



## ODYSSEY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY DRAMA: RISE OF SHAW AS A DRAMATIST - A REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT:

Among the four literary genre, drama is considered the most potent vehicle to hold a mirror to society. True to this fact, English drama, in its marathon journey, has created a tremendous appeal to the different sections of people from time to time reflecting the contemporary life. Infact, its glory began right from the Elizabethan period and received a paradigm shift from nineteenth century, especially due to scientific inventions and discoveries from Victorian age. The proposed paper throws a flood of light on its dramatic travel with its new concepts and techniques. The transformation can be visualized from the perspective of depicting human propensity to intellectual exuberance to enlighten the audience with thought provoking ideas besides providing a variety of recreation. As well, the paper focuses on the historic rise of G.B. Shaw as a dramatist on English literary horizon. In this process, his indomitable competence and art of writing is reviewed with an eye of creative temperament and critical observations.

**KEYWORDS:** genre, drama, mirror, society, appeal, contemporary life, Elizabethan, transformation, audience, ideas, G.B. Shaw, reviewed.

### REVIVAL OF DRAMA OF IDEAS

The last years of the nineteenth century in England closed with a revival of both “Wit and Woe” in the theatre. The Drama of Ideas, dealing with social problems, arose out of the sentimental experiments of earlier years. Younger literary men were engaged in evolving a new theatrical form out of farce, extravaganza and melodrama. The public was being regaled with a fresh kind of serious, realistic drama.

The revival of drama in England towards the end of the nineteenth century may be attributed to several reasons. By the middle of the nineteenth century several adverse restrictions imposed upon drama were removed leaving the atmosphere healthier and more congenial to the production of plays of merit. Though the new liberty was not fully taken advantage of, a number of theatres were built in the sixties and the seventies and greater freedom was felt in the matter of the production of plays.

### RESPONSE OF AUDIENCE

The revival of drama was also due to the positive response of the audience. During the early years the audience became unruly and crowded around the two patent theatres and clamoured for popular evening entertainments. Unlettered, vulgar working classes wanted spectacular shows and musical extravaganzas. For them existence of a theatre was justified only when it catered to their tastes. But, after a prolonged concession to the popular taste, a slow shift crept into the threshold of the new theatrical technique.



Something that was far more significant was the improvement in the audience. The stigma that puritans imprinted on the minds of the audience vanished. Gradually the audience realized that the theatre was more than a mere evening rendezvous. The theatre was given a social standing which it had not possessed in the early years of the century when the queen took unmistakable delight in dramatic entertainments.

The audience evinced much interest in social problems that were contaminating the society to its last fiber. Social reformers like Ruskin and Owen had awoken the people to the fact that they are their 'brother's keepers'. Evils of society ignored so far, were beginning to awaken the slumbering conscience of the nation. The Victorian prudery started waning by paving way to the open discussion between the two sexes. Altogether, the atmosphere was congenial to the writing of plays which had a close bearing on society.

### Shift in Acting and Nature of Drama

The acting which had become dull and monotonous in the early years of the nineteenth century, gradually received a mild impetus. As A.C. Ward observes, "Acting had entirely lost contact with life and was no mirrors held up to nature. The stage had become the home of falsity and extravagant impossibility, the word 'theatrical' was taken into common use to denote whatever was unreal and un-life like".

At this critical juncture in the development of the English drama appeared a group of young dramatists – Tom Robertson, A.W. Pinero, H.A. Jones who gave it a lead in its attempt to free itself from the romantic flights of farce and melodrama and move towards realism and satire.

Robertson saved drama from the stale romantic themes and the farce and extravagance that so long prevailed in the theatre. He introduced social ideas into his plays. We may note that "As far back as 1865 when Robertson's *Society* was produced, to be followed in 1867 by *Caste*, there had dawned the possibility of a new drama realistically concerned with the problems of contemporary life". Encouraged by the reception of the comedy, *Society*, he proceeded to compose several works with similar laconic titles – *Ours* (1866), *Caste* (1867), *Play* (1868), *Home* (1869), *School* (1869), *War* (1871) and others "Thus establishing a new kind of domestic drama which some contemporaries came to style the 'tea cup-and-saucer' theatre". Robertson presented common problems relating to domestic life in a realistic manner. As Nicoll points out, "Robertson's aim was to urge the public to bring their 'fireside concerns' to the play house and this he sought to do by making his plots and characters and settings as realistic as he possibly could".

Robertson began his life as an actor and then started writing plays. He introduced realistic situations and living characters in his plays which are remarkable for their craftsmanship. His plays presented the point of view of the rising Victorian middle class in England. Though he could not rise above conventions, he brought naturalism to the British stage. On the whole, Robertson became a leading light for the future artists. He infused new life into drama and prepared the ground for others. His example was influential "Both in domesticating the drama and turning its attention to social actualities and was an inspiration for later dramatists like A.W. Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, Bernard Shaw and even Oscar Wilde".

A.W. Pinero showed a brilliant promise, but somehow he failed to fulfill it. He wrote a number of realistic domestic plays. He introduced new technical methods in British drama. He was a man with wide experience of the theatre and won acclaim as one destined "To take a good position as a dramatic author". Pinero's early plays, *The Money Spinner* (1880) and *The Squire* show his grasp of the social issues of the time. Although his plays are not unaffected by popular taste, the court theatre farces – *The Magistrate* (1885), *The School Mistress* (1886) and *Dandy Dick* (1886) secured him an important position on the stage and his replacement of incident and situation by character earned him recognition as a talented dramatist.

Henry Arthur Jones wrote eighty seven plays in all, of which twenty three plays were never produced and acted. He "Installed drama as a significant and social force and an institution for social education" what is more he showed "A lively sense of characterization that helped materially to vitalize the stereotyped figures of the older Victorian period".

## IMPACT OF IBSEN

In their efforts to make drama realistic and purposeful, the English dramatists have been greatly influenced by the Norwegian Colossus, Henrik Ibsen, whose work created sensation enormously in 1890 and gave a fillip to the realistic movement to the deeper study of character and to a subtler conception of plot and character presentation. He started introducing for the first time contemporary problems in his plays. As Shaw says, "Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our situations. The things that happen to his stage figures are things that happen to us".

Ibsen's dramatic technique has provided a good opportunity for the playwrights who later come as his successors to write problem plays or discussion plays. As Shaw himself puts it:

You had in what was called a well made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second and an unraveling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation and discussion: and the discussion is the test of the Playwright.

## SHAW'S EMERGENCE ON ENGLISH STAGE

The greatest of the English exponents of the new drama was George Bernard Shaw. Steeped in Ibsenism, or what he understood to be Ibsenism, he decided to endow the theatre with a deep social purpose. His puritan conscience was so stern that he could not keep silent when he came across injustice or ignorance. He lashed his whip relentlessly at every situation – political, social and religious and won reputation as a modern Socrates. As A.C. Ward rightly points out, "Until Bernard Shaw began to write for the theater, there had been no modern British dramatist who took current social, political and religious problems as subjects for plays. He started out with the conviction that the emotional tangles of men and women had received far too much attention on the stage, and he made up his mind to do in English what Henrik Ibsen had been doing in Norwegian since about 1875".

Apart from Ibsen, Shaw had several influences which went a long way in shaping him as a dramatist with a social purpose. Under the influence of Shelley, he became a vegetarian and a teetotaler in 1881. In 1882 he had an opportunity to listen to the speech of Henry George on 'Progress and Poverty'. Influenced by the inspiring lecture Shaw said that it "Changed the whole current of my life". Later, as his curiosity compelled him to know more about economics, he progressed to read Karl Marx's *Das Capital*. As a result, in 1884 he joined the Fabian society, a group of socialist intellectuals.

The Fabians were against the Marxian concept of class struggle. They appealed not only to the workers but to all men whom they could persuade that their aims were just and reasonable. However, Shaw's mission as a Fabian turned meteoric and he soon became disillusioned in the efficacy of Fabian tactics owing to the miserable and ignominious failure of the Trafalgar square demonstration on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1887.

As his financial condition became much discouraging, Shaw was introduced to Pall Mall Gazette and to the world as journalist in 1885. He was appointed music critic to *The Star* in 1888 under the name of Carno di Basetto and in 1895 dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review*. His criticism appeared vigorous and free from jargon, technicalities and accepted judgments. Before beginning his career as a dramatist, Shaw vehemently questioned the existing conventional drama. In the teeth of severe opposition, he openly declared that social problems must be given their due place on the stage as they expose the social evils. By taking a cue from the plays of Ibsen, Shaw started writing his plays with the sole purpose of showing the need for sociological plays.

Shaw as a dramatist ventured to reform the then existing stage techniques and themes through his incessant deliberations on the theater. He declared:

I had no taste for what is called popular art,  
no respect for popular morality, no belief in

popular religion, no admiration for popular heroics.

He also explained that his aims are openly didactic. He hopes to instruct and educate as well as entertain, for “The bad theatres are as mischievous as bad schools or bad churches”.

Elsewhere he states:

Every attempt to extend the repertory proved  
that it is the drama that makes the theatre  
and not the theatre the drama.

From this it is clear that Shaw is essentially an anti-romantic iconoclast. He boldly declared:

I have spared no pains to make known that my  
plays are built to induce, not voluptuous  
reverie but intellectual interest, not romantic  
rhapsody, but humane concern.

Shaw’s early plays fall into three categories – “Plays Unpleasant”, “Plays Pleasant” and “Plays for Puritans”. Under “Plays Unpleasant” we have *Widower’s Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893) and *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1894). Shaw himself states the reason why he calls them “Plays Unpleasant”.

Why I have labeled the three plays in this  
first volume unpleasant the reason is pretty  
obvious: their dramatic power is used to force  
the spectator to face unpleasant facts.

In “Plays Pleasant”, *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Candida* (1895) and *You Never Can Tell* (1895-96) the characters dominate and acquire paramount importance with some pleasant facts. These plays dramatize the conflict between passion and reason. As Sahai points out, “Pleasant Plays first showed the ‘romantic’ side and then the light of realism reveal the absurdity of idealism, bringing disillusionment in its wake”.

The “Three Plays for Puritans” include *The Devil’s disciple* (1896-97), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and *Captain Brass-bound’s conversion* (1899). Shaw’s purpose in writing these plays for puritans is “To show romance transcended by a higher-than-erotic purpose”.

## CONCLUSION

It is drawn from the above discussion that the drama has undergone an amazing metamorphosis with the advent of many dramatists. However, Shaw’s contribution is unique and praiseworthy. The early plays of Shaw are concerned primarily with the social problems of the contemporary society such as slum landlordism, capitalism, prostitution, love and marriage and puritanical rigidity and hypocrisy. Shaw treats these acute social problems of the day not simply as a social propagandist but mostly as a dramatic artist. Of course, his traverse has not stopped with the presentation of social issues, but continues to proliferate philosophical and highly motivational plays such as *Man and Superman*, *Saint Jon*, *Back to Methuselah*, *Pygmalion*, *The Apple Cart* etc., and has made a remarkable bench mark as a dramatist of all times. So to say, age cannot wither his plays, nor custom stale. Critics may call him a propagandist, but his plays will have perennial appeal as long as drama retains its pristine glory.

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### Declaration

We declare that this is our original work and has not been published or sent for publication anywhere else.



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