

George Bernard Shaw as a Social Reformer

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Abstract: *George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright, critic and polemicist whose influence on Western theatre, culture and politics extended from the 1880s to his death and beyond. In 1895, he became a theater critic for the Saturday Review and began writing plays of his own. Through his society reforming works, he is known as a social reformer.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

As novelist he also becomes a vegetarian, a socialist, a spellbinding orator, a polemicist, and tentatively a playwright. He became the force behind the newly founded (1884) Fabian Society, a middle-class socialist group that aimed at the transformation of English society. Shaw produced a large quantity of journalism and criticism, particularly in his role as a music and theatre critic. He is an Irish comic dramatist, literary critic, and socialist propagandist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925 and donated the prize money to the founding of the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation.

As a Fabian socialist:- The famous Four Fabians who are:- **Beatrice and Sidney Webb, Graham Wall's**, and **George Bernard Shaw** founded the London School of Economics with the money left to the Fabian Society by **Henry Hutchinson**. In 1884 The Fabian Society was founded in England with the aim of bringing about a socialist society by means of intellectual debate, the publication of books and pamphlets, and the "permeation" of socialist ideas into the universities, the press, government institutions, and political parties. This was in marked contrast to the other means of bringing about socialism which was adopted by Marxist parties, namely the use of violence and revolution to overthrow capitalism. Some of the Society's early members included the playwright George Bernard Shaw, the writers and educators Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the feminist Emmeline Pankhurst, and the novelist H. G. Wells.

In 1889 the Fabian Society published a collection of essays, *Fabian Essays in Socialism* edited by George Bernard Shaw, in order to present their ideas in a coherent form.

As a Social Reformer: - As a social reformer he raised the conflict between human feelings and circumstances, every social question furnishing material for drama. He was predominantly a socialist who only believed in equality.

Shaw's early plays are classified at two levels – "**Pleasant Plays**" **Arms and the Man (1894), Candida (1894 -95), You Never can Tell (1895-96)** and "**Three Plays for Puritans**" **The Devil's Disciple (1896-97), Caesar and Cleopatra (1898), Captain Brassbound's Conversion (1899).**

"Unpleasant Plays" **Widower's Houses (1892), The Philanderer (1893), Mrs. Warren's Profession (1893-94),**

The main objective of these plays was consideration of some significant social problems. In most of these early plays, Shaw the social propagandist was at work and, at his best. He was concerned mainly with such social problems as slum landlordism, capitalism, prostitution, jealousy, marriage and puritanical hypocrisy, which he treated most realistically and satirically with scintillating wit and humor. A general perception and belief of the literary world is that Shaw deals with the contemporary social problems not as a dramatist but as a socialist. However, a close study of the early plays of Shaw reveals that the dramatic artist is always lurking behind the social propagandist. In this sense, Shaw was a rationalist as well. **C.E.M. Joad** observes, "**Truth being clear, close and communicable, the most obvious method of communication is that of exposition and demonstration. Hence Shaw is predominantly a rationalist.**"

Shaw's chief interest in '**Mrs. Warren's Profession**' is to show that prostitution is caused not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but by undervaluing and overworking women who are forced to resort to prostitution, just for their livelihood.

As in **'Widower's Houses'** the people are held responsible for evils in society. It is a mature play, which shows at best, some of Shaw's powers as a dramatist. Shaw achieves dramatic conflict through the complexity of its theme and the economic and emotional aspects of the plot. It is a scathing attack directed at the social evils of slum landlordism and capitalism. The play, in Shaw's own words, is a **"grotesquely realistic exposure of slum landlordism."** Shaw shows how the despicable attitude and callous indifference to the sufferings of the poor on the part of the rich and their greed for more money resulted in the degradation of the poor. It is the double standards of the whole social system, which provokes Shaw to unveil it and show vice its own face.

'The Philanderer' is a satire on marriage as an institution involving economic slavery. It dramatizes grotesque sexual compacts made between men and women under marriage laws. It is also a satire on people's fake intellectual fads. His purpose in the play is to show that no woman is the property of a man and that she belongs to herself and nobody else. The depiction of the conflict between passion and reason lends the play dramatic interest. Conceived as an anti-romantic comedy,

In **'Arms and the Man'** romantic love is contrasted with the practical love of a man of sense. It is an anti-romantic play. It satirizes the false sentimentalism that is associated with love and war.

His famous play **'Man and Superman'** dramatizes the problem of relationship between man, woman and marriage.

To save Shaw from hell-fire, a friend prevailed on a Roman Catholic priest to catechize the upstart atheist. Having repaired with his catechumen to a church cell, the priest began: "The universe exists; somebody must have made it."

"If that somebody exists," interposed Shaw,

"Somebody must have made him."

"I grant that for the sake of argument,"

The priest said: - **"I grant you a maker of God. I grant you a maker of the maker of God. I grant you as long a line of makers as you please; but an infinity of makers is unthinkable and extravagant; it is no harder to believe in number one than in number fifty thousand or fifty million; so why not accept number one and stop there, since no attempt to get behind him will remove your logical difficulty?"**

II. CONCLUSION

Throughout his life Shaw dealt with prevailing social problems. He was against the exploitation of the working class. His plots have an artistic beginning, climax and final denouement. The real villain in the Shawian comedy is the society. Shaw himself observed that: - **"Until society is reformed, no man can reform himself except in the most insignificant small way."** It is a general perception of the literary world that Shaw is more of a thinker, a social reformer, a propagandist, and a literary satirist than a dramatic artist. In a way, Shaw himself has created this impression. He once said: **"I am no ordinary playwright. I am a specialist in immoral and heretical plays. My reputation was gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals. I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinion on sexual and social matters. I have no other incentive to write plays as I am not dependent on it for my livelihood."**

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