

Shaw's Major Barbara as a Thesis Play

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Abstract: Shaw's *Major Barbara* has always been controversial and has largely created problems for critics and audiences alike. In recent years Shavian literary criticism has focused increasingly on *Major Barbara*, perhaps the most debatable and well-known of George Bernard Shaw's major plays. The current trend of opinion seems inclined to take *Major Barbara* as Shaw's finest masterpiece or as one of his two or three masterpieces. There seems to be general agreement on the brilliance of its comedy, characterization, and dialogue. However, the argument usually arises from what to make of the conclusion. We have here many controversial questions to be asked. Can we regard it as a thesis play or anti-thesis play? A thesis play is a drama which deals with a very specific problem and, very probably, offers a solution at the end. Obviously, the play ends with some sort of a realistic solution which is the unity between the three different powers or characters. However, one may argue whether such a realistic leap is far convincing or not? And to what extent such finality can be applied as a tenable peaceful resolution? To put it more precisely, the paper attempts to examine the tenability of Shaw's ideas and solutions offered in the play when seen on other settings and situations like the Palestinian case. It offers a perspective analysis to the end of the play and to what extent we can regard it as a thesis play.

Keywords: Thesis, end, Shaw, Money, Poverty.

1. INTRODUCTION

Obviously, the play comes under the so-called drama of ideas where the conflict is mainly between conceptions and ideas and not between characters or heroes and anti-heroes. One might prefer sometimes to call it cerebral play as it evokes minds and intellects rather than feelings or emotions. Here we have three main characters and each one of them represents a power or a conception. The Undershaft who owns the arms factory represents the power of money and gunpowder whereas his daughter Barbara who is a major in the Salvation Army represents the power of religion and faith. Her finance Cusins represents the power of the intellect and culture. In this kind of drama the characters run a sustained debate about their views of how, for example, to solve a problem or how to build up a society or civilization. In *Major Barbara*, the argument tends to be between humanity and destiny rather than between men and women. Fundamental power is presented in *Major Barbara* in armorer's terms. Whether it is economic, spiritual, or visceral, power finds its point of origin at the cannon works, where the main argument of its terms, as most critics have noted, is between Undershaft and his future son in law and successor Cusins. (Newton, 1991:765-80)

2. SHAW'S FIRST AID TO CRITICS AND READERS

To begin with, it is worth noting that the current reading of Shaw's *Major Barbara* focuses on his habit of seeing the world in terms of contraries, a habit related to his basic refusal of absolutes, his aversion for definiteness. We are compelled to respect the qualities and values of opposing among the very different characters in his play, and we also have a sense of their complementary flaws. One may begin the discussion of the play by looking at the Preface which is offered by Shaw as a kind of explanation for his critics and readers. The opening part of the Preface is titled with rubric First Aid to Critics, and the next begins by saying that Shaw is inclined to help his critics understand the meanings of the play by telling them what to say about it. Very soon we will discover that this is extremely ironic. Readers and critics who opt to accept Shaw's help might need to remind themselves with Shaw's critical maxim that the existence of a discoverable and perfectly definite thesis in a poet's

work by no means depends on the completeness of his intellectual consciousness of it. In his article entitled *The Marriage of Contraries*, J. L. Wisenthal argues that what Shaw says in the Preface about the play does not in any case, necessarily represent his whole view of it. "His explanations of everything are deliberately one-sided: he brings to his public's attention the aspects of a question which he wishes them to consider"(J. L. Wisenthal, 1974:57).

3. MONEY AS A SOCIAL FACT, A MEANS NOT AN END.

The significant idea that Shaw wanted his audience/readers to look at is the importance of the economic factor. That's why the second part of the Preface titled "The Gospel of St Andrew Undershaft"(Shaw, 1960:15)and this concept or gospel is mainly concerned with money and poverty. In order to help his critics understand his play he tells them what to say about it. Thus he carries on:

In the millionaire Undershaft I have presented a man who has become intellectually and spiritually as well as practically conscious of the irresistible natural truth which we all abhor and repudiate: to wit; that the greatest of our evils, and the worst of our crimes is poverty, and that our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor (*MB*: 15)

Throughout the play itself Undershaft's gospel is clear and straightforward when he tells Cusins in act two that there are 'two things necessary to salvationmoney and gunpowder' (*MB*: 93). And that's his religion or way of life. He is saying to us in a very daring language that you need enough money to live a descent life and power enough to be your own master. For modern readers, teachers, directors, and actors, it is significant to know more precisely, in today's terms, 'the wealth or poverty-reflective of the standard of living- of Shaw's characters.'(Dukore, 2016:73).When discussing such views with the students undertaking Modern Drama module, most of them believe that Shaw is a very much realistic and convincing when his ideas are applied to their current situation in Palestine. To return back to the hero of the play Undershaft one can notice that his factory of weapons is referred to only in an economic context, as the profession which was his alternative to poverty. To Shaw and his spokesman in the play, the Undershaft, poverty is a crime and not a thing to be proud of. To emphasise this same point we can go back to the very beginning of the play which clearly illustrates the assumption that *Major Barbara* is much concerned in a very direct way with money. Undershaft's ex-wife Lady Britomart has discussed with her son Stephen the question of how to get some money from his father in order to increase the family's income and help in his sisters' future coming marriages. She must get the money somehow. It is this necessity which moves and instigates the actions in the whole play. Thus, Undershaft, the father and the provider of money is invited and brought into contact with his family after a separation of twenty years, more or less!. Unlike his mother, Stephen the son is disillusioned about the sources of his father's wealth as can be seen in act one of the play:

Lady Britomart. I must get the money somehow.

Stephen. We cannot take moony from him. I had rather go and live in some cheap place like Bedford Square or even Hampstead than take a farthing of his money.

Lady Britomart. But after all, Stephen, our present income comes from Andrew Undershaft.

Stephen. [*Shocked*] I never knew that. (*MB*: 59)

This finely anticipates, in a minor and ironic way, Barbara's shocking discovery in act two that the money which runs the expenses of the Salvation Army comes directly from the factory of death of her father and his like, Bodger the Whisky distiller. What is quite similar to this is Lady Britomart's discourse with her son Stephen that it is not a question of taking money from him (Undershaft) or not: it is simply a question of how much. This attitude anticipates the Salvation Army's behaviour in act two when refusing Bill Walker's pound while accepting Undershaft's five thousand illegal money. The same question in both cases is a practical economic one and not a moral one. Monetary signifiers are clear and evident in the play to the extent that the critic Albert Sydney calls an article on it 'The Price of Salvation' and Bernard F. Dukore titles a chapter in a book 'Scrap It' - Money and Morality. (Quoted by Dukore) This leads us to remark that the first part of Shaw's *Major Barbara* is concerned with the economic issue of the rich while the second with the poor and that in both cases the source and big donor of money is Undershaft. Moreover, the locations of the three acts attract our attention to

the vital importance of money as a social fact. The Salvation Army shelter in act two is a representation of the outcomes of poverty, suffering and misery, while the setting of the canon factory reflects the merits and value of money. This kind of contrast between the two settings is articulated by Undershaft himself when he said to his daughter 'I see no darkness here, no dreadfulness. In your Salvation shelter I saw poverty, misery, cold and hunger. (MB: 141) Here, the Undershaft is boasting on the superiority of his kind of salvation over that of the Salvation Army of his daughter. When Barbara asks him what his religion is, he frankly replies, 'my religion, Well, my dear, I'm a millionaire. That is my religion'. (MB: 88). Clearly, Undershaft belongs to what might now be named the *1 percent*, a term that come from the title of a 2006 documentary film. *The One Percent*, directed by Jamie Johnson, an heir to the Johnson and Johnson fortune (Johnson, 2006). It manifests itself chiefly through the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement in 2011 and is used to characterise people with earnings far higher than those of the other 99 percent of Americans, with whom the Occupy movement identifies.

4. POWER AND AUTHORITY

One might wonder whether the theme of the need for money the only central motif in Shaw's *Major Barbara*. I would argue that the play is not so much about money *per se* as it is about power and authority that come with it. The play can be interpreted as an examination of the nature of power or the control or command over others. The word power itself occurs more than twenty eight times in the last fourteen pages of the play, and all through the play examples are to be found of various sorts power, of which money is only one sort. For example, we can consider the discussion between Lady Britomart and her son Stephen where the power of money is made manifest. Moreover, her power over her son is the power of an authoritarian and dictatorial mother over a confused and inexperienced son. We can also remind ourselves with Undershaft's power (the power of money and gunpowder) which has a very crucial impact over all the characters, though of course as a personality he is less authoritarian and domineering than his wife. Cusins, who appears as less authoritarian than either of them, has in a sense more significant power than anyone else in the play, the power of culture and intellect. What about the power of Barbara, the power of religion and faith. Obviously she could not continue her job in the Salvation Army without her father's money and donations. That's why she discovered that she will be unable to save any souls or feed the poor and the needy without her father's help and support and then she agreed to take the money from him. As put by Dorothy Hadfield, in a debate in which public power is at stake, *Major Barbara* requires a world where powerful men are allowed to put women into their proper places. This reconstruction of gender is essential to the reconstitution of the play: romantic comedy can entertain some gender trouble; serious philosophy cannot (Hadfield, 2006).

5. UNITY BETWEEN THE THREE DIVERSE POWERS

Now we can go back to our main question which is concerned with the end or the controversial conclusion of the play. As we know the play ends with the suggested and implied unity between the three powers as articulated by Undershaft when he said to Cusins in act two: 'Let us call things by their proper names. I am a millionaire; you are a poet; Barbara is a saviour of souls. What have we three to do with the common mob of slaves and idolaters?' (MB:97) Here, Undershaft is suggesting his realistic and also Shaw's realistic solution in order to eliminate poverty and build up a modern society which is free from evils and vices. Actually, this unexpected outcome of the play bewildered some of Shaw's modern readers and earlier critics. In his article entitled *Major Barbara and Her Male Generals*, Thomas Noel claims that the apparent victory of Undershaft's 'survival-of-the-fittest capitalism' appeared to challenge Shaw's socialist principles and creative evolutionism and to dispute his affirmed rejection to give in to pessimism, which he considered pointless (Noel, 1979:135). However, the modern critics who look at *Major Barbara* as a Shavian masterwork are in favour of analysing it positively in some way or another. They see the play as pointing the way toward an ideal or at least as depicting the victory of good over evil. Joseph Frank compares it to Dante's *Divine Comedy*; he claims that Undershaft, Cusins, and Barbara - the superman elite - move toward a social paradise, a 'heavenly city,' represented in the drama by Undershaft's model factory town Perivale St. Andrews (Joseph, 1965: 61-74). Anthony Abbott calls the final act a cerebral argumentation on the theme of realism versus idealism. Barbara represents idealism; Undershaft represents realism while Cusins the hero of the play for Abbott is a happy blend of the two. (Abbott, 1965) Barbara Bellow Watson claims that Barbara symbolises the female attitude which will lead to and bear the superman (Watson, 1968).

One might argue that all these readings or re-readings to understand *Major Barbara* idealistically or at least positively have their shortcomings. Undershaft's town with its cannon factory of gunpowder is a disturbing archetypal of the coming social paradise as Frank sees it. At first sight Cusins calls it a 'heavenly city' as well as 'perfect' and 'wonderful' because he is astonished to find it the extreme opposite of the grimy, unhealthy, oppressive industrial town he has known up to then. (*MB*: 129) On the other hand, we can also witness some sort of irony and exaggeration in Cusins' positive description of the town. A careless worker in the town can so easily blow up himself and his friends in the factory beyond all concerns of cleanliness, health and prosperity. Even if caution is never taken; the whole industrial compound blooms on blowing other towns and people into pieces. The idealist reading of the play has to ignore these basic facts or else look beyond them into a future when a model factory town like that of Undershaft's will be built on something less explosive and more beneficial to humanity than a gunpowder and a cannon factory. Abbott admits the weakness of his analysis when he suggests that Shaw set up Cusins as the happy blend of idealism and realism too late, as a kind of reflection when the outcome had already been given over to Undershaft. Another significant shaky interpretation is the one which tries to see in Barbara the vibrant idealistic who will take the lead to a better future, whether in the path of a social utopia or the superman. As an individual she is active and honest but her vision fogs and fails after the Salvation Army crisis.

In politics they say that absolute power corrupts. In this regard who is going to have the upper hand power in the future unity between the three powers? Undershaft, Barbara or Cusins! The challenge of power is so clear and the question is who rules the world: civilization cells or power cells. Barbara is disillusioned about the Salvation Army and she resigns her commission in it and falls subordinate to her father. Undershaft is the general in command, and Cusins pushes his way up the ranks of power to join him. Barbara is left a follower rather than a leader. Undershaft tells Barbara that his money made it possible for her to become a major, and she does not deny it. (*MB*: 141) When she resigns from the Salvation Army, she pinches her major badge on her father. She now realises that her father is rich enough to buy any rank or whatever he wants with his wealth alone. Her idealism impels her to join the Salvation Army in order to feed the hungry, feed the poor and the needy, and save their souls or convert them to Christianity. Her father tells her that the army takes advantage of the hunger of the poor to convert them as if using food as a kind of bribe which in turns keeps the workers self-disciplined and industrious for the profit of the rich. The army depends on the donations of profiteering tycoons to conduct its activities. Barbara accepts her father's basic reality and decides to leave the army and join her father's canon factory where she can preach the well fed workers and not the poor. She has nowhere else to direct her rich spiritual and physical energy. In the Salvation Army she felt herself part of a greater power working for a greater good outside of herself. (*MB*:140) She lost faith in that power and hence is the bareness.

At this point one can claim that her natural strength falls into limbo after the Salvation Army calamity. However, she could manage to put herself together and be able to restore back her power and happy to be led by Undershaft and Cusins. Her father and fiancé are the leaders who control the action and they are the decision makers. The third act of the play demonstrates the dramatic struggle on power and leadership between Undershaft and Cusins and their eventual union of strengths. In this conflict and contest, Barbara plays a very secondary feminine role and in the long run she is submissive to the superior male vision. At the end of the play her pious intentions are evident throughout the 'the raising of hell to heaven and of man to God, through the unveiling of an eternal light in the Valley of the Shadow,' (*MB*: 152). Barbara's words remind us with her preaching in the Salvation Army but she may have a social goal in the back of her mind. What happened to her is not a defeat but a setback. Like the phoenix, she will rise up again and continue her mission preaching her father's workers. There, she looks forward to a good and decent life of material comfort.

But one may ask, Is Barbara the only one who goes to Undershaft? The answer is no; surely, she is not the only one. They all do- Cusins, Lady Britomart, and even his son Stephen who regards himself as a moralist and can distinguish between right and wrong in life! In any case, we need to remind ourselves that Cusins agrees upon the proposed deal with Undershaft hoping to control the canon factory in the future and to take over the enormous power of the Undershaft's big business. As a strong female heroine, Barbara Undershaft derives her strength from Christianity where she responds to spiritual voices and Salvationist appeals. She seems to be idealist, rather than realist in the Shavian sense of the terms. She dedicates herself to Christian idealism based on a belief which turns a blind

eye on the substantial realities of the world it functions in. Cusins pragmatism opens her eyes to the limitations of her idealism. Her vision of the world is somewhat changed to become one based on a realistic appraisal of the world. Of course, the conclusion of the play is controversial in the sense that there is no indication that she will control and lead the unity or she will not. It is rather difficult, but not impossible to imagine her as the great heroine who will take the lead to a better future. To achieve such a noble role, she is supposed to depend on the male power to create a better life for all generations.

6. CONCLUSION

Obviously, the play can be classified as a thesis play. One may conclude by saying that the three powers are all important and they complement one another. In reality, political advance is impossible nowadays without weapons and power and religious advance is impossible without money. Without such powers we can only achieve partial fruits and outcomes. What is required is the marriage or the fusion between the three different powers: intellectual power, religious power and materialistic power. This is the real meaning of the alliance which undershaft offers in act two. The characters and the audience are not entirely aware of the inferences of the synthesis. It is left for the audience to reflect on. It is the marriage between the contraries, between heaven and hell, love and hate, life and death which are vital to the human existence.

When teaching literature I always say to my students that we are teaching literature not for the sake of art or literature, but for the sake of our society. This means that we can learn more about ourselves in terms of values and of how to run our life. Thus last but not least, I would argue that though this solution of the play has its shortcomings and seems somewhat hard to be applied in reality on the Palestinian case, this dream of unity among the Palestinian factions is far better than their hateful division with its negative ramifications on all sides of life in Palestine. This unity is the first practical step to face the enemies and create solidarity among the Palestinians, the secularists and the Islamists.

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