

Core 311

UNIT 01

D. George Bernard Shaw as a Dramatist (1856-1950)

****01. Introduction:****

George Bernard Shaw (26 July 1856 – 2 November 1950), known at his insistence as Bernard Shaw, was an Irish playwright, critic, polemicist and political activist. His influence on Western theatre, culture and politics extended from the 1880s to his death and beyond. He wrote more than sixty plays, including major works such as *Man and Superman (1902), Pygmalion (1913) and Saint Joan (1923).* With a range incorporating both contemporary satire and historical allegory, Shaw became the leading dramatist of his generation, and *in 1925 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.*

****02. Features of His Plays****

****(1) His Ideas:****

Shaw believed that the ideas of his plays were

Their most important feature. He saw the stage as a platform for his views and

Reluctantly adopted the role of ‘entertainer’ only when his three “unpleasant” plays failed. When his fame was assured he again gave more prominence to his themes, and

Though his theatrical art was never forgotten, it was very often subordinated to his

Concern with a thesis.) Yet Shaw will be remembered not as a prophet, but as a

Dramatist, an artist in the theatre. Already many of the ideas with which he inspired or

Horrified his generation are accepted as commonplace. Shaw's fundamental aim in his

Drama was the bettering of the lot of humanity. Scoffing at the romantic view of life, he examined man and his social institutions with intellectual courage and shrewd,

Irreverent insight. Slum landlords, prostitution, marriage conventions, social prejudices,

The romanticized soldier, the glamorous historical figure, the medical profession, the

Critics, religion—these are but some of the people and things which came under the

Microscope of his rationalism. His earliest work was emphatically socialist, and socialism, later in a more moderate form, remained his hope for humanity. Man and

Superman and then *Back to Methuselah* proclaimed the creed of Creative Evolution

Which would eventually bring about perfection, in the first play through selective

Breeding, in the second through an incredible longevity. Religion was the main theme of

His later plays. It was Shaw's delight always to turn the social scene inside out, to show the other side of the accepted picture, a process which he undertook

With a roguish humour, a delight in shocking the conventions, and a provocative

Mixture of serious argument and more or less fantastic fooling. Not infrequently his sense of fun ran away with him and his serious meaning was overshadowed.

****(2) His Prefaces are very striking:****

In them he expounds views more or less closely

Connected with those which underlie the plays which follow. They were first used in his

Earliest works, when his only method of reaching a public was through the printed copy,

But he continued to use them throughout his career. (It seems probable that the prefaces,

Rather than the plays themselves, will ultimately be accepted as the definitive statement of his ideas. Emphatic and authoritarian in tone, yet touched with an attractive geniality, they are closely argued and in a most incisive style. Often they reveal truly deep thought; sometimes they are spoiled by an obvious desire to be clever which carries the author further than he would otherwise have gone. In some of them there is also the tendency of the, zealous reformer to write down to his reader, and this can be irritating,

though it must be recognized that this seems more obvious now that the ideas he expounds are generally accepted than it may have done at the time of their penning.

****(3) His Wit From the days of Widowers' Houses Shaw's wit sparkles through his plays:****

With *Arms and the Man* it began to have great prominence. Wit is the very essence of Shawian comedy, in which the dramatist, standing outside the world he creates, sees it

with an impish detachment. His sense of fun is undying, and there is in his drama an endless stream of exuberant vitality and gaiety of spirit. Sometimes his sense of humour is uncontrolled and the result is disturbing, but generally it can be said that there is a

serious purpose underlying his fun.) I am a dramatist so intellectual, so persistently witty,

so detached from his subjects, it is not surprising to find that there is relatively little emotion. Shaw rarely touches the depths of true tragedy, even in *St Joan*, and in his work as a whole the emotional passages are brief. Indeed, Shaw seems to distrust the emotions, as we can gather from his attitude toward love and his ideal of the pure intelligence, which is the ultimate perfection envisaged in *Back to Methuselah*.

****(4) His Characters. (After Shakespeare no English dramatist equals Shaw in the variety and vividness of his characters.):****

Though he lacks almost entirely that interest in the individual per se which is one of Shakespeare's qualities. The characters of Shaw are largely seen as the products, good or bad, of social forces, or as the representatives of ideas. Some are mere mouthpieces for his theories, while others are really projections of his own

personality.) None the less he has contributed many memorable characters to the national heritage; among them Alfred Doolittle (Pygmalion), Henry Straker (Man and Superman), Larry Doyle (John Bull's Other Island), Sir Ralph Bloomfield Bonington (The Doctor's Dilemma). Many of his characters are built with Dickensian skill around one idiosyncrasy, and Shaw is an apt caricaturist. He is particularly successful in the

creation of women characters, and it is interesting to note that he has natural heroes and no villains.

****(5) His dialogue was from the beginning of the highest order:****

Throughout his life Shaw was a brilliant talker, and he used this gift to great advantage in his plays. He excels in

brief, witty exchanges and, above all, in the handling of extremely long speeches

when his characters put forward their carefully reasoned arguments." He had the art of

making the long discourse as interesting and dramatic as action, and this was something

new to the stage. His brilliance in this has never been surpassed.

****(6) His Dramatic Technique:****

In spite of the emphasis which he placed on his ideas, Shaw rarely neglected the art of the theatre, and his best plays are excellent on the Boards. His sense of the stage was clearly illustrated in the skill with which he supervised rehearsals of his own plays. He made full use of the tricks of the trade and

Was a master of the art of surprise. His plays often contain an almost bewildering variety of mood, which demands great flexibility of response from his audience. To begin with he followed the conventional dramatic patterns of his age, and it was only when his reputation was established that he began such experiments as the epilogue to *Man and Superman* and the gigantic cycle of *Back to Methuselah*. One of his most

interesting innovations is the use of the long stage direction, written with all the care and artistry of his dialogues and prefaces.

****03. His Prose Works:****

In addition to his plays and novels Shaw published a number of political and critical prose works, among them *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* (1937), *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism*, etc.

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