

— 報 文 —

An Analysis of “A Tale of Two Liars” by Isaac Bashevis Singer

Sawako TANIYAMA

Isaac Bashevis Singer sees character development as modern literature’s most important element. In the conversation with Richard Burgin in *Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1978), Singer says:

... The Fiction writers who don’t discuss character and only discuss social problems take away from literature its very essence. They stop being entertaining. We always love to discuss and reveal character because human character is to us the greatest puzzle. No matter how much you know a human being you don’t know him enough. Discussing character constitutes a supreme form of entertainment. (47)

It is this emphasis on character that puts a psychological (and, therefore, modern) twist on a story like the one discussed in this paper, which, like many of Singer’s stories, has a narrative style that sounds folkloric.

In “A Tale of Two Liars” (1958) Singer delves into the psyches of Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov whose minds and destinies are played with by Satan, the Arch-Devil, who also happens to be the story’s narrator. Both of these characters are incorrigible liars and they accept the Devil-narrator’s irrational ideas presented to them at certain crucial moments. They eventually become criminals who are sentenced to death. Their abilities to create believable lies, by which they have managed to gain advantage over people, are shown ultimately to be weaknesses. As morally weak people, they are deceivers who are ultimately deceived. They are enticed to listen to Satan’s seemingly reasonable voice, leading them to self-destruction.

Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov in “A Tale of Two Liars” are both liars. At the beginning of the story the narrator Sammael, the Devil, ironically introduces the effects of lying: “A lie can only thrive on truth; lies, heaped one upon another, lack substance” (36). The Devil succeeds in manipulating the two liars to ruin themselves because he knows that they respect deception, not the truth.

Glicka Genendel comes to Janov to find a man to marry because she believes what a soothsayer prophesied. According to the soothsayer she will find her mate in Janov. She uses excuses and lies in order to find her future husband. She pretends to be a widow of the Zosmir rabbi. She makes people believe that she is the widow of the rabbi by using quotations from the Talmud in her communication with them. To avoid the levirate marriage ceremony she uses an excuse that her husband was an only son. She knows how to attract people, especially men, with her charming and coquettish ways. Soon she becomes engaged to Reb Yomtov who has come to Janov from Palestine to ask for donations.

We will learn through two incidents that Glicka Genendel is untrustworthy and that she fights back vehemently when the truth about her threatens to be revealed. While she is engaged to Reb Yomtov, she is accused of being engaged to another man, Reb Kathriel Abba, and having received thirty gulden as a trousseau. Reb Kathriel Abba stands by the truth and tries to prove his truthfulness. Yet, she does not back off and demands Reb Kathriel Abba to pay her thirty gulden for slandering her. Fortunately for her and unfortunately for him, the judge fears the oath-taking might be a bad omen and orders Reb Kathriel Abba to pay restitution for slander to settle the case. Another incident happens right after this. A beggar from Zosmir brings to light that the rabbi and his wife are alive in Zosmir. Glicka Genendel explains calmly that she meant “Kosmir.”

Although Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov can hide their identities as liars from the public, they can not hide from one another. They find out that their engagement gifts to each other are not genuine. Glicka Genendel discovers that the pearl necklace from Reb Yomtov is paste and announces that the wedding is off. To this accusation Reb Yomtov lies by saying that it is the jeweler’s fault and that he will exchange the fake for the genuine article after the wedding ceremony. He also points out, in defending himself, that Glicka Genendel’s gift to him, a “sapphire-studded cover for the Sabbath loaf” (38), is made up of only cheap beads (39). Through these acts of deception they find that they are truly meant to be for each other.

After the wedding, however, Reb Yomtov feels truly cheated because he discovers that his wife is not a young woman but quite old. He plans to get rid of his wife for that reason. He carries out his plans to get a divorce by tricking her. He suggests to his wife that they should move out Janov to live in Jerusalem. For that he needs to visit some towns in Poland to make collections without her. He tells her he will come back by mid-summer, stopping off at Lemberg, Brod and some other towns. She accepts what he says

to her and promises him that while he is gone, she will wait for his return and visit her relatives' graves to say farewell. With his wife's consent, he leaves for Poland. But he goes to the town of Piask instead of Lemberg. There he has the assistant rabbi and the scribe write out "a Bill of Divorcement for Glicka Genendel" (41) to be sent to Janov. He thinks that his divorce from Glicka Genendele is taken care of and starts for Lublin to make collections at Marshall Synagogue.

According to Reb Yomtov's plot this is supposed to be the end of his marriage life with Glicka Genendele. But they are to meet again in Lublin soon after they are parted at Janov. They meet as strangers under disguised identities. After Reb Yomtov has preached at Marshall Synagogue, he is invited by a young man to stay with his family. It is in this young man's house that he is introduced to Glicka Genendele as his mother-in-law. He is not only astounded to find her in this house instead of being in Kalish, but also astonished to learn that she has a daughter. He has already told the young man that his name is Reb Solomon Simeon, lying out of habit, and that his wife died three years ago. When both of them realize that they have lied to each other, Reb Yomtov asks her not to expose the truth to the young man's family. He tells her that not revealing the fact that he is her husband will be to her own advantage. He persuades her that she would look bad if she were to "remain a deserted wife" (44). Therefore they continue with their false identities when the young man introduces them to each other.

"We have a most distinguished guest in the house," he said. "This is Reb Solomon Simeon of Lithuania. He has just returned from a visit to the Chazars, who, as you know, live very close to the Lost Ten Tribes." And to Reb Yomtov he explained, "My mother-in-law is to depart shortly for the Holy Land. She is married to a Reb Yomtov, a delegate from Jerusalem and a descendant of the house of David. Possibly you've heard of him?"

"I most certainly have," Reb Yomtov said. (44)

Glicka Genendele is ready to take revenge against her husband. To start with, she steals his money from his coat pocket. Then she hides his overcoat, cap and shoes so that he will not escape during the night. Although Reb Yomtov is half naked he is talked into escaping the young man's house by the narrator, the Devil.

"Why hang around here like a trussed calf awaiting the slaughterer?" I said.

“Open the window and run.”

“Just how am I to manage that,” he asked, “with no clothes or shoes?”

“It’s warm enough outside,” I told him. “You’re not going to get sick. Just find your way to Piask, and once there, you’ll make out all right. Anything is better than remaining with this termagant.” (45)

He jumps out of the window and sprains his ankle. As much as he wants to escape on the Piask road, he is to be caught on the balcony trying to set his dislocated ankle.

Glicka Genendele’s disaster begins when she obeys the Devil’s evil advice. He talks her into committing a crime when she learns of Reb Yomtov’s disappearance from the guestroom. Without thinking of the aftermath, she follows him. The Devil threatens her by saying, “The fact is it’s you who’ve done the stealing, and if he’s caught, he’ll tell about the money you took from him. You’re the one who’ll suffer” (46). He talks to her so that she will come to feel that she is guiltier for stealing Reb Yomtov’s money than he is for escaping from her. When she hears this, she cannot have confidence in her judgement of the situation and asks for further advice from the Devil. He only suggests to her some irrational thoughts on what to do next: “Don’t you see? Steal your daughter’s jewel box; then begin to yell. If he’s apprehended he’ll be the one who’s thrown in jail. That way your revenge is certain” (46). She does not consider whether his plots are ethically correct or will, in the end, ruin her life. She takes his advice and steals her daughter’s jewels so that she can connect her husband’s disappearance to the theft of her daughter’s jewels. Reb Yomtov is blamed for the theft and is put into jail as she planned.

Now that Reb Yomtov is in jail the Devil convinces Glicka Genendele to work for her divorce. The Devil makes her feel that it is disgraceful to have a husband who is in jail for theft. When she is helpless, she always asks the Devil for advice:

“What should I do?” she asked

“He sent you a divorce by a messenger to Janov. Go to Janov and get the papers. First of all, you’ll be rid of him. Secondly, if you’re not here, you can’t be called as a witness. And if you’re not at the trial, who will believe his story? When the excitement is over, you can return.” (47)

She follows his advice to go back to Janov to get her divorce papers. Before that, she tries

to return her daughter's jewelry but again Satan interferes and says: "What's the rush?" I asked. "If the jewels are found, they'll let the liar out, and who's that going to harm, but you? Let him stay behind bars. He'll learn that one doesn't trifle with such a fine, up-standing woman as you" (47). The Devil manipulates her so that she will believe his plans are favorable for her and cruel to Reb Yomtov.

So far, Glicka Genendel's revenge against her husband has been successful. In his trial the judge finds him guilty of the theft. No one believes him when he tries to prove that he is no thief. First he has to establish his identity as Reb Yomtov whose wife is Glicka Genendel. He fails in this because his wife is off to Janov to obtain the divorce papers. What is worse, her daughter shows up as a witness in front of the judge and says, "Everyone knows you are Reb Solomon Simeon" (48). The judge decrees that he should get "twenty-five lashes, and then hanged" (48).

Reb Yomtov, in his desperation to save his life, listens to Satan's voice without questioning Satan's reasoning. He gives up his Jewish faith after Satan talks to him in this way:

"Are you stupid enough to still believe in the power of prayer? Remember how the Jews prayed during the Black Plague, and, nevertheless, how they perished like flies? And what about the thousands the Cossacks butchered? There was enough prayer, wasn't there, when Chmielnicki came? How were those prayers answered? Children were buried alive, chaste wives raped-and later their bellies ripped open and cats sewed inside. Why should God bother with your prayers? He neither hears nor sees. There is no judge. There is no judgment." (49)

Reb Yomtov is swayed and stops praying to God. He comes to believe that the Devil's suggestion of converting to Christianity is wisdom that will rescue him from being executed. Satan tells him:

"Become a convert," I told him. "Let the priests sprinkle a little holy water over you. That way you can stay alive and have revenge in the bargain. You do want to revenge yourself, don't you, on your enemies? And who are your enemies but the Jews, the Jews who are quite willing to see you hang because of the lies that a Jewess has invented to destroy you?" (49)

He believes conversion to Christianity will keep him from being executed and free him from jail. He does not care that abandoning his Jewish faith will only leads him to the total negation of his Jewish identity. He converts to Christianity but he learns from the priest, "When one is sentenced to death," ... "there's no way out. But don't be sorrowful; you will go with a clean soul into the next world" (50). Reb Yomtov's many lies end with deep grief and the execution of his death sentence.

Glicka Genendel also falls into a trap prepared by Satan. Not knowing that she is already a widow, she tries to get the Bill of Divorcement from the assistant rabbi in Piask. From the rabbi she learns a man called Leib the Coachman in Piask has the papers. She makes efforts to get it from him but Leib tells her he will give it to her only if she commits adultery with him. This is when she is played with by Satan's power and is led to her destruction.

He bolted the door and put out the candle. She wanted to scream but I muffled her voice. Oddly enough she was only half afraid; the other half of her was alive with lust. Leib pulled her down onto the straw; he stank of leather and horses. She lay there in silence and astonishment.

That such a thing should happened to me! she marveled to herself.

She did not know that it was I, the Arch-Fiend, who stoked her blood and muddled her reason. Outside destruction already lay in wait for her.
(54)

As soon as she has given into the inexplicable power of Satan, there comes the Lenchic squire with a foray into the very place where the two adulterers are fornicating.

Glicka Genendel has no idea that the Piask thieves came to Lenchic and stole many things the night before, nor has she any idea that Leib drove for the robbers. Even though she has nothing to do with the sacking, she is investigated and questioned about the jewelry and Reb Yomtov's gold coins from Turkey she has kept in her bosom. Her lies do not work at her trial. She says that the jewelry is hers but it does not fit her. Her statement of the ducats originally belonging to her husband who is in a prison in Lublin also works against her. The conclusion of the trial is that she is guilty of stealing.

She tries to find a way out of the death sentence by confessing that she stole her daughter's jewelry in Lublin. Yet again, Satan leads her to death knowing her vanity:

But I said to her, “First of all, no one’s going to believe you. And suppose they do, look what happens. They fetch your daughter here and she finds out that not only have you stolen her jewelry, but also that you’ve fornicated with that scab-head like a common harlot. The disgrace will kill her, and so you’ll have your punishment anyway. Incidentally, Reb Yomtov will be released, and believe me, he’ll find your situation amusing. No, better keep quiet. Rather perish than yield to your enemies.” (55)

Satan sways her away from telling the truth about the jewelry by using her pride of exposing herself as a thief to her daughter, as well as giving a chance to Yomtov to enjoy her situation. Satan does not tell her that he has been executed. Satan succeeds in manipulating her into her destruction for he knows “it is well known that my people are vain and will lay down their lives for their vanity. For what is the pursuit of pleasure but pride and delusion” (55).

As the end of Glicka Genendel draws near she listens to her voice more than Satan’s. He tries to tempt her to convert to Christianity just like he did Reb Yomtov but she refuses. She also confesses her first and the last true story to the rabbi before her execution. The rabbi promises her that she will be sent to Paradise. Once she is sentenced to death however, she has to amend every sin, like Reb Yomtov, in Purgatory (Gehenna) before going into Heaven. Satan shows how they are doing in purgatory: the two sinners are being punished by being hung by their tongues and with braziers under their feet.

In this story Satan wins over the two liars and sends them to Gehenna to atone for every sin. He also tells the liars what lies do to liars.

... “Now, tell me whom did you fool with those lies? Well, you have only yourself to thank. Your lips spun the thread, and your mouths wove the net. But be of good cheer. Your stay in Gehenna lasts only for twelve months, including Sabbaths and holidays.” (57)

In “A Tale of Two Liars,” in which the arch earthly deceivers Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov become victims of the ultimate deceiver, Satan, is a story that explores the nature of good and evil. As is typical of Singer’s fiction, evil is presented as a powerful and seemingly unstoppable force that ultimately self-destructs after causing considerable damage. The question of good and evil in this story is two-fold. The first question con-

cerns the nature of destiny and free will. The other concerns the nature of Satan as a moral necessity.

Most importantly, Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov have chosen to be liars. They have defined their lives through the art of lying. The element of moral choice is what gives them psychological dimension and keeps them from being “flat” characters like those in traditional in folklore. That they have become liars by choice seems to show that they have free will, not that they are in any way fated to be that way. Yet, Singer himself believed in the power of destiny over people. In his last interview, in 1987, with journalist Norman Green for *Salon* magazine (now on-line) Singer said:

I would say that I believe in free will and I believe at the same time in destiny. It seems to be a contradiction but it is not a contradiction. In other words, all our passions and everything were not created just by us. They have been created by higher powers. At the same time we are given some choices to make; we have to make these choices between good and evil. If not, we could not exist (Green: 1998, on-line).

Whatever Singer might have thought about the nature of destiny, however, it is plain that the two characters do have the power to refuse to listen to Satan, as Glicka Genendel does when she refuses to follow Satan’s advise to convert to Christianity (like Reb Yomtov). We also see that when she is lost she confesses her evil ways to the rabbi. Thus, Singer suggests that however predisposed to lying these characters are, they do have the power to change their ways whenever they choose to. In short, they have the power to see what is good and evil and to choose good over evil.

In this regard, Satan has a dual role. He is both the tempter who persuades Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov to do evil and the punisher of evil deeds. He punishes these two characters on Earth by convincing them to tell lies that will ultimately lead to their self-destruction. In so doing he sends them to Purgatory (Gehena) after their deaths to suffer for their sins.

As the tempter, Satan may be the personification of destiny and, thus, can be seen as Singer’s attempt to reconcile his views on fate and free will. In this way he seems to say that one can dialogue with destiny and to turn away to another destiny. That these characters are professional liars, however, in effect seals their destinies when tempted by Satan.

As the punisher of sins, Satan, ironically, becomes in effect the servant of God. In this way, the supreme evil of the universe acts toward the greater good. By duping Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov to commit lies that will destroy them, he, in effect, rids the world of a small portion of evil. Only good can come from the deaths of Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov. The world is not only rid of their presence but their deaths through self-delusion serve as a warning to those who believe that being perpetual liars will always be their advantage. In this way, Singer seems to answer the age-old theological question of why God allows Satan to exist if He is the more powerful of the two. Satan in this story is shown to be a moral necessity who hastens the destruction of evil by making evil as terrible as it can possibly be so that it naturally self-destructs. Singer, however, does not answer the most important question concerning evil, namely why God allows it to exist in the first place.

In “A Tale of Two Liars,” as in other stories by Singer, we see a traditional Judao-Christian universe where good is the positive force and evil is the negative force. However powerful and unstoppable evil seems to be, it is ultimately doomed because it represents chaos, that is the absence of good. Evil, then, is seen like a vacuum, that can only be filled by good.

Tied to this is Singer’s belief in redemption. Importantly, Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov are not sent to Hell, bad as they are, but to Purgatory where they must suffer not in perpetuity but only until they have atoned for their sins on Earth. In so doing, the sins of Glicka Genendel and Reb Yomtov are put into proper perspective. Their sins are in the end petty. That they are forced to suffer the ultimate punishment for comparatively minor evils (theft and adultery) but are allowed ultimate redemption in the after-life suggests that there is a disproportionate cruelty to the system of justice in the Christian nation that sentenced them to death.

That Satan converts Reb Yomtov to Christianity and attempts to do the same to Glicka Genendel is a joke aimed at evangelical Christianity. Singer is not necessarily saying that Christianity is intrinsically evil. He is, however, saying that instantaneous conversion without tests of true faith is evil. In so doing, he is indirectly justifying the Jewish approach to conversion, which is the exact opposite to that of evangelical Christianity. The potential convert approaches the religious leader and must convince him or her and, later, other religious leaders of his or her sincerity in becoming a Jew. What Singer is saying is that conversion without sincerity does the Devil’s work. Hence, any religious leader or organization that pushes mindless conversion is not creating good but, likely,

only aiding evil (if only self-deception).

Ironically Satan as both narrator and principle actor in “A Tale of Two Liars” emerges as the story’s most sympathetic character. The reason for this is, ironically, because he is the only one who consistently tells the truth.

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