the inhumanity of his plan. C.J. commits suicide because he is unable to tolerate a strangling incarceration. Waters is driven to drink as he realizes that he is to be blamed for the man's death, and in turn he challenges the source that has so twisted him into his obsession which is the white establishment. He confronts and attacks two white officers in his drunken stupor: "I've killed for you! Nothin changed-see? And I've tried everything! Everything! "(53). Waters' aims are noble, but he finally realizes that his ends have failed to justify the means. He has been misdirected all along by a blind admiration of his white superiors. His murder in the play is a sort of justice, retribution for all his past crimes, and finally something he himself welcomed.¹⁷

To uncover the personality of Waters is an intriguing process in itself. Fuller has created a complex villain whose rich character can explore a variety of contradictory emotions. This very complexity of character, paralleling the growing complexity of Fuller's mystery, sheds light on the complexities of trying to solve the race problem in general since this play examines the roles that black men are often forced to play in a racist society. The black soldiers are not given the opportunity to be real soldiers; instead they function a little more than servants,

handymen, garbage collectors and gardeners; therefore, they view the baseball games as the only area where they can prove superiority over the white soldiers. In fact, the play is designed to cause the audience to investigate and evaluate racial tensions.¹⁸

Fuller's choice of a sophisticated African-American P.F.C. Peterson as the actual culprit is less a dramatic trick than a thematic necessity, one in which Fuller can maintain that a more dangerous enemy lies within black ranks, rather than without, one that is at least as dangerous as Waters himself. Peterson places an ironic sense of closure on the mystery. He is strong and opinionated, in many ways the kind of man Waters is trying to make out of all his men. Unlike Waters, though, Peterson maintains his attachment to his black heritage. He is a man from Hollywood. But unlike C.J., the suicider from Mississippi, Peterson is a Southerner who has been introduced to the sophisticated world and has developed the tools to protect himself, to stand up for himself. The self-reliance is what Waters admires, the black pride and sense of separation is what Waters wants to beat out of him. The conflicting perspectives lead first to a first fight and finally to Peterson murdering Waters for destroying C.J., who presents a kind of innocence that Waters was ashamed of and that Peterson seemed anxious to stand up for and wanted to help preserve, at least in part.¹⁹

A Soldier's Play, at one level, condemns white oppression, but at the more specific, focused level, it attacks the flaws in the African-American response to that oppression. An example is the continuous conflict between the white Captain Taylor and the chief investigator, Captain Davenport, an African-American. Their rational attempts to determine the guilty party are constantly clouded by over prejudices that neutralize their formal efforts to discover the truth. Taylor considers himself to be a fairly liberal white, concerned about blacks as human beings, though they are still social inferiors. His attempts, though, at honesty and sincerity are comical: "Forgive me for occasionally staring, Davenport, you're the first colored officer I've ever met."(17). Taylor observes Waters as, "colored soldiers aren't devious like that".(28). Taylor is blinded by a consequent over zealotry to do right; thus, he falls into a sort of liberal trap and over-reacts to the facts presented him. In the second interview with the two suspected white officers, he is the one to charge them with murder, going only on an unsound suspicion that the men, obviously bigots, are lying. The accusation comes despite Taylor's own earlier

insistence that the men had alibis. Davenport, however, at this point releases them. In spite of being reasonable during this interrogation, Davenport, is not much different from Taylor at other times. Feeling like a crusader for his race, he first considers the Ku Klux Klan²⁰ until the common-sense evidence eliminates it as a possible force. The Ku Klux Klan would have cut off Waters' insignia. Then, Davenport attacks the white officers with a conspiracy charge. He blindly argues against fact, claiming that their alibis are "nothing more than officers lying to protect two of their own".(54). Eventually he does settle into looking at the facts and coming upon the truth. Once the investigation is solved, Davenport offers a fitting eulogy to those men destroyed by the event and a fitting condemnation of those blinded by colour, himself ironically included, stating, "nothing anyone said, or did, would have been worth a life to men with large hearts-men less split by the madness of race in America".(99). The madness has captured all in the play, not just the victims, and presumably not just those in the play. The events which Davenport reports at the end of the play; Waters' death is mistakenly filed as heroic, the troops involved are shipped out and soon wiped out in an operation in Germany.²¹

In *A Soldier's Play*, Fuller pursues the issue of internal change. Since Africans-Americans are trapped by the white institutions, it is the whites' responsibility to enact change or even that is the blacks' responsibility to force them to enact change. The superficial changes created by social activism are not what Fuller is working toward. Rather, Fuller's work assumes the trap and argues that blacks should show initiative to change the conditions themselves as they are the direct beneficiaries.²²

In 1981, when Charles Fuller wrote *A Soldier's Play*, the United States military was fully integrated. In fact, the military services have been the largest equal opportunity employer of African-American for many years. Historically Africans-Americans have joined the military during wars but unceremoniously returned to civilian life once the war ended. World War II began in much the same way. For many Africans-Americans, there was no reason to want to involve themselves in this war, the experience in World War I had taught them that once their services were no longer needed that blacks found they had gained nothing by their sacrifice. The freedom they fought for was not theirs, and the country they defended rejected them. Thus, many of them considered World War II as a white

man's war, but some, like Sergeant Waters, saw the war as an opportunity to prove that blacks were as brave, as strong, and as accountable as any white soldier. They reasoned that blacks could shoot a weapon, fly a plane, and kill a German as well as any white man, and they wanted a chance to prove it. They also saw the war as a means to wedge a crack into the segregation that still defined the American life. If the military could be integrated, then may be other areas of American life could be opened up as well.²³

Fuller does return to a military setting since it gives him the opportunity to "have men confront men"²⁴, more honesty, "since you can't call a man a fool whose principal function is to defend his country".²⁵ In these rarefied conditions, black-white relations are more pointed and perhaps more consequential, for one's survival may eventually depend on the support of a racially different companion. And African-American interrelations themselves take the same weight for the same life-death reasons.²⁶

The writers of these two plays, *The Hostage* and *A Soldiers' Play*, present how racism distorts the soul not just of the oppressor but the victim. The character of the soldier in the two plays has two faces; the face of the oppressor and the oppressed. Lesili, in *The Hostage*, is the innocent British soldier who has nothing to do with his government's politics towards Ireland, however; being British puts him in the oppressor's camp from whom the IRA soldiers seek to revenge. At the same time he is oppressed by the IRA soldiers, being imprisoned by them, though he is not a representative of his government. His death at the end of the play makes him a victim. It is his government to blame for its politics.

Waters, in *A Soldier's Play*, is the African-American soldier who suffers from his colour, he is in the oppressed's camp, however, his self-mission to purify his race according to his own criteria makes him harder than his oppressors. Like *The Hostage*, Waters' American government is to blame for what happened to him.

Behan and Fuller present in their plays examples of oppression which becomes a universal one, not related to a particular nationality. It is the politics of war which forces men to become soldiers raising faked slogans of sacrifice and heroism. In fact, the two camps in the war have their own victims from their men.

Behan presents love as the solution to overcome the suffering of racism, only if love is given enough opportunity to achieve its aims to spread the

spirit of equality and forgiveness. Fuller, on the other hand, depicts hatred as the worst result of oppression and racism. All the black soldiers are victims of hatred, they sacrificed their lives only to prove that they are equal to the white soldiers, not to fight Hitler in Germany. Hatred becomes a motive behind their desire to join the war and become soldiers. Their death at the end is a tragic one because those miserable men lived and died as victims of their reality. Fuller shows that there are different reasons to be a soldier more than the false aims of war.

Notes

¹ William W. Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 127.

² Nicolas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 158.

³ Brendan Behan, *The Complete Plays: The Hostage* (NY: Grove Press, 1978), p. 140. All subsequent references to this play are cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

⁴ John Russel Taylor, *The Angry Theatre: New British Drama* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. 106.

⁵ Grene, p. 158.

⁶ Maureen Hawkins, "Women, Queers, Love, and Politics The Crying Game as a Corrective Adaptation of Replay to *The Hostage*", *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, ed. Susan Shaw Sailer (Granville: University Press of Florida, 1997), pp. 196-97.

⁷ Grene, p. 162.

⁸ Maureen Hawkins, "Berndan Behan (1923-1964)", *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995*, ed. Bernic Schrank (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 27.

⁹ Hawkins, "Women, Queers, Love, and Politics The Crying Game as a Corrective Adaptation of Replay to *The Hostage*", p. 195.

¹⁰ Hawkins, "Berndan Behan (1923-1964)", p. 28.

¹¹ James McNamar, "Brendan Behan (1923-1964)", *Modern Irish Writers*, ed. Alexander G. Gonzalez (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p.17.

¹² Grene, p. 165.

¹³ Demastes, p. 131.

¹⁴ Charles Fuller, *A Soldier's Play* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), p.72. All subsequent references to this play are cited parenthetically within the text by page number.

¹⁵ Demastes, p. 131.

¹⁶ Bernard L. Peterson, *Contemporary Black American Playwrights and Their Plays* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 132.

¹⁷ Demastes, p. 134.

¹⁸ Peterson, p. 183.

¹⁹ Thomas S. Hischak, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1969-2000* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 196.

²⁰ Ku Klux Klan is the name of several past and present hate group organizations in the United States whose avowed purpose was to protect the rights of and further

the interests of white Americans by violence and intimidation. www.Wikipedia.com

²¹ Demastes, pp. 134-37.

²² Hischak, p. 129.

²³ Peterson, p. 170.

²⁴ Demastes, p. 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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صورة الجندي في مسرحية (الرهينة) للكاتب برندان بيهان ومسرحية الجندي للكاتب جارلس فللر

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الخلاصة:

إن صورة الجندي الذي يضحى بكل شيء للدفاع عن وطنه و قيمه لم تعد توصف بهذا الشكل في المسرح الحديث. مع حدوث حربين عالميتين و العديد من الحروب الإقليمية و الأهلية أصبح الجندي ضحية و ليس بطلا. يرسم الكتاب شخصية الجندي كرجل يعاني الكثير كونه ضحية حكومته و سياستها التي أرغمته على أن يكون في هذا الموقع. يعبر الكتاب المسرحيون عن آرائهم المتعلقة بالعرق و الاضطهاد و الحرب من خلال شخصياتهم، مثل شخصية الجندي كما في المسرحيتين المختاريتين لهذا البحث، هما: "الرهينة" للكاتب برندان بيهان و "مسرحية الجندي" للكاتب جارلس فللر.