

---

# UNIT 1 BACKGROUND OF ENGLISH DRAMA FROM THE RESTORATION PERIOD TO BERNARD SHAW

---

## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 English Drama from 1660 to Shaw and its European Background.
- 1.3 Shaw's Ideological Background
- 1.4 The life and plays of Shaw
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Reading for the History of Drama

---

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

---

After reading this unit, you should be able to have an overview of the growth of English Drama from the Restoration till Shaw's time and also a broad acquaintance with Bernard Shaw's life and plays, his background, the important events in his life, the literary and intellectual influences on him and his own development as a playwright.

---

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

---

In England, the comedy of manners reached its zenith in the Restoration period but after the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it entered a phase of decline. The lesser achievements of the heroic tragedy were also not sustained. After a comparatively barren period, drama in England was revived mainly under the influence of Ibsen. We shall first trace this process of the development of English drama and subsequently focus on Shaw's own career and the formative influences that shaped his philosophy and dramaturgy.

---

## 1.2 ENGLISH DRAMA FROM 1660 TO SHAW AND ITS EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

---

The closing of the English theatre in 1642 ended a glorious phase of English Drama, and its reopening in 1660 marked a decisive break with the past. However the Puritan repression of 1642-60 had not fully succeeded in snuffing out the spirit of the theatre and in some form or the other surreptitious performances and popular forms of entertainment continued during the interregnum. The dominant influence in the Restoration theatre came from France where Corneille had already created a grand tragedy and Moliere had achieved unrivalled success in comedy, but the pre-1642 tradition also had a revival, and some of the trends from the era continued to penetrate the spirit of Restoration drama.

The first twenty five years of the period i.e. the reign of Charles II (1660-85) were clearly marked by the spirit of Reason, Empiricism and license. Influenced by the

Inductive method of Bacon, the anti-idealistic political theory of Hobbes's *Leviathan* and the revolutionary astronomy of Copernicus and Galileo, the new age dispersed with faith, mystery and intellectual authority. It mistrusted the supernatural and denigrated Imagination. It discarded the old Ethic and called for a practical and pragmatic value system which ridiculed the notions of chastity and marital fidelity.

The theatre itself following the French model underwent a perceptible change. In the French theatre, the auditorium, an enclosed place, was long and narrow with the stage surrounded on three sides by the audience. Artificial lights, sets and properties were introduced, and women invaded the stage as actresses. Following the contemporary French theorists, the plays meticulously observed the unities of time, place and action. So in England also, in place of the open Elizabethan theatre bereft of light and sets, there was an enclosed theatre with artificial lights and some sets and rudiments of properties. Now the actresses played the female roles with no need for any one to "boy" Cleopatra's "greatness". Women did not have to be given male disguises as in *As You Like It* or *The Twelfth Night* and plays with dominant female roles could be written and performed.

The main Restoration tragedians were Dryden, Lee and Otway, all associated with the heroic tragedy. They were inspired by the French neo-classicists, Corneille and Racine, who in their contrasting manners dramatized the conflict between honour or reason and passion. Rhymed couplets furnished them with the appropriate format to adequately handle historical and mythical themes - in the grand manner in Corneille and with subtle psychological insight in Racine. Dryden, however, opted for blank verse in *All for Love* although he had employed rhyme in his other heroic plays like *The Conquest for Granada*, *All for Love*, his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which represents the Restoration tragedy at its best, had, like other plays of its kind, grand characters - Emperors, Kings, Generals - who were larger than life, exaggerated emotions and bombastic speeches. Its great theme was the clash of honour and passion-dramatized so effectively earlier in Corneille's *Le Cid*.

In contrast, Restoration comedy was a more popular and artistically superior genre. Here, the great French model was Moliere. Although he built his plays around central characters with marked eccentricities - a miser (*The Miser*), a misanthrope (*The Misanthrope*), a hypocrite (*Tartuffe*) or a hypochondriac (*The Imaginary Invalid*), he also combined the exposure of these characters with probing social criticism. The Restoration comedy of manners likewise provided a critique of the manners and morals of the contemporary society and used many comic devices employed by him such as disguises, intrigues, farcical action. Written primarily for the urban upper class, it reached its zenith in the plays of Dryden (*The Wild Gallant*, *Marriage a la Mode*), Etherege (*The Man of Mode*, *The Comical Revenge*), Wycherley (*The Country Wife*, *The Gentleman Dancing Master*, *The Plain Dealer*) and Congreve (*The Old Bachelor*, *Double Dealer*, *Love for Love*, *The Way of the World*). In the Orange period, Farquhar (*Recruiting officer*, *The Beaux Stratagem*) and Vanbrugh (*The Provoked Wife*, *Relapse*) carried on the tradition with some modifications. These plays had a contemporary setting with a number of gallants and belles from the London aristocracy, upper class witwounds, fops and country cousins, jealous and niggardly middle class traders and several servants including the clever valets. The plot was built around intrigues and seductions, often involving disguises and role playing. What made the plays really lively was the witty and polished dialogues and repartees. The successful lover was an urbane aristocrat with plenty of wit, grace, tact and shrewdness. The conventional morality was jettisoned as the ridiculed cuckold rather than the unscrupulous seducer became the target of satire.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, leading to the successful culmination of the attack on King James and his Royalist supporters who believed in the Divine Rights of Kings, there emerged the new order under King William, theoretically based on the idea of governance as a kind of contract between the ruler and the ruled, Locke became the new political theorist of this order "women's Liberation Movement"

perity under the influence of the précieux movement in France and partly because of Queen Mary surfaced in a tangible manner. The voice of the "Feminists" against the casual promiscuity and the depiction of women as sexual objects in the plays was joined by a resurgent clergy protesting against the "immorality" and "indecentness" of English Drama. Bishop Jeremy Collier's tract entitled *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* virtually ended the career of Congreve and led to the demise of Restoration comedy after Vanbrugh and Farquhar.

Georgian England was Whig dominated with Walpole and his ilk rather than the monarchy as the real powers, and with their middle class orientation, the plays also underwent a transformation. The "immoral" comedies of intrigue had to give way to sentimental drama: Addison and Steele represented the new Age. Nevertheless, John Gay wrote *The Beggar's Opera*, an immensely popular musical about the underworld with all its corruption, crimes and license—adapted later by Brecht as *Three Penny Opera*. Henry Fielding would have been a worthy successor to Gay especially in the parodic mode of plays like *Tom Thumb*, *The Great*, but his ill advised and imprudent attacks on Walpole ushered in the Censorship Act and the end of a scintillating career in drama. Although Dr. Johnson thought of himself as a tragic poet, his *Irene* was anything but a stage success. After a lean phase of four decades which was quite a contrast to the rich French theatre of Voltaire and Beaumarchais, theatre in England flickered for a while in the plays of Goldsmith (*The Good Natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer*) and Sheridan (*The Rivals*, *The Critic* and *The School for Scandal*). The basic format of these plays was embedded in the Comedy of Manners but the license and the permissiveness of the Restoration era were missing. Romantic love, which had made a late appearance in Congreve in *Millamant's* attachment to *Mirabell* was extolled and glorified as the plays became morally simpler and narrower.

A century of Romantic and Victorian theatre (1790-1890) witnessed no resurgence of great drama in England. There were, as in the Eighteenth century, numerous Shakespeare revivals and various forms of theatre, but no great dramatists. During the same period, Germany and surprisingly France gave birth to great Romantic plays. Although Goethe's magnum opus, *Faust* is not quite stageable, he did write stageworthy plays like *Eqmont* and *Goetz von Berlichingen*. However, the great German Romantic playwright was Schiller whose masterpieces *William Tell*, *Mary Stuart*, *The Maid of Orleans* and *The Robbers* - presented larger than lifesize rebels, non-conformists and outcasts, struggling valiantly against authority. Hugo, the pivotal French Romantic playwright followed Schiller in depicting grand characters in exotic settings in works like *Cromwell* and *Hernani*. In contrast, all the English Romantic poets who tried writing plays - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats failed as playwrights. Shelley's *The Cenci* was the best of these plays, closely followed by Byron's pieces like *Manfred* and *Cain*. The accent in them is on grand characters, rebels against authority, exotic and historical settings, lofty and poetic dialogues, a declamatory style of acting and a clear separation from the contemporary reality.

In the Victorian period, romantic drama degenerated into melodramas with black and white characters and sensational last minute rescues. In them, the divorce from contemporary life was complete and total. At the other end of the spectrum was the so-called "well-made play" popularised in France by Scribe, Sardou and Feydeau. Their intercepted messages, miscarried letters, central misunderstandings and twists in plot led to a highly contrived and artificial theatre.

However, the real break through came from Europe in the form of Realistic drama that Ibsen ushered in. Realism in a sense went back to the Wordsworthian Romantic concept of writing about low and humble characters in the language of common man. Its dominant concern was, of course the middle class, which it did so much to expose and satirise. This was partly because the period was clearly dominated by the middle class. In England, the First Reform Bill of 1832 had decisively shifted political

power to the whigs representing the shopkeepers, traders and industrialists. The repeal of the Corn laws in 1846 even more unmistakably undermined the economic base of the landed aristocracy and sealed the middle class control of the economic and political life of the nation. Across the channel, the uprising of 1830 in France was succeeded by the deposition of King Louis Philippe in 1848 and the revival of Bonapartism which was drenched in the middle class ethos. Central Europe had gone further in the overthrow of the old feudal class with violent revolutions in 1848.

To return to the plays, although Ibsen continued the romantic predicament of the artist as alien and was often self-reflexive like them, his was primarily a revolt against romanticism. In his post 1876 plays i.e. in his realistic pieces, he aimed at verisimilitude, at the creation of the illusion of reality on the stage. Beginning with a belief in objective reality, he sought to embody its details in his choice of characters, events, plots, dialogues, imagery, music, lights, sets and the style of acting. Thus in plays like *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler*, the characters resemble real people and nothing happens to them which cannot take place in real life. Following the Greek models of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Ibsen also aimed at the unities of time, place and action. As the unity of time required the action to begin at a late point of attack, it posed the problem of exposition which Ibsen usually solved by beginning the play with a visitor who came after a long time. In informing him, the residents acquaint the audience with the background of the past events. Otherwise, the play begins with servants who gossip about the secrets of the house. Ibsen's characters use prose and try to speak like real people. The realistic dialogues are matched by realistic imagery and symbolism as all the images and symbols have some meaning at both the literal and the metaphorical levels. Similarly sets, properties and lights are realistic. The plays have lamps on the stage to indicate the source of illumination, and consequently Ibsen builds a rich symbolic pattern of light and darkness in many of his works. Sets also are photographic and the play has all the properties that the "original" in "real life" is supposed to have. Likewise the source of music is known to the audience, and it is a part of the story. Finally, the acting style is natural and subdued. The stage and the auditorium are like watertight compartments and the actors are supposed to be completely oblivious of the presence of the audience. In fact, the premise is that the actor is not acting at all but just leading a real life.

Anton Chekhov in some ways went beyond Ibsen in modifying his realism. Thus he dispensed with some of the sensational actions in Ibsen - especially the suicides and violent deaths at the end of the plays - that are, to use Aristotle's words, "possible" but not "probable". In fact, Chekhov progressed through the drama of "indirect action" to the drama of "inaction". He also rejected the unity of time on the ground that too many events happening in a short span of time did not convey a sense of genuine reality. Chekhov also questioned Ibsen's idea of dialogue. As in real life, Chekhov's characters, unlike Ibsen's, do not listen to each other, and they change the topic of conversation frequently. Unlike Ibsen's drama of psychological intensity, Chekhov aims at the depiction of a social panorama.

In England (and Ireland), the resurgence of dramatic literature began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with a few writers of well made plays and comedies including Oscar Wilde. Wilde's comedies of wit with sparkling dialogues and ingenious paradoxes, revealed at their best in *The Importance of Being Earnest* certainly prepared the way for the other great Anglo-Irish comic genius and master of paradox, George Bernard Shaw although Shaw's concept of drama for the sake of social-economic-political transformation of the world differed radically from Wilde's dictum of art for art's sake.

---

### 1.3. SHAW'S IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

---

Shaw had absorbed a variety of philosophical and ideological influences in his early years. Henry George, the author of *Progress and Poverty* converted him to the

leftist cause with his lecture. Trade unions surfaced then on the scene in a notable way especially after the third reform bill of 1884. Around this time, the Fabian society with a social Democratic outlook emerged with thinkers and organisers like William Morris, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and H.M. Hyndman associated with it. Shaw discovered them by reading their tract, *Why are the many poor?* They advocated gradual social-economic reforms within the framework of democracy.

Shaw, however, soon realized that institutional changes alone could not bring fulfilment, justice and prosperity to mankind. What was needed was a change in the very nature of man. So he turned to Creative Evolution which could lead to the emergence of superior human beings or supermen. The idea of evolution was very much in the air in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the intelligentsia was familiar with the theories of Darwin. Shaw, however, wanted to go beyond Darwin to those who felt that Evolution could be willed. Lamarch was an important forerunner in this respect. Another major influence was Samuel Butler who felt that Darwin had "banished mind from the universe". Butler "identified mind with design" with "intention". A contemporary of Shaw who developed the concept of Creative Evolution was Henri Bergson whose book *The Creative Evolution* appeared in 1907. On the other hand, the idea of a "will" which guides the growth of animals had been muted by Schopenhauer, the writer of *The World Considered as Will and Idea*. Schopenhauer thought of the Will as blind and the element of chance governing the movement of the universe. Nietzsche, the German Philosopher had conceived of the superman in an anti-Christian moral framework. By a rather interesting coincidence, Dostoevsky, the Russian novelist, had projected in *Raskolnikov of Crime and Punishment*, a young man, who following the exploits of Napoleon had decided to rise above ordinary humanity by killing a frail old woman. Whereas Dostoevsky resolved the moral conflict in Christian terms, Nietzsche condemned the teachings of Christ as a gospel of weakness and effeminess. When he envisaged a transcendence of Christianity he contemplated an ethic that would reject notions of good and evil, look down upon charity and compassion as indicators of effeminacy. Pronouncing the death of God, Nietzsche in books like *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Will to Power*, conceived of a superman who could be superior to normal humanity by virtue of his strength. Shaw, however, realized that not brute strength but intelligence is what the life force is driving at.

Nietzsche found a "consanguine" spirit in Wagner, the great musician, Wagner's operas similarly celebrated heroes of exceptional strength. Shaw as a great lover and connoisseur of music - in fact, he was a music critic for quite some time - thought of himself as a "Perfect Wagnerite" and that further linked him with Nietzsche.

However, Nietzsche's male chauvinism was something that Shaw could not stomach. Partly as a result of the influence of Ibsen's *New Woman* - as presented in *A Doll's House and Ghosts* - and partly out of his own convictions, Shaw saw a woman as active and dynamic, a fighter for her rights. Shaw, in fact, emerged as an early feminist of sorts. Also, in a remarkable study, Whitman points out that the Shawian ideology ultimately derived from Hegel.<sup>1</sup>

For some of Shaw's ideological roots, we need to go back to his birth and upbringing.

---

## 1.4 THE LIFE AND PLAYS OF SHAW

---

George Bernard Shaw was born in a family of impoverished Irish Protestant gentry in Dublin on July 26, 1856 and he spent his first twenty years there. The monumental biography by Michael Holroyd suggests what earlier studies by Colin Wilson and others had not discounted that perhaps George Bernard Shaw was the son not of George Carr Shaw but of George John Vandeleur Lee, a music teacher and conductor, who stayed with the family and formed some kind of *menage a trois* with

George Carr and Lucinda Elizabeth Shaw (nee Gurly). George Bernard acquired his love of music in early childhood - it was a part of the family life with both Lee and Mrs. Shaw earning their living from it. The drunkenness of Mr. Shaw, which had disastrous consequences for the family created in the boy a strong revulsion for alcohol and contributed subsequently to his "Puritanism".

George Bernard Shaw was miserable in Dublin before he moved to London to join his mother and sister Lucy - the other sister Agnes having died of tuberculosis - and Lee there. His early years in London were marked by struggle and failure. He wrote five novels which flopped miserably - *Immaturity*, *The Irrational Knot*, *Love among the Artists*, *Cashel Byron's Profession* and *An Unsocial Socialist*. The first two of these written in 1878 and 1880 had autobiographical elements and along with *Sixteen Self Sketches*, written much later, provided insights into his early life. However, his work as a professional reviewer and critic of music and drama for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Dramatic Review*, *Magazine for Music* and *The Star* provided him with economic support, and more important than that, a platform for expressing his ideas.

Shaw's first exercises in dramatic writing resulted in three "unpleasant" plays - *The Widower's Houses*, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. In each one of these, he boldly engaged a contemporary issue in the manner of a discussion play - respectively the exploitation of poor tenants by landlords, Man-woman relationship in the context of the New Woman and organised prostitution. Even as he finally took one side, he also gave the "wrongside" its say. Thus Sartorius in *Widower's Houses* could justify himself, and Mrs. Warren could deeply move her daughter Vivie. *The Philanderer* had the added dimension of autobiography. Charteris was a self-portrait, Jullia Craven was Mrs. Jenny Patterson, the first woman to "seduce" Shaw and Grace Tranfield, the actress Florence Farr who was his mistress for several years in the 1890's. Although *Mrs. Warren's Profession* shows a deep grasp of the issues, these plays were too grim and bitter to appeal to the English audiences and they were not critical successes either.

However, the next four plays i.e. the "Plays Pleasant" - *You Never can Tell*, *Candida*, *The Man of Destiny* and above all, *Arms and the Man* - achieved great successes as in each of them, Shaw gave full vent to his comic genius along with his serious engagement with major social-ethical issues. *Candida*, as Christopher Innes points out in his book *Modern British Drama, 1890-1970*<sup>2</sup> takes off from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Here the woman, Candida instead of walking out of the house chooses to remain with her husband Morell in preference to the idealistic poet Eugene Marchbanks. Here, Shaw also introduced the triangle that often recurs in his plays - a woman who has to make a choice between the rational thinker and reformer and the sentimental poet, modelled here after Shelley or perhaps Yeats as Colin Wilson suggests in *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*.<sup>3</sup> *Arms and the Man*, the famous "anti-romantic" comedy has a similar triangle involving Raina, Sergius and Bluntschli. The play attacks both romantic warfare and romantic love. Another important theme is snobbery an awareness of class - distinction, which remained Shaw's perennial concern.

Before completing the "Three Plays for Puritans", Shaw got married in 1898 to Charlotte Payne-Townshend who in many ways resembled his own mother. Rich but sexually unattractive and puritanical, Charlotte, perhaps never consummated her marriage with Shaw. Except for his "diversion" with the great actress, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Shaw remained :loyal" to Charlotte inspite of the rather insipid marriage he had with her.

Among the "Three Plays for Puritans" *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* was a minor piece, and although *The Devil's Disciple* was a considerable commercial success in the U.S., it was *Caesar and Cleopatra* that was the great work of dramatic art. *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shaw's first major "historical" venture, presents Cleopatra - vis-à-vis Caesar and not Antony as in Shakespeare and Dryden. He drew upon

Mommsen's History of Rome and Plutarch, but Caesar is also to some extent, a self-portrait. As distinguished from the romantic and superstitious Egyptians he is a hard-headed, down to earth, practical man who refuses to be swayed by romantic notions like love, revenge, heroic gestures etc. The play also has several anachronisms which give it a touch of contemporaneity.

*Man and Superman*, an ambitious and artistically consummate dramatisation 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 in 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 of Ann and Jack will emerge the Superman. This theme is supplemented by a medley of topics/motifs such as the datedness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberalism - embodied in the respectable Roebuck Ramsden - socialism and the new working class, represented differently by Mendoza, the President of the Brigands and Henry Straker, the smart chauffeur and also parent-child relationship depicted through Whitefields and Malones, the Irish-American tycoons. The play follows the conventions of comedy, with variations on stock devices such as the clever valet, verbal deflations and inversions, father-son conflict over the latter's choice of a bride.

However, this is punctuated by the dream sequence in Act III involving John Tanner (Don Juan), Mendoza (The Devil), Ramsden (The Statue - The Mayor) and Ann (Dona Ana) which marks a clear departure from conventions of realism. Shaw also makes extensive use of classical music in the play, especially that of Mozart.

*John Bull's Other Island*, which appeared in 1904, was a perceptive study of the English and the Irish characters through the contrasting portraits of the English Tom Broadbent and the Irish Larry Doyle - "partners in an engineering business" - and Peter Keegan the unfrocked priest. Nora Reilly, Lerry's early sweetheart completes the picture in an extremely humorous work which rejects Irish sentimental nationalism even as it denounces the business efficiency of the Englishman.

*Major Barbara* (1905), another "anti-romantic" play of Shaw dramatizes the conflict between the practical and ostensibly devillish Andrew Undershaft and his idealistic daughter Barbara (a major in the salvation Army) and her fiance, the Greek scholar and poet Adolphus Cusins, based to some extent on Gilbert Murray. Barbara's mother, Lady Britomart, her brother Stephen Undershaft, her sister Sarah and Sarah's fiance Charles Lomax all living away from Andrew are comparatively insignificant in the moral conflict. Instead of Barbara converting her father to the cause of the salvation Army, it is the latter who converts her and Cusins to his cause. Cusins will take over the Cannon factory from him. The solution to the world's problem is that the enlightened and sensitive intellectual must acquire power through practical means.

Besides the many minor plays, during the next ten years, he also wrote *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (1910), *Androcles and the Lion: A Fable Play* (1912), and, of course, *Pygmalion* (1912). *The Doctor's Dilemma* encapsulated Shaw's almost obsessive attack on the medical profession in the form of the choice that Dr. Sir Colenso Ridgeon has to make - a choice between the painter - Louis Dubedat - a scoundrel, though a genius, based upon the unscrupulous socialist Edward Aveling - and Blenkinsop, a mediocre but honest general practitioner. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Ridgeon is in love with Mrs. Dubedat. Ridgeon with his limited resources can save only one patient and he opts for Blenkinsop, letting Dubedat die, but ironically Mrs. Dubedat, the widow refuses to marry Ridgeon. What gives life to the play is the liveliness of the dialogues and the sharp edge of the satire.



*The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* was Shaw's most sustained engagement with Shakespeare as a character. Although Shaw is full of allusions to Shakespeare in many of his plays, it is only in *The Dark Lady* that he has William Shakespeare and Mary Fitton as characters. The play in one act clearly deflates Shakespeare and his achievements.

*Androcles and the Lion* was a reexamination of Christianity in its early years through the story of Androcles, his wife Megaera, and a bunch of Christian prisoners and martyrs, victims of "the Roman persecution of the early Christians." However, as he said again in his postscript to the play, "my martyrs are martyrs of all time, and my persecutors the persecutors of all time."<sup>4</sup>

*Heartbreak House*, written over a period of six years (1913-19) dramatises the plight of the decadent aristocracy in England. The play subtitled a "fantasia in the Russian manner on English themes" shows Captain Shotover, his elder daughter Hesione and her husband Hector Hushabye as representing the Heartbreakers - the enlightened but effete aristocracy - in contrast to the younger daughter Ariadne, married to Sir Hastings Utterword, who embodies the Imperialist Class - the Horsebackers - and Boss Mangan, a Napoleon of Industry, a vulgar and crude business "magnate". The Heartbreakers are worth saving, but drifting and without will, they spend their time in dilettantism and flirtation, unconcerned with the business of money and management. Mazzini Dunn, a liberal, and his romantic daughter Ellie who is disillusioned when she discovers the unreality of Hector's tigers, Mangan's millions, Hesione's beautiful black hair and Shotover's "seventh degree of concentration" represent another social set along with the working class people - Nurse Guinness and her villainous "husband", Billy Dunn, a former boatsman of Shotover and now a "burglar". The bombers that destroy the rectory and the gravel pit complete Shaw's picture of mass-destruction, even Apocalypse if the enlightened upper class does not wake up to its responsibility of governing England. The house, built like Captain Shotover's ship effectively symbolizes England, and in a larger sense, "cultured, leisured Europe before the war". The distintegration of form in showing major variations on the comic structure and mode is punctuated by pointed references to *Othello*, *King Lear* and a scattering of quotations from other Shakespeare plays. Thus Ellie is the romantic Desdemona and Hector (Marcus Darnley) early Othello who captivates her. In contrast, Randall is the jealous Othello. On the other hand, Shotover is King Lear and Hesione and Ariadne, his two worldly daughters - Goneril and Regan. Hector is like Albany and Ellie, a parallel to Cordelia. The "drumming" in the sky at the end is like the storm in the heath and Mangan offering to take off all his clothes resembles Lear stripping himself. The Chekhovian manner is shown in the creation of an atmosphere through the country house setting with its weekend visitors, all the characters behaving strangely here like people going off to sleep, women "fascinating" men, the burglar getting deliberately caught etc. The season of autumn, the "scene" of the garden and the field beyond, the sound effects such as the drumming in the sky, Randy's flute and the visual effects of different shades of light all contribute to the creation of "mood".

*Back to Methuselah*, a "Metabiological Pentateuch" (1920) which Shaw regarded as his most ambitious work did not quite achieve the level of artistic success Shaw aimed at. The five parts are entitled, "In the Beginning", "The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas", "The Thing Happens", "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman" and "As Far as Thought can Reach," and there is also a "Post script after Twenty Five Years". They take us from the Garden of Eden to a point in time 30,000 years in the future, demonstrating and explaining Shaw's idea of Creative Evolution. Here Shaw reiterates that the Life Force in moving in the direction of superior brains and envisions a world in which people would live long only in order to transcend the physical body and lead a life of the mind. In the first part, Adam who finds life somewhat boring does not want to live very long, but in the second play, the brothers Barnabas expound their view that man should will to live for three hundred years. And in "The Thing Happens", Franklin Barnabas's housemaid and his son-in-law do



turn out to be long livers. In the next play, there are numerous long-livers now inhabiting what was once Ireland. Finally in the last part we observe how intellectual pursuits have supplemented material comforts and physical enjoyment. A baby is delivered out of an egg and it is fully grown like a person of twenty and the phase of youthful pleasures lasts for barely five years before people turn to intellectual contemplation like thinking on the properties of numbers. Thus the Ancients are also disembodied minds spending all their time in pure thought. It is aimed at "complete mastery of matter" and it represents the highest stage of human evolution.

*Saint Joan* (1923), the most "moving" of Shaw's plays is a "Chronicle" that provides the typical modern treatment of historical material, highlighting the parallel between the past and the present, focusing issues of contemporary significance. Thus the conflict of Joan with the Church and the Feudal order becomes symbolic of the antagonism between individual genius and centralized authority. The rise of nationalism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century France parallels that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland; Joan who dresses up as a man and fights like a soldier represents the modern feminist - the New Woman. The issue of visions is carefully skirted by never showing Joan with her voices as she is always viewed in others' company. The play covers the entire military-political career of Joan and adds the epilogue to provide the typical Shavian touch. Although *Saint Joan* is a rare example of a Shavian play with an emotional appeal, Shaw repeatedly brings in comic elements to puncture the tragic and the emotional build up. The Epilogue makes sure that the play does not end on a crescendo of feelings, but it also provides a perspective and a corrective. The dream sequence in it pertinently universalizes the predicament of saints in the human world and it also enacts a confrontation of the past and the present. The "clerical looking gentleman in modern dress" enters the play to announce Joan's canonisation, and in the sharp dichotomy between his dress and that of the other characters, we observe the contrast of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the same time, Shaw makes it clear that the world is not yet ready to receive its saints.

The last plays of Shaw, on the whole, show a clear decline in his powers and the only ones worth mentioning are *The Apple Cart* (1929), *Too True to be Good* (1932), *On the Rocks* (1933), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934) *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* (1939), *Buoyant Billions* (1947) and finally the "Playlet" (a debate in dialogue form) - *Shakes versus Shav* (1949).. *The Apple Cart* was often seen as an attack on democracy and a defence of monarchy. However, it contains an objective scrutiny of the limitations of popular democracy showing how King Magnus, who is far more cultivated and intelligent than all his ministers including the Prime Minister, Proteus, can easily beat his opponents at their own game by offering to abdicate and contest the elections for the parliament. He clearly emerges as the political victor. The play also has a rather interesting interlude showing the King with his mistress which distinctly echoes Shaw's relationship with Mrs. Patrick Campbell but is not of much relevance to the political theme. *Too True to be Good* goes back to the Wasterland theme in its attempt to present boredom and despair, but the treatment is not unreal and the dreamlike atmosphere is far from convincing. *On the Rocks* return to the metaphor of the ship of state to show how the cabinet government of the parliamentary system is unable to cope with the imminent crises facing the state. Shaw highlights the contradictions of the political parties and the system as the labour ministers reject the revolutionary plan of nationalization and the conservatives welcome it for their own reasons. At the end, however, nothing is resolved and there is no hope for the state. *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* has a lighthearted vision of the Final Judgement but the play is far from artistically consummate. *In Good King Charles's Golden Days* is set in the period of Charles II with Sir Isaac Newton, George Fox, Sir Godfrey Kneller and the King himself as characters. The play has no plot but the dialogues, which are powerful, carry it through. *Buoyant Billions*, although a rambling play, emphatically re-affirms the Shavian optimism and Idealism. Finally *Shakes versus Shav* presents a rationale and a defence of Shaw's dramatic career as measured against the achievements of the

Bard of Avon. As expected Shaw glorifies his own works and intersperses curious judgements such as pointing out that *Heartbreak House* is superior to *King Lear*.

A lonely and bored man in his last years, Shaw had a fall on September 10, 1950 and soon after coming back home from the hospital, he died in his sleep on November 21, 1950. Thus ended a rather uneven career. A man of immense vitality, Shaw became a great public figure through sheer force of will and intellect. Although he wrote much that was pedestrian, he had a phase of great creativity starting from mid 1890's and subsequently there were many isolated perks of excellence such as *Heartbreak House* and *Saint Joan*. If we also recall his great achievements as a writer of non-fictional prose - which we have not rightly considered here - we have to admit that he deserved to be acknowledged as the Grand Old Man of English literature of the twentieth century.

---

## 1.5 LET US SUM UP

---

In this unit, we have first surveyed the developments in and influences on English Drama from 1660 till Shaw's time. The Restoration Age was one of reason, empiricism and license, and the new theatre following the French model was less primitive than the earlier one. The heroic tragedy had grand characters, exaggerated emotions and bombastic speeches. In contrast, Restoration comedy was characterised by intrigues, disguises and role playing, witty and polished dialogues and stock characters such as wits and witwounds, cuckolds and gallants, belles and fops and the clever valets. Things began changing after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and Collier's tract attacking the profaneness of the English stage. The Eighteenth century was a barren phase in dramatic literature with the exception of Gay's, Goldsmith's and Sheridan's comedies. Similarly in the succeeding age, all the Romantic poets failed as playwrights. The revival of drama began with the influence of Ibsenite realism which aimed at verisimilitude or the illusion of reality. His drama represented the details of reality in his choice of events, characters, plot, dialogues, imagery, music, lights, sets and the style of action. Chekhov modified Ibsenite realism to make it less "dramatic" and sensational and dispensed with the unity of time and the neatly structured dialogues. In England the new drama was centred round writers of well made plays and witty comedies like Oscar Wilde.

Shaw's ideological antecedents initially came from Henry George and the Fabian society. On the other hand, his sustained interest in Life Force emanated from his encounter with the ideologies of Lamarck, Butler, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Nietzsche and Wagner.

We have also seen how Shaw's struggles in his early life led to his dramatic career, beginning with the "Unpleasant" plays, then the "Pleasant" Plays and "Three Plays for Puritans". *Man and Superman* with its devastating satire on the conventions, manners and beliefs of the age embodied Shaw's philosophy of the Life Force evolving in the direction of superior intelligence. *John Bull's Other Island* with its humorous exposition of the Irish character and *Major Barbara* which showed the triumph of the Armament manufacturer over his idealistic daughter in the salvation Army registered the zenith of Shaw's achievements in this phase. After *The Doctor's Dilemma*, Shaw struggled to regain the earlier artistic heights, but in the process, he wrote three of his greatest plays: *Heartbreak House*, *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan*. *Back to Methuselah* is somewhat dragging even as it contains the quintessence of his philosophy of the Life Force, but both *Heartbreak House* and *Saint Joan* reveal impressive powers of technical innovation. The last twenty five years of his life finally indicated a sharp decline in his artistic talents although *The Applegart* has some claims to excellence.

## References

1. Robert F. Whitman, *Shaw and the Play of Ideas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 107.
2. *Modern British Drama 1890-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
3. *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment* (1969; London: Macmillan, 1981).
4. George Bernard Shaw, *Complete Plays with Prefaces* (New York: Dodd, mead & Co, 1962), V.472.

---

## 1.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. How did the Eighteenth Century Comedy differ from the Restoration Comedy?
2. What were the main features of the theatre of Realism?
3. How did Chekhov go beyond Ibsen's realism?
4. Trace the major influences on the Shavian philosophy of the Life Force and Creative Evolution.
5. Describe the development of Shaw as a dramatist from *Widower's Houses* to *Caesar and Cleopatra*.
6. Which institutions and beliefs did Shaw satirise in his plays of the middle phase?
7. What are the major technical innovations introduced by Shaw in *Heartbreak House* and *Saint Joan*?
8. How did Shaw's own background contribute to his view of man-woman relationship?
9. Why was Shaw called an iconoclast?
10. Mention some of the comic devices used by Shaw in his plays.
11. What were Shaw's political views as expressed in his plays?

---

## 1.7 SUGGESTED READING FOR THE HISTORY OF DRAMA

---

Brustein, Robert. *The Theatre of Revolt*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964.

Leech, C. and T.W. Craik, eds. *The Revels History of Drama in English* London: Methuen, 1975.

***Pygmalion***

Nicoll, Allardyce. *History of the English Drama 1660-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1952.

Williams, Raymond. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

(The list of books on Shaw will be given at the end of the units on *Pygmalion*)