

## The Future Conscious Eye in Bertolt Brecht's poem To Posterity

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النظرة المستقبلية الواعية في قصيدة " الى الاجيال القادمة " ل بيرتولت بريخت

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### Abstract

The present study concentrates on the role of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the German poet and playwright who is globally well-known for his Epic theatre. Brecht shows a unique and extreme proficiency in writing plays. This study, however, illustrates his poetic talents as a significant poet while shedding the light on his poem To Posterity (1939), which carries a universal message to all humans and future generations. The study ends with a conclusion of the main points

**Key Words: Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), Brecht as a Poet, To Posterity (1939)**

### الخلاصة

تركز الدراسة الحالية على دور الكاتب والشاعر الالمانى بيرتولت بريخت (1898-1956) والمعروف عالميا لمسرحه الملحمى. بريخت ايضا يمثل قدرة ومهارة متميزة في كتابه المسرحيات. هذه الدراسة توضح دور بريخت كشاعرا مهما من خلال تسليط الضوء على قصيدته " الى الاجيال القادمة" (1939) تنتهي الدراسة الى خلاصه توضح ابرز النقاط. كلمات مفتاحية: بيرتولت بريخت (1898-1956), بريخت ك شاعر, قصيدة " الى الاجيال القادمة" (1939)

### 1. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) : An introduction

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) represented an extravagant special talented figure of exclusive impact on the modern English theatre. He symbolized the brilliant mentality which stimulated most readers all over the world. Born in Augsburg, Germany on the tenth of February in 1898, Brecht was the son of a family which mixed the Protestant and Catholic beliefs. He belonged to a middle class family which depicted the cornerstone on which he put his theatrical work. Dramatically, Brecht illustrated the extremely influential practitioner of twentieth century. The man whose reputation as great playwright, poet, and theatre director gave him the position of leadership among his contemporaries. He gained attention and respect from most theatre directors and critics for his genuine ideas and technical additions which he brought on stage. Brecht's journey for success was not that easy, for he overcame many impossibilities. From his adolescence, Brecht met different actors, theatre directors and famous companions who widely affected him. Starting with Arthur Kutscher till Herbert Ihering and Karl Valentin who really gave him the various manipulations which created the sense of openness and novelty which

he adopted in his works. His beginnings, however were not that effortless since he witnessed the events of the World War I and the obstacles that he faced to be a way from its drawbacks. The roots of his creative abilities sprang from his unique individualistic opinions and the flawless modern technical touches which he invented. It is also worth-noting that Brecht showed a particular ability in dramatic works from an early age. In Munich, for example, he was called Bert Brecht and known for his first three plays Baal, Drums in the Night and in the Jungle. In 1922, he awarded the Kleist Prize and the prize carries the citation which says, “[Brecht's] language is vivid without being deliberately poetic, symbolical without being over literary. Brecht is a dramatist because his language is felt physically and in the round.” (Poem Hunter. The world Poetry Archive, 2012). Brecht talents spread quickly to other European countries when he started writing using the English language. His fame was due to his plays Life of Galileo (1943), Mother Courage and her Children (1939) and Caucasian Chalk Circle (1948). The interest in poetry might be a good reason why Brecht interred the English world. As a poet, he gained great reputation just like his fame as a playwright. Though Brecht the dramatist was well-known according to the English stage as “epic dramatist” while Brecht the poet was very famous in Germany. (Mackinnon, 2020) Poetry, for Brecht, was something universal. It was based on purpose and this purpose should be meaningful and has an international message. If his plays were epic, his poetry represented a voice of alteration and an act of addressing the whole universe for the sake of narrating a world problem and investigation a society needs. Brecht’s poetry, in other words, sought for communication and innovation. His poems, particularly, refused the social norms and traditions of his bourgeois society in Augsburg, Germany. Brecht’s anger for the corrupted society and the upper class seemed to have another form. His poem On the Infanticide Marie Farrer sent a universal message of gaining forgiveness and attention from the whole world to the life of the miserable people like Marie Farrar. The lines below supported Brecht’s address to all universe to help and understand rather than blame and dismiss:

You who bear your sons in laundered linen sheets  
And call your pregnancies a “blessed state”  
Should never damn the outcast and the weak:  
Her sin was heavy, but her suffering great.  
Therefore, I beg, make not your anger manifest  
For all that lives needs help from all the rest. (as cited. In Edward Mackinnon. 2020)

The poem spoke about the sad story of Maria Farrar, an unmarried working lady who was forced to kill her newborn child after a very difficult moments of birth. She became criminal and dismissed from her scornful society which had no respect for the weak. (Mackinnon, 2020). However, during the 1920s the personality of Brecht began to have a more critical or political tendencies. He joined the Communist Party in Germany and showed great intention to support the working class with clear dissatisfaction for the aristocratic bourgeois class of the 1929. Brecht’s poetry, then, changed to have a “dialectical” voice which eventually carries the mode of satire and social struggle. During his lifetime, Brecht suffered the pain of exile. He experienced the Scandinavian and the American exiles. The years between both exiles served to build the most perfect and mature poetry that Brecht wrote. At that time, his poems expressed his address for universal truths like his poem “To Those Born After” which carried the moments of suffering he lived in exile and shared it to all readers:

To the cities I came in a time of disorder

That was ruled by hunger.

I sheltered with the people in a time of uproar

And then I joined in their rebellion.

That's how I passed my time that was given to me on this Earth. (Poem Hunter. 55)

The American exile also contributed to the hardships that Brecht experienced. His misery came when he sold his writings for the simplest needs of life. “Every morning, to earn my bread/I go to the market where lies are bought. /In hope/I take my place amongst the sellers” (cited in. Montironi 2012). What increased his misery was his loss for his best comrades like, Walter Benjamin and his beloved Margarete Steffin. Nonetheless, Brecht’s political challenge was not covert. It was reflected in most of his writings, especially his rejection for the political uprising governments at his time. The last years of 1940s, Brecht went back to Germany when he started to reconstruct his theatre in Berlin and turned to write peace poetry like Freedom and Democracy (1947) after the changes of Germany. The search for global freedom and justice definitely represented a crucial subject for Brecht. His major concern was achieving the Marxist concepts which he obviously followed. The struggle against social discrimination justified the reason why Brecht always mentioned his rebellious intentions in his poetry for the sake of change and dissatisfaction. The below lines from his poem To Those Born Later (1939) carried this meaning:

You who will come to the surface

From the flood that's overwhelmed us and drowned us all  
Must think, when you speak of our weakness in times of darkness  
That you've not had to face:

Days when we were used to changing countries

More often than shoes, Through the war of the classes despairing

That there was only injustice and no outrage. ( Worldly poetry Archive. 55)

During his lifetime, Brecht produced different genres of literature including some poetry collections, short stories, essays, theatrical works (more than fifty plays), (Squiers,2012: 3-4) operas, screen plays and many other literary adaptations or works on politics, history, literature and culture. In addition, Brecht wrote two writings publications involving a diary which realistically reveals Brecht's personality as a human. That diary re-narrated the experience of Brecht between 1920-22 when he worked as a medical assistant during World War I. In this collection Brecht's love stories and his social and personal concepts appeared away from his theatrical or literary careers. (Squiers,3-4)The second collection, meanwhile, concentrated primarily on Brecht's philosophical, political and literary or artistic opinions. That collection opened the door to the creativity that Brecht had as a theater adaptor and as Marxist theorist. The collection was often referred to as Arbeits journal produced between 1934-1955. Throughout his lifetime, Brecht remained between the circle of philosophy following the theories of Marx and theatre dramatist affected by Frankfurt. But for most time, Brecht was famous for his artistic view more than philosophy. (Squiers ,6)Broadly speaking, for a dramatist like Brecht theatre mirrored the scope that widely offered his unrevealed beliefs about life and society. His epic theatre violated all the norms of traditional theatre. The search for innovations and social alterations was a major concern for Brecht's theatre. The epic theatre focused on the life of the working class showing the necessity for this segment of society to create social order and balance. Brecht himself was a bourgeois educated person but always searched for the rights and justice of the "Proletariat". (Squiers, 62-63)However, much attention was directed to Brecht's influence on others and vice versa. Theorists like Carl Marx and Engels Lenin represented famous influences on Brecht. His journals, letters and essays reflected the notion that art had global effect on the world's opinions and could possibly have a reason for change or revolution. Brecht never hesitated to have others' beliefs and concepts. He used to follow other theorists' beliefs and that reinforced his views of innovations which he sought in his writings. Most of the critical essays written about Brecht's theatre provided enough justifications why he was unique. He influenced others and at the same time get influenced by them. One of these influences caused the appearance of Brecht's distinctive "Epic Theatre", the theatre that clearly manipulated the real difference from the traditional dramatic theatre. In his epic theatre, Brecht was conscious about the elements and structure of dramatic theatre. Starting from the differences between the two theatres, Brecht did not see the necessity for the consequent, step by step, and direct line of events in a play or story. He, rather, looked for the nonlinear series of events that prepared the audience for what might happen in the action. Moreover, Brecht directed attention to the idea of conflict most stories, novels, and plays adopted. He considered the unresolved struggle as an appropriate manner for creating more suspense and consciousness in the minds of his audience. Scenes, Brecht regarded, were no longer in need for one by one series of events which started from a problem to resolution at the end of long related scenes of events. But some actions required an attempt of separation or discontinuity for developing the self-analyzed view point a reader could possibly conclude. (Squiers,123-25)Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children (1941) portrayed a successful manifestation for Brecht's theatre. The story of Margarete Steffin and her three children depicted the structure and plot of Brecht's theatre. The events in this play moved in a consequent order but did not follow the one after one actions. Each scene had a different act that carried indirect connection to previous event. This way encouraged the alienation effect when an actor became detached from the action because of the sense astonishment or fear. The alienation effect was obviously attached to epic theatre for the purpose of making distance or giving the audience the opportunity to think and give discussions. The alienation effect, in one hand, supposed distinction between the epic theatre adopted by Brecht and the dramatic traditional theatre. On the other hand, the idea of alienation was in some way related to the function of epic theatre. In this case, the epic theatre might indicate multi-functional purposes depending on what meaning it conveyed. (Martin and Bial, 1999) The epic theatre revealed an entertaining function in addition to its philosophical side. This interpreted Brecht's intention of coming up with the epic theatre which opened the way for the audience to participate in the intellectual reaction to what was performed in front of them on stage. Brecht's contradictions to dramatic theatre contributed in this point. He established the epic theatre in an attempt to get detached from the exceptionally learning effect that dramatic theatre provided. People, after all, wanted knowledge and pleasure at the same time.

The existence of the epic theatre justified why Brecht required his audience to be conscious to what was going on in their world. The theatre, for Brecht, had not only be didactic but also entertaining. Epic theatre could thus be performed everywhere and served to have enormous social revolution. It could teach, please, and stimulate the audience' attention to question their social and logical problems. Thus, epic theatre sent an international moral function. Part of what readers found in epic theatre was its natural moral tendency. They could reach at moral purposes out of what they studied or connected to what was offered to them in plays. The intention of Brecht was not directly shown, but readers could eventually deduce it when they came to the endings of his stories. The universally moral artistic purposes of what Brecht wanted to convey to all readers and audience all over the world. Especially at his time, Brecht was highly conscious about the scientific world of discoveries which led readers to question and suspect what was around them.

## **2. The Poetry of Bertolt Brecht.**

The shift from theatre to poetry carried the same principles for Brecht. His poetry crystalized a condition of political and intellectual rejection to traditional poetic subjects and forms in the English and American societies after the I and II World Wars. (Hays, 2013, pp148-55). Previously, the poetry of United States and England was colored with clear dissatisfaction about the social injustice and political issues. Brecht's poetry, however, depicted a more intensive manner of political irony and personal or individualistic sensitivity. During his lifetime, whether in Germany or in his exiles, Brecht showed an enthusiastic endeavor to write poetry that realistically manifested the spirit of the age. He wrote several subjects which constituted the major concerns of society and had great influence on American culture especially his ideologies. Brecht represented a prolific talented poet in addition to being a playwright. His poetry productions reflected his borrowings from other well-known poets like, Gay, Kipling, Dante, Marlowe, Verlaine and Rimbaud. From essays to poems and from theatre to prose, Brecht's style of re-writing other works remained influential. His long exile years (1933-1945) were enough to realize what he intended to cover in his artistic literary productions. The poetry that he introduced was particularly relevant to social and political ups and downs that he witnessed after II World War. The idea of the necessity for social change and universal consciousness raised from Brecht's intentions of humanistic purposes. His sense of modernity aimed to make innovations and led modern society away from the barbarism of wars. " poetry foundation" website (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/bertolt-brecht>) considered that Brecht's poetry contributions include his Poems (1913-1956) (1997) and Poetry and Prose (Bertolt Brecht) represented various directions from personal, occasional poems, poems for plays (involve music and performance) and political and war poems. Writing poetry, for Brecht, meant making something functional. It did not show that poems should contain ordered rhymes and rhythms. Rather, Brecht's poetry, established what readers needed to understand in the present world. However, Brecht's major concern from his early poetry was to make a poem connected to a song. The early poems were intrinsically related to ballads, chronicles, and melodies. The sense of artistic order resulted in a kind of attention to the modern chaotic atmosphere and got the opportunity to realistically engage with events of the world. The poetry of Brecht came against the poetic movements in Germany and United States during 1920s. According to Brecht, the poetry of his contemporaries like, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan George, did not add new or invent some difference to readers. For Brecht, the purpose of writing poetry should not be restricted to ordered forms and subjects imposed didactically for readers. Rather the poet, according to him, should had the identity of an artist participated in the readers' struggles and poetry had to perform a social function or offer. The " e-notes" website (<http://www.enotes.com/topics/bertolt-brecht/>) denoted that Poetry, written in a traditional classical manner with strict rhyme scheme and classical religious and secular subjects, produced fruitless results and caused people's detachment from the events. Thus, Brecht adopted the type of poetry which sprang from people's sufferings and was productive in regard to the political and humanistic matters. For more than 30 years, Brecht wrote more than 1,500 poems collected in various volumes. The reader of Brecht's poetry clearly noticed the multiple positions and roles the major characters performed. The voice of Brecht also referred to a mixture of different view-points and shapes. From one hand, a reader might find the voice of a writer who was absolutely under the effect of capitalism. But from the other hand, readers could possibly determine the condition of a revolutionary poet whose aim was to make change or discover a new life with free possibilities and tremendous subjects related to political and social details of life.

## **3. Bertolt Brecht's Poem To Posterity (1939)**

This paper primarily intends to study Bertolt Brecht's poem To Posterity (1939), which crystalized Brecht's philosophy of the world and his view of art and the artist. The poem, as well as, told how poetry functioned as an effective factor that addressed people's needs and dreams in contemporary society. The voice of the poem

suggested the artist's role in investigating the conflicts that humans encountered. It tried to open the minds for global and universal questions about humans' problems and beliefs in life. Brecht directed the attention to the significance of questioning and searching to answer the struggles that Man faced in his present world. Politically, the poem was written during a very sophisticated period when the world was under the crisis of World War II. The political changes witnessed many events starting from the Japanese invasion to china, the birth of CIO and the on-going negativity of the Great Depression which continued from 1929. The pessimistic and gloomy tone resulted from these conditions in addition to the harsh unkind atmosphere which accompanied the socialist artist like Brecht. The poem, thus, revealed a picture of threat that Brecht saw on present and future generations. He invited readers and audience to be conscious about their roles and rights in society. (Fish, 2011) Brecht obviously declared his dissatisfaction of the life at the miserable time when speaking about the rights and justice was considered something forbidden.

Indeed I live in the dark ages!

A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens

A hard heart. He who laughs

Has not yet heard

The terrible tidings.

Ah, what an age it is

When to speak of trees is almost a crime

For it is a kind of silence about injustice!

And he who walks calmly across the street,

Is he not out of reach of his friends

In trouble?

(Poem Hunter. The Worldly Poetry Archive, 51)

From the beginning of the poem, Brecht obviously announced his dissatisfaction of the life at the miserable time when speaking about the rights and justice was seen a taboo. The world, that Brecht described, lacked meaning and importance for it concerned with injustice and fruitlessness. "A hard heart" carried the meaning of difficulty and solidity. Brecht used "dark ages" to refer to the gloomy and mundane years that he lived as an artist and socialist. He offered a question to all humanity from present and future generations to consider whether they deserved such life or not. He intended to shed the light on the conscious mind which came to be silent and calm at his time. The use of words like "guileless", "smooth forehead" and "hard heart" all came to mean what Brecht regarded the cruel image of modern society. (<https://eliteskills.com/c/18010>). He started his poem with these expressions to denote his pessimistic look of the world. His call invited future generations to re-define their identity and role in life and to question this age which prevented any voice of change or revolt. The reader of Brecht's poetry could precisely see his character as fighter and revolutionary who put his center at the proletariat class and explained his position as a socialist and an adaptor of the Marxist theory. He, thus, reflected his refusal to his present life which as he declared in exclamation "For it is a kind of silence about injustice!".

It is true: I earn my living

But, believe me, it is only an accident.

Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.

By chance I was spared. (If my luck leaves me I am lost.)

They tell me: eat and drink.

Be glad you have it! But how can I eat and drink When my food is snatched from the hungry

And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?

And yet I eat and drink. I would gladly be wise.

The old books tell us what wisdom is:

Avoid the strife of the world Live out your little time

Fearing no one Using no violence

Returning good for evil -- Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness Passes for wisdom.

I can do none of this: indeed I live in the dark ages!

(The Worldly Poetry Archive, 51)

The lines above penetrated Brecht's essential philosophy of humanity. They sent a message of pure humanistic feelings to all people all over the world. The details manifested his extreme inner call for justice, human rights and equality. Brecht used the very simple activities of everyday life to refer to his misery. He believed that eating

and drinking were some other people's rights and he found it too difficult to drink while others were thirsty. In other words, Brecht concentrated on the idea of social deprivation and poverty in the light of obvious discrimination and lack of freedom in the society at his time. The lines above, moreover, told what was mentioned in the old books of wisdom like, living in peace and using no violence in addition to preferring good on evil and preventing desire fulfillment. (The Worldly Poetry Archive, 51)

These concepts of wisdom were, unfortunately, no longer presented at Brecht's time. That is why he declared that he could not do any of the wise things to keep his way in balance. He felt that his role as a poet or playwright could do nothing to stop people's suffering.

I came to the cities in a time of disorder  
When hunger ruled.

I came among men in a time of uprising  
And I revolted with them.

So the time passed away  
Which on earth was given me.

I ate my food between massacres.  
The shadow of murder lay upon my sleep.  
And when I loved, I loved with indifference.

I looked upon nature with impatience.  
So the time passed away

Which on earth was given me.

In my time streets led to the quicksand.  
Speech betrayed me to the slaughterer.  
There was little I could do. But without me  
The rulers would have been more secure.

This was my hope.

So the time passed away  
Which on earth was given me.

(The Worldly Poetry Archive, 52)

Then, Brecht shifted to the second part of the poem where his misery took another shape. This time he narrated his suffering as a poet who came in a very hard time and in the cities of chaos and disorder. The countries that Brecht visited and the conflicts affected him negatively. "The shadow of murder lay upon my sleep" this is a clear manifestation of discomfort and restless nights that he spent while revolting and voicing against the powerful upper class society and the political forces. The "eliteskills" website states that "The repetition of the line "So the time passed away" gives an emphatic dimension of dissatisfaction about Brecht's age and the inner refusal of the condition that the poet or the artist lived at that time. (<https://eliteskills.com/c/18010>. Analysis. Explanation and Interpretation. "To Posterity" by Bertolt Brecht). However, Brecht invited future generations to be conscious about their goals in life and their rights. "There was little I could do" this was also another indication for Brecht's useless attempts of doing something productive. His intention was to enable the modern reader to imagine the situation of disappointment that existed at his time. He mentioned how his revolts were of no significance because they failed to help him overcome his struggles "I came among men in a time of uprising/ And I revolted with them".

You, who shall emerge from the flood

In which we are sinking,

Think -- When you speak of our weaknesses,

Also of the dark time

That brought them forth.

For we went, changing our country more often than our shoes.

In the class war, despairing

When there was only injustice and no resistance.

For we knew only too well: Even the hatred of squalor

Makes the brow grow stern.

Even anger against injustice

Makes the voice grow harsh.

Alas, we Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness  
Could not ourselves be kind.  
But you, when at last it comes to pass  
That man can help his fellow man, Do no judge us  
Too harshly.

(The world Poetry Archive. 2012, 53)

The third part of the poem involved a more influential address to future generations to “emerge from the flood /In which we are sinking”. This invitation, eventually, leads future generations of readers or audience to be more conscious and to consider the failure that Brecht referred to as “flood”. This means that the poet suffered great injustice and dark ages. He wanted the future generations of revolutionaries to be more strong and to take a different way of expressing anger. “Even anger against injustice /Makes the voice grow harsh” the line suggested that anger should be shown in a stronger but more ordered way to give reasonable justification for its adopters. “Alas, we who wished to lay the foundations of kindness/ Could not ourselves be kind” Brecht raised the sense of regret and grief when he confessed his hopelessness to have understanding from the harsh world of injustice. He reminded himself of this fact especially when this should be part of being as a socialist. (Reisman,2003) At the final two lines, Brecht advised future generations of readers and audience to be more amiable and considerate. “Do not judge us too harshly” this line, compassionately, revealed a mixed feelings of Brecht’s inner psyche. Firstly, it represented an advice of a professional revolutionary poet, playwright and socialist to regard and respect the pioneers who could not achieve their dreams. Secondly, Brecht emphasized the importance of being kind and to feel other’s suffering. Finally, the poet was after sending a universal message of considering all times, the past, the present and future in order to be conscious and active in contemporary society.

### Conclusion

To Posterity is a universal poem which speaks to future generations to consider all times and to learn from the experience of the old ages. Brecht wants to awake the conscious status inside people for the sake of knowledge and communication. He concentrates on the idea of connectedness between all generations and reminds his audience that all problems and pains are relevant to the problems of the present world. Moreover, Brecht’s poem retells future generations of readers to be responsible for their rights and roles in life as wells as their voice. His poem is majorly an invitation to those conscious readers to rise their revolts and attention towards whatever circumstances they may encounter in their society. Brecht, thus, is a poet who describes what he sees in future times like dissatisfaction, anger and disappointment. The poem reveals the intellectual mentality of its poet and sheds the light on the other side of Bertolt Brecht as a poet whose main enemy is ignorance and injustice.

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