Bernard Shaw's Novels: a Critical View

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Abstract: *The aim of this article is to demonstrate the importance of Bernard Shaw's fictional writing for his dramaturgy. Severely rejected by the critics, Shaw's fiction rarely receives the credit it deserves. His novels are important principally because they portray the end of the Victorian century in the light of the rigid and conservative values of English society. They disobeyed the dictates of the period by criticizing society in accordance with the author's iconoclastic style, which characterized his later theatrical work. It is important to establish a link between Shaw's novels and his dramaturgy. In his fiction it is already possible to detect the inversion of morality in the Victorian social and cultural context, which becomes more profoundly accentuated in his plays.*

George Bernard Shaw was in his mid-twenties when he resolved to make a major effort to launch his literary career by writing five novels in five years: *Immaturity* (1879), *The Irrational Knot* (1880), *Love Among the Artists* (1881), *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1882) and *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883). Since almost nine years elapsed between the writing of his last novel and the completion of his first play in 1892, the isolation of the five novels at the beginning of his career offers a useful opportunity for a critical study of the young Shaw and his "jejune" work. Both Shaw and his early work have been much condemned by critics and biographers who have failed to understand that without the rigorous discipline that Shaw imposed on himself sometimes working for up to six hours a day without interruption, he would possibly never have become the mature playwright who so radically transformed the Victorian stage. Shaw himself is not to be trusted in his critical statements about his early work. His genuine fondness for the novels contrasts with his uncomfortable feeling that others might think them unworthy of the famous dramatist he turned out to be. Furthermore, because his later work was so successful, he was naturally uneasy about the failure of his early writing. Critics and biographers give one the impression of having glanced superficially through the novels and taken Shaw's comments at face value. If the author himself was not appreciative of his early works and offered no more than superficial explanations for his novels' origins and aims, it is less than surprising that critics should have been

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equally skeptical about his fiction. These novels reveal how Bernard Shaw created his artistic persona by trial and error, laboring from immaturity to success until he finally became the iconoclastic playwright that everyone later took for granted. Above all, the novels serve as the basis for his drama of ideas.

In his art, music and theatre criticism, as well as in his own drama itself, Shaw never hesitated to attack the Victorian cultural and literary tradition and the ethical structure upon which it was founded. He began to break with that tradition, in ideological if not stylistic terms, in the novels he wrote in the 1880s. Despite his profound discontent with life and letters in that period, Shaw was initially unable to find any terms in which to express his ideas other than those provided by Victorian tradition itself: serialized novels with a large population of "ladies and gentlemen" and numerous marriages, with upper-class characters who speak well-phrased sentences replete with a wide variety of punctuation marks, and drop "aitches" or speak in comic dialect at the other end of the social scale, and where young, single women do not stand unescorted at social events, at least not without feeling uncomfortable. However, Shaw's "jejune" novels reveal his unease with this conventional world. His heroes and heroines tend to be, like their creator, outsiders making their way in an alien world, rather than middle-class Victorian insiders at home in a familiar world. Shaw's themes and incidents depart from the typical problems and solutions of marriage, crime and morality, since his characters are prepared to defy convention, refusing to accept the pre-established roles dictated by Victorian society. It is assumed by most critics, anthologists and biographers that, since Shaw's novels failed, they were somehow *supposed* to fail, so that Shaw could fulfill his true destiny and become the playwright, wit, socialist, and iconoclast that he later turned out to be.

The fact is that publishers in the 1880s, when Shaw was attempting to become a novelist, were highly aware of the new, semi-literate but not "educated" class (education had been made compulsory in England by the Education Act of 1870) who were far less likely to be interested in novels of ideas than those of adventure. Publishers understood that the buying public was little disposed to read original, "non-received" morality and with their eyes on the profits to be made at a time when novels were the most widely consumed genre after the newspaper, were understandably reluctant to publish "brainy" novels, or those without the stock ingredients of a thrilling plot, a handsome hero and a beautiful heroine. The 1880s were the decade of Robert Louis Stevenson, who published *Treasure Island* in 1883, which was much praised by his friend Henry James in "The Art of Fiction" the following year. With the building of the Savoy Theatre in 1881 the decade saw a succession of wildly popular Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas, like *The Mikado* in 1885, which introduced the late-Victorian mind to the mysterious land of Japan, in the same year that Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* took readers to Africa. The decade also witnessed the arrival of Sherlock Holmes in 1887. Thus, a vast production of escapist literature was becoming tremendously popular.

Shaw's first novel was entitled *Immaturity* and was, according to its author, a conscientious attempt to fulfill Victorian requirements of "length and solidity" in order

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to qualify it for inclusion in "Mr. Mudie's Select Lending Library of three-volume novels." In spite of the publisher's complaints that the novel had no plot, it is obvious that Shaw did his best to satisfy the popular demand for intrigue and suspense by introducing a number of complicated romantic relationships. However, like so many other first-time novelists before and after him, Shaw's primary interest, unconscious though it may have been, was in the search for his own self. More than half a century later Shaw would express his contempt for the autobiographical impulse:

> All autobiographies are lies. I do not mean unconscious, unintentional lies: I mean deliberate lies. No man is bad enough to tell the truth about himself during his lifetime [...] and no man is good enough to tell the truth to posterity in a document which he suppresses until there is nobody left alive to contradict him. (Shaw 1949, 71).

The novel tells the story of Robert Smith and the persons and places in his life in 1878, when he comes to London at the age of eighteen. It is divided into four Books: "Islington", "Aesthetics", "Courtship and Marriage" and "Flirtation." Though Shaw did not find a revolutionary language for his novels and their themes, he handles the only marriage in this novel unconventionally in the sense that the courtship and marriage take place well before the end of the novel; thus, "Courtship and Marriage" comes before "Flirtation," an original contribution to the form of the traditional Victorian novel. Intellect and marriage do not mix well in Shaw's novels. He is unwilling to accept romantic love because he fears its glorification of the "self" will lead lovers to ignore the "demand of the Life-Force rejection of the self.'" She describes "romanticism" as a heresy to the progress of the mind. In *Immaturity* he subconsciously comments on his young self, too close to Ireland to be able to portray London society without Irish traits. Smith is portrayed as rather old-fashioned, emblematic of a culture which is centuries behind the British Empire, economically and socially. Most critics have failed to comment on an aspect that can be considered of the utmost importance in Bernard Shaw: his dual point of view, the Anglo-Irish critical vision, from which he is able to shrewdly criticize both cultures.

Perhaps the least popular of Shaw's published novels was *The Irrational Knot*. However, the author considered it "a fiction of the first order" in which the morality is original and not "ready-made". Indeed, as it was written long before Shaw had read translations of Ibsen's work, he goes so far as to say that it "may be regarded as an early attempt on the part of the Life Force to write *A Doll's House* in English by the instrumentality of a very immature writer aged 24." (Laurence 190) Shaw's comments raise several important issues. First, in bringing forward original morality as a major criterion for fiction and applying it to Ibsen and himself, Shaw, in his own words, "assaults" two distinct critical traditions – the old one which argued that literature should endorse society's moral ideals, and the new one which "either relegates aesthetics and morality to separate compartments, or drastically subordinates the importance of moral

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content." Second, his linking of *The Irrational Knot* with *A Doll's House* establishes an important literary affinity between Ibsen and Shaw which critics have yet to take seriously. When Shaw describes Ibsen as "a bold pioneer," a unique "realist" in his moral attitudes, he is also implicitly referring to his own "jejune work." For Shaw, the rare "realist" is one who perceives with unusual clarity and conviction that conventional morals my be "pernicious" because they "derive from little more than social consensus, a consensus commonly used to mask human realities, support an obsolete status quo, and suppress important qualities of individual freedom". The characters and action of the novel are carefully constructed to provide a solid basis for its theme. Its protagonist, Edward Conolly, is a rationalistic American electrical engineer and inventor who is pursuing his work on the state of Lord Carbury, a nobleman with a scientific mind. Shaw creates an artist who is not an aesthete but a practical engineer, whose art takes the form of railways, machines and other utilitarian tools. This inversion must be seen in the context of nineteenth-century aestheticism and all the "follies" perpetrated, according to Shaw, in the name of "art" and "art for art's sake." Conolly proposes marriage to Marian Lind and she, attracted by his brilliance and unique personality, accepts, against the advice of her feminist friend, Elinor McQuinch, who labels marriage as a form of prostitution. The marriage turns out to be less than ideal and Conolly, losing respect for his wife, treats her like a doll in the house.

In Shaw's third novel, the hero is Owen Jack, a composer modeled on Beethoven, as far as looks, manner and temperament are concerned. Jack was the first of a line of historical characters whose imputed share in Shaw's powers of entertainment makes them a good deal more pleasant than the originals could have been. A major theme is that of "genius neglected" and "genius ultimately vindicated." The point is made repeatedly by contrasting the authentic genius of Owen Jack with the uninspired work of Adrian Herbert, contrast which finds its female equivalent in the difference between Madame Szcympliça, a Polish pianist of international reputation, and Mary Sutherland, a dilettantish painter. Adrian Herbert is Shaw's most detailed portrait of the aesthete-artist. He is "but a pose," who willingly abandons art for love, being what Jack Aurélie and Shaw himself most despise in art: "a duffer" and "a humbug." Before his marriage Adrian does, however, achieve a kind of success because, in Jack's words, he is neither too good for the Academy people nor too bad for the public. Shaw believed that the true artist should never marry. Adrian Herbert's decline begins with his adoption of aesthetic art and his conventional marriage. Owen Jack, the genuine artist, on the other hand, remains single. In his third novel, the only "realists" are artists, only they are in touch with the "real," while all the other characters are to be judged by comparison with them and with "reality." According to Shaw, "the artists themselves stand for the value that lies behind the search." Opposite them stands society, "equally representative of an absolute, the absolute of inert anti-reality." Thus, the artists and society must be kept apart; and it is the artists themselves who must defend this vision for, according to Shaw, society, conscious only of its desire for value, constantly strives to attain to the

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reality for which the artist stands and which he in his person is. The unenthusiastic reception accorded to his first novels undoubtedly persuaded Shaw that he was somehow on the wrong track. Had he persisted in the same course he would have remained at best a minor Victorian novelist. There was, however, a way out. In his fourth novel, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, Shaw began to free himself by creating the genre that would establish him as a famous playwright in the 1890s: the ironic comedy that would demolish Victorian conventional ideas which served to bolster prejudice against unorthodox professions, Creative Evolution, the independence of women, and other thorns in the flesh of the traditional Victorian frame of mind. In *Cashel Byron's Profession*, Shaw expounded his own symbolism of the mind and the body. According to Shaw, just as the body represents itself, it also stands for the largest and most important part of the mind. The man who "thinks" with his body like the pugilist Cashel Byron can be as much of a "genius" and a "visionary" as the man who thinks with his mind alone. Indeed, Shaw's point is that the man who thinks with his mind alone cannot be considered a genius unless he uses the muscle of his brain in the same way that Cashel Byron uses the muscle of his arm. Shaw came to see that the trouble with conventional nineteenth-century rationalism was that it assumed that the brain is exclusively a machine and, furthermore, a machine constantly at war with the "flesh," rather than the "super sophisticated muscle or organ that it really is." Boxing also attracted the iconoclast in Shaw. The novel was the first in his defenses of notorious professions, which he would return to when he discussed prostitution in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Boxing was not considered a completely "respectable" sport but it must have pleased Shaw to write on an outrageous subject. Cashel Byron is a hero out of romantic comedy, a hero in whom social opposition must be merely temporary and who will ultimately find himself reintegrated into society. However, Shaw goes one step further and renders his protagonist an ironic "outsider," a hero whose role as a "professional prizefighter" is an almost pure expression of the idea of opposition. By presenting a hero who is only a temporary outcast, Shaw is introducing his own, more confident self.

By the time Shaw embarked on his fifth novel, he had arrived at a far better understanding of himself. He had come to see that the difference between himself and most other people was one of degree, in the sense that his mind was a little further developed than most. Henceforward a most profound change comes over Shaw's art. *An Unsocial Socialist* is by no means the first nineteenth-century novel in English to advance a left-wing political or economic theory, but it is the first "Georgite/Marxist" novel written in English. *An Unsocial Socialist* is the work of a converted "Georgite/Marxist," a novelist advocating a social program. We can see the germination of Shaw's socialist ideas in this novel. Critics were to see the characters and many of the situations in *An Unsocial Socialist* as "frivolous"; but it is possible to say that such was Shaw's intention. The comic contrast is between the irresponsible world of English society and the dark crime of "social mismanagement" of which it is guilty. Shaw's aim was to present precisely the contrast between "upper-class levity" and the economic burden of

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the poor. So utterly convinced was he of the Marxist point of view that he dared to demonstrate its relevance in *milieux* far removed from Manchester: a country school for girls and the rural estate of "landed gentility." The protagonist, Sidney Trefusis, "a gentleman by birth," but whose money comes from tainted sources, becomes a teacher for ideological reasons in a girls' school and tries to preach socialism to his students. This boarding school is neither a place of learning nor, to the disappointment of Shaw's implied sentimental reader, "romance." Shaw's project might be described as the interrogation of the "aesthetic" using the Victorian sentimental novel as "exemplum", demonstrating that its key components, the hero, the heroine, marriage, and the middle- or upper-class setting, are units of cultural perception which encode and so uncritically reproduce contemporary social relations of class and gender inequality. Shaw intended to be "un-social," to deconstruct "society." In choosing the novel form, he set out to deconstruct the Victorian sentimental novel. It seems that the process of writing *An Unsocial Socialist* also taught Shaw that the novel form was not an adequate vehicle for his social, economic and political views.

Shaw's novels anticipated many of the trends which were later to figure in his mature work as a playwright. The embryonic presence of the novels is discernible in all Shavian drama. It is possible to observe not only a structural and thematic connection but also an affinity of characterization and incident. Shaw introduces characters that were considered unacceptable in Victorian times and refuses to accept the conventional dichotomy between villain and hero. These were new elements in the novel which he would later develop in his drama. The topics of tainted money and notorious professions are mainly present throughout Shaw's writing from his earliest days as a novelist to his maturity as a playwright. In Shaw's fifth novel, *The Unsocial Socialist* as well as in his first play *Widowers' Houses*, even the most frivolous situations and characters are shown to have a dark and weighty economic significance. Trefusis as well as Henry Trench, the protagonist of Shaw's first play, are rich capitalists and preach socialism but do not intend to return their tainted fortune which allows them to live well. The characters similar to those in *An Unsocial Socialism* neither conduct pleasant conversation nor accept the device of romantic situations to solve their problems. Shaw entirely confused critics and playgoers alike when he refused to comply with the convention of standard theatrical situations and, for that matter, with what he called "modern commercialism." Just as in his last novel he condemned the sentimental novel form, so, in his first play, he rejected the convention of the well-made play as a bad school for art, emphasizing that his art was the expression of his sense of moral and intellectual "perversity rather than of his sense of beauty."

Shaw made the relationship between *Cashel Byron's Profession* and his third play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894) abundantly clear:

> The tremendously effective scene – which a baby could write if its sight were normal – in which she [Mrs. Warren] justifies herself is only a paraphrase of a

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> scene in a novel of my own. "Cashel Byron's Profession" (hence the title, "Mrs. Warren's Profession"), in which a prize-fighter shows how he was driven into the ring exactly as Mrs. Warren was driven onto the streets. Never was there a more grossly obvious derivation. (Weintraub 328).

The novels are full of other elements which can be found in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. We can refer to Lydia Carew's resistance to a relationship with Cashel Byron because of his profession. In spite of his protests that, as an occupation, pugilism is more decent than colonial imperialism and war, Lydia remains adamant and states that society has a prejudice against Cashel's profession which she, herself, cannot overcome. Society nurtured a prejudice against women with a past. Mrs. Warren, a former prostitute herself, owns several brothels in Europe; the play provoked Shaw's first clash with the Censor. In "The Author's Apology" to *Mrs. Warren's Profession* Shaw criticized the conventional well-made play for its inherent hypocrisy just as he had criticized society for rejecting Cashel Byron:

> ....an unwritten but perfectly well understood regulation that members of Mrs. Warren's Profession shall be tolerated on the stage only when they are beautiful, exquisitely dressed, and sumptuously lodged and fed; also that they shall, at the end of the play, die of consumption to the sympathetic tears of the whole audience [*La Dame aux Camélias*], or step into the next room to commit suicide [The Second Mrs. Tanqueray], or at least be turned out by their protectors and passed on to be "redeemed" by old and faithful lovers who have adored them in spite of their levities. (Shaw 1988, 186)

These are examples of what Shaw considered to be the dishonest conventions of the Courtesan Play, which formed the basis of his strong reaction against nineteenth-century melodrama. In Cashel Byron's Profession, Shaw, the iconoclast, began to criticize the hypocrisy of society by making a pugilist physically and intellectually more authentic than Lydia's friends, who belonged to the upper-middle class and had had the opportunity of a formal education. Shaw had depicted other notorious professions in his novels. Ed Conolly in *The Irrational Knot* is an engineer and was rejected by upper-class society. Owen Jack in *Love Among the Artists* refuses to compose music in honor of the aestheticism of the times. Trefusis in *An Unsocial Socialist* and his socialist activities are emphatically banned by society.

Notorious professions can also be related to *Major Barbara* (1905). That virtue is often a parasite upon sin is the paradox Major Barbara's Salvation Army must accept (in spite of the hypocrisy of such a morality) if its good works are to be furthered. Thus the Army – to the initial horror of the idealistic Barbara Undershaft – accepts contribution from a distiller and a munitions manufacturer. In a similar fashion gentility fattens upon immorality in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Concerning this Shaw observed that there was an economic link between Cashel Byron, Sidney Trefusis, Henry Trench, Mrs. Warren

and Undershaft because all of them prospered in questionable activities. The action of *Major Barbara* revolves around the characters of Andrew Undershaft and his daughter Barbara, who want to convert one another to their respective religions. Barbara, a major in the Salvation Army leads her father to her shelter in the East End of London, but fails to impress him. Undershaft first proves to her that the Salvation Army is not what she thought it was by "buying it" with a large donation, then leads her to his model works and induces her to participate in his work by making her figure husband his junior partner. This solution inevitably reminds one of Mrs. Warren and her daughter. There was something curiously tormenting in the problem which compelled Shaw to take it up again and again. The parallel is obvious. It is again the problem of tainted wealth, and the opposition of the daughter to the parent who represents this tainted wealth. *Major Barbara* is indeed a great triumph of artistic creation, in the sense that it combines the intense seriousness and social consistency of *An Unsocial Socialist*, *Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* with the power and artistic vision Shaw attained later on. In fact, scrutiny of these two plays leads to the conclusion that, after more than ten years of deliberation, Shaw has come down on the side of Mrs. Warren. Barbara's position is essentially that of Mrs. Warren. Prostitution, said the latter, is "far better than any other employment open to her [a good-looking, well-behaved, sensible girl]. I always thought that oughn't to be... I stick to that: it's wrong. But it's so, right or wrong; and a girl must make the best of it." (Shaw 1988, 250)

Although Shaw empathizes with the poor, he does not sentimentalize or idealize them, his argument being that, if poverty actually improved people, this would justify making poverty compulsory. Shaw insists, rather, that poverty is unequivocally demoralizing: its fruits are not simple piety, honest rectitude, and altruistic sentiment; they are more likely to be, at best, hypocrisy, cynicism and shattered self-respect and, at worst, unthinking brutality. In his Preface to *Major Barbara* Shaw writes that... "Undershaft, the hero of Major Barbara, is simply a man who, having grasped the fact that poverty is a crime, knows that when society offered him the alternative of poverty or a lucrative trade in death and destruction, it offered him, not a choice between opulent villainy and humble virtue, but between energetic enterprise and cowardly infamy." (Shaw 1960, 17) Undershaft, the super capitalist, is "right" in terms of a society and a social morality Shaw believes to be wrong, where strength and wealth are virtues, and where theft and murder may be the only means for a man to keep his self-respect. The germ of an idea which was discussed initially in *An Unsocial Socialist* and further developed in *Widowers' Houses* has now blossomed fully in *Major Barbara*: were society to organize itself more intelligently Undershaft would be an impossibility. Undershaft is presented in the play as an ambiguous figure, a paradox, "right" and wrong" at the same time, and yet beyond such distinctions. It seems right to conclude that Undershaft is a thoroughgoing realist. As an arch-capitalist, his realism is dedicated to exploiting the follies and idealisms of society, but it is also his realism that "educates" Barbara. Far from being an "incoherent farrago of ideas," *Major Barbara* appears to have a carefully

worked out intellectual and dramatic structure based in part on the idea of a dialectical opposition. It seems evident, then, that, although the seeds of Shaw's socialism were planted in *An Unsocial Socialist*, it is only in *Major Barbara* that the form of the resultant tree can be clearly discerned.

Shaw's novels are important not only because they give us glimpses of the dramatist but also because they offer a fascinating portrait of a young artist with an open mind. Bound to no particular convention in art or science, unlike most other English authors of his time, Shaw welcomed every new revolutionary point of view or idea he came across. In the young Shaw one can see, above all, a rebel against the accepted traditions and *mores* of his time, an individualist, determined to think for himself, who has yet to find his philosophy. However, his novels provided training, discipline, and a social, political and cultural background for his future drama. They reveal a young man who is intensely curious about human nature and is keenly observant of its ways of thinking and talking. Above all, he is a reformer, interested in improving mankind and society, but nevertheless equipped with genuine wit, optimism and a tremendous gift of laughter.

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