

George Bernard Shaw as a Dramatist

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw with his tall and erect figure, straight like a ramrod, and his grey beard, has almost become a legend. Shaw possessed a dominating personality which will be remembered even after his plays have been forgotten, and he will always be known as the most outstanding figure of his times. Shaw, "has been for modern British what Socrates was for ancient Greece", i.e., the Good Man of our time. Shaw is dead, but the legend which he himself helped to create continues.

He was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary, and the most complex personalities of modern time. He is a Socialist, a Fabian, a Pacifist, a vegetarian, and many others things. He is also anti-capitalist, anti-cannibalist, anti-smoke, anti-drink, anti-royalist, anti-democrat, anti-inoculationist. The present article aims at making an in depth study of George Bernard Shaw as a dramatist.

Bernard Shaw is not a simple personality as critics often take him to be. Critics who emphasize any particular aspect of Shaw can quote evidence from Shaw himself to prove their theses while one can successfully quote Shaw's own statements to prove the opposite. This does not mean that he is a bundle of contradictions, but is an instance showing his versatility. Who the real Bernard Shaw is, still remains as unsolved puzzle.

Shaw, both as a critic and a dramatist, is convinced that the actor's job is to execute the author's conception of a particular character. In a letter to Henry Arthur Jones, he explains the actor's role in a play: "Take the ordinary actor at a rehearsal. How often does he divine without a hint from you which way your lines are to be spoken in scenes which are neither conventional nor otherwise obvious? How many actors playing Shakespeare can catch intentions in the speeches which are plain enough to you? I scrupulously avoid any direction that could not be conveyed by the action of make-up of the actor, as otherwise the play would no longer be a play".

Shaw's plays are essentially intellectual plays. He claims that the plays have a specific purpose or exposing social evils: "My reputation has been gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals. In particular, I regard much current morality as to economic and sexual relations as disastrously wrong, and I regard certain doctrines of the Christian religion as understood in England today with abhorrence. I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinions in these matters".

Shaw talks much about the propagandistic nature of his plays. His plays do not follow the pattern of well made plays to which the audience is accustomed. His plays do not have emotional and romantic scenes. Hence, perhaps, Shaw's plays were condemned as no plays at all; his characters were dismissed as mere mouthpieces of Shaw. The domination of the stage by the star-actors like Sir Henry Irving and Ellen Terry and Bradley an attitude towards character criticism must have been the other

possible reasons for Shaw being dismissed as a mere propagandist with no characterization to his credit.

The basic controversy whether Shaw is an artist or just a propagandist is not ill-founded. Though Shavian philosophy of the Life Force can be found consistently implicit in Shaw's major plays, Shaw is not consistent in this attitude towards the purpose of art. Shaw's period of authorship is also too long to expect Shaw to be consistent. Arthur Nethercot analyses the various changes of trend in Shaw's attitude towards art and philosophy:

Strange as it may seem Shaw started out, as he admits in his *Sixteen Self Sketches*, as an art-for-art's-sake man. But when he found he was getting nowhere under the domination of this creed, he became an artist-with-a-purpose, maintaining that "great art is never produced for its own sake". In 1899, after finishing *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, he had written to Ellen Terry about his intention to abandon practical plays and turn to "Shaw-philosophy." And by 1903, in the dedication to *Man and Superman*, he had found his new title. By this time, he said, "the artist-philosophers are the only sort of artists I take quite seriously." For many years he regularly referred to himself as one of these artist-philosophers

Although Shaw continued to list himself among the artist-philosophers, he found new changes to ring on the classification as time went on. In the preface to *Back to Methuselah*, which he wrote in 1921, he calls himself an 'artist-prophet.' And, as Nethercot adds: "... by his postscript to the same work in 1944 he had added a new element or emphasis: he was now also a "born artist-biologist struggling to take biology a step forward on its way to positive science from its present metaphysical stage." And so he remained in his *Self Sketches*: the artist-philosopher-prophet-biologist a true protean, dumbfounding man".

Nethercot has analysed the various changes of attitude in Shaw towards the purpose of his art and he has clearly brought out the fact that throughout his career, Shaw is primarily an artist. Shaw himself makes this aspect clear. Conceding that anybody could have done the propaganda, Shaw told Mrs. Pearson: "No one could have written my plays. I had to write them: they were a part of me."

The artist in Shaw can be clearly seen in his letters. Hardly anything else reveals inner workings of Shaw's personality better than these intimate exchanges with actors, actresses and people of the theatre. When he writes to actors and actresses, he does not talk about his philosophy, or about his socio-political and economic ideas. He talks to them about the plays only in terms of characters as individuals, not in terms of abstract concepts. In a letter to Louis Calvert, Shaw described Undershaft neither as a Life Force figure nor as a personification of wealth: "Broadbent and Keegan rolled into one, with Mephistopheles through in ... Undershaft is diabolically subtle, gentle, self-possessed, powerful, stupendous, as well as amusing and interesting. There are the makings of ten Hamlets and six Othellos in his mere leavings."²¹ One should not ignore the pluralistic qualities in Shaw. The use of phrases like "diabolically subtle" is highly suggestive of the Shavian ideas. But, all the same, it is the artist who predominates and the characters are individualistic to the extent the play needs them to be.

A note on the Shavian concept of the Life Force will not be out of place here. Carl Henry Mills explains the concept crisply: “For Shaw, man is the instrument created by life for the advancement of life’s instinctive purposes. Man’s very reason for being, then, will be found in the fulfillment of life’s intentions regarding him, not in the vain pursuit of his own purposes ... Shaw’s theory of creative evolution represents femininity as being more primitive and fundamental than masculinity and calls civilization an attempt on man’s part to make himself something more than the mere instrument of woman’s purpose. Since woman has more direct inheritance from the life force, she usually succeeds in turning man back to his specific biological function of reproduction and nourishment. Man may have his dreams and his ideals, but woman will very often divert him from them. The exception in Shaw’s theory to this usually male behaviour is the philosophic man of genius, who holds within himself a special potential of life, and is expressly created for the purpose of carrying life to a higher level by giving mankind a new insight into truth, a new conception of political association and moral obligation, a new vision of beauty, or a new refinement of personal relationships”.

Considering the Shavian philosophical concept of man-woman relationship as the ultimate base for Shavian plays, the plays can be classified into three groups. Plays written before *Man and Superman* can be termed as early plays. Among these plays, *Major Barbara*, and *Caesar and Cleopatra* are chosen for analysis. The plays written during and after the war are termed as later plays, among which *Heartbreak House*, *Saint Joan* and *Apple Cart* are chosen for discussion. As Shaw himself puts it, “every drama must present a conflict. The end may be reconciliation or destruction: or, as in life itself, there may be no end; but the conflict is indispensable: no conflict, no drama.”

Christopher Caudwell is quite hostile towards Shaw: “Believing in the solitary primacy of thought, all his plays are devoid of humanity, because they represent human beings as walking intellects.” But Caudwell’s view cannot be correct because mere thought alone cannot exist as drama. Shaw’s characters are not frozen characters as Caudwell suggests, because a character cannot propose ideas without life. Though they may not have the Shakespearean complexity, they have lives of their own. Even a minor character like Alfred Doolittle can be complex. Though his becoming rich can be sociologically interpreted. His problem in the given situation is human. The dilemma Doolittle experiences, before accepting the money, is quite human:

“That’s the tragedy of it ... It’s easy to say chuck it; but I haven’t the nerve. Which of us has? We’re all intimidated ... that’s what we are. What is there for me if I chuck it but the workhouse in my old age ? I have to dye my hair already to keep my job as a dustman. If I was one of the deserving poor, and had put by a bit, I could chuck it .

When the bullying Lady Britomart loses her grip over the children, after the arrival of Andrew Undershaft in the family scene, there is a change of tone and mood in her. Her self-pity is poignant: “A woman has to bring up her children; and that means to restrain them, to deny them things they want, to set them tasks, to punish them when they do wrong, to do all the unpleasant things. And then the father, who has nothing to do but pet them and spoil them, comes in when all her work is done and steals their affection from her.

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