

Some problematics of Bernard shaw's drama

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Abstract:

If one considers the history of the British drama, the modern theatre was free to develop around the end of the nineteenth century. During the last two decades of that period and the very beginnings of the twentieth century it is well noticed the revitalization and a new dimension of the drama not only in Britain but throughout Europe. The playwrights started writing a new kind of drama away from the conventional one of the Victorian period. They started treating real problems of everyday life, leaving behind the myth of the hero. They were focused mostly in realistic concerns of social matters. One of the greatest representatives of this period who is known to have paved the way to Modern Theatre and considered as the master of the problem plays or drama of ideas is George Bernard Shaw. The elements of his drama, such as the paradox used for teasing, the ability of making people reflect by compelling them to laugh, the ability to show to the audience the other side of the truth etc. make him a very distinguished playwright.

Introduction:

The playwright Bernard Shaw was famous not only for his dramas, but as an essayist and art critic, poet and novelist. He is acknowledged as the greatest dramatist of British Literature after Shakespeare's contribution to British Theatre. The upheaval of British drama comes out through Shaw's counteractions of theatrical conventions and the realistic illustration of social concerns in his plays. He is known as the creator of 'Plays of Ideas'¹⁹ where mostly are explored themes like rising problems because of sexual diversity, gender equality, social and economical divisions, the rights of women in the society as well as within the family, the effects of

¹⁹ Kadija, R. "Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature"; Tiranë, 2001, ALB DESIGN, pp. 68-70

poverty, religious theories as well as philosophical ones. What is important of his influence in the resurgence of a new area in play writing is that he made the first steps towards the symbolist drama and the theatre of absurd.

Traces of Shaw's life

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland on the 26th of July, 1856. His mother was a teacher of music so he had a musical education in his early childhood, which later led him to cultivate the music criticism. He did not follow school regularly because he could not stand organized training of any kind. During his early youth he worked as a rent collector in Dublin, later on, he studied economics and politics. His analytical faculty, which would guarantee his success as a critic, began soon to assert itself. At this time he was discerned as an orator, socialist commentator and arts and literature critic writing mainly for the '*Saturday Review*'. Shaw tried writing novels for a very short time, (1879-1883) but this resulted time consuming and unsuccessful. In the next ten years he worked as a journalist-critic, as a book reviewer and then as an art critic concerned in music.

Then he turned to drama, a genre in which he felt he could express his social, political and philosophical ideas and thoughts freely. He was very much influenced from Nietzsche, Wagner, Schopenhauer, Ibsen and Marx. Shaw was a dedicated socialist and a member of Fabian Society who promoted the gradual spread of socialism by peaceful means. His first drama was "*Widowers' Houses*" (1892)²⁰ collected in his *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* where he *savagely* attacks social hypocrisy. After this drama, his next thirty years were a well deserved success for the writer because his plays were coming out one after the other. He was very keen of social reforms, especially on behalf of those living in need. Thus he found his way of dramatic writing to reflect these problems.

His first writings were successfully published since 1898, but he went through major political clashes from his standpoint of the Britain role in the First World War. Due to this, his books were removed from the libraries and his plays were boycotted. He was even asked to resign from Authors and Playwrights Society because he was accused for sympathy towards Germans and Nazism. Even so, Shaw did not give up but kept on writing drama. When '*Saint Joan*' came out in 1923 his reputation was

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:G.B.Shaw/life_and_career

regained considering this play as a masterpiece. This matches with the First World War while in 1925 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature but refused the material reward requesting it to be used to finance translation of Swedish books to English. Shaw's radical rationalism, his utter disregard of conventions, his keen dialectic interest and verbal wit often turned the stage into a forum of ideas.²¹ He wrote 63 full-length plays where discussion, debate, refined sense of humour and intellectual wit were their basis. He is the only person to have been awarded both a Noble Prize for Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938) for his contributions to literature and for his work on the film *Pygmalion* (adaptation of his play of the same title), respectively.²² He kept on writing until his late years of living. He died at the age of 94 at Aycot, St. Lawrence, Hartfordshire, on 2nd November, 1950. According to his wish, the ashes, mixed with those of his wife, were scattered along footpaths and around the statue of Saint Joan in their garden.

His problem plays

Bernard Shaw is considered the most meaningful playwright of British Literature. When he began writing drama, the critics and the managers of theatres noticed his innovative, witty plays with a bitter sense of humour which avoided the romantic conventions of the time. There were a lot of controversial concerns in his plays, such as prostitution, gender discrimination, false morality, social strata divisions, political views etc. The literary critics have also remarked that in his plays the social, economical and political matters are interwoven, especially his strong objection towards the inequality and bitter injustice to the mass of people due to capitalism at the time he lived.

Being such a genius, he achieved to form a new dramatic genre which transforms the melodramatic conventions and uses irony through comedy in order to promote serious views about moral and social institutions. His dramas are flavoured with his proficiency to link in astute combination the dramatic, the comic, and the social remedial together. Lack of morality or sublime morality, the reality of the low or middle class of the Victorian era are combined with a number of paradoxes and ironic tones in most of his plays. The characters of Shaw's drama for a period of time were censured as non realistic and with deep lack of vitality and sensuality. His description

²¹ From Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969

²² Gibs, A. M., Bernard Shaw: A Life. Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2005, pp. 375-376

for strong women also independent in their lives has been for a long time a matter of continuous interest for the Feminist Movement and others. The philosophical, theological and psycho-analytical theories that permeate his plays have been long observed as reflections of Shaw's own problems. Regardless of the critics to his work, Shaw's great contribution in the British and world theatre is undeniable. One of his greatest achievements is considered his '*drama of ideas*' exposition, in which the theatre is obliged to transmit moral instruction.

The ironic and comic effect in his '*drama of ideas*' contains some techniques such as reversion and inversion, prompt and unexpected turns of judicious and shrewd dialogue, abrupt changes of the situations and characters' attitudes, the clashes between outer appearance and the essence of different things and phenomena, the efficient usage of ironic aphorisms and sharp paradoxes.²³

Thus, if we consider his first play, '*Widowers' Houses*' (1892) we clearly understand the hypocrisy of the landowners that profit greasy incomes from the exploitation of the poor. This play is essentially a play of ideas or a problem play, due to which the polemics of the time among critics and playwrights were very stern. Because of this Shaw made clear his purpose: "*In Widowers' Houses I have shewn middle class respectability and younger son gentility fattening on the poverty of the slum as flies fatten on filth. That is not a pleasant theme.*" (George Bernard Shaw, in the preface to "Plays Unpleasant")²⁴ This play is full of refined dialogues and brilliant aphorisms showing that the author was a master of satirical portray of the characters.

Another major theme browsed for the public in this play is that of the tragedy of good-will people manipulated from the selfish ones for their mean purposes. As Cavendish points out in his review,: '*He (the author) shows us the brutally ugly architecture of society: the way the love nest of bourgeois contentment is reached via the rotten stairway of greed and need, assisted by the slippery-smooth banister of hypocrisy.*'²⁵

Major Barbara (1905) is another '*drama of ideas*' where the prevalent theme is that of the capitalism over the poor. Shaw here makes use of comedy to put in view and to explore the dehumanizing consequences of poverty and unemployment as a result of the capitalist social organization. His peculiarity of ending the play is to give

²³ Kadija, R. "Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature"; Tiranë, 2001 Shtëpia Botuese ALB DESIGN, pp. 68-73

²⁴ Shaw, George Bernard. "Preface: Mainly About Myself," from *Plays Unpleasant*. London: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1898

²⁵ By Dominic Cavendish. *Widowers' Houses*, Manchester Royal Exchange, review. 'Greg Hersov's superlative revival of George Bernard Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* at the Manchester Royal Exchange is an unmissable reminder of why the playwright matters.' www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics, 10:57AM 04 May 2009

suggestions or alternatives for solution; he does not sort out the problem of the play, welcoming the audience to think seriously about the theme.²⁶ When *Major Barbara* came to light, Shaw had to face many of the time critics, regarding the play as unpatriotic and as a blasphemy done to the Church. Objecting this sort of critics and others, Shaw takes up the risk to give critics some essential facts due to his modern ideas. The tragi-comic irony of the inconsistency between what is real life (represented by the Gospel of Andrew Undershaft) and the romantic and idealistic imagination (represented by his daughter, Barbara, who joined the Salvation Army) is shown artistically as a boomerang for the society which knows the reality but hardly admits it.

There are many ways of facing the truth, but dealing with it is much more personal. The way that Barbara deals with the truth is avant-garde, because she embraces the reality keeping deep in heart her ideals, she declares herself with no social belonging because she thinks she does not properly fit to either her father's gospel, nor to the predications of the Salvation Army. Thus Shaw embodies in Mr. Andrew Undershaft a piece of our unaccepted natural truth that we all fear poverty, that each of us fights how not to be or remain poor. Mr. Undershaft is not the only one who has understood it, but he is one of the few persons who freely accept it, although he abhors this truth but regards it as inevitable. As Shaw claims, "Poor but honest," "the respectable poor," and such phrases are as intolerable and as immoral as "drunken but amiable," "fraudulent but a good after-dinner speaker," "splendidly criminal".²⁷

Another play to be discussed is *Arms and the Man* (1894) where Shaw mocks the romantic notions about war that glorify a gruesome matter, which critics blamed it as Shaw's attempts to ruin the heroic concept. This is the pleasantest of all his dramas where the military heroism is satirized with great skill. The author's suggestion that any soldier would prefer food and shelter instead of arsenal and being asked to kill the other (claimed as an enemy by the authorities) was regarded as a foolishness by critics. Anyway, Shaw held in the introduction to *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant* that all he had to do was introduce any doubters to the first six real soldiers they came across, and his stage soldier would prove authentic.²⁸ Being a

²⁶SparkNotes Editors. "Spark Note on Major Barbara ." SparkNotes LLC.n.d.. www.sparknotes.com/drama/majorbarbara/ (accessed April 14, 2011)

²⁷ Bertolini, J. A., George Bernard Shaw. *Pygmalion and Three Other Plays* Spark Education Publishing, 2004 p.12

²⁸ Lois Kerschen, *Critical Essay on Arms and the Man*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006. Source: www.novelguide.com

holder of socialist views and an active representative of Fabianism, he brings to us the element of a peace treaty at the end of the war because he holds that there are such sublime means to reduce violence which mankind ought to use at any time, and not to pretend aggression over the enemy which later is followed by idle festivities of heroic victories. This play does not denigrate courage as a principal virtue needed in the battlefield, it does not even show lack of courage from man at war; it simply suggests substituting bullets with chocolates in a figurative meaningful way.

Arms and the Man does not only draw a distinction between the fantastic with the prosaic, but the play artistically illustrates the interconnection and mutual dependence of romanticism and realism. The three major characters in this drama are exposed to their double standards of the human mind. On the one hand, their thoughts are tickled with absurd and meaningless heroics, but on the other hand the human mind stores a realistic level of awareness regarding its own self-deception. Thus this play is considered an exposure to the psychology of romanticism, exploring its coexistence with, rather than its distance or dissociation from, reality. Such an inclusive, no absolutist approach is the essence of Shavianism. Shaw expresses his principle clearly in the Preface to this play: *'But the obvious conflicts of unmistakable good with unmistakable evil can only supply the crude drama of villain and hero, in which some absolute point of view is taken, and the dissentients are treated by the dramatist as enemies to be piously glorified or indignantly vilified. In such cheap wares I do not deal.'*²⁹

A very much arguable play which was even banned not to be performed, is *Mrs. Warren's Profession* written in 1893 and debuted for the first time in 1905 in United States. The author here explores his continuous interest on gender equality stressing out the idea that social pressures and artificial social structures lead society towards sexual discrimination. This drama is illustrated as a harmful indicator of a capitalist system that does not give to women the right for equal chances. The effects of this discrimination come across economic problems of women themselves. Thus, when Mrs. Warren is showed up as a prostitute, she justifies this fact as a personal choice. The social reaction to this drama was very strong and unexpected. For this reason, Shaw felt that he had to make some clarifications concerning the theme in the preface to the play, titled *The Author's Apology*: *"...prostitution is caused not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing*

²⁹ Charles A. Berst, "Romance and Reality in *Arms and the Man*," in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, June 1966, pp. 197–211.

and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together'.³⁰ Shaw does not pretend that prostitution is a moral profession any poor girl may easily take up in future, but he is stressing the fact that society, which allows masses of people to endure miserable lives filled with poverty, is every bit as immoral as any particular vice. He knew well the consequences of poverty in Victorian England, the hypocrisy of the wealthy, and the interdependence of the rich and poor³¹, and this is another of his dramas which shows this bitter relation.

Shaw sees society, and even nature, as capable of genuine evolution and his comedy reflects that view in its very structure. Both the nature of the conflict and the nature of its resolution differ in Shaw from the traditional comic pattern, both thought and character in his drama assert the possibility of radical change, for they disobey law itself, not just some abuse of the law. They defy custom itself, not just some perversion of custom. In comedy the most complete rejection of tradition is a play that ends with its leading characters not getting married and treats this ending as a rapturous fulfillment. There is one whole category of a courtship, in which the woman escapes from marriage and from the tyranny of love with the same swoon of relief that drops other women into a lover's arms.³²

The last drama taken into consideration is *Pygmalion* (1912) and put on stage for the first time in 1913 in Wien in the German language. This drama is considered as the most famous of Shaw's plays so it has been shown several times throughout Europe. The myth of Pygmalion is retreated by Shaw but in a very specific and innovative way. Professor Higgins transforms his Galatea (Eliza – a flower girl from the slums) into an object which is used for his scientific purposes, disregarding completely of her thoughts and feelings. The problem arises when this statue wants to get back to life again but this time to be independent, to make her own way and to earn her living. In *Pygmalion* there is a great distinction between social classes in the aspect of speaking, writing, living, dressing or behaving etc. Another element of class divisions is the proper use of the language where the art of speaking correctly and beautifully in all its dimensions, the standardization and correct usage of literary terms was of a great concern to Shaw. Thus the central theme of the play is the

³⁰ Cited, Kadija, R. "Modernism and Postmodernism in English Literature"; Tiranë, 2001 ALB DESIGN, p. 73

³¹ "Mrs. Warren's Profession: Introduction." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 19. Detroit: Gale, 1998. eNotes.com. January 2006. 15 April 2011. www.enotes.com/mrs-warrens-profession/introduction

³² Barbara Bellow Watson, *Fabian Feminist: Bernard Shaw and Woman*, 1977. Source: www.guthrietheatre.org

social importance of language. Even though *Pygmalion* is a comedy, Shaw used his master skills in each detailed dialogue. Shaw was a misogynist like Higgins, but differently from him, Shaw believed in a greater vital force in women. Due to this fact, the play *Pygmalion* is widely considered a feminist play. With the figure of Eliza on stage, the audience comes to realize the resurgence of the new woman demanding her rights and her denied dignity.

To sum up, in a few words it can not be possible if speaking about Bernard Shaw's gift in writing and proclaiming about those social problems that hurt society even today, half a century after his death. His points of view about women's rights, Ireland faults, the required reform of phonetics, the exploitation of the poor from the capitalists and many others also very important for which he fought continuously, discover his witty mind and his up-to-date humor.³³ His works in music and arts critics is still astute and fresh. His dramas are still showed in different countries and in different languages. This consistency in time and problematic makes him a mastermind of the British Literature.

The Modern Theatre would feel the absence of Shaw and his valuable contribution in the British Literature, as a result, in the tableau of British Literature this puzzle would not be sorted out. He wanted that his audiences not merely to be entertained, but above all to think, learn and draw conclusions. That is why his theatre is called '*the theatre of ideas*' in which the stage is used as a means to attack evils and institutions or expose hypocrisy.³⁴

³³ Braybrooke, P., "The genius of Bernard Shaw"; Norwood, (Pa), 1977, Norwood Editions, pp. 26-32

³⁴ Ansaldo, M., Giuli, G., Zanichelli, M. G., Golden Pages, A Short History and Anthology of Literature in English. Petrini Editore 2006, pp.68-70

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