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Conflict between Individual Judgement and Established Authority in George Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*

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Abstract:

Saint Joan is a record of what mankind does to its saints and geniuses. Man, by nature, does not want a saint or a genius. So, when a great soul appears, the hatred of man flares up against him or her. This fact is conveyed by the dramatist through the history of Joan, though a genius was crushed between two mighty forces, the feudal system and the Catholic Church. The conflict and the eternal struggle between individual judgement and the established authority throughout the life and career of this selfless girl are presented with rare realism, impartiality and intellectual brilliance by Shaw.

Keywords: Universal Tragedy, Conflict with Church, Conflict with Secular Authority, Mystic Experiences.

Introduction

Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* is generally regarded as one of the best plays of Shaw and is considered the greatest play of the 20th century. It is a historical play, a religious play, as well as a high tragedy and a great work of art. The central figure is Joan of Arc, popularly known as the Maid. She was born as a poor peasant girl in 1412, at Domremy in Lorraine, France. Though she was a child of humble origin, Joan saw '*visions*' and heard '*voices*' telling her to free her country from the rule of the English. Not only did she claim to be the spokeswoman of God but also patronised her own king. She was contemptuous of the opinion of others and led troops to victory on plans of her own. She was too frank and outspoken, made enemies on all sides and when she was burnt not a finger was raised to help her.

An action in a tragedy develops through a conflict. In *St. Joan*, the conflict is between Genius and Discipline or between Private Judgement and Authority. To what extent should an individual be given freedom to act according to his or her conscience and to what extent an Established Authority can assert its power, is still a question mark even today. This conflict and differences in opinion has resulted in the tragedy of Christ, Galileo and a host of others. Liberty breeds anarchy and authority breedstyranny. To quote A.C. Ward: "To Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, Joan represents a menace to the church, the Earl of Warwick, a menace to the feudal system; both are determined that the menace should be rooted out"(Bernard Shaw 77). Joan's tragedy has universal appeal because of an ever-recurring tragic pattern.

Conflict with the Church

Religious faith was a living, breathing reality in the Middle Ages and it was the very breath of life. The established Church, the Catholic Church, was the supreme authority in matters religious and even Kings and Princes dared not to go against its dictates. The Church acted as a unifying force. The sole jurisdiction was with the Holy Inquisition over religious offences. Nobody, not even the King, could dare to question its judgement.

Like the Church, Joan also stands as an irresistible force and immovable object. With her reliance on individual judgement and inspiration, Joan comes into headlong clash with the all-powerful organisation, the Church and the result is a poignant and moving tragedy. With terrific brilliance and passion, Cauchon presents the case against Joan.

what will the world be like when the church's accumulated wisdom and knowledge and experience, its councils of learned, venerable, pious men, are thrust into the kennel by every ignorant labourer or dairy-maid whom the devil can puff up with the monstrous self-conceit of being directly inspired from heaven? (Scene IV).

The Church, according to the people of the Middle Ages, was the representative of God on Earth. They believed in the church as they believed in the Moon and the Sun or any other natural phenomenon. This significance of the church is brought out again and again by the Bishop.

Conflict with Secular Authority

Richard De Beau Champ, the Earl of Warwick, is a representative of Feudal system. So, it is quite natural for him to be a bitter enemy of Joan's doctrine of Kingship. To him and to all the feudal barons, the important thing is her avowed role as God's messenger to the King of France. "If the people's thoughts and hearts were turned to the king and their lords became only the King's servants in their eyes, the King could break us across his knee one by one" (Scene IV). Even the Church is involved in this seemingly secular heresy. Cauchon explains:

To her, the French-speaking people are what the Holy Scriptures describes as a Nation. Call this side of her heresy nationalism if you will: I can find you no better name for it. I can only tell you that it is essentially anti-catholic and anti-Christian: for the Catholic Church knows only one realm and that is the realm of Christ's Kingdom. Divide that Kingdom into nations, and you dethrone Christ; and who will stand between our throats and sword? The world will perish in a welter of war. (Scene IV).

The Earl calls it a 'secular heresy' and he is bent on crushing this spirit of nationalism before it becomes more popular among the common people, by liquidating Joan. Her death becomes a political necessity, which must be carried out at any cost, without any considerations of pity or morality. It may be pointed out clearly that the play is a secular conflict between Nationalism and Feudal order.

Mystic Experiences

In the play, the Archbishop offers a definition for the word 'miracle':

A miracle is an event which creates faith. That is the purpose and nature of miracles. They may seem very wonderful to the people who witness them, and very simple to those who perform them. That does not matter: if they confirm or create faith, they are true miracles? (Scene II)

Joan's story moves on two platforms. First, there was the visionary level and the next one was the practical level. On the first platform, Joan sees '*visions*' and hears '*voices*' telling her what she was to do and in the next platform, she obeyed the '*voices*' and carried out their orders. She is given a mission in the visionary level and she carries it out in the practical level. It is seen clearly through the miracle of the 'eggs' in Scene I and the miracle of the 'changing

wind' in Scene III .The above mentioned scenes convinces the non-believers of Joan that she is not an imposter basically, which creates faith is building up the legend of the Maid. This helps in enabling her to perform her mission at the practical level.

As a humble daughter of the Church, Joan sincerely and devotedly believes in her '*visions*' and '*voices*'. As she believes that God has chosen her for a special mission, she is not prepared to do anything contrary to the command of God, whatever may be the consequences to her. She openly and firmly tells her judges during the Holy Inquisition:

If you command me to declare that all that I have done and, and all the visions and revelations I have had, were not from God, then it is impossible: I will not declare it for anything in the world. What God made me do I will never go back on; and what He has commanded or shall command I will not fail to do, in spite of any man alive. That is what I mean by impossible. And in case the Church should bid me do anything contrary to the command I have from God, I will not consent to it, no matter what it may be. I believe that God is wiser than I; and it is His commands that I will do. All the things that you call my crimes have come to me by the command of God. I say that I have done them by the order of God; it is impossible for me to say anything else. If any Churchman says the contrary, I shall not mind him; I shall mind God alone, whose command I always follow. My voices do not tell me to disobey the Church; but God must be served first. (Scene VI).

Thus Joan was a visualiser: she saw imaginary saints just as many people see imaginary pictures or landscapes; she was a sane person with normal hallucinations.

St. Joan as an Allegory

St. Joan is a literary composition with double meaning which has an interesting story with a hidden moral significance. The readers are instructed and morally edified. Abstract truths are conveyed through concrete symbols. As a genius, Joan comes into conflict with discipline or established authority or in other words, the Church.

The rise and fall of Joan is a thrilling, sensational and gripping story. Shaw has filled the play with symbolic and allegorical significance. Joan is the saint, like Christ, is martyred. Joan's conflict with the established authority is a continuing conflict. This sort of conflict has always been there and shall go on forever. Her '*voices*' and '*visions*' symbolise the conscience and common sense of humanity. The Earl of Warwick and Bishop Cauchon symbolise the forces of ignorance and stupidity, which for ever seek to suppress the voice of truth.

According to the philosophy of creative evolution by Shaw, Joan symbolises the upward urge of the Life Force, the urge to raise to higher and higher levels of the evolutionary ladder. Her enemies stand for the different obstacles and hindrances that check and retard Life's upward movement. The conflict between the good and the evil, between ignorance and knowledge, between religious faith and hypocrisy, between selfishness and self-sacrifice, between reason and superstition, between intelligence and ignorance, between the seer and the fool, between blindness and understanding, between truth and falsehood, between Christ and Anti-Christ, between individual freedom and established authority show that *Saint Joan* as an allegory of conflicts. Practically, all the characters stand for some idea or moral truth as they have been imparted some allegorical or symbolic significance.

Conclusion

As a historical play, *St. Joan* is a curious blend of fact and fiction and not a photographic reproduction of history. Bringing before the readers the portrayal of medieval atmosphere, Shaw in his Preface says: "To understand Joan's history, it is not enough to understand her character; you must understand her environment as well". Moreover, the appending of the Epilogue is a stroke of genius by Shaw which brings out the real importance, that is, the consequence of the burning of Joan. Joan as burned for heresy in 1431, rehabilitated in 1556, designated venerable in 1904, declared blessed in 1908 and finally canonised in 1920. According to Purdom, the play thus becomes a record, "of what mankind does to its geniuses and saints" (*A Guide to the Plays of Bernard Shaw*23).

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