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George Bernard Shaw as a Reformer

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ABSTRACT

Shaw's plays reveal him as a dramatist who was sincere in his effort to reform the maladjusted social order of the twentieth century. His message throughout his work was consistent. Shaw showed that in a system of Capitalistic society, a just distribution of wealth was impossible

Keywords:- Religion, Society, Western, idealist,

Introduction

Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in 1856. His father's family had been small landowners in Ireland since the late seventeenth century and they had intermarried with the Irish. But previously they had lived in Hampshire, and they claimed an ancient Scottish origin. His father, after employment at the law courts, became in middle life, a grain merchant. His mother was the daughter of an Irish country gentleman. She was twenty years younger than her husband and she lived largely for her art, that of an opera singer. Shaw's education was ordinary enough, but as a boy he loved to frequent the Irish National Gallery to study the pictures there and by the time he was fifteen he had a sound knowledge of some of the great composers too. To great writers such as Goethe and Moliere he introduced himself by following up the sources of the operas. He was, indeed, left to a great extent to find his own way, and he spoke of his early years as, "rich only in dreams". Religiously the family background was Protestant, but Shaw rejected the Christian faith.

At fifteen, his mother having gone to London with her two daughters, who were both older than their only brother, Shaw was left with his father and he worked as a clerk in a Dublin estate agent's office, where his efficiency soon got him promotion from rent collecting to the position of a cashier. Four years of this employment was enough for him. Determined to be a writer, he resigned from this post and in 1876 he joined his mother in London. He tried journalism, but in ten years, up to the age of twenty-nine, it is said that he earned only \$6 by that means. His inner confidence, however, sustained him through those hard years till his writing began to bring him in a small income. Between 1879 and 1882 he wrote four novels. The first, *Immaturity*, dealt with the problem of marriage. It remained unpublished until his collected works appeared. The second, *The Irrational Knot*, written in 1880, first appeared serially in 1885-87; it was published as a book in 1905. The third, *Love Among the Artists*, was also serialised in 1887-88. It was the fourth novel in the order of their writing, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, was his first published book, for it appeared soon after its serialization in 1885-86, and it is decidedly the best of his novels. None suggests that Shaw would have won the success as a novelist that he achieved as a dramatist, but these novels anticipate many of the themes and ideas he was to express later in his plays. They contain, too, touches of disguised autobiography.

The important events for Shaw in these years of struggle were his meetings with people and his discovery of ideas. In 1882, he went to a meeting addressed by Henry George, of whose speech he later declared that it, "changed the whole current of my life". He then began to study Socialism and Economics, and he read Marx's *DAS Capital* in the British Museum. He became acquainted with leading Socialists. Henry Salt, an apostle of Shelley's ideas, and Edward Carpenter, another progressive idealist, were among them. It was the newly founded Socialist journal *Today* which accepted *Cashel Byron's Profession*, and it was through that acceptance that Shaw met William Mors. He already knew Sidney Webb, to whose very clearly conceived socialist and economic ideas he owed much, and of whom he has said; "Sidney Webb was of more use to me than any other man I have ever met." His membership of the Fabian Society, to whose Executive he was elected in 1885, further extended his contacts and activities. He read papers to the Fabian Society, his outstanding aptitude for debate showed itself, and he became a public speaker on platforms and at street corners, where his tall figure, red beard, clear and self-assured mind and abounding detailed knowledge, mastered his audiences.

By 1890, his knowledge of contemporary economic matters was considerable, and it was controlled by a comprehensive philosophic outlook. Like his friends he envisaged a better world to be brought into being by the co-operative efforts of realistic thinkers activated by a selfless love of

humanity. This lofty moral idealism had, at first, no religious basis, but it was not long before he found a belief which lent it a strong support. In the writings of Samuel Butler he saw an escape from the Darwinian theory of evolution which made chance, not purpose, the determining factor, and when, in 1891, he came to know the thought of Nietzsche, he realized that he had already been thinking in terms of a purposive Life Force behind the working of the universe. This Life Force he moreover, perceived, explained the place of women in the world, for it accounted for woman's ruthless pursuit of man. Men like himself must, therefore, by intelligent co-operation with the Life Force, use all their endeavors to hasten the evolution of mankind to higher moral, intellectual, economic and social standards. To this stage in his thinking he had practically come, when he turned to the dramas as his medium of expression.

SHAW AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

PYGMALION

By nature Shaw was a tireless crusader for social justice and righteousness; he was a propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people. He was a zealous missionary and social reform was his mission. He tried to liberate his age from, "Humbug, mental sloth, social apathy, superstition, sentimentalism, collective selfishness, and all the static ideas which have not been consciously subjected to the tests of real life and honest thought." In *Pygmalion* Shaw has focused on the problem of education. To educate is to give new life to those who receive the education. This problem is presented through the medium of a lesser theme which is national one confined to the English. Another Problem presented in the play is the predicament of Alfie Doolittle. The dramatist highlighted particularly his problem.

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a king of Cyprus who fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite. But Ovid, the Roman poet (43 B.C.-A.D.18), invents a more sophisticated version in his *Metamorphoses*. According to him, Pygmalion was a sculptor, a worker in marble, bronze, and ivory. He was exclusively devoted to his art. He had an image of beauty in his mind and no woman could come up to it in the world. He, therefore, worked over his statue from morning to evening in search of a loveliness beyond his powers of expression. In fact, the statues of Pygmalion were always far more beautiful than real human beings, and each statue was more nearly perfect than the last. Still in each new statue, Pygmalion felt something lacking. While his admirers stood entranced before his statues, he never cared to look on them. But was whole heartedly absorbed in his next attempt.

After long labour and careful patient working, the statue was actually finished. The legend has it that half the night Pygmalion gazed at the beautiful image: then with a hopeless sigh he went to bed, haunted as ever by his dreams. Then came the day of the festival of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. Pygmalion had always felt a special devotion for this goddess because he, by his very nature, was a seeker after beauty. He had, therefore, never failed to give Aphrodite the honour that was due to her. To put it more truly, he had lived all his life in the worship of the goddess. As custom had it, the devotees of Aphrodite offered her many splendid gifts. This time when Pygmalion approached the altar, he prayed earnestly and saw the fire that burned there leap suddenly in flame. This excitement stirred him and he came back to his statue though without knowing as to what he would encounter on his return. His Galatea was as he had left her. He looked at her longingly once more, and as on several former occasions, he seemed to see her move. On a sudden impulse, he approached Galatea and held her in his arms

SHAW AS A RELIGIOUS REFORMER

Shaw has expressed his views on God and religion in a number of plays, but the most extended exposition of Shaw's views on the subject is provided by *Saint Joan*. Shaw was the first artist to view the story of Joan of Arc properly in the great frame of conflicting forces from which proceeded as its motive power. The people of genius have extraordinary gifts and resources and capacities for private judgment. This brings them into disruptive clash with the organized judgments that constitute the warp and woof of the social structure. They are crucified, poisoned, burned, imprisoned, exiled, or otherwise neutralized by those to whom they seek to minister. Shaw discerned at once that the story of Joan is without meaning, without form, and void, if approached on the traditional basis that her inquisitors were base villains. Accordingly, he presents Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, and the Inquisitor, and all those with them in the processes of the trial as, in Joan's words in the Epilogue, As honest a lot of poor fools as ever burned their betters.

The trial, he tells us in the Preface, not only was fair within the standards of its time and the precedents upon which it rested, but fairer than many tribunals practising in the modern world. Shaw in the play shows us the sense of desperate necessity under which the inquisition weighed the case of Joan of Arc: it felt that the Church was threatened by the rise of Protestantism represented by Joan. The vital question was whether any individual could set himself up in defiance of the authority of the Church Militant as the direct recipient of instructions from God. Joan, though she did not know it and would have been homfied at the idea, represented rampant Protestantism. "The perspective in which her case is viewed is vast enough to include the cases of the not-long-dead Hus and Wycliff." Joan and the Church, then, stand as irresistible forces and immovable objects. Cauchon presents the case against Joan with brilliance and passion. He likens her not only to Hus and Wycliff, but to Mahomet. "What will the world be like

when the Church's accumulated wisdom and knowledge and experience, its councils of learned venerable, pious men, are thrust into the kennel by every ignorant labourer or dairy-maid whom the devil can puff up with the monstrous self-conceit of being directly inspired from heaven?"

The Church is the established authority, the representative of God on earth, and the Middle Ages people believed in it as they believe in the Moon and the Sun or any other natural phenomenon. This significance of the Church is again and again brought out by the Bishop. But this is not the only point at which Joan comes into conflict with society. The Englishman, Warwick, represents the case for the feudal order. To him and to all the feudal barons, the important thing is her avowed role as messenger from God to the King of France. This implied divine right and authority of the King is a threat to the whole feudal structure and to the selfrule of the barons. If the people's thoughts and hearts were turned to the King, and their lords became only the King's servants in their eyes, the King could break everyone across his knee one by one. Nor is the Church uninvolved in this seemingly secular heresy. Cauchon explains: "To her the French speaking people are what the Holy Scriptures describe as a Nation. Call this side of her heresy Nationalism if you will: I can find you no better name for it. I can only tell you that it is essentially anti-Catholic and anti-Christian; for the Catholic Church knows only one realm, and that is the realm of Christ's kingdom. Divide that kingdom into nations, and you dethrone Christ; dethrone Christ and who will stand between our throats and sword."

"The world will perish in a welter of war." The plot of the play is divided into six brilliant scenes, some of them long 'talky scenes' but Shaw has succeeded in making them as interesting and absorbing as action itself. For example, Scene IV is a brilliant example of Shaw's remarkable power of making discussion and argument mentally exciting. Nothing happens in this scene, there is nothing in it, hut talk, A.C.Ward remarks "Yet when the play is performed on the stage the audience sits spell-bound in breathless silence throughout the long talk on religious and political ma-" Duffin agrees with Ward and writes, "And there is always the wonderful Scene IV, a marvellous piece of dramatic dialogue and a Shavian essay in the interpretation of hi-tory."~ The scene is the setting of the stage, the laying of the hse, so to say, for the explosion which will blow up poor Joan. While this scene presents dramatically the forces at work against the Maid, Scene V brings home to the audience the loneliness of the Maid. It shows her among her 'friends', who one and all tell her quite frankly that she would be friendless' in case she is captured by the English. Thus, with great skill, curiosity and suspense are excited, and the background is built up for the trial scene. The trial is a remarkable achievement, intellectually and emotionally. It shows Shaw's intellectual brilliance in stating both sides of the case with equal impartiality, force and clarity. Even long speeches like that of the Inquisitor have been made all-absorbing in their interest. One can actually see before his mind's eye, "the lone girl fencing with, stabbing at, baming, and defeating the crowd of some sixty learned men."

"The very voice that spoke at the historic trial echoes through the play, for the most Shavian remarks of Joan find a close parallel in historical records. It has been said that Shaw's plays are lacking in emotion, but the trial scene and its aftermath give a lie direct to all such criticism. The trial scene is satisfying both intellectually and emotionally. To quote Wards: "The trial scene is most romantic and emotional part of the play and it has done most to make 'Saint Joan' popular. Here a young girl, alone, is seen and hard fighting for her life against the mightiest power in the world." This wondafil combination of courage and defenceless wins admiration and touches the heart."

CONCLUSION

Alard~ce Nicholl regards "Shaw is the father of the theatre of ideas in England, and his plays are so many sermons on social follies and social vices." Shaw himself said that he wrote his plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to his point of view. He regarded current views of economics, religion, sexual relationships, etc., as entirely wrong, and so sought to change them by discussing them and turning them topsy-turvy in his plays. In the course of his long dramatic career, he has expressed himself practically on every subject between heaven and earth -literature, art, medicine, religion, politics, morality, marriage and family relations, racial prejudice, poverty and social standards. In other wotds the themes of Shaw are bewildering in their variety. However, unity and coherence is provided by his theory of Life Force. Shaw himself defines Life Force as "vitality with a directon". Like Schopenhauer's Will and Thomas Hardy's Immanent Will, it is the creative pricipal at the back of things, manifesting itself as ceaseless striving in all living things. Shaw's Life Force differs from Hardy's Immanent Will in one important respect. It is purposive; it is not merely "ceaseless striving", it is striving with purpose.

The purpose of the Life Force is to evolve into higher and higher forms of life. It does not aim at creating greater beauty, nor at greater physical prowess, but at higher forms of intelligence. "It cares as little for beauty as for morality". Artificial social codes have no meaning for it. Even individual happiness does not count. Everything that comes in the way of its creative function, its drive for betterment, its striving for higher form of consciousness, is swept aside. It has worked through a process of "trial and error", and has reached the stage of intelligence represented by Man. But it is only a stage in an apparently endless journey; soon Man himself will be superseded by the Superseded by an the Superman. Life will evolve in the course of centuries into "pure thought". Shaw's philosophy of Creative Evolution and Life Force found its first extended treatment in Man and Superman (1903). It was further developed in the five plays constituting the Back to Methuselah series. Shw's views 0x1 a variety of other subjects become explicable, if one keeps his theory of Life Force in mind. He considers poverty an evil, and ~orns capitalism because they defeat the purpose of the Life Force. Sen Gupta says, "His advocacy of socialism is really subsidiary to his championing of the causing of Creative Evolution."

He has never been a socialist for the sake of socialism. For him it (socialism) is only a means for doing away with the ponderous machinery of capitalism, which is trying to stifle the activities of the Life Force. Shaw is a socialist because he knows that unless all have equal incomes, equal freedom and leisure, the Life Force will not be able to move upward. Socialism is desirable for it makes easy the evolutionary action of the Life Force. Poverty must be abolished for it represents illness, weakness, disgrace, meanness, ugliness, corruption and degradation, all of which are serious obstacles in the way of the Life Force. Equality of income means equal opportunities for all; money is desirable for it means health, intelligence, beauty and honour. "In our society Ann has to choose between Tanner and Tavy, but if there had been perfect equality of incomes, Tanner's chauffeur, Straker, would have been in the running and would probably have beaten his rivals." Such equality of income and opportunity will lead to the birth of a race of Superman, not all at once, but in the long run. Shaw's socialism is an offshoot of his philosophy of Creative Evolution, and hence it has its own peculiarities. Like the other socialists, he does not go into the technical details of the matter. In his dramas, he only draws our attention to the basic problems, underpayment of the poor, idleness of the rich and the consequent waste of leisure and energy, without entering into any technicalities. If there is any underpayment, there will be inequality, overwork, dirt and degradation, and the Life Force will be handicapped. The asphyxia of poverty must be removed; for the Life force must breathe. It is also for this reason that unlike the other socialists, he is not in favour of sudden or violent changes in the existing social order.

Life can evolve only slowly during the course of ages, and hence any overthrow of the existing social order is meaningless and wasteful. Shaw favours only mild social change. He is in favour of the waiting policy of the Fabian Socialists: he believes in the illumination of the intellect rather than in the hasty breaches of the law. Poverty is the theme of *Major Barbara*. Major Barbara opens with Lady Britomart in the library of her house in London, England, as her son Stephen, whom she has summoned, enters. She has asked to see him, she reveals, because of her concern about his future financial well-being, as well as that of his sisters, Sarah and Barbara. The audience learns that her daughter Sarah is engaged to Charles Lornax, who will not be able to support her until he receives his inheritance. It is also revealed that her other daughter, Barbara, who has joined the Salvation Army, is engaged to Adolphus Cusins, a Greek scholar who also has an insufficient income and who, Lady Britomart believes, only pretends to be a Salvationist because he is in love with Barbara. Stephen as well should soon seek a wife and will need to provide for his own family. For this additional monetary support, Lady Britomart tells Stephen that she must turn to the children's father, Andrew Undershaft, a wealthy munitions manufacturer from whom she has been separated for many years. Lady Britomart also reveals that Stephen will not inherit his father's business because each heir to the Undershaft enterprise must be a foundling and must, when he dies, leave the business to another foundling. Stephen, horrified by his father's profession, does not wish to take his father's money and is upset when he discovers that Undershaft is expected at Lady Britomart's house almost immediately. Barbara, Sarah, Cusins, and Lornax, who have also been summoned, enter the library.

Barbara is enthusiastic about seeing her father because he has a soul to be saved. Undershaft is shown into the room and introduced to his children. He expresses an interest in the Salvation Army, saying that their motto, "Blood and Fire," could be his as well. While the others are clearly uncomfortable with Undershaft's profiting from war, he reveals that he is not at all ashamed. When Barbara invites him to her Salvation Army shelter, he agrees to come the next day provided she will come the day after to his munitions factories. Barbara, hoping to convert her father, agrees to this arrangement, while he says that he may in fact convert her. When Lady Britomart decides to ring for prayers, Undershaft says that he will only stay for a service conducted by Barbara, and Barbara agrees to conduct one. All leave for the service in the drawing room, except for Stephen who, still disgusted by his father, remains in the library. The second act opens the following day at Barbara's Salvation Army shelter where Snobby Price, an unemployed workman, and Rummy Mitchens, a poverty-stricken woman, are seated at a table, eating the Army's standard meal of bread and milk. Both admit to confessing sins they never committed in order to please the Salvationists, on whom they depend for assistance. Jenny Hill, a young Salvationist, enters with Peter Shirley, also unemployed. Bill Walker, a rough young man, enters and accuses Hill of taking his girlfriend, whom Barbara later reveals has been "saved," into the Army. In his anger, Walker pushes Hill, strikes Mitchens, then strikes Hill as well. Barbara enters and, by her frank manner, lack of anger, and persistent talk of God's love, arouses feelings of shame, compounded also by Hill's forgiveness, in Walker. Undershaft enters and observes as Barbara continues to work on Walker, who becomes more and more uncomfortable, finally leaving to seek his girlfriend at another shelter. Barbara exits, leaving Cusins to converse with Undershaft, who reveals that he considers money and gunpowder necessary to salvation, for without them, one cannot afford such niceties as honor, truth, and love.

Cusins reveals that he has indeed become a Salvationist for love of Barbara, and the two men discover that their love for Barbara is what they have in common. Undershaft says he will convert Barbara to preaching his gospel and, to reach that end, will buy the Army, an organization that he finds useful because it causes workers to be honest and happy, and thus less likely to form unions or become socialists. When Barbara returns, Undershaft offers her money, but she refuses, believing his money to be tainted because of his profession. At this point, Walker returns and offers Hill a pound because of his ill treatment of her. She refuses, suggesting the money be given to Mitchens, whom he also hurt, but he will only give it to Hill, as Mitchens met his violence with threats of her own. Hill suggests some of the money be given to the Army, but Barbara refuses; what she wants is Walker's soul, which she hopes to save. Mrs. Baines, the Army Commissioner, enters, saying she has wonderful news.

A Lord Saxmundham will give the Army five thousand pounds if five other men will each meet his donation. Undershaft reveals that this benefactor owns Bodger's Whiskey, a fact that does not dissuade Mrs. Baines, who asks Undershaft for five thousand as well. When Undershaft agrees, Barbara is incredulous that the Army will take his money or the money from Bodger's Whiskey; she believes that businesses such as her father's and the whiskey company are harmful to a humane, Christian society. Cusins suggests that Mrs. Baines, Undershaft, and himself march immediately to the

coming meeting, but Barbara refuses to attend. After the others leave, W&er, who has returned, taunts the defeated Barbara for saying the Army will not be bought. When Walker leaves, Barbara states that she will no longer work for the army and offers to take Shirley to tea. The act ends with the two of them leaving together

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