

Shaw's Technique and Treatment of Theme

We will now deal with a very important aspect of Shaw as a dramatic artist - an aspect that made him famous throughout the world and ensured him a place in the history of dramatic literature almost equal to Euripedes. But this fame certainly was not forthcoming. As we have already seen, Shaw was not considered as a dramatist at all by the contemporary critics and theatre-goers. The Shavian technique appeared to them so wild that they failed to digest it, much less appreciate it. It is desirable to hear Bernard Shaw speak of this. He was quite aware that "the jigsaw-puzzle business, the working out of a plot, is necessary in detective stories, and helpful to the playwrights who have talent enough to put their clock-work mice through amusing tricks, and hold their audiences by jury-box suspenses"¹. With that set technique of the so-called "well-made play" Shaw had nothing to do, as the dramatist himself declared². Hence he spoke against the "well-made" technique in such sure and forceful language.

The myth that the drama of ideas is meant only for reading is baseless. Though in such a play "idea" comes in the first place, still it has to be a stage-play. Shaw did

1. As in G.B.S. : Man of the Century Vol II - Archibald Henderson. Appleton-Century-Crofts Ltd. 1956. P 729 -30

2. Ibid P 730

not want just to preach his ideas through his plays; he wanted to make his plays immensely actable. He did not want to use his ideas only as a philosopher, but mainly as a dramatic artist.

Naturally Shaw had to find out his own technique; apparently new and original, his dramatic technique is not really so, which we will find out in course of our examination. The fact remains, nevertheless, that he used his knowledge as a socialist and an economist to give his plays a genuinely vertebrate structure. Even his first play Widowers' Houses, which has been announced by him as "a ¹ propagandist play - a didactic play - a play with a purpose", shows Shaw's dramatic technique at work. He maintains, "you will please judge it, not as a pamphlet in dialogue, but as in intention a work of art as much as any comedy of Moliere is a work of art"². The association of the name of Moliere in the very first play of Shaw is significant as we shall see afterwards. Before this he had written five unsuccessful novels. Now with his experience as a novelist of unsuccessful novels and a dramatist of a "propagandist play" Shaw formulated his own method of construction: "As a fictionist, my natural way is to imagine characters and spin out a story about them, whether I am writing a novel or a play"³. Naturally in his dramas characters assume more

1. Preface to Widowers' Houses. The Complete Prefaces of

Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 702.

2. Ibid. P 703.

3. Ibid. P 700.

importance; he never designed the plot of his plays in advance. Rather he gave his characters freedom and let them, through their interactions, work out the play. It is particularly due to this that we find what is called "ideosyncratically differentiated" characters in his plays. But though not pre-designed, the forms his plays take are inevitable. We are to bear in mind that his are dramas of ideas in which "discussion" is the most essential thing because it is through discussion only that the plots of the Shavian plays develop. We find his characters incessantly talking to explain and develop the "idea" and also to argue out the probable objections to these ideas. The works of Ibsen interested him profoundly as dramas of ideas. It may be said that it is Ibsen who started the "talk" on the stage and Shaw kept the stage ever "talking". This "discussion" in a drama of ideas, as Shaw pointed out in theory as well as in practice, is intertwined with plot and is, as it develops the plot, inevitable. If we accept the drama of ideas as a genuine genre of art, discussion must also be accepted as the legitimate instrument through which the dramatist lays bare the dramatic conflict. Ideas cannot be explained and developed without provoking debates

1. Shaw writes, "Now you have exposition, situation and discussion; and the discussion is the test of the playwright". The Quintessence of Ibsenism. Constable & Co. Ltd. 1913. P 187.

- even if there are only two persons on the stage with conflicting ideas.

In the old-fashioned plays written after the Parisian school of Scribe and Sardou there is an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and some sort of tidying up in the third or the last. Then Europe witnessed Ibsen's A Doll's House with a 'new' technique. In the last scene of the play, Nora, instead of falling into the arms of her husband, which should have assuredly happened in the old-fashioned plays, turns on him to say, "we must set down like two rational beings¹ and discuss all this that has been happening between us". Now onwards, when A Doll's House finished its conquest of Europe, audiences expect a rational discussion as well as a human situation. Shaw met the expectations by giving them both. But, it may be mentioned that it took a long time for the audience to accept this type of play because they had only the "well-made play" in their mind and eye.

But this technique is not "new"; it is new only on the modern stage where the audiences saw, before Ibsen and Shaw, only the "well-made play". This technique had been used by preachers and orators of old; more important, this technique had been seen in the rhetorical speeches in the primitive dramaturgy. As Shaw put it in his inimitable language, "Rhetoric, irony, argument, paradox, parable, the

1. A Doll's House - Henrich Ibsen.

re-arrangement of haphazard facts into orderly and intelligent situations : these are both the oldest and the newest art of the drama" ¹ . Shaw only revived the old technique.

Bernard Shaw began his career as a dramatist imbued with the new doctrine of Ibsenic realism. But he was never to follow Zolaesque naturalism. Again, he was not a "realist" in the ordinary sense and to call him a "realist" without any qualifying remark would lead to wrong conclusions. He was always in the classic tradition recognizing that stage characters must be endowed by the author with a conscious self-knowledge and power of expression and a freedom from inhibitions. It is this power that differentiates a Shaw or a Shakespeare from a gramophone or a camera. This method resulted in two things - first, far from being artificial, the characters became living and, secondly, the plays did not just resemble life, rather they became "larger than life". This last point is important. Shaw's characters are not gramophones; neither are his plays photographs of life as it is. The characters are indeed probable in their respective situations and the situations are not impossible. The characters expound and explain various philosophies trying to find out the meaning and essence of life; we find some of the characters guessing the future. Again, some of his characters, say in Back to

1. The Quintessence of Ibsenism. Constable & Co. Ltd. 1913.

P 204.

Methuselah, actually live in future when the forces of Creative Evolution would have wrought many changes in the physical as well as mental horizon of man; we find the Ancients trying ceaselessly to free themselves from the burden of the physique. Thus, after reading such plays, it is not possible to label him as a "realist" in the ordinary sense. The plays lack factual truth, but the presence of essential truth in them cannot be lost sight of. It is true that he dealt with economic and political problems of the day, but in them, too, we do not find only a photographic representation of the facts of life. Shaw did not write merely political or social tracts and pamphlets.

Shaw, of course, was not another Ibsen. Though there was some similarity between Shaw's class and early circumstances and Ibsen's and though Shaw's quarrel with the prevailing capitalist social order was much like Ibsen's, yet their plays are very much unlike, despite the superficial resemblances which is due to the fact that they wrote for the same type of theatre. Shaw, like Ibsen, sometimes enlarges his drama by a retrospective first act; but this device is an old one though no one before Ibsen carried it to masterly length. The really new feature which Ibsen introduced is the final discussion of the whole business by the characters. This device is not used by Shaw in the simple A Doll's House - form; he developed it to such an extent that it enabled him to taunt the critics by declaring that his plays were discussions or debates. In Too

True to be Good one of the characters declares at the end of the first act that the play is virtually over and in the remaining acts the characters will only discuss what passed in the first act. But the discussions are real and Shaw takes care to dramatize the debates. These discussions are not reminiscent of Ibsen. Ibsen, we must note, studied the Parisian school headed by Scribe and Sardou; he accepted the mechanical technique of construction. But being an artist and not an artisan, he takes his plays to a height which is beyond the artisans of the Parisian school.

Shaw maintained right from the beginning that the methods of Scribe and Sardou were the wrong methods. It would be evident from the following discussion what Shaw's ideas about construction was - a play should not be constructed, it should grow. Shaw lets his inspiration lead him to apparently impossible feats; for instance, the Epilogue in Saint Joan which solved the problem of presenting Joan's historical future and its significance. Ibsen's technique has little to do with Shavian technique, for whereas Ibsen's plays are "constructed", Shaw's are natural growth. Shaw, so far as technique is concerned, is as far removed from Ibsen, as he, so far as he is an artist, is removed from the Parisian school. We must bid adieu to the notion that Shaw is an Ibsenist. Only this much may be said that Ibsen raised nineteenth century drama to a level at which it could become a vehicle of expression for Shaw's inspired ideas.

What made Shaw's works seem so novel and wild to the uneducated readers and theatre-goers was that he revived

the classical technique of playwrighting, applying them to modern problems. Shaw adopted the method of the Greek dramatists in order to deal with the topics of the hour. While the essence of Shaw's plays may not be very original, their novelty lay in the fact that they are half-sermon, half-debate in which every conceivable subject is discussed - from love, marriage and family life to science, politics and religion, his laboriously acquired knowledge of social condition and his "philosophy" of Creative Evolution informing most of them. As he had little to do with the method of the "Well-made play", and as he was an artist, not the manufacturer of entertainment pieces, it must be interesting and necessary to hear him explain his own method.

In an interview on "How to Write a Play" with the Glasgow Evening Times¹ Shaw threw some invaluable light on the mysterious riddle of creativity in drama -

"Plays begin in all sorts of ways. I can sit down without an idea in my head except that I must write a play, and a play comes"

"Most plays begin with a dramatic situation; the rest is only a device for bringing it about. The Devil's Disciple obviously grew round a situation. John Bull's Other Island began with a farcical fancy which developed into a big political situation.

1. Glasgow Evening Times. February 7, 1937. (George Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century, Vol II, Archibald Henderson. Appleton - Century - Crofts Ltd. 1956. P 730.)

"As to Pygmalion, the scene in which Eliza makes her successful debut at the Ambassador's party was the root of the play at its inception"

"Then you have the thesis play. Back to Methuselah dramatizes the thesis that our conduct is influenced not only by our experience but by our expectations, and that life is not at present long enough for us to take it seriously.

"A theme may lie in a playwright's head for half an hour or half a life time before he uses it. The perception that Saint Joan was an early Protestant came to me from the report of her trial, but I never thought of writing a play about her until years later when my wife suggested it one day when I was at a loss."

Obviously Shaw used not one, but varied techniques in his plays; this variety of techniques make them seemingly wild. Yet, it should be observed that his earlier plays show no marked deviation from conventional standards of dramatic construction. They are problem plays, with the inevitable conflicts of interests. Indeed, as early as 1895, Shaw envisaged drama from a social point of view, maintaining that social questions are produced by the conflicts of human institutions with human feeling. And he makes the sweeping remark that the "material of the dramatist is always the conflict of human feeling with circumstances, so that, since institutions are circumstances, every social question¹ furnishes material for drama". Owing to enormous progress

1. As in George Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century Vol II Archibald Henderson. Appleton Century Crofts Ltd. 1956 P 731.

in the field of journalism, modes of transportation and communication, social questions have taken on greatly enhanced interest for a vast audience. But Shaw was too great an artist not to realize, granting all his concern for society and its reformations, that social questions are too sectional, too topical, and all too temporal to move a man to the mighty effort which is needed to produce great drama. But if contribution to the freedom, welfare and happiness of mankind is regarded as a criterion of value, a social drama of ideas may actually be more worthwhile than a work of purely imaginative art.

Shaw's comic genius, in conjunction with his revolutionary spirit, impelled him towards revolt against what were popularly but erroneously termed "rules" of the drama. The first of all rules was that our sympathies must be irrevocably attached to one side in the conflict. The spectator must always know where he is. With his love for surprises and anti-climax, Shaw refused to be restricted by any iron-clad rule. The secret of Shaw's strangeness is his unpredictability. He possessed extraordinary skill in all forms of stage-entertainments : comedy, farce-comedy, farce, extravaganza, burlesque. Again, Caesar and Cleopatra, The Doctor's Dilemma, and Saint Joan attest to his genius in chronicle, tragi-comedy, and even tragedy. Another secret of Shaw's technique is deliberate mixture of forms, the sudden transition from one to the other. "This perturbing dichotomy upset the spectator, who felt that Shaw had failed to supply

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a compass for the voyage into uncharted areas" . Actually Shaw's technique, more often than not, is to upset the spectator who thought that Shaw was aimlessly drifting towards an unknown destination. In The Quintessence of Ibsenism he declared, "Never mislead the audience was an old rule. But the new school will trick the spectator into forming a meanly false judgement, and then convict him in the next act, often to his grievous mortification"². The deliberate mixture of forms was the result of his own studied effort to mortify the spectator who could not understand what to think of the plays. This technique of misleading the audience is best illustrated in the Widowers' Houses. When one considers this play in generic terms, one recognizes at the outset its affinities to three conventional dramatic forms - melodrama, the well-made play, and romantic comedy. But no sooner does one recognize this than one also recognizes how different the play is from all the three forms. Shaw explicitly refused to turn the Widowers' Houses into a melodrama where one would get a conflict between unadulterated good and clearcut evil. In the Preface to his Play Pleasant Shaw emphatically declared, "In such cheap wares I do not deal"³ . Sartorius is not a villain and

1. George Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century Vol II Archibald Henderson. Appleton-Century Crofts Ltd. 1956. P 733.

2. The Quintessence of Ibsenism - G.B. Shaw. Constable & Co. Ltd. 1913. P 203.

3. Preface to Play Pleasant . The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hainlyn Ltd. 1965. P 729.

Trench is not a hero; Sartorius does not repent and Trench does not become a socialist. More, the happy denouement of the "well-made play" is mocked even as the characters celebrate it; and Shaw's characters are considerably different from those of the "well-made plays". But chiefly the generic basis of the structure of the Widowers' Houses and its point of departure is romantic comedy, in the conventional formula of boy getting girl after successively meeting and losing her. But the hero - hero, because he is young leading man of the play and also because he becomes engaged to the young pretty heiress - is not the typical hero of a romantic comedy. Trench's betrothal and the end of the Widowers' Houses seems a grim parody of the ending of a romantic comedy. One more clearly recognizes that the ending of the Widowers' Houses is tragi-comic rather than comic when one considers what the play might have been if Shaw (or William Archer, the initial collaborator) had turned it into something more conventionally happy or comic. Eric Bentley has observed that the Widowers' Houses consists of "inversions of accepted patterns" ¹. Just as Shaw inverts the conventions of the "well-made play", so he inverts the pattern of conventional comedy and with bitter irony thrusts comedy in the direction of tragi-comedy.

With Shaw matters are rarely simple or simple-dimensioned. The perception of Kierkegaard may be quite relevant ; "The comical is present in every stage of life for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and

1. Bernard Shaw - 1856-1950 - Eric Bentley. 1957. P 101.

wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present. The Tragic and the Comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction ; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical the painful contradiction The comic apprehension evokes the contradiction or makes it manifest by having in mind the way out, which is why the contradiction is painless. The tragic apprehension sees the contradiction and despairs of a way out; . . . wherever there exists a contradiction and the way out is not known . . .there the contradiction is not painless"¹. In the Widowers' Houses Shaw evokes both types of contradiction. Although they themselves achieve a state without pain, nevertheless, in the slums, off stage, suffering persists. Shaw described the Ibsenite theatre as a place where we "are not flattered spectators killing an idle hour with an ingenious and amusing entertainment : we are guilty 'creatures sitting at a play:'. . ." ². The Widowers' Houses both flatters the spectators with an apparently amusing entertainment and at the same time turns them into guilty creatures. The play delights, but it is a disturbing delight, Shaw's first play is discussed at length because even in his first play his technique of construction, particularly his method of misleading the audience, is manifest.

1. Quoted from "The Comical". Trans David F. Swanson and Walter Lowrie : "Dramatic Theory and Criticism" ed.

Bernard F. Dukore. N. Y. 1974. P 556.

2. The Quintessence of Ibsenism -G. B. Shaw. Constable & Co.Ltd. 1913 P 205.

It is Opera which was Shaw's true medium where imaginative fancy supplants scientific fact, singing replaces talking, and the scene is laid in a wonderland where miracles are natural and where anything may happen. For Shaw music cast the spell and opera transcended comedy. As a boy Shaw acquired a thorough knowledge of Don Giovanni, its entrancing strains, and the perfection of its structure. The lesson he learnt from Mozart of the value of fine craftsmanship was the most important feature of his education. From that educational experience stemmed Shaw's possibly the most original contribution to dramatic technique which has been termed "Operatic play of ideas"¹ by Prof. R. A. Brower and "Operatic ideological play" by Archibald Henderson.² With the use of rhythmic dialogue and characters distinguished by voice-tones as in opera, Shaw creates a new type of drama. His comedy of this type --- compactly presented in the Hell Scene in Man and Superman --- is not an opera or musical drama perfect, but a play, comic in character, presenting the clash of ideologies in rhythmic prose at different levels of tonality. Anna and the Man, Caesar and Cleopatra and The Apple Cart also have the qualities of an opera. We shall discuss this point again while discussing the artist Shaw in a different chapter.

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1. In his essay on Shaw in "Major British Writers" Vol II 1904 Brower uses the term.
 2. G. B. Shaw : Man of the Century Vol II - A. Henderson. Appleton - Century Crofts Inc. 1956. P 733.

Shaw was a master in different types of the laughter-provoking plays --- comedy, farce, burlesque, extravaganza. It is possible to distinguish the devices, artifices, and techniques he employed, even though the very form of the play itself is changing under the eyes of the reader. A comedy of emotions treated wittily, such as Arms and the Man is transformed almost magically into a satiric farce; the glory of war is turned into a satiric farce; Sergius wins the battle because the enemy does not have the right ammunition. The glamour of romantic love only seems to illumine the hero and the heroine, but it turns out that the lovers, following a code of artificial convention, prove untrue to each other in response to natural instincts.

Shaw is an expert in making use of ironic comedy. This is most beautifully illustrated in The Philanderer in which there is the picture of the young doctor who has discovered a new disease and is delighted to find the people suffering from this disease, but then is despaired to find that the disease does not really exist. Dr. Paramore does not become happy to find that the disease does not exist; rather he becomes sad because he now cannot fight for a cause. The doctor becomes more concerned about the sickness than about the sick. Shaw possibly suggests that the idealist is more concerned about the sin than about the sinner. Thus the business of Dr. Paramore's discovery of the disease and his despair that there is no such disease is

not only farcial, but also has philosophical import.

In his roles as humourist, wit, and farceur Shaw uses various techniques, none of which is either original or new. First comes what may be described as the character wearing an air of entire seriousness, but his language is madly funny. Shaw's description of this device is precise as well as penetrating : "I take the greatest pains to find the right thing to say and then say it with utmost levity"¹. This is really the technique of Oscar Wilde in The Importance of Being Earnest. This is the technique of bringing sharp contrast - gravity alternating with levity in a way irresistibly amusing. In farce-comedy Shaw uses the device of turning the climax of comedy into the anti-climax of farce. This is the very essence of humour -- this lightning transformation from the normal to the abnormal. The familiar cliches, too, emanate humour - from the sublime to the ludicrous. One of the best and representative examples of this technique may be found at the conclusion of the First Act of Man and Superman where Tanner, who has been exercising his eloquence to defend Violet's supposed carrying without being married, collapses on hearing that Violet is actually married and the child she bears is legitimate. Shaw has something to say about this technique of transforming the normal to the abnormal, the serious to the funny; " Just when I am really rising to the height of

1. As in G.B.S. Man of the Century. Vol II. Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc. 1956. P 727.

my power that I may become really tragic and great, some absurd joke occurs to me, and the anti-climax is irresistible I cannot deny that I have the tragedian and I have the clown in me; and clown trips me up in the most dreadful way" ¹ .

The problem raised by Shaw is a serious one, because it involves the aesthetic problem of mixing the categories. It is assumed that comedy aims at clearing the air after rebuking the guilty in a good natured manner. Anti-climax is somewhat harsh in nature, for the deflation may be not only humorous but even humiliating. Shaw means that to pass suddenly from the climax of tragedy to the comic anti-climax is to pass from the sublime to the ridiculous, which, of course, does not necessarily prevent the author from becoming a great author. Scenes and acts in Shaw's plays are often carefully built anti-climaxes; even whole plays like Arms and the Man, Candida and The Devil's Disciple stand on the anti-climax. As G.K. Chesterton says, Vergil's "Arma Virumque" is a mounting and ascending phrase and suggests that man is more than his weapons. The Latin line also suggests a superb procession of warriors and arms. In Shaw's play, there is the din and bustle of war, a great cavalry charge, but the warrior is completely debunked and

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1. The N. Y. Times. January 6, 1929. Quoted in G.B.S. : Man of the Century - Archibald Henderson. Appleton-Century Crofts Inc. 1956. P 727
 2. George Bernard Shaw - G.K.Chesterton. The Bodly Head. London.1965. P 111.

humiliated. In Candida when everybody is mentally prepared to hear Candida's preference for Marchbanks, comes her declaration that she gives herself to the weak man. It takes some time for the audience to realise that the man who appears to be strong is really the weak man.

In The Doctor's Dilemma Shaw developed his peculiar mixture of tragedy and comedy, so that people scarcely know whether to laugh or cry. We may notice that in the old religious Mystery and Miracle Plays, which Shaw studied with great attention, the most solemn scenes alternate with the most laughable ones. The secular drama kept up this characteristic British tradition: The porter in Macbeth, the clown in Antony and Cleopatra, the grave digger in Hamlet defy classical decorum by introducing laughter into deepest tragedy. In King Lear the alternation of the tragic and the comic is dropped and there is one interweaving of the two, each heightening the other. Shaw calls The Doctor's Dilemma a tragedy, but it is really a tragi-comedy. The loss of the gifted husband of Jennifer is hardly in itself a tragedy. Shaw started the play with Jennifer as the protagonist, possibly with the idea of tragedy, but discovered that his concern is not with her or her husband, but with the doctor whose dilemma is whether to treat the artist Dubedat who, however, is a depraved individual, or the sick, poor general practitioner. But then Dubedat dies a beautiful death with the swan song: "I'm perfectly happy." Shaw does not suggest that Dubedat should

be preserved, a good painter though he is, at all costs. The judgement of the doctor is confused because the artist's wife fascinates him. The doctor's judgement to let the artist die is clouded by personal feelings and puts him in an absurd situation. He is the tragic protagonist, but his tragedy is presided over by the comic spirit.

Shaw sometimes uses the conventions of melodrama; but the conventional melodramatic situations suddenly take unconventional turns. The point may be illustrated from The Devil's Disciple : just where the melodramatic clergyman would show courage he appears to show cowardice; just where the melodramatic sinner would confess his love he confesses his indifference. The melodramatic playwrights have so often made a man face death for the woman he loves, but Shaw makes him face death for the woman he does not love --- only to put the woman in her place. Shaw gives a twist to the trite episodes and the stock situations of the conventional melodrama; in Act III of the play, the melodramatic formula requires Dick to avow his love for the priest's wife, for whom he is ready to sacrifice his life. But when Judith visits him in prison and asks him if he is not taking her husband's place out of love for her, he replies : "If I said - to please you - that I did what I did ever so little for your sake, I lied as men always lie to women . . . I had no motive and no interest . . . I have been brought up standing by the law of my own nature; and I may not go against it; gallows or no gallows. I should have done the

same thing for any other man in the town or any other man's wife". Here, again, Shaw succeeds in humanizing the stock figure of melodrama, revealing in him a credible mixture of good and evil. Dick may scoff at religion and break the social code, but he is not naturally vicious or depraved. In the stern asceticism of his nature, he is a more genuine Puritan than his mother. He is not a conventional stage-hero, but one who obeys the law of his own nature under every trial; he pities the devil, takes his side and champions him against the world.

Another technique of Shaw is that he made the worse appear the better and he carried this technique farther than any other ancient or modern playwright. This is the technique of the Wit. Shaw went as far as imagination can reach in his climactic feat of cynicism in "Don Joan in Hell" in Man and Superman by intellectual fireworks, by the most vertiginously witty exhibition of epigrammatic sophistries, transforming the Seven Cardinal Virtues into Seven Deadly Sins, interchanging Heaven and Hell itself. This is the exaggeration and diabolic ingenuity of wit - a field in which Gilbert, Wilde and Butler excelled. They possibly excelled Shaw in social suavity and stylistic elegance, but Shaw far excelled them in intellectual range, breadth of view, artistic perspective, and philosophic content and vision.

By the second decade of the present century some of the more acute students of English literature among French

critics were clearly recognizing the close affinities¹ between Moliere and Bernard Shaw. Regis Michaud has noted that Shaw bade fair to become a fashionable Moliere --- a Moliere who wrote his plays to "usher in the golden age according to Karl Marx". This observation is misleading because Shaw did not refer to Marx earlier than in The Apple Cart. Michaud, however, comments on some resemblances between Moliere and Shaw and concludes that if social comedy was a mere germ in Moliere, it receives an arresting extension in Shaw. The findings of Michaud cannot be lightly dismissed even though to portray Shaw as a replica of Moliere would be a gross mistake.

Moliere's plays were called "conversation pieces" and when Shaw labelled his own plays as "disquisitory" pieces, the resemblance between the two playwrights became unmistakable and obvious. It may not be out of place to mention here that Shaw considered not Shakespeare but Moliere as the greatest dramatist that ever lived. Moliere, in the preface to his masterpiece Tartuffe categorically stated that the principal end of comedy was to correct the vices of men who were more likely to be laughed, and not scolded, out of their sins. It was his belief that as a comic poet he could do no better than attack the vices of his time

1. As referred to by A. Henderson in G.B.S. : Man of the Century . Vol II P 737. Appleton Century Crofts Inc. 1956. Michaud's work is in French.

with ridiculous likenesses. The voice of Moliere, in this respect, is unmistakably the voice of Shaw. When we remember how Shaw associated his first dramatic work, Widowers' Houses with the art of Moliere, we again find the resemblance between the two in the technique and the treatment of theme.

But, still, Shaw is not Moliere; neither did he intend to be. We may, after examining the resemblances between them, say that Shaw has picked up the torch of Moliere and carried it to the future. Actually Shaw began where Moliere had ended¹. There are unmistakable differences between the art of the two masters. Moliere was not a social reformer of the Shavian brand; he accepted the French society as he found it. Further, Moliere was not, conventionally speaking, immoral or heretical; but Shaw was both and found not much in the then English society worthy of preservation. The task before Shaw was colossal - to present a new philosophy of life and to create a new audience; but this was not the task of Moliere. Shaw's technique of characterisation has little, if anything, to do with that of Moliere. The central character with Shaw is no longer, as with the French dramatist, some extraordinary and exceptional individual, but a whole social class, an institution, national traits, or even an entire civilization. The central character in Moliere is replaced in Shaw by a code of conduct, often unconventional, a

1. G.B.Shaw : Man of the Century Vol II. Archibald Henderson Appleton-Century-Croft Inc. 1956. P 739.

philosophy of life, incorporated in an individual. The characters in Shaw's plays who do not incorporate these qualities are made ridiculous through the satiric exposure of the fallacious views and shallow codes of conduct, sentimental, romantic, conventional. Shaw's characters are not pathological as Moliere's are; Shaw portrays class types. He does not portray the coxcomb, the miser, the pedant, the bore, or the coquette; he portrays the cockney, the manufacturer of armaments, the professional soldier, the brigand, the saint, the politician, the dictator, the king - all class-types. It is in this sense that Shaw's plays are twentieth century morality plays. Every Shaw-play is a twentieth century Pilgrim's Progress with the great army of individual pioneers striving for ever onwards towards a new social Utopia.

In the correspondence between Henry James and H. G. Wells¹ we have the classic case of the literary artist and the professed journalist. To Henry James literature, like painting, is an end; to Wells, on the other hand, it is a means which has a use. Wells would rather be called a journalist than an artist. Bernard Shaw in retrospect may be connected with Wells. We see them as embattled Socialists and Evolutionists debating endlessly with the Distributism and the Christian Liberalism of Hillaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton. Shaw, further, would have echoed many of Wells's

1. Henry James and H.G.Wells. ed. L.Edel and G.N. Ray. 1958.

remarks in his controversy with Henry James. But behind the outward resemblance between Wells and Shaw there is a great inner distinction. Wells was a teacher of Science and a writer of scientific textbooks before he became a novelist; Shaw was a music critic and a theatre critic before he won his fame as a playwright. We are apt to think of him merely as the propagator of Ibsen and Samuel Butler; we forget his love for music and the fact that his writings were profoundly influenced by the four masters of his youth - Bunyan, Blake, Dickens, and Ruskin. Wells in his novels would rather be called a journalist than an artist; in his dramatic criticism Shaw would have queried the distinction. The fact, of course, is that both Shaw and Wells are first rate artists.

Shaw was convinced, when he mournfully noticed the deplorable condition of the English drama in the nineteenth century, that the "new drama" must compete with the contemporary novel; that the "new drama" must also be immensely readable. He was, to that end, writing plays with enormous stage directions because he was convinced that the time when the playwright could say, like the Elizabethans, "a street" or "another part of the battle field" and leave it at that, had gone by. Shaw not only set his scene in utmost detail, but gave his actors an overwhelming amount of help by detailing the person and personality of his characters.

The massive detail of the stage as well as the characters, to say nothing about the lengthy but interesting prefaces, makes his plays something of a cross between dramatic literature and the novel. These novel-plays are, naturally, meant to be read, and, needless to say, to read them is a delightful experience. Shaw's indebtedness to, or rather his affinity with, the Dickensian technique has already been noted. It may further be noted, in this connection, that Shaw was, like Dickens, a literary cartoonist in his method of characterisation and invention of plots. Shaw exaggerates; he magnifies and does not minify; yet this exaggeration does not destroy the sense of reality. This is actually Dickens all over again.

I have already said that Shaw's plays are twentieth century morality plays. This demands a bit more elaboration. Certain features of the Morality Plays and the Interludes appealed strongly to Shaw's comic instinct and controversial disposition : loose jests over solemn subjects, didactic arguments, and prolonged debates. He was a natural rebel, with an irresistible tendency a la Nietzsche, to transvalue value, to turn things upside down and inside out. The Seven Deadly Sins or Mortal Vices, integrally embedded in the morality plays, afforded him the perfect opportunity for inverting conventional standards. In their place he set the seven illuminant good qualities and wittily renamed them "The Seven Deadly Virtues". Long before

becoming a dramatist, he was delighting William Morris and his circle of congenial intimates with his witty and caustic lectures on those Seven Deadly Virtues, much to the discomfort of the moralists. In the morality play a struggle, episodic and yet continuous, takes place between the forces of good and evil, for the possession of human soul. Shaw designed quite seriously a new table of ethical values though we find him rather capricious in his choice of these Deadly Virtues. We find him giving varying lists depending upon the circumstances depicted in the individual plays. In the Hell Scene in Man and Superman, the most detailed study of ethical traits and moral values found anywhere in Shaw's writings, we are told that Hell is "the home of honour, duty, justice, and the rest of the seven deadly virtues". Elsewhere he catalogues eight with others unspecified. Don Joan tells the Devil : "Your friends are not moral, they are only conventional . . . to the very backbones of their souls. Beauty, purity, respectability, religion, morality, art, patriotism, bravery, and the rest are nothing but words which I or anyone can turn inside out like a glove".

The great flexibility in dealing with the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Deadly Virtues is illustrated by another example in Shaw's allegory of the Christian religion under the pressure of social, financial, and economic forces. In Major Barbara we are offered a new list of Seven Deadly Sins in the conflict between Wealth and Poverty -

food, clothing, firing, rent, taxes, respectability, and children. Be this as it may, Shaw surely is the master morality playwright of the twentieth century. His plays, most of them, are moralities voicing the clashing ideas and conflicting ideologies of our time. Man and Superman, Back to Methuselah, Major Barbara, Androcles and the Lion, Heartbreak House, On the Rocks are all twentieth century morality plays.

The distinguishing characteristics of the cartoonist are exaggerations and distortions. This distortion is not a deviation from, rather a heightening of, reality. To exaggerate some feature --- a nose, a chin, a brow --- is not to destroy likeness; it is a stroke of perspective in order to accentuate a dominating and determining feature of character. Shaw was a literary cartoonist; and as a literary cartoonist his aim was humorous, exaggerative portraiture, and not caustic or malicious satire. Shaw's crucial innovation was, in abandoning raw realism and photographic representation, to develop a new form of "Ultra-realism" or "supra-naturalism". It was necessary to create characters, in order to achieve this, in a strictly realistic setting, giving in their mouths truths as naked thoughts from the sub-conscious. This expression from the sub-conscious is as truly self-expressive as the soliloquies of Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth and many other Shakespearean self-revealers. This view is explicitly set forth by Shaw : "My sort of play would be

impossible unless I endowed my characters with powers of self-consciousness and self-expression which they would not possess in real life. You could not have Esop's fables unless the animals talked"¹. O'Neill's concept of bringing the inner life into parallel with the outer life interested Shaw deeply, because that achievement of the American dramatist, in whom Shaw saw the "only" contemporary American dramatist, strongly resembled what he himself had long been attempting to do. He realised the essential unreality of each person with two voices distinguished by different keys; one the natural language of daily life, insincere and artificial; the other, the speech from the sub-conscious. "But the schizophrenia, he felt, was too glaring for the stage, forbidding even that classic remission of incredulity expressed so ingeniously by Hazlitt"². Shaw felt that there was but one solution to this problem; to have the individual, in the realm of the Conscious and on the plane of daily living, speak with but a single tone and voice the uninhibited impulse to truth of the Sub-conscious. Shaw illuminates the whole matter in a passage of a letter written to Prof. Allardyce Nicoll, referring to his practice of making characters "say not what in real life they could never bring themselves to say, even if they understood themselves clearly enough, but the naked soul truth, quite

1. Sixteen Self-sketches - G. B. Shaw. N. Y. 1949. P 157.

2. G.B.S. : Man of the Century. A. Henderson. Vol II
Appleton-Century Crofts Inc. 1956. P 755.

objectively and scientifically presented, thus combining the extreme of unnaturalness"¹. This Shaw divined in Shakespeare at his greatest moments. The Shakespearean soliloquy, in so far as it was not merely an "aside" for the information of the audience, was an attempt at this. According to Shaw the highest drama is nothing but a striving towards this feat of interpretation².

No study of the dramatic technique of Shaw could be complete without a reference to the puppetal semblance noticeable in many of his plays, especially those which are labelled as moralities. All his morality plays - and in a broad sense all the plays of Shaw are morality plays - are termed indiscriminately by him as allegory, parable and fable. There was a childlike mood of wonder in Shaw that responded to that philosophic spirit of Bergson, who found the basic meaning of humour emerging from consideration of man as a puppet, a mechanical toy. All the allegorised characters of Shaw, in particular those presenting a single trait or characteristic, have something of the rigidity of the marionette.

No one who has studied with care the Shavian drama, the settings, and the handling of characters, which often appear to be "thought-marionettes" skilfully designed

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1. Cited by Prof. Allardyce Nicoll in A History of Late Nineteenth century Drama 1850-1900 (Cambridge, 1949) Vol I. P 201-202.
 2. Ibid.

and often only thinly disguised, can fail to trace their origin back to the old church pageants and shows. Punch and Judy shows in which Shaw revelled as a youth certainly had deep-seated influence in his plays. In the Shaw drama chest we find both the staged marionette-shows with human puppets and the modernised Punch and Judy Play. The Dark Lady of the Sonnets and Great Catherine are illustrations of the former type while The Devil's Disciple and The Shewing up of Blanco Posnet are of the latter. It is quite interesting and appropriate to note that the last work Shaw wrote for production should have been a puppet play - Shakes versus Shav (1949) - produced by the ¹Walds Lanchester Marionette Theatre at the Lyceum Hall, Malvern. The note of Shaw on the Programme beginning "This in all actuarial probability is my last play and the climax of my eminence, such as it is", is quite significant. It would be wrong, of course, to discover the puppet-master Shaw in all his plays and in the same degree. Certain critics have gone up so far as to assert that to Shaw had occurred the notion of relieving the British drama from the burden of human beings and substituting a procession of puppets. To this Shaw retorted, "You must not let yourself be overwhelmed by my style All my plays were written . . . as plays of life, character, and human

1. This note is printed as Preface to Shakes versus Shav in The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 916-917.

destiny; like those of Shakespeare and Euripedes". It must be admitted, however, that the relation of Shaw's plays to marionette shows and Punch and Judy Plays, and through the latter to the old Moralities has not been given any serious study.

When a playwright uses so many and so varied techniques, as does Shaw, we feel really disturbed and at a loss; no wonder the Victorian play-goers did not know what to think after seeing a Shaw-play. Shaw at the same time and to the bewilderment of the critic, claims that he is an inspired artist and wants us to understand that his plays are not "constructed plays"; rather they grow naturally. Shaw, we all surely agree, is never dull and there is a lot of truth in the observation that if a playwright "constructs" a play, he will find himself in the position of a person putting together a jig-saw huzzle, absorbed and intensely interested in an operation which becomes unbearably dull. A good play constructs with a subtlety, and often with a mechanical ingenuity that deludes the critics who hold the playwright as a crafty artificer when, in fact, he has never thought of what one character would say until another gave the cue. This is not the technique of an artisan, but of an inspired artist. When after the production of Saint Joan, which gave Shaw a towering position in the theatre, the playwright was called upon by the Modern Historic Records

1. As in G.B.S. : Man of the Century Vol II A. Handerson
Appleton Century Crofts Inc. 1956. p 718

Association to define the principles that govern the dramatist in his selection of themes and methods of treatment, he sent a lengthy reply in which are to be found some specific statements which illuminate how he works and why, at least in his later works, there is a mystic spirit. In view of the significance of Shaw's observation, I venture to quote him at length :

"I am not governed by principles; I am inspired; how and why I cannot explain because I do not know. But inspiration it must be; for it comes to me without any reference to my own ends and interests."¹

This is a fair description of a dramatic author; it also shows that the inspired artist works without being inhibited by his own aims and interests - social, political or philosophical. That Shaw can write like an inspired artist is amply demonstrated in that scene in Candida where Candida declares her purpose of remaining with the strong man because he is the weak man. She is asked to choose between two men, one, a self-confident preacher, her husband, and the other, a wild and weak young romantic poet, her lover. She chooses the former because she understands that he requires her help more and he has more weakness. Here we see one of the best reversals that Shaw ever effected. But there is more than this in Candida. Marriage is an actual human relation which has some emotional results. The wife regards

1. As in European Theories of the Drama - Barrett H.

Clark. Cincinnati. 1918. P 475.

her husband at once as the strongest and the weakest man depending squarely on her. It may be said that this relationship is not one based on love or fear, but one based strictly on marriage. The man has the incurable sense of the mother in his wife. This fact about the marriage relationship has been brought out by Shaw in the play.

The "principles" guide only the lesser writers who try to construct their plays, but Shaw's plays, being pieces of inspiration, cannot be thought of in terms of being "constructed". But the inspired artist gives his work a total design; how it happens is without his knowledge. Shaw writes,¹ "I find myself possessed of a theme in the following manner. I am pushed by a natural need to set to work, to write down conversations that come into my head unaccountably. At first I hardly know the speakers, and cannot find names for them. Then they become more and more familiar; and I learn their names. Finally I come to know them very well, and discover what it is they are driving at and why they have said and done things I have been moved to set down.

"This is not being "guided by principles"; it is hallucination; and sane hallucination is what we call play or dramaI do not select my methods; they are imposed on me by a hundred considerations . . . by the nature and limits of the art of acting, by the capacity of the spectators for understanding what they see and hear

1. As in *European Theories of Drama*. Barrett H. Clark Cincinnati. 1918. P 475.

"I have to consider . . . the extent to which the magic of art can break through commercial prudence, the limits set by honour and humanity to the tasks I may set to my fellow-artist the actor".

It appears from the foregoing discussion that Shaw was not an innovator in dramatic technique. He was at bottom a classicist in dramatic construction who constantly fell back upon Moliere and Euripedes as well as other great dramatists and story tellers. Certain it is that he modelled a number of his plays upon the almost plotless conversation pieces of Moliere. But, in addition, he may well be credited with having created the so-called "debated drama". He labouriously carried the debated drama through the several phases of the disquisitory, discursive, and digressive dramas. These last are plays in which Shaw seemingly capriciously, but in fact deliberately, digresses from the central theme of the play, and makes a personal tour of his brain with all its prejudices and eccentricities. Such plays are entertainments, no less delightful because they do not conform to the orthodox canons of dramatic art. So far as possible he eliminated plot, frequently discarded the technique of the "Well-made Play", shunned the romantic dramas of love and intrigue and, in later phases, devoted himself entirely to the expression of general philosophical ideas in conversational pieces.

When I say that Shaw, at bottom, is a classicist, I mean that his execution is classical. But the source of

his plays is always romantic in so far as they are the result of his inspiration. All great art is romantic in inspiration and classical in execution.

It is Shaw, more than anybody else, who kept the world laughing for over half a century. He was almost like a prankish boy - with a fundamental difference, nevertheless - playing with a huge but stupid animal, the Public. An analysis of his predicaments and the way he handled them may be given in this way : Waggery as a medium is invaluable. Shaw's case greatly is the case of Rabelais over again. When he began to promulgate his opinions, he found that they appeared to the unthinking people extravagant and even insane. In order to get a hearing it was necessary, Shaw understood, to attain the footing of a privileged lunatic with the licence of a jester¹. He found that he had only to say with perfect simplicity what he meant seriously just as it struck him, to make everybody laugh; the real joke is that all the time he is in perfect earnest.

All this is said to bring home the point that the technique of the Shavian drama and the treatment of theme in that drama are not air-tight compartments which could be studied independent of each other. Much has already been said about the treatment of theme in a Shaw-play, but a little more discussion is deemed necessary.

1. George Bernard Shaw - Clarence Rook. The Chap-Book. 1896. P 539.

So long the critics and the theatre-goers had the notion that drama must be written with "dramatic" themes. But it was Shaw who showed that a drama may include, as its theme, anything and everything; after him it has become impossible to say which themes should be branded as non-dramatic. Shaw takes up love, marriage, family life, money, poverty, capitalism, socialism, critics, ministers, future life, simpleton, conscience, the League of Nations, Ireland, England --- to name them haphazardly --- in his "Social", "Political", "Philosophical" plays and treats them in his own way.

The phrase "in his own way" makes it necessary to have a glimpse, however quick, into the mind of Bernard Shaw; this would help us understand why he dealt with his themes in the way he did. Granting the artist, a man obviously deals with a subject in a manner that best suits and fits in his mental make-up. Shaw's was a gigantic intellect and it is quite a difficult job to separate the chaff from the grain. Still an attempt may be made. Though we do not completely agree with G.K. Chesterton's analysis of the mind of Bernard Shaw, Shaw's mind can be studied in the very three broad different aspects analysed by Chesterton - Irishman, Puritan, and Progressive. All these aspects have to be understood in order to examine how the playwright dealt with his themes.

1. George Bernard Shaw - G. K. Chesterton, The Bodley Head. London. 1961. P 6 - 80

Shaw had the rare quality of being a saint of a strictly ascetic type, for he was actually unwordly and innocent; this unworldliness and innocence - the qualities of saints - are typical Irish qualities. Nothing can be truer than this that Ireland has a quality which made it the land of saints and virgins. Elsewhere in this chapter it has been noted that Shaw had a childlike mood of wonder. He is often audacious in theory, but is always comparatively clean in thought¹. This is owing to his childlike innocence which made him courageous enough to give voice to unpalatable truths. A queer clearness of the intellect is an Irish gift and from behind the seemingly jumbled-up thoughts of Shaw this clearness radiates. It has been noted by C.E.M. Joad that Shaw's thought is coherent : ". . .his thought . . . is remarkably coherent, and the doctrine of Creative Evolution informs and unifies his teaching on every other topics"². This consistency, this coherence, would be impossible had he not have a clear intellect. He seemed to the English, as he seems to some people even now, wild and unreasonable because he was really much too reasonable to be anything but fierce when he is fighting. Personally one of the kindest of men, Shaw sometimes has written to hurt, not because he hated a particular man, but because he could not stand calmly certain ideas and would slay them if he could.

1. Ibid.

2. Shaw - C.E.M. Joad. Victor Gollancz Ltd. London. 1949. (Distributor : Allied Publishers Ltd. Bombay and Calcutta). P 198.

The English are always led to the fallacy that the Irish are weak and emotional and this fallacy springs from the fact that the Irish are lucid and very emotional. An Irishman may like romance, but, like Shaw, will not fail to point out that it is "only romance". But here we must grant the individual oddities and eccentricities of Shaw which are many and varied.

As a growing boy, Shaw developed an attitude of criticism, of scepticism, towards religion - an attitude which begot many wrong and misleading conclusions. His father had a devastating sense of anti-climax which was transmitted to the son. The father, while reproving the son for his irreverence, ended the reproof with even a more outrageous irreverence. Shaw's irreverence towards religion, it should be noted, was actually his irreverence towards the conventions of religions. An overwhelming contempt towards the conventions of religion and society was absorbed by Shaw in his impressionable years. The spirit of comic irreverence to which he was exposed in his childhood spent in the company of his father and his uncle Walter, had been highly beneficial to him throughout his life. It set upon him the seal of a satirist; but, may it be noted, he never satirised the truth of religion; he satirised only he sham, the hypocrisy. As a small boy he, like many other children, conceived a positive hatred for religious practices because of compulsory church attendance. I feel irresistibly tempted to quote Shaw to give an idea of his

hatred for congregation in the church which appeared to him, not the house of God, but the house of Satan.

". . . To this day, my flesh creeps when I recall that genteel suburban Irish Protestant Church, built by Roman Catholic workmen who would have considered themselves damned had they crossed its threshold afterwards. Every separate stone, every pane of glass, every fillet of ornamental iron work - half dog-collar, half coronet - in that building must have showed a separate evil passion in my young heart"¹.

The unnaturally motionless figures of the congregation in their Sunday clothes and bonnets, and their set faces, pale with malignant rigidity produced by the suppression of all expression produced a positive impression of intolerance on young Shaw - an impression that lasted throughout his life.

The adjective used by G.K. Chesterton to the home of the Shaws as "narrow, Puritan"² is very much misleading. It is true that Shaw was a Puritan, but to call the house where he was born and where he spent his young

1. Quoted from Geogre Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century Vol I. Appleon-Century Croft Inc. 1956. P 45. The essay "On Going to Churce", was Published in The Savoy, January, 1896. This essay has been frequently reprinted, particularly in The Philistine.

2. G.B. Shaw - G.K. Chesterton. The Bodly Head. London.1961.

days as just Puritan and also narrow is capable of drawing us to wrong conclusions. From all we know of their home with the elder Shaw and Walter discussing religion in the most comic and outrageous tone gives us the impression that it was not an average "narrow, Puritan" home. In later life Shaw reached the unalterable conclusion that, so far as Protestant gentry was concerned, Ireland was the most irreligious country in the world. The letter written by Shaw, when he was only nineteen, to "Public Opinion" brought the charge of atheism against him. True it is that Shaw was not religious in the conventional sense and certainly it was outrageously blasphemous of him to liken the church to the house of Satan. But Shaw was religious in a deeper sense. He, at bottom, was a spiritualist and a mystic for whom the formalities of religious practices had little value. That he was a Puritan is beyond dispute. In one of his numerous prefaces Shaw declared, "I have always been a Puritan in my attitude towards art". Exhibiting all that is purest in the Puritan, Shaw, a closer study will reveal, was on the side of the Puritan in almost everything. He had unflinching devotion to truth and the deep desire to see truth face to face. He was highly impatient with irrelevant sentiment or destructive symbols and was gifted with the rare quality of

1. The whole letter is quoted by Archibald Henderson in George Bernard Shaw : Man of the Century Vol I. Appleton - Century - Crofts Inc. 1956. P 48-49.

2. Preface to Three Plays for Puritans. The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 743.

constant effort to keep the soul at his highest pressure and speed. We may here note that Shaw found in Bunyan, a Puritan, a Kindred soul, Bunyan was Shaw's favourite author and went so far as to place him above Shakespeare as a writer and philosopher¹. But here again, a note of caution must be sounded. Whatever is sentimental and deliquescent in Puritanism was rejected by Shaw. To look at Shaw as an orthodox Puritan also will be misleading because he never supported any repression. Instead of calling him a Puritan it would be more fitting to call him a biologist. Shaw's condemnation of such highly respected institutions as marriage and family led many to brand him as obscene and immoral. As he said and wrote unpalatable, discomfoting facts, he was looked upon as immoral by the "moral" Victorians. But the fact is that he was opposed to repression, the greatest good for a Puritan, of pleasures. The "Puritan" Shaw would feel out of water in the England of Cromwell. Sex experience, for Shaw, was not a taboo; rather it was a part of human growth and about this subject he thought and thought like a true biologist. But Shaw did not indulge, and he did not want the good man to indulge in feminine charm. Shakespeare's Caesar may thus indulge, but not Shaw's Caesar.

1. It may be noted that Shaw called John Bunyan "Greatest English dramatizer of life" in the Preface to Three Plays for Puritans. The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 746.

Shaw was born in an epoch, or rather at the end of an epoch, which was in many ways unique in history. There had been other periods of reform which had swiftness as the main characteristic, for example, the period of the French Revolution which changed the colour of all Europe and brought about a change in the mental horizon of the people. The nineteenth century was, too, a period of reform; but now the ideas of reform dwindled into the feeble idea of mere progress as had never happened before, not certainly in the period of the French Revolution. The Republican energy failed to plant real hope in the mind of the people. By the fag end of the nineteenth century two distinct figures arose in the society - the pure Conservative and the pure Progressive¹. These two figures would have been laughed out of existence in any other epoch of history because there is something comically foolish in the idea of mere progress or going forward as in the idea of mere conservation without judgement. Whereas there have been ages of Conservation and Progress, only the last part of the nineteenth century remained content only with these two words.

History, the wise say, repeats itself. We know how the wave of the Renaissance froze into mere form of classicism. So also the ideas of democratic rights and freedoms of the nineteenth century stiffened into mere scepticism, destructive of everything, including democracy

1. George Bernard Shaw - G.K. Chesterton. The Bodley Head.
London. P 50.

itself. The destroyers were always talking, possibly without understanding the implications of all their talks, of going ceaselessly forward. The result was as it should be: the moral world was completely in a chaos. For all their talks of morality, it had no solid land beneath its feet when Bernard Shaw arrived on the scene. The Progressive of the time was always discontented and this discontentment led him to some futile speculations; his was an almost mad search for institutions which he could break or alter and then thank himself for becoming a progressive. Thus the mind of the Progressive was a veritable riot. Shaw was also a Progressive, but with a difference; and he could beat all the progressives of the time comfortably in this great game of being a progressive. The secret of his victory was that his was not a mental riot; he was completely clean-headed who could always find the most unthought of arguments to counter the views of his opposition. Whereas most of the progressives had no idea about their destination or aim, Shaw had the knack not only for producing a new and surprising argument, but also had a new philosophy. It is greatly his credit to have brightened the "modern movements" with suggestive thoughts, even though his thoughts are not entirely original.

The romantic rationalists were struck dumb by the Shavian trick of exposing their sentimental views; he turned their own rationalism against their sentimentalism. The romantic rationalists would hold that women were equal to men and then look at them as goddesses. Shaw contended that

if she was his equal it would be foolish and illogical to romanticise her as a goddess and to place her on the altar as a charming, flawless creature. Whereas for the women equality meant the emancipation of women making them equal to men, for Shaw it meant primarily the emancipation of men from the bondage of woman-worship, allowing them to be rude to women. In almost every play of Shaw we find a man and a woman pitted against each other in arguments, in which the woman is out-witted and out-manoevred until she admits that she is no better than, but equal to, his male victor. It is an illustration of Shaw's undisputed ability to throw a newer light on every aspect of life. He out-manoevred the progressives and caught the revolutionists napping when he pointed out that the Home Rule for Ireland, with which the revolutionists and the progressives fell in instinctively, was a bad thing because it started with the word "Home" which could not have any good influence on a man. In thus arguing Shaw exposed the sentimentalism of the romantic rationalists. Whereas most of the people including the romantic rationalists looked at Love and War and the British Party System with awe and reverence, Shaw took care to scrap the romance out of these things and showed point-blank that neither Love nor War had any romantic charm and that the British Party System was unworkable. The romantic idealist's view of Love and War and the romantic idealists themselves were intolerable to Shaw; he threw cold water upon them by using the term "idealist" always as a reproach. It must,

however, be borne in mind that, far from being a sceptic, Shaw's dogma was not one of hopelessness and unbelief. For a man to whom Life was glorious, nothing could be more foreign than the dogma of futility and hopelessness.

Shaw was a profound humanitarian which meant for him an identification of human life with the life of nature. But he was careful lest people should mistake him for being a sentimentally compassionate man. So he claimed that he was an economist who hated to see life wasted by carelessness and cruelty. He became a vegetarian and claimed that he became a vegetarian not because he felt sentimental about animals, but because it was his "duty" not to devour animals and also because he disliked dead animals. He was not a sentimental socialist and any suggestion that he became a socialist because he was sentimental enough to take poverty as cruel, would not be entertained by him. He announced that he became a socialist because poverty was wasteful and the greatest of all crimes from which all other crimes emanate. It is true that he felt bitter to see the oppressed poor, but he would not admit that his view-point was that of a sentimentalist; rather it was that of an economist. He would say that he hated the poor and so would not have even a single man remain poor. Thus Shaw was the arch-progressive of his time, the difference between him and other progressives being very great. His arch-progressivism antagonised even some of his friends and progressive contemporaries. In every age the world demands some passionate protestant, to compel us to justify our

beliefs and to evaluate our lives. Through the ages we have seen the births and works and messages of Moliere, Swift, Voltaire, Ibsen, Carlyle. To this bright galaxy we may safely add the name of George Bernard Shaw - a destroyer no doubt, but not a destroyer who destroys for its own sake, but for creating something greater and nobler. Here was a man who stood against all sham and hypocrisy, against ugliness in life and society; in short, a man who carried on the war of Jesus Christ --- to unmask imposture, to overthrow tyrannies, falsehoods, and superstitions.

With this idea of the mental horizon of Shaw we may proceed to ask what the themes of his plays are and how did the dramatist deal with these themes. It is impossible to answer this question in a sentence or two because his themes are as varied as the moods of Nature; and because he does not treat his themes in the fashion of a conventional man.

Shaw was not a socialist dramatist in the same sense that Upton Sinclair was a socialist novelist. His knowledge of economic systems and their bearing on the life of the people certainly stood him in good stead as a dramatist. But to say this is to give as little idea of what kinds of characters he creates, what situations they find them in, and what the plays are about as may be given of the figures of Michelangelo by asserting that they are the works of a man who understood the skeleton and the muscles --- one who had the knowledge of anatomy. It is quite wrong and misleading to assume or even suggest, as has

sometimes been done, that the possession of socio-economic intelligence must imply that the writer who possesses it writes tracts for social reform without bothering for art.

Shaw has to thank himself for playing into the hands of the critics. In his early days he wrote books on Wagner and Ibsen which introduced their subjects to the English-speaking public wrongfully as primarily social reformers. Though the reformist zeal in Wagner and Ibsen cannot and should not be completely ignored, Shaw, in his zeal, emphasized this aspect in them to such an extent that they appear before us, if we accept Shaw's views about them, as nothing but social reformers of the Shavian brand. Shaw's views about them are nothing but a misinterpretation, for Wagner and Ibsen were artists in the first place. Ibsen's theme, although characteristic of the nineteenth century European society, is not a doctrine of social revolution; it is rather the dramatization of the tremendous conflict between one's duty to the established institutions and moral dogmas and one's duty to one's own conscience. Ibsen treats this theme over and over again in a number of ways in different settings. The conflict in The Pillars of the Society and that in A Doll's House or Hedda Gabler is fundamentally the same, the difference lying in the situations the characters find themselves thrown into. The conflict between the nineteenth century moral world and the dictates of one's conscience is the basic theme of Ibsen. It is a big question whether Bernard Shaw has any such basic

theme. Shaw really deals with subjects of unthinkable variety and it is Shaw who has shown that any subject could be a subject for treatment in a drama provided the dramatist has the technique of dramaturgy at his finger-tips. Shaw was certainly conscious of the importance of his themes. This becomes obvious from his declaration that he regarded much current morality as to economic and sexual relations as disastrously wrong and that he regarded with abhorrence certain doctrines of Christian religion as understood in England. It is a fact that Shaw is important as a dramatist for his dramatic technique as well as for his themes.

But to classify the themes of any dramatist, of Shaw most of all, is a task beset with difficulties ; and although I have made an attempt to do this, it is wellnigh impossible to ascribe one particular theme to one drama ; that would be a serious mistake and any such attempt is bound to end in futility. The colourful, artistic and, one might add, the philosophic mind of Shaw worked into all the plays and we may well discover in one single play of Shaw themes more than one. In a play of ideas the playwright deals with ideas and dramatizes them. It is only commonplace observation that political, economic and social problems cannot be thought of independent of each other ; even philosophic systems may be regarded as by-products of socio-economic conditions. It is obvious, therefore, that in a play of ideas we cannot expect only one theme, but a whole set of them cutting across each other frequently. A

"political" play of ideas can naturally have "philosophical" bearings; a play dealing with the moral atmosphere of a given period or place cannot be thought of without relating it to the political and economic situation of the period or the place. Still an attempt at classification of themes of Shavian plays is not useless --- even though all the themes of his plays and even of one single play may not be covered -- in as much as it would help us to understand these plays. While making such an attempt we can at best speak of the major theme and the minor theme in a play, always bearing in mind that such a classification is not quite satisfactory and may sometimes be misleading; the so-called major and minor themes may, playing into each other, become really one. Again it must be noted that in the purely "disquisitory" plays of the last period of Shaw's dramatic career one does not find "theme" as such because in them one finds "talks" about various interests leading to no specific idea, thus keeping one askance for a precise theme or themes.

The theme which recurs in Bernard Shaw is the polar opposition between the type of the saint and the type of the successful practical man. We find the clearest presentation of this type of opposition in the conflict between Father Keegan and Tom Broadbent in John Bull's Other Island and between Barbara and Andrew Undershaft in Major Barbara. There the moral scales are pretty evenly weighted and the

1. Bernard Shaw at Eighty --- Edmund Wilson in G.B.S : A Critical Survey --- Ed. Louis Kronenberger. The World Publishing Co. N.Y. 1953. P 143.

predominance of the practical man produces an effect of satisfactory reassurance without carrying any evil implications. But these opposites --- the saintly and the practical --- also have the tendency to dissociate themselves from one another and to feature themselves alternatively in successive plays. Thus in The Devil's Disciple the hero is a dashing fellow who has flashes, though somewhat melodramatic, of saintliness and his opponents are made comic or base. The same is true of The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet. Caesar and Cleopatra is a play glorifying the practical man of business; Androcles and the Lion glorifies the saintly and so does Saint Joan. In Saint Joan the protagonist and the antagonist are shown alike effective.

But this theme of the conflict between the saintly and the practical is not, though a recurrent theme in the plays of Shaw, the only theme that he treats. His themes are amazingly various covering a big area of human thought --- relation between man and woman, between husband and wife, parents and children; War; the problem of conscience, of Education and creation, character and disposition; the problems of the individual and society; high politics ; religion; and running through almost all the plays, the theme of Creative Evolution. He presents the classic themes in drama; the clash within the mind of the individual, between institutions, and between the individual and the forces that govern or try to govern the society. Shaw's themes are traditional, but where he differed from the

earlier playwrights is the way he looked at the themes. As a "younger son of the middle class" he discarded the morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie and turned his themes inside out to discover the sham and the shallow in the Victorian morality. It is not that all the themes of Bernard Shaw are modern. Most of the "modern" themes and "ideas" are a hundred years old when they are not as old as the world. But these themes appear so fresh when expressed by Shaw; in the hands of most of the others the same themes would turn quite dull. The reason may be that he seldom deals with the conventions or convictions from the same ground as another man would do. An excellent example of this may be found in Saint Joan. There is no dearth of dull wearisome books on the ordinary anti-clerical theme. In these books clericalism is denounced; the clerics are denounced because they condemn the heroine. But Shaw does not denounce the clerics; rather he defends them and shows that Cauchon really tried to save Joan. Again Shaw does not portray Joan as a romantic heroine; his Joan is a soldier who has not lost her feminine nature; she is immature and ignorant, for she has no notion that her words and actions definitely go against the interests of the Catholic Church and the Feudal System. While dealing with the theme of war, for instance, in Arms and the Man he shows that the romantic attitude towards war is sham; that it is more important to have a few bits of chocolate to eat in the field than cartridges for revolver. In this play romantic love has been ridiculed for neither Sergius nor Raina, who appears so romantic in the beginning, is satisfied with romantic love.

It is not a question of whether Shaw's ideas are right or wrong. The point is how he dramatizes his ideas as he deals with his themes. For instance, the theme of education and creation has been dealt with in Pygmalion, in which the creator gives birth to certain problems by imparting education to Eliza. The flower-girl could earn her daily bread when she could not talk correctly and properly. Prof. Higgins teaches her how to talk properly and Pickering gives her lessons in deportment and now she finds herself completely helpless. Formerly she was independent and could depend upon herself, but now she must depend upon somebody, preferably a man. Unlike Pinero and Jones, Shaw did not seek any compromise between the society and the individual. There was every fear that the upholders of morality would brand him as immoral for having exposed the naked, discomforting facts about the Victorian society. Shaw himself declared that he was a specialist in "immoral" and "heretical" plays and thought that such plays were essential to the welfare of the nation. By "immoral" Shaw did not mean what was not proper, but what was contrary to conventional standards of manners and moralities. Taking the risk of being called "obscene" he asked pointedly the validity of the manners and moralities of the convention-bound people making the protagonists of his plays unconventional; he asked the use of the established institutions and beliefs which, he thought, the people had already outgrown. In this respect, however, he was not the first playwright in European literature, for the plays of

Ibsen have also been labelled "immoral"; Ghosts has been called "an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly"¹ and The Master Builder, ". . . unwholesome . . . simply blasphemous"². It may be pointed out that Shaw made an open confession of his "immorality" : "I had . . . no respect for popular morality, no belief in popular religion"³

We must not fail to note that Shaw never makes adultery a theme. In one of his earliest prefaces he wrote : "I have a technical objection to making sexual infatuation a tragic theme. Experience proves that it is only effective in the comic spiritLet realism have its demonstration, comedy its criticism, or even bawdy its horse-laugh at the expense of sexual infatuation, if it must, but to ask us to subject our souls to its ruinous glamour, to worship it, to deify it, as if it alone makes our life worth living, is nothing but folly gone mad erotically"⁴ Shaw was interested in sexuality in its intellectual and comic aspects, but his works seldom indicate a simple sexual attitude. He does not ignore love which he finds unaccountable and mysterious and irrational. He, therefore, is deliberately anti-romantic, laughing at the illusions of the

1. As quoted in Ibsen. Michael Meyer. Penguin. 1974. P 686.

2. As quoted in Ibsen. Michael Meyer. Penguin. 1974. P 739.

3. Preface to Plays Unpleasant. The complete Prefaces of B. Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 716.

4. Preface to Three Plays for Puritans. The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 749.

play between the sexes. He treats love with the respect of one who realises its importance, but without false sentiments or exaggerations so that he never glamourizes love or the lovers. The beloveds in his plays are not paragons of virtues; his is not the cult of woman-worship. Shaw is chiefly concerned with what may be called conscious love --- love without false sentiments and trivialities. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that Shaw regarded love simply as a mechanical attraction. You Never Can Tell contains a characteristic love-episode where Valentine has fallen hopelessly in love with Gloria and has to reveal himself to her though he hated himself all the while for his helplessness. As the play advances he is shown to be a man of imagination in whom love becomes an ecstasy. Valentine tries, not with complete success, to bring the ecstasy on to the level of conscious love. In Arms and the Man romance is blasted, the romantic hero and the heroine are thrown off their pedestal of higher love, and conscious love replaces romantic love and its pretences and illusions. One of the most distinguished works of Shaw, The Heartbreak House which is generally produced and read without its love theme in mind, shows the attainment of conscious love in a girl who passes through emotional love and love of convenience. If one desires to see Caesar and Cleopatra in Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra as sexually infatuated, one must be utterly disappointed. Shaw's Caesar never worships woman, never allows them to fascinate him; Cleopatra understands that Caesar is above the human weakness of eroticism.

Whereas politicians generally have a short view and whereas their activities are guided by expediency, Shaw's is a long one and, as his interests went far beyond party politics, he is not guided by expediency. These become evident from such plays as The Apple Cart, Too True to be Good, On the Rocks, The Millionairess, Geneva etc. which deal with "high politics". In these plays he shows the inadequacy of political education, uselessness of political institutions that exist without purpose, lack of leadership and the challenge of false leadership; he shows the necessity of attaining consciousness and the need for political philosophy. Shaw writes : "Until there is an England in which every man is a Cromwell, a Rome in which every man is a Caesar, a Germany in which every man is a Luther plus a Goethe, the world will be no more improved by its heroes than a Brixton villa is improved by the pyramids of Cheops¹". It should be understood that Shaw's praise of Fascist leaders and Soviet leaders was not the outcome of his blind partiality for dictators; it was rather the outcome of his impatience with pretended democracy.

In The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet, Androcles and the Lion, Saint Joan, and Major Barbara religion is the theme together with individual conscience. We must not expect a systematic body of thought in the plays of Shaw who is primarily an artist ; it is often forgotten that the function of the artist and the academic philosopher is not the same.

1. Quoted by C.B.Purdom in A Guide to the Plays of Bernard Shaw. Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1963. P 110.

Shaw is a comic genius from whom a workable philosophical system should not be expected ; but he has philosophical ideas which are essentially religious. I have maintained in another place of the present work that Shaw's philosophy and his religion are essentially one and he has given dramatic expression to it. Saint Joan is possibly the most religious of Shaw's plays followed by Androcles and the Lion. It may be noted that a religious content is discernible throughout his works from John Bull's Other Island to In Good King Charles's Golden Days.

Creative Evolution and Life Force is the dominant theme in a number of Shaw's plays ; they may be called the Philosophical Plays of Shaw. We may name, Man and Superman, Back to Methuselah and the short piece, The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles in which Creative Evolution is the main theme. In the first play the Neitzschean idea of the Superman becomes the eternal purpose to which man must give himself ; in the voluminous Back to Methuselah the idea that human life is the expression of the will to create, through which man could make himself anew, has been dealt with. The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles suggests that every day should be treated as a Judgement Day. In Major Barbara, Caesar and Cleopatra, Misalliance, Androcles and the Lion and many other plays "Life Force", "Will of God", or "Evolutionary Appetite" is present as leading idea. The themes of religion and Creative Evolution are of eternal interest and so the plays of Shaw dealing with such themes go beyond merely temporal and comic.