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Finding "Justice"

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest" (Wiesel). This quote from Elie Wiesel's Nobel lecture exemplifies one of the major themes of *Saboteur.* More times than not, injustice is caused by the abuse of power and while forms of "protest" will be different, people will fight against injustice. *Saboteur* demonstrates two all-too-common realities: When given too much power, people will abuse it and when people are cornered and feel like they have no legitimate options for justice, they will utilize any way out they can find.

It is quite clear that there is abuse of power throughout this story. Beginning with the throwing of tea by police officers and ending with officers forcing Mr. Chiu to sign an inaccurate document, the abuse of power by people within the government seems as though it will never cease. The most blatant abuse of power arises in a conversation between Mr. Chiu and the police chief. Mr. Chiu explains to the chief that it is illegal to torture the young lawyer Fenjin in the back yard and asks if the chief is worried about appearing in a newspaper. The chief replies, "No, we are not, not even on TV. What else can you do? We are not afraid of any story you make up. We call it fiction. What we do care about is that you cooperate with us. That is to say, you must admit your crime" (Jin 207). The chief is clearly in a position with enough power that he can

avoid the consequences of the law and, therefore, can do whatever he pleases to get his way. This abuse of power goes hand-in-hand with the response shared by Mr. Chiu with many people who've been placed in similar situations.

The first clue to the idea of the tendency for people to find any form of "justice" they can comes from the title itself. The title, *Saboteur,* foreshadows the end of the story. With enough context, one could surmise from the title that Mr. Chiu, a man who feels he is left with no legitimate options for justice, will find any way possible to get his revenge. The word "sabotage" is French in origin and there are several theories on how it came to be. All of these theories share the word "sabotage" coming from the word for wooden shoes, "sabots." In addition, all of these theories deal with oppressed people finding their way out. The first and most common theory is that French Luddites working in mills would throw their clogs into the machines during the Industrial Revolution in order to stop the machines from working. The next theory is that "the original saboteurs were the farmers who trampled crops with their wooden clogs to force the landowners to meet their demands" ("Origins of English"). The final theory is that railway strikers removed the sabots that held the railway lines in place ("Origins of the"). This theory could be the most significant as it was "two railroad policemen" who began the oppression of Mr. Chiu (Jin 201). While Mr. Chiu calls his accusers saboteurs, it is truly Mr. Chiu himself who is the saboteur in the end. Like the original saboteurs, Mr. Chiu felt he had no other option for "justice" but to take drastic measures.

When the power-holders give Mr. Chiu no form of justice, he feels that is forced to take such measures to find his own form of justice. Mr. Chiu is backed into a corner and given no other option than to sign a document admitting to a crime that he didn't commit if he wants to

save himself and Fenjin. When people feel that they aren't given reasonable options, they will never react positively. This proves to be the case with Mr. Chiu. Because he feels that he was forced into a decision, he also feels that he is forced to act if he wants to achieve "justice." While Ha Jin doesn't make it completely evident, it's easy for the reader to infer that Mr. Chiu is the cause of a hepatitis epidemic. Ha Jin makes it clear that Mr. Chiu is after his "way out," in this case his way of exacting revenge, when he writes, "if he were able to, [Mr. Chiu] would have razed the entire police station and eliminated all their families. Though he knew he could do nothing like that, he made up his mind to do something" (Jin 208). This gives us the first hint that Mr. Chiu will get his revenge, but it's still unclear how. The method of Mr. Chiu's revenge starts to reveal itself when he travels with Fenjin to restaurants all over the city rather than eating his fill at one. Fenjin's thoughts on the matter remind us of Mr. Chiu's ailment, hepatitis. "Fenjin was baffled by his teacher, who looked ferocious and muttered to himself mysteriously, and whose jaundiced face was covered with dark puckers. For the first time Fenjin thought of Mr. Chiu as an ugly man" (208). Ha Jin then all-but reveals Mr. Chiu's fulfillment of his innate desire to find his "justice" when Jin writes about "over eight hundred people" catching hepatitis in Muji (209). Mr. Chiu was left without a legitimate path to justice, so he was forced to turn ugly.

This tendency for people without options for justice to turn to ugliness in order to find their own sense of justice can be backed historically. One example can be seen by viewing Germany's actions. After World War I, the Treaty of Versailles placed all of the blame for the war on Germany. The Germans were forced to pay off debts that seemed insurmountable. In fact, Germany didn't finish paying off their debt until 2010, 92 years after the Treaty of Versailles placed this debt on Germany (Crossland). The feeling that they were given no fair or reasonable

options was one that many Germans shared. This feeling of entrapment is one of the major causes of WWII. Many Germans felt that since the world had turned against them, they needed to turn against the world. Similarly, Mr. Chiu felt that the community and policemen had turned against him so he had no other option but to turn against them if he wanted "justice." Germany turning to its evil side in order to find its own form of "justice" is just one real-life example of this common trend. *Saboteur* brings to light how drastically people will react if they feel they aren't given a fair shot at justice. Another real-life example of this premise can be seen by looking into Ha Jin's life.

Ha Jin faced oppression in his life and felt that he was forced to take drastic measures in response. Several events throughout Ha Jin's life built up before finally causing him to react. The Chinese Culture Revolution started in 1966, when Ha Jin was just ten years old. The Cultural Revolution resulted in schools being closed, Chinese citizens being killed or imprisoned, and many Chinese people losing faith in their government altogether (Cultural Revolution). Jin's drastic reaction hasn't yet been provoked at this point; however, growing up in this environment clearly had an influence on Jin's writing. This influence is seen in *Saboteur* as Mr. Chiu is getting arrested. Jin writes, "[Mr. Chiu] wasn't afraid. The Cultural Revolution was over already, and recently the Party had been propagating the idea that all citizens were equal before the law" (203). In addition to the influence of the Cultural Revolution, serving in the People's Army began to steer Ha Jin toward a drastic reaction. When interviewed, Ha Jin spoke about his experience in the army. Jin said, "I served in the Chinese army, and the army was called The People's Army, so we were from the people and supposed to serve the people and protect the people. I was shocked that the field armies would go into the city and really suppress civilians"

("An Interview"). Even this experience wasn't enough to provoke a drastic response from Ha Jin. Jin's reaction finally came after he had already moved to America for graduate studies. While in America, Jin saw televised footage of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. It was at that point that a drastic response was provoked. Jin decided that he, his wife, and his son would need to stay in America rather than moving back to China ("Ha Jin Author"). While this reaction may not seem all that drastic to some, one must imagine making the decision to leave one's home and culture behind for good. Ha Jin's real-life experiences with the Chinese government had quite a bit of influence on his writing.

As can be seen from a historical perspective, Ha Jin's life, and the text itself, *Saboteur* brings to light the common theme that power is abused, casing injustice, and people will react adversely to this injustice. When people feel that they have been given no legitimate option for justice, they will fight back to find their own form of "justice." While some forms of protests may be more violent than others, "there must never be a time when we fail to protest" injustice (Wiesel).

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