

## George Bernard Shaw's art of characterization

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George Bernard Shaw with his tall and erect figure, straight like a ramrod, and his grey beard, has almost become a legend. He was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary, and the most complex personalities of modern time. He is a Socialist, a Fabian, a Pacifist, a vegetarian, and many others things.

He is also anti-capitalist, anti-cannibalist, anti-smoke, anti-drink, anti-royalist, anti-democrat, etc. By nature Shaw was a tireless crusader for social justice and righteousness; he was a propagandist for the intellectual enlightenment of the people. He was a zealous missionary and social reform was his mission. He tried to liberate his age from, "Humbug, mental sloth, social apathy, superstition, sentimentalism, collective selfishness, and all the static ideas which have not been consciously subjected to the tests of real life and honest thought."

Shaw was a ruthless critic but he criticized in a most charming and pleasant manner. He attacked institutions, which are not sensitive, in preference to people who are: and when he did criticise individuals, he added sugar to the pill, so that they could swallow it without making a wry face. He could not only take the attacks of his enemies with good humour but by means of his wit was able to turn them to his own advantage. In his personal life, Shaw was a man of simple habits, who shunned luxury of every kind, and for whom the best recreation was work. His tastes were simple. He did not require the stimulants which other men take in order to endure life or to forget their worries: he was a vegetarian, a total abstainer and non-smoker. He never played games, and his exercises were limited to walking and swimming.

Bernard Shaw's characterization has come in for a good deal of criticism at the hands of critics. His characters have been denounced as 'static' 'wooden', 'flat', as personified abstractions', and as gramophone records for the playing of Shavian themes. This is so because his art is usually 'judged according to the canons of the old romantic drama and is found wanting. It is forgotten that he is the founder of a new kind of drama 'the discussion drama', or 'the drama of ideas', which must be judged by its own rules and principles and not by those of an older and outmoded form.

Shaw has achieved characterization by various modes such as creating characters based on nineteenth century stereotypes and drawing characters on actual models. Devices like naming of characters, style of dialogue, stage directions, character-interaction and paradoxical and anticlimactic endings have also contributed to his characterization.

Shaw, being essentially an artist, does not conceive his characters as mere personification of ideas but as individuals. Shaw conceives characters as human beings is confirmed by the fact that Shaw created some of his characters based on living models. Drawing characters from real life is one of the major modes of characterization in Shaw's plays.

However, it can be understood that Shaw does not just copy his originals. He takes what he wants from them, a few traits that have fired his imagination and there from constructs his characters. For instance, though Shaw admits that Vivie Warren is based on Mrs. Sidney Webb,

the point of similarity is possible between them only in their modernity of outlook. Vivie is a New Woman, who decides not to marry whereas Mrs. Sidney Webb was a successful wife. Shaw himself adds that Vivie is an absolutely new type in modern fiction. Hence, Vivie is not only based on an individual but also a specimen of a new type of character.

In some cases, the source of inspiration must have been the intellectual side of the models. For instance, the fact that Andrew Undershaft modeled on Alfred Nobel is quite revealing. The similarity is confined to the fact that Undershaft, the gun-maker's financial aid to the Salvation Army is as paradoxical as Alfred Nobel's constitution the Nobel Peace prize from the money he earned out of selling bombs.

It may be true that Shaw based some of the characters on actual models and created a few characters with specific actors/actresses in mind for enacting the roles. But, as the 'dark lady' of Shakespearean sonnets is quite interesting even without the knowledge of her identity, Shaw's characters are also interesting by themselves. It is not imitation. It is creation. Shaw himself explains his method: "... I have used living models as freely as a painter does, and in much the same way: that is, I have sometimes made a fairly faithfully portrait founded on intimate personal intercourse, and sometimes... developed what a passing glance suggested to my imagination ... Between the two extremes of actual portraiture and pure fancy work suggested by a glance or an anecdote, I have copied nature with many degrees of fidelity, combining studies from life in the same book or play with those types and composites and traditional figures of the novel and the stage which are called pure fictions".

Naming of characters is an important ingredient of Shavian characterization. Though sometimes Shaw allows his characters to be quite impersonal, calling them as He, She, A and Z, he knows how to make use of a name. A meticulous artist, as he is, Shaw is quite careful not only in giving names to his characters, but even in using the right pronunciation. He used to often consult Gilbert Murray regarding Greek words and their pronunciation.

Cusins is physically weak, but intellectually strong. His name means 'noble wolf', suggesting cunning and nobleness in him. Cusins is intelligent enough to see through Undershaft and honest enough to tell him what he thinks of him.

There are similar names in Shaw quite rich in meaning. Nicola is a successful servant and his name means 'Victory people.' The Lady, who 'escapes' from marrying Brassbound is rightly named after the Virgin martyr, Cicely. Tanner is so called, perhaps, as a tanner mends the leather; he tries to mend the people. The name Nora meaning 'honour' is quite suitable for Nora who is sensitive to the core. Magnus is great, as the name itself suggests. Amanda is the beloved of both the cabinet and the king, Amanda meaning 'fit to be loved'.

Andrew Undershaft, the creator of fatal weapons is ironically named after 'Andrew', the patron saint of Scotland, as the girl, who decides to have no romance and no man in life is named Vivie (vivid-full of life). But, Shaw's Frank is frank, Candida, candid (at least apparently) and Bluntschli, blunt, as Shakespeare's Cordelia is cordial. Doolittle does little both as a dustman and as a father. The name Lickcheese sound very unpleasant. Morgan's comment on Lickcheese is quite apt: "Lickcheese emerges as a personification of Henry George's view of the origin of capital – in the middleman who is neither owner of property nor labourer, but able to persuade the landowner of the value of his service."

Detailed stage direction is another major aspect of Shavian characterization. Shaw, himself an actor and a producer/director, knew the difficulties in translating the play to the stage. To minimize the difficulties of the actor and the director, Shaw makes explicit in the stage directions what is implicit in the plays. Shaw's stage directions are full of minute details –

landscape, political, social and historical backgrounds – as well as individual's bent of mind and even his or her relationship with others. They not only describe the physical qualities of the characters introduced but also their mental caliber. They sometimes even forecast the future.

Shaw knew quite well that gestures could be effectively used for characterization and character-interaction. In *Devils Disciple*, for instance, Judith smiles. The stage direction reads: "implying 'How stupid of me!'" For a reader this stage direction compensates the absence of the actor whereas on the stage this prompts the actress as to what kind of an impression she should make with her smile. In the same play, during the trial of Dick Dudgeon, Burgoyne remarks: "By the way, since you are not Mr. Anderson, do we still – eh, Major Swindon ? Meaning 'do we still hang him?'" The early part of the statement is addressed to Dick Dudgeon, though he is called Anderson, because he is to be hanged only in the name of Anderson, while the later part is addressed to Major Swindon. Burgoyne asks Swindon, using gestures, whether they are to hang the accused. Burgoyne's simultaneously talking to Dudgeon and showing a gesture to Swindon in a climactic situation will definitely produce tremendous visual effect on the audience, not to mention how much the actor who might play Burgoyne would gain by this stage direction while even the reader can visualize the dramatic scene.

Shaw's stage directions are noted for their clarity. The movement of characters on the stage is more clearly visualized in Shaw because it is given, not in terms of abstract stage area, but in terms of characters. For instance, in *Candida*, the description of the movement is clearly given along with the mood of the characters. While Burgess crosses to Eugene "with great heartiness," Morell "joins Candida at the fire." Even emotional reactions are vividly described in the stage directions at most crucial situations. In the same play, Marchbanks stretches himself on the hearthrug, face upwards and throws back his head across Candida's knees, looking up at her. When they are in such a position, Morell comes in. One expects one of the most embarrassing scenes. But what happens is quite the contrary:

"Morell comes in. He halts on the threshold, and takes in the scene at a glance.

MORELL : (grave and self-contained) "I hope I don't disturb you". Candida starts up violently, but without the smallest embarrassment, laughing at herself. Eugene capsized by her sudden movement, recovers himself without rising, and sits on the rug hugging his ankles, also quite unembarrassed".

The lack of embarrassment, which Shaw makes clear through stage direction, is quite vital for the character-interaction in his plays. Emphasizing the use of settings and props in Shaw, Best goes to the extent of arguing that they are participants in the play: "Frequently Shaw employs settings and props for purposes considerably beyond their conventional function of background, context, or mood: he uses them for ends which are symbolic, ironic, descriptive, or even more notably, he causes them to become participant in the action as visual arguments – employing them sometimes, indeed, almost as sub-rosa characters".

Among the many possible instances, the contrast between the poor atmospheric background of the Salvation Army shelter in West Ham and the rich, orderly atmosphere seen in the rectory town of Perivale St. Andrews is a good example for the settings being participants in the play. Shaw's description of the West Ham shelter of the Salvation Army exposes its pitiable economic condition: "The building itself, and old warehouse, is newly whitewashed. Its gabled end projects into the yard in the middle, with a door on the ground floor, and another in the loft above it without any balcony or ladder, but with a pulley rigged over it for hoisting sacks.

The visual argument as suggested by Berst lies in the contrast of this camp with the factory of death: "Perivale St Andrews lies between two Middlesex hills, half climbing the northern one. It is an almost smokeless town of white walls, roof of narrow green slates or red tiles, tall trees, domes, campaniles, and slender chimney shafts, beautifully situated and beautiful in itself... The firestep, being a convenient place to sit, is furnished here and there with straw disc cushions; and t one place there is the additional luxury of a fur rug".

The very atmosphere helps Undershaft to win over Cusins and Barbara to his side. Education of man is the general aim of comedy. Instead of the hero being educated by a woman, owing to strange incidents and melodramatic clashes between men as happens in Shakespeare's comedies, the enlightenment is achieved in Shaw by cool-headed intellectual discussions. The plays of Shaw, hence are essentially dialectic.

Shaw's effective use of language and style then contributes to Shaw's art of characterization. The language and style of various characters differ depending upon the nature and situation of the characters. In Shaw's plays, which are essentially socialistic, class difference is echoed through the different ways of using language. Michael Gregory and Susanne Carroll explain that different classes "have different ways of using language, different 'strategies' for meaning, different 'fashions' of speaking. Class structure created different linguistic codes."<sup>13</sup> Hence, an important aspect of dialogue is the differentiation of the speech of individuals. Every speech, at least ideally, is characteristic of the speaker. But, in Shaw, when an educated man has to confront an illiterate, both have to be equally verbal because otherwise the dramatic debate would not take place. Further, is Fred Mayne rightly puts it: "Not only does the style of speech suit the speaker, but it also varies widely in the same speaker. This does not mean that the characters necessarily speak out of character, but that they change under the pressure of a new situation, or, as is more likely in Shaw, under the pressure of a new idea or challenge".

From a broad outlook, one can observe that the iconoclastic Shaw-heroes are often fond of rhythmic rhetoric. They use negative frequently. Question-tags and interrogatives are part of their dialect. Marchbanks, Dick Dudgeon, Julius Caesar, Brassbound, Andrew Undershaft, Higgins, King Magnus and Shotover have a common dialect, though they are not identical. Marchbanks, for instance uses negatives often in his rhetorical outburst against Morell: "You think because I shrink from being brutally handled – because (with tears in his voice) I can do nothing but cry with rage when I am met with violence – because I cant lift a heavy trunk down from the top of a cab like you – because I cant fight you for your wife as a drunken navy would: all that makes you think I afraid of you. But you are wrong. If I have not got what you call British pluck. I have not British cowardice either: I'm not afraid of a clargyman's ideas".

The repetition of the word 'because' and the use of negatives can be marked as special features of Marchbanks' dialect. He use 'if' clauses at least nineteen times within the play. Richard, another iconoclast, uses 'if' clause at least eleven times in the play. His characteristic rhetorical question is 'Do you understand?'

"Do you understand that I am going to my death? (She signifies that she understands) Remember, you must find our friend who was with us just now. Do you understand ? (She signified yes) See that you get him safely out of harm's way. Don't for your life let him know of my danger; but if he finds it out, tell him that he cannot save me".

Richard's dialect is marked by negatives, rhetorical questions and 'if' clauses. As Prince Hal in Henry IV, Part I uses prose when he is in the company of friends and blanks verse when he has to talk in the capacity of the prince, Shaw-heroes also speak different dialects under different situations.

Among the important women characters, Vivie and Joan impress as independent women who can be treated on par with Shaw-heroes. They, as their dialects reveal, are intellectually superior. Vivie's dialect is marked by repeated use of negatives:

VIVIE : "My dear Mr. Praed: do you know what the mathematical tripe means? It means grind, grind, grind for six to eight hours a day at mathematics and nothing but mathematics. I'm supposed to know something about science; but I know nothing except the mathematics it involves. I can make calculations for engineers, and so on; but I know next to nothing about engineering or electricity or insurance. I don't even know arithmetic well".

Though a woman, Joan is a Shaw-hero and hence uses rhetoric often. Her language is basically poetic. But, like Caesar, she uses slang when she talks to inferiors or to the Dauphin whom she treats like a child: "What is my business? Helping mother at home. What is thine? Petting dogs and sucking sugaraticks. I call that muck".

Even minor characters in Shaw are endowed with a high sensibility and their language is equally polished. Hence, Lickcheese would say that 'that cock won't fight any longer' to mean that the old system will not work. Hodson, a driver uses two dialects. He talks standard English to Broadbent, but uses Cockney with Irish Laymen. Shaw makes use of Cockney not only to produce comic effect but also for achieving characterization. The change Eliza undergoes is not merely phonetic. Her sensibility also undergoes a transformation which is revealed in her language in the later part of the play.

Though Shaw has dispensed with conventional plots and stereotyped heroes and villains, he very much insists on using the basic element of drama, namely, conflict. But the conflict in Shavian drama is unique. Since Shavian drama is basically intellectual, physical action and emotional conflict are bound to be missing. Action is there, but it is mental action. Conflict is there, but it is essentially conflict of ideas through characters. Hence, conflict which results in character-interaction becomes another major mode of Shavian characterization. Explaining the intellectual conflict found in Shavian drama, Ward observes that it has replaced emotional conflict:

"A great deal of critical disapproval of Shaw's plays has been based upon the supposition that they lack this primary element of conflict. If conflict in drama necessarily implies a clash involving either violent physical action or intense emotional disturbance, then conflict in that sense is lacking in the Shavian drama. It is, however, intentionally lacking, and its place is taken by mental action, which to Shaw was far more exciting."

Shaw's plays are in a sense, pedagogical exercises. A Shaw-hero is a teacher or a student or both. The conflict in Shavian drama depends much on the Shaw-hero. The clashes he has with the antagonist, or the society itself, or the mother-woman, provide the intellectual conflicts which result in character-interaction. The main function of the teacher, the Shaw-hero, is to transform a child into a man or woman. But there is no common moral to be learnt except that each man should act according to the laws of his own nature. One understands one's real profession, only during the 'hour of trial.'

In *Major Barbara*, the clash is between Barbara and Undershaft. Andrew's visiting the Army Camp results in Barbara shedding her uniform. It symbolizes the unquestionable victory of Undershaft. Satan-like, Andrew buys Cusins, Barbara's lover to succeed him in the business, thereby winning Barbara herself. During the 'hour of trial,' Barbara is disillusioned and she realizes that, "Turning our backs on Bodger and Undershaft is turning one's back on life". But the end of the play is paradoxical where the professor of Greek becomes a gunmaker while Barbara is seen busy choosing a house for her. Whether the surrender to Undershaft is temporary or



permanent is an open question. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins, the Shaw-hero, teaches Eliza not only phonetics, but also a sense of independence. The dilemma at the end of the play is only hypothetical. Higgins is never in a dilemma. He is a Life Force figure who will never bother to marry. Whether Eliza will marry Freddy or not is also not important. The real point of interest is that she has acquired independence and she has choice, which she learns during her 'hour of trial'.

*Heartbreak House* is an allegory of Europe before and during the war. Civilization is a ship on the rocks. Though the characters are allegorical, Shaw has fused abstractions with personality, giving a kind of psychological density. During her 'hour of trial' Ellie Dunn realizes that 'heartbreak' is not as painful as she imagined it to be. It is actually life educating her. Captain Shotover is a Shaw-hero, but exhausted and disillusioned about the educability of Man himself.

Joan, though defeated, is a vital Genius, who refuses to compromise with the system. That she is unconventional, bold and intelligent is revealed by the fact that she is in man's dress. The explanations she offers for it are quite reasonable. Her teaching techniques of war to a Captain reveals not only her audacity but also her role as a teacher. The trial scene, which is also her 'hour of trial'. Exposes her love for freedom and her disillusionment that the world will never learn.

The clash between Magnus and Proteus in *Apple Cart* symbolizes the clash between monarchy and democracy or rather between plutocracy and both democracy and monarchy. Magnus ultimately wins, but by a paradoxical method, i.e., by threatening to contest in the elections. The end of the play is more paradoxical and anticlimactic. Magnus is tired of politics. May be, like Joan and Shotover, Magnus is also disillusioned about the educability of Man. He permits his wife to treat him like a child. The play closes with the scene where Jemima forcibly leads Magnus to dinner as a bullying mother does a disobedient child.

The conflict and the character interaction, made more dramatic by paradox and anticlimax, provide Shaw's characters with a kind of complexity. The plays become dramatic and intriguing while the characters become complex, alive and interesting. The lack of conventional endings in most of the plays helps to add complexity to the characters.

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