

Recasting the Realist Tradition in Modern Drama: A Reading of G. B. Shaw and John Galsworthy

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy, two late 19th and early 20th century dramatists from realist tradition focused in their plays on the types of contemporary social problems and their incredible repercussions on society. The study aims at clarifying the position of Shaw and Galsworthy in the battle of reestablishing better human society on the earth in the midst of snarled social conventions. The purpose is to analyse the dramatic products of Shaw and Galsworthy and to find out the causes and natures of human suffering, especially the suffering of the underdog, the downtrodden, the poor, the suppressed and the oppressed. Both G.B. Shaw and Galsworthy were uncompromising realists who exposed various manifestations of social malevolence in their plays. They kept in mind detachment and objectivity in dealing with social problems. They were not conscious of any desire to solve those problems in their plays or to effect great reforms. Their only ambition in drama, as in other works, were to present truth – the realist culture, to produce in them a sort of mental and moral ferment, whereby vision might be enlarged, and imagination livened and understanding promoted.

Key words: Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, realist tradition, modern drama.

Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy were very witty realists who loved to present people with the absurdity of their conventional way of thinking. Their satires range widely over such real subjects as heroism in war, physicians and their power over life and death, religion, the battle of the sexes, education and heaven and hell. In their plays Shaw and Galsworthy combined realistic moral problems with ironic tone and paradoxes. Discussion and intellectual acrobatics are the bases of their drama. Although Shaw and Galsworthy's

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plays focus on real ideas and issues, they are vital and absorbing, enlivened by memorable characterizations, a brilliant command over language and dazzling wit. They were successful in recasting the realist tradition in drama.

George Bernard Shaw wrote several plays with social and political themes under the banner of realism. To a large extent those plays dealt with issues such as poverty and women's rights and implied that socialism could help to solve the problems created by capitalism. Under capitalism people have been forced to impose restrictions that in a socialist nation would have no sense, in order to save the proletariat from extermination. From realistic point of view Shaw's philosophy was creative evolution. He tried to present a coherent and comprehensive view of human nature and of human life, and also to show the way in which human life should best be lived in tangled capitalist conventions.

Shaw penned drama as the instrument of highlighting the realist tradition. According to him by getting rid of poverty people will get rid of the unhappiness and worry which it causes. To defend themselves against this, women, like men, resort to artificial happiness, just as they resort to artificial insensibility when they have to undergo a painful operation. The ferocity of the resistance to their attempt to abolish artificial happiness shows how indispensable it has become under capitalism. Any social change which abolishes poverty and increases the leisure of routine workers will destroy the need for artificial happiness, and increase the opportunities for the sort of activity that makes people very jealous of reducing their fitness by stimulants, and people should get to the possibility of discarding all those social restrictions on personal liberty which the prevalent dearth of happiness and consequent resort to pernicious artificial substitutes force to impose.

He can be considered as a fighter with a realistic approach against the man-made problems in the class-ridden society. He is one of those realists who have the courage to face the truth and declare that a number of time-honoured institutions and conventions are neither holy nor divine and that they must not be allowed to outlast their utility. He was not concerned with pity in the play. He was concerned to diagnose sham and release vitality. To some extent he played the role of a blatant propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people in general. In his view there was not merely some social evil or injustice here and there, but the whole social structure was distorted and based on false assumptions. In order to bring home this truth to the readers or audiences, he often indulged in gross exaggeration,

which is the basis of caricaturist's art, but he was distinguished from a caricaturist by his sincerity of purpose. His aim was not merely to raise a laugh, but also to bring about the much needed social reform. He has shown that most of our sentiments are based on poverty and inequality, which are the poisons that will destroy our civilization in the long run. Thus, Shaw was against typical social conventions. In a positive or constructive way he criticized the customary beliefs and established customs and ideas coated with common sense.

Shaw was not guided by any established notion; instead he was guided by a self-originated rational approach over-flooded by the sympathy to down-trodden society. Being a member of the Fabian Society he had deep dislike for the bourgeoisie class. In a sense he was inspired by Marxian ideology which foregrounded his moral support for the proletariat – subordinate class. His inner thoughts are reflected in the portrayal of social reality with the aim of producing in his readers or audiences a sort of mental and moral ferment for social reform. He was first, last and all the time, a realistic critic. He was in search of the object of his criticism for its underlying ideas and subject these to his test of the logic of events. Most of his criticism directed towards society's ideas in religion, politics and morality that gave him the identity of an iconoclast.

He saw drama as a vehicle for presenting, in entertaining and provocative form, his realistic views of abuses and contradictions of the social order and his suggestions of the true way in which to view human experience and institutions. His object was to satirize, not the invented characters in the plays, but the audience. In his desire to shock rather than to lull, to provoke rather than to amuse, Shaw put into his characters' mouths reality based discussions in which his characteristic wit and love of paradox were given full play. A favourite device of his was to stand the popular view on its head, thus both outraging and titillating his audience from the realistic end.

Shaw aimed at bettering of the lot of humanity by subjecting accepted conventions and institutions to the cold, searching light of his penetrating intellect. All his plays are about some important aspects of contemporary realistic social life or some important social evil or social institution which he considered an evil, and which was scrutinized with courage and determination. Thus he to a large extent was inspired by Shavian Drama. The most important element in a Shavian Drama is its discussion of some important social

problems. Instead of the conflict of wills, as in the romantic drama, we have the conflict of ideas and the conflict of speech in Shaw's dramas. Ideas are more important than feeling, and when he dealt with emotions he left much to be desired. To some extent he failed to devise satisfactory emotional situations. Thus, he used play as a vehicle for intellectual stimulation and provocation. Though he was concerned with both people and ideas he gave more emphasis on ideas. For the sake of reality Shaw invariably attempted in mocking and scoffing at the weaknesses of human nature and society.

He was inspired by the thought that to the mass of oppressive and unjust laws that protect property at the expense of humanity, and enable proprietors to drive whole populations off the land as well as off the heart. He further added that the ridiculous social distinctions between manual labour and brain work, between wholesale business and retail business, are really class distinctions, resulting in complete chaos, waste, havoc, suffering division of mind, friction, clash and conflict in society.

According to Shaw, socialism plays a great role in transforming the power of life and death from private hands to the hands of the constitutional authorities, and regulating it by public law, resulting in the great increase of independence, self respect, freedom from interference with tastes and ways of living, and, generally, all the liberty. Money as a means of freedom is thrown away on the people who are physically rich. In the funniest way he expressed through his dramas that socialism would be unendurable because it would dictate what to eat, drink and wear, leaving no choice in the matter, when people are cowering under a social tyranny which regulates meals, clothes, hours, religion and politics.

Where there is society there are conventions. In other words, society consists of conventions. Shaw upheld the idea that nobody can live in society without conventions. Being a realistic he had to preach one form of unconventionality at a time. Realism reflects in his treatment of the various themes of his plays.

Shaw has expressed himself realistically on every subject between heaven and earth – literature, art, medicine, religion, politics, morality, marriage and family relations, racial prejudices, poverty and social standards. In fact, his plays contain many sermons on social follies and social vices.

In *Arms and the Man* (1894), the realistic criticism is less fierce. Shaw's radical realism, his utter disregard for conventions, his keen didactic

interest and verbal wit often turn the stage into a forum of ideas. The play¹ has Balkan Setting and makes light hearted, though sometimes mordant, and fun of romantic falsifications of both love and warfare.

The playwright may be considered hysterical but, as an artist, has a capacity to renounce personal happiness in the interest of some larger realistic purpose. This is a significant theme for Shaw; it leads on to that of the conflict between man as spiritual creator and woman as guardian of the biological continuity of the human race that is basic to *Man and Superman* (1903). It is shown in this play that an idealistic, cerebral man succumbs to marriage. The play² contains an explicit articulation of a major Shavian theme – that man is the spiritual creator, whereas woman is the biological “Life Force” that must always triumph over him. Shaw expounded his philosophy that humanity is the latest stage in a purposeful and eternal evolutionary movement of the “life force”. The play’s hero, Jack Tanner, is bent on pursuing his own spiritual development in accordance with this philosophy as he flees the determined marital pursuit of the heroine, Ann Whitefield. In the end Jack truefully allows himself to be captured in marriage by Ann upon recognizing that she herself is a powerful instrument of the “Life Force”.

Shaw continued, through his play, to explore realistic consciousness³ and to point out society’s complicity in its own evils. In *Major Barbara* (1905), Shaw has his heroine, a Major in the Salvation Army, discover that her estranged father, a munitions manufacturer, may be a dealer in death but that her principles and practice, however unorthodox, and religious in the highest sense, are those of the Salvation Army. The play thus postulates that poverty is the cause of all evil and Shaw upholds the idea that man can achieve aesthetic salvation only through political activity, not as an individual.

Pygmalion (1913) is a realistic picturisation of love and English class system. It is also a study of the clever treatment of middle-class-morality and class-distinction. It is a combination of the dramatic, the comic, and the realistic corrective that gives Shaw’s plays their special flavour. Based on classical myth, *Pygmalion* plays on the complex business of human relationships in a realistic world. Phonetics Prof. Henry Higgins tutors Eliza Doolittle, not only in the refinement of speech, but also in the refinement of her manner.

Like Shaw, Galsworthy occupies a conspicuous place as a writer of realistic plays in modern English drama. His plays deal with the problems of contemporary life in a realistic manner. To a large extent his plays deal with

the problems of contemporary social life. He deftly combines the realism of a social reformer with the missionary outlook of an idealist. Galsworthy maintains complete impartiality and objectivity in the presentation of social reality.

Galsworthy aims at the representation of contemporary life in its familiar everyday aspects. To Galsworthy, romantic flights were quite unnecessary, the humdrum world around us, with all its welter of conflicting forces, provides sufficient dramatic material for artist’s purpose. His presentation and criticism of social questions earned for him the reputation of a powerful social realist in English drama.

He is fundamentally a modern realist. His plays mirror contemporary society. He had a profound humanitarian outlook of life and he tried to the best of his ability to adopt a realistic attitude. He was slow to condemn individuals. He was not sentimental in his approach and only rarely did he rely upon pathos for the effect of his scenes. He had an excellent sense of dramatic architecture and although his emphasis was not on individuals, he had the power to give the realistic quality to the persons with whom he dealt.

His realism should not be confused with the photographic representation of life. His realistic plays are poignantly shaped and inspired by high intention and imagination. He dealt with social reality like a social reformer. The social problem was the raw stuff of realism – a means through which he made his communication, evaluation and expression. To a large extent his imagination is enlivened by constructive imagination. He gave us impressive close ups of life at its most damnable, but he had the artist’s love of design, his eye for detail. His plays deal with contrasts.

Galsworthy’s plays realistically describe modern society and its problems. He totally eschewed the romantic element in his presentation of problems. Ideas, institutions, morality, class interests and social forces form its main theme. Many of Galsworthy’s plays are based on an inexorable incompatibility between the justice of society and what is actually just. He also handled definite problems of marriage, of sex relationship, of labour disputes, of the administration, of the law, of solitary confinement, but for him the individual problem leads always to the general relations between individuals within the social organism. He suggested no practical reform, though reform appeared in his constant indication of existing wrongs. His solution was not practical but ethical. The source of evil for him laid in failure of imagination and sympathy.

He depicted the familiar aspects of every day life in a natural manner. He explored the dramatic possibilities of the common place. He minutely observed life around him and tried to create in his plays an atmosphere of absolute truth. He endeavoured to depict the realistic picture of society and its problems. But he did not hold any view on social or moral progress of mankind. He analyzed problems and institutions, particularly English ones, from the point of view of a liberal compassionate, upper middle-class man. His civilized social criticism reflects the virtues of such a mind.

Galsworthy observed complete impartiality in the treatment of social realism. An incorruptible lover of truth, he attempted to shape all his plots and problems with the greatest impartiality, allowing both sides to air their opinions and throwing light on their ideas in all possible way. All of his plays exhibit the same features – the omnipresence of a fundamental social problem expressed in a severely natural manner, without straining of situations or exaggeration of final issues, a corresponding realism of dialogue, leading at times to an apparent ordinariness, a native kindliness of heart added to the sternness of the true tragic artist and a complete absence of sentimentalism even when pitiful scenes are introduced.

While dealing with the theme of social realism Galsworthy upheld various pictures of society in his plays. A society and its institutions which are set up to punish wrong doer and maintain law and order, may inflict inexpressible misery and even injustice on innocent people. He also talks of social deterioration which arises inevitably out of social injustice. The drunkard, the swindler, the criminal and the prostitute were not so to begin with. Social injustice done to them has done them incalculable damage and has turned them into what they are. Topics dealing with such social problems formed interesting themes of Galsworthy's social tragedies. There are then dramatic themes bound up with the tragedy of idealism. There are also instances of social tragedy arising out of caste feeling.

In the portrayal of social realism, Galsworthy very subtly and cleverly championed the cause of the downtrodden, the poor, the underdog, the suppressed and the oppressed. He was opposed to blind materialism and took umbrage against the wealthy, leisured people. The impartiality in a play is very remarkable. The suspense is maintained throughout since the scales are held evenly. The interest of the reader never flags.

Galsworthy was above all a realist with a noble heart and singularly free from those foibles of vanity that frequently accompany the generous

gestures made by smaller hearted men. He hated crookedness, custom and fear. His own conventional upper middle-class upbringing brought him into little contact with the lower social orders, yet he understood their laws and their difficulties as well as he understood those of his own class.

As a writer of realistic plays, Galsworthy skillfully reproduced an atmosphere of absolute reality. His plays are solid and honest with no ornamentation, no claptrap. *The Silver Box* (1906), reveals the truth of the old adage that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. Society with its ominous invisible presence decides that the rich shall be preferred to the poor. Jack Barthwick, the rich and influential politician's son, and Jones, the thief of no connections and no money, commit theft. Barthwick goes scot free but Jones, deemed to be a nuisance to the community, is convicted and imprisoned. The most significant point in this play is with reference to the legal machinery in our society. The author exposes the hollowness of the law courts and the justice that is meted out to the people through these legal institutions. Two persons are guilty of the same crime, but so vicious and depraved is the legal system that the rich man escapes punishment and the poor man is punished for the same crime.

In *Strife* (1909), Galsworthy upholds the picture of extremism and violence. Roberts and Anthony are two chief protagonists in the play and they are vehemently opposed to each other. They are extremists and cannot understand other man's point of view. They want to fight to the finish. Both want to dominate each other and do not agree to budge even an inch from their declared stands. The result is both have to suffer humiliation and disillusionment. They do fight for something personal but they are leaders of two different social forces and therefore, they also fight for the welfare of the classes they represent. But the fight leads them nowhere. An agreement which had been proposed before the strike began is reached at between their followers. They are overthrown. The conflict between them leads to suffering and loss. The playwright exposes how suffering weighs heavily on the starving men and their families.

In *Justice* (1910), Galsworthy shows the cruelty of the English judicial system and the heartless destruction of innocent lives that it causes without presenting a single villain. It deals with the situation of a weak-willed young man who forges a cheque in order to get money to help his unhappily married lover to find a new life. In this play, Galsworthy vividly exposes the inefficiency of the administration of justice and the evils in jail administration. It is conceived as an ecstasy of rage against human oppression.

Galsworthy succeeded in making drama out of little people. In *Loyalties* (1922), he succeeded in expounding the very idea of social realism. The play⁴ deals with anti-Jewish feeling and discrimination against a racial minority. Captain Dancy, a brilliant and dashing officer in the British army during the First World War becomes the victim of social convention.

Conclusion

Thus, Shaw and Galsworthy may be considered as realists who, in their plays, place before their readers or audiences the truth about the complexities of life, their purpose being to make people think and understand the inartisticity of realism. They spread realism and demolish all that is false and irrational by focusing on it the searchlight of logic and reason. But their realisms are not always photographic realisms: there is also much heightening of reality. Though in order to achieve realistic purpose, the playwrights often resort to exaggeration of reality they never lead to distortion and falsification of reality.

Both Shaw and Galsworthy were realists and exposed social realism through their plays, yet there are slight differences between them in handling the theme of realism. Shaw often indulged in gross exaggeration whereas Galsworthy never did so to achieve the purpose of realism. Shaw allowed his own personality to intrude in presenting the sides of a case. On the other hand, Galsworthy presented both sides of a case with rigid impartiality and insight. He never intruded himself though he was with the downtrodden in mind, as doing so would destroy the purpose of awakening the conscience in the mind of the masses to abolish social problems.

While portraying social realism, Shaw almost invariably attempted at mocking and scoffing at the weaknesses of human nature and society, but Galsworthy never attempted to do so. Shaw was a blatant propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people, but Galsworthy was never a propagandist, as he believed in detachment and objectivity while dealing with a social problem. To Shaw, drama was a means of reformation, not preaching whereas Galsworthy was a preacher, not a reformer.

Shaw had actually more imaginative sympathy than is usually conceded to him, but his satiric gift, his genius for derision caused him to appear cynical. He was carried away by his own views to such an extent that he failed to enter adequately into the view point of others. He would scoff and curse because his intellectualism turned into witty satire and attack. He used plays as a vehicle for intellectual stimulation and provocation. But Galsworthy,

because of his sympathy and humanitarian outlook, would wince and ultimately find himself constrained to bless. His emotionalism led to charity, sympathy and toleration. Shaw cynically dealt with the class-war whereas Galsworthy seriously dealt with the class-war.

Shaw's philosophy was creative evolution. He tried to present a coherent and comprehensive view of human nature and of human life, while Galsworthy's philosophy was natural evolution. The latter had succeeded in uncovering the picture of the society as really as it was, which was absolutely free from intellectual attachment. It may be called naturalistic technique.

Shaw adopted a pragmatic and welfare-oriented approach to politics in which the concepts of right and faith were central to a progressive socialist realism seeking equality. Galsworthy, on the other hand, adopted a realistic and ethic-oriented approach to uphold social problems. The former was not concerned with worried pity in his plays. He was concerned to diagnose sham and release vitality. Galsworthy, on the other, was deeply concerned with pity in his plays. Shaw in order to reveal social realism in his plays used his characters as merely his mouthpieces. Galsworthy, on the other hand, in order to reveal social realism used characters as living creatures of flesh and blood aroused by the elemental passions in their nature.

End Notes

¹ Colin Wilson comments on Shaw's making of the play thus: "*Arms and the Man*, the famous anti-romantic comedy has a similar triangular involving Raina, Sergius and Bluntschli. The play attacks both romantic war fare and romantic love. Another important theme is snobbery, an awareness of class-distinction, which remained Shaw's perennial concern" (Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, London: Macmillan, 1981, p. 21.)

² Shaw's concept as pointed out by Colin Wilson in the play: "*Man and Superman* an ambitious and artistically consummate dramatization of Shaw's concept of the Life Force recreates his favourite triangle – this time with Ann Whitefield, the 'mother-woman', John Tanner, the 'philosopher-man' and Octavius Robinson, the poet-lover. As is usual with Shaw, the mother-woman heads for the philosopher-man, Tanner- partly a self-portrait, who tries in vain to escape from her, in preference to the languishing and sighing lover-Octavius. Out of this union Ann and Jack will emerge the Superman" (Wilson, *The Life and Plays of Bernard Shaw, Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, London: Macmillan, 1981, p. 54.)

³ Tracy C. Davis traces a parallel between Shaw and reality thus: "He functioned as

Higgins, the self-styled benefactor of Cambell/ Eliza, thwarted by her performance for a younger, less intellectual man, Cornwallis-West/Freddy” (Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, London: Preager, 1994, p. 93.)

⁴Ifor Evans comments on nature of problems highlighted by Galsworthy in the play thus: “He seems sometimes to have formulated his selected social problem rather blatantly, and his characterization is simple, while the theme is pressed home with a heavy emphasis. Though his plays are well constructed, the mechanism tends to remain apparent. His sense of pity was controlled usually by his intelligence, but it was always in danger of becoming excessive” (Evans, *A Short History of English Literature*, p.189.)

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