George Bernard Shaw as a Dramatic Artist: Mastery of Stagecraft, Elaborate stage-directions, Realistic

G.B. Shaw has a definite message to deliver. He has a philosophy to propound. “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.” On account of this he is generally regarded as a philosopher, a propagandist, a debater and a social reformer and not as a dramatist and a man of the theatre. “Shaw is a literary satirist and iconoclast, but no playwright.” This is the view of many. But nothing is farther from the truth. Shaw “is essentially a man of the theatre and his natural affinity for the stage is as strong in him as his evangelical tendency”. It is altogether wrong to think that he “is merely an advanced propagandist who has chosen the theatre as a ready and insidious instrument for the furthering of his ideas.” “Shaw is essentially a man of the theatre. He is a consummate dramatic artist. He has shown greater knowledge of the stage and its technique than any of his contemporaries. He has taken greater pains to make his plays really interesting and appealing to the audience. The dramaturgic skill of his plays is no less essential than their philosophic ideas. Essentially a playwright, his plays are instinct with the life of the theatre.

George Bernard Shaw had a wonderful mastery of stagecraft. His skill in the art of construction of plays was consummate. He evolved a technique of his own to suit his purpose. But he was no innovator and did not invent any new technique. He adopted the traditional methods whenever he found them suitable for his purpose. He borrowed freely from Ibsen who introduced some new methods in his drama. Thus he made a harmonious synthesis of the old and the new methods to evolve one to suit the need of his plays. In imitation of Ibsen he discarded ‘asides’ and ‘soliloquies’. He directed his effort to an easy and natural concatenation of events as was not seen in the plays of his time. As a matter of fact he “used the technique of Euripides and Moliere, he revived the idiosyncratic differentiation of character seen in Shakespeare, he provided the actors and actresses with enormously effective parts, such as had not been created by a British writer for nearly three hundred years, and he restored the long rhetorical speeches which are in important feature of primitive dramaturgy”.

The special features of Shaw’s dramatic technique are: (i) his prefaces, (ii) his elaborate stage-directions, (iii) his rejection of the artificial limitations of the classical unities, and (iv) lack of action and conflict in his plays.
Shaw was hardly dependent on the stage for the publicity of his plays. He was fully conscious of the blindness of the commercial theatres of London. He knew that the theatrical managers would be shy to produce his plays for commercial reasons since his plays would not readily attract a large audience. He therefore decided to make the appeal of his plays wider by first committing them to print. So, he wrote his plays, primarily more for reading than for acting. With this end in view he wrote a preface for each of his plays to introduce it to the reading public. With the same end in view he gave elaborate stage-directions in his plays. His prefaces were intended to explain the purpose of his plays and the messages they were meant to convey. They gave him an opportunity to argue at length certain matters which were of interest to him. By means of his elaborate stage-directions he aimed at creating the atmosphere of the stage in the study of his plays. They combine the function of the novel and the drama. They create the necessary atmosphere, comment upon stage-settings and interpret characters rightly.

The English playwrights immediately before Shaw were in favour of keeping up the three classical unities of time, place and action in their plays under the influence of the French dramatists whom they imitated. Shaw rejected those artificial restrictions outright and followed Shakespeare in violating the classical unities in the construction of his plays.

Shaw’s plays are marked by an absence of conflict which is an essential element in dramatic action. This is regarded as a serious drawback of Shaw’s dramatic art. It is a fact that conflict in the physical sense is really absent in Shaw’s plays. But his plays are not altogether without conflict. There is always a mental conflict present in his plays. There is clash of competing ideas and opposing standards of human values in them. “If conflict in drama necessarily implies a clash involving either violent physical action or intense emotional disturbance, then conflict in that sense is often lacking in the Shavian drama. It is however by design lacking, and its place is taken by mental action, which to Shaw is far more exciting. For the conflict of passion Shaw substitutes the conflict of thought and belief: or rather, he brings moral passions to the stage to brake the long monopoly of physical and sensual passions. He is the drama of the thinking man. The true revolution which must be ascribed to him is the transference of conflict of modern drama from the physical to the mental place.” This is how A. C. Ward has commented on the absence of conflict in Shaw’s plays.
George Bernard Shaw

Shaw’s plays are lacking in action. They are, in fact, no more than dramatic dialogues. The characters in his plays merely stand or sit and discuss and argue things. They talk together and hold debates. They do things little. This, of course, is true. But the lack of action in his plays has been amply compensated by the flow of ideas, by the dazzling bouts of intellectual swordsmanship, and also by amusing wit. There is a profusion of these elements in his plays to keep the attention of the audience sufficiently engrossed so that they never feel for the absence of action. The fact is that Shaw is not very much interested in action. He reduces action to make room for discussions. He does not devise action that develops naturally from the characters or is a logical outcome of the situation. Sometimes he introduces violent and arbitrary action to keep the play moving. Such action does not spring naturally from the development of the plot or the characters. It bears little relation to the general structure of the play. It is often ‘arbitrary and convulsive, and does not spring naturally or resolve itself into the organic structure of the play.

The plot of a Shavian drama is very simple. It is made up very meagre elements and is altogether free from multiplicity of action. There is no complexity of events. It is usually divided into three Acts but occasionally into four Acts. There is no subdivision into scenes.

It is generally believed that Shaw’s characterization is defective. The characters of Shaw’s dramas are shadowy unrealities. They are not individuals but mere types. They are not characters by automatons bestriding the characters are merely “mouthpieces for his own ideas”, and they preach openly or by implication Shaw’s own gospel. The view regarding the characters of Shaw’s dramas is only partially true. It is true that “the larger numbers of his personages are instinct only with the life of intelligence and are but the mouthpieces of the author.” It is equally true that “everything that a character says comes out of his creator’s mind.” But it is not true that all his characters are not “individual people with authentic personalities but only gramophone records” to express his own ideas and air his own views. Shaw’s characters are not without variety and vividness. They have a peculiar quality which makes them stay in the memory and enables them to pass into conversation. Shaw’s principal characters are, with more or less deliberation, abstraction from humanity but his minor characters are human beings drawn in the spirit of Shakespeare or Dickens, though they too serve as black ground to his ideas. Shaw’s women “are distinctly unpleasant and practically unsexed women. Their bodies are as dry and had as their minds, and even where they run after men, as in the case of Anne in Man and Superman, the pursuit has as much sense appeal as a time table. Whether such women ever existed, or whether in creating them Ibsen convinced Shaw, they ought to exist as a counter-irritant to the romantic, swooning, novel reading females of our boyhood, is an open question.” Shaw’s characters are excellent talkers. They are never dull and monotonous. They are “various, versatile and vital”. They live in a world of their own ideas and are quite at home there.
Shaw writes his plays in prose which is the language of reason and intellect and not in verse which is the language of emotion. He is one of the greatest masters of English prose with a masterly command over the English language he writes natural, racy, and vivid dialogues. His language smacks of cold intellectuality. It is free from emotional fervour. It is sparkling with fun, wit and humour. It serves a practical and utilitarian purpose and is used for reasoning, argument and discussion. He is a great stylist. His style is peculiarly his own. He wields it is an effective weapon to assert his point of view with conviction. Shaw himself has said that his style is an instrument of assertion. “A true style”, says he, “is never achieved for its own sake…..Effectiveness of assertion is the Alpha and Omega of style. He who has nothing to assert has no style and can have none: he who has something to assert will go as far in power of style as its momentousness and his conviction will carry him.”

George Bernard Shaw is a realist. He writes with a serious purpose. The reality of life is the most serious and exciting thing to him. He finds that ‘life is real, life is earnest,’ but he has not imitated the appearances of life. He has explained to his audiences the reality that lies at the core of things beneath their deceptive appearances. His realism is absolutely free from any touch of romance and sentimentalism. He has based his dramas on what he regards, as ‘genuinely scientific natural history’. As scientific history is free from romance, his dramas too are entirely free from it.

Shaw writes with a purpose. He has made his plays vehicles of his ideas. His plays are about something that matters. The following observation of Joad deserves attention in this connection. He says, “Shaw’s interests in his plays lie pre-eminently in morals, politics and philosophy. He is in fact, a philosopher. Moreover, he possesses, as did Plato, a strong dramatic gift. The gift he deliberately uses to bring his ideas on human life and how it should be lived and on human communities and how they should be run to the notice of the people who would not read strictly philosophical works, presenting them so entertainingly and startlingly that audiences who saw the plays would remember either through pleasure or from shock the ideas which had been brought so forcibly to their notice.”

George Bernard Shaw’s Philosophy of Life: Creative Evolution and Life Force

“Shaw’s judgements are often scatterbrained, but at least he has brains to scatter.” - Max Beerbohm

Pre-eminently a first-rate dramatist whose work had a major influence on British drama, Shaw is a philosopher par excellence, with a definite philosophy of life. As a philosopher he is the chief exponent of the philosophic doctrine known as Creative Evolution. The earliest statement of his philosophic doctrine appears in his Man
and Superman as the doctrine of Life Force. This doctrine runs through most of his later plays and takes final shape as the doctrine of Creative Evolution in his Back to Methuselah published in 1921.

A C Ward has traced the growth and development of Shaw’s philosophic doctrine in the following wards: “This play was Bernard Shaw’s earliest full statement of his conception of the way of Salvation for the human race, through obedience to the Life Force, the term he uses to indicate a power continually working upon the hearts of men and endeavouring to impel them towards a better and fuller life. In later plays the Life Force seems to become more and more closely identified with what most people mean when they speak of the Will of god and the Holy Ghost ……………….The philosophy of the Life Force introduced in Man and Superman, ran through most of the later plays.

Unlike Hardy’s Immanent Will, Shaw’s Life Force is represented as a power making consciously towards a state of existence far more abundantly vital than anything yet experienced by mankind. His startling themes on slum landlordism and prostitution, the folly of punishment and revenge, religion, politics, the medical profession, marriage, parenthood, and phonetics—came into the stage. They came with the force of life. But the Life Force is not purposed to work unaided; men and women are required to act as willing and eager agents for the furtherance of its great work. The existing rage of men, however, (so Shaw thought in 1903), was too mean-spirited and too self-centered to serve the Life Force, which would consequently be compelled to supersede man by a more effective instrument of its will – the Superman! In Back to Methuselah once again the purpose and claims of the Life Force were stressed; Once again, and in plainer terms than before, he spoke his warning that if man did not come up to the mark, Man would be replaced by a less tragically futile creature.” Shaw “pleads for the substitution of Creative Evolution – his ‘religion of the twentieth century – which teaches not only that man is the
potential Superman, but also that man can himself hasten the evolutionary process by ‘willing’ his own upward development. In fact Shaw’s intellect or ideas is imbued with bold, critical intelligence and his sharp pen, brought to bear on contemporary issues, helped mold the thought of his own and later generations. Moreover, his Life Force accomplished this through a brilliance of wit that remains unsurpassed. Now coming to the point, the Life Force is not named so frequently in Back to Methuselah as in Man and Superman, but it remains as the power behind the idea of Creative Evolution. The ultimate desire of the Life Force is to establish the city of God on earth. The intention at the back of the idea of Creative Evolution is that man should work intentionally towards to evolution of a human type that will be strong enough to establish and worthy enough to maintain the earthly Jerusalem. Creative Evolution is the doctrine commended by Shaw as a means through which the desire of man and the purpose of the Life Force may be made identical.

The Rich Metaphorical Significance of the Hell-scene in Man and Superman

Act III of Man and Superman is loaded with rich metaphorical significance. It is virtually a full-fledged one-act play incorporated into and interfused with the texture of this drama by the superb dramatic genius of Shaw. The drama being a realistic one the Hall scene typifies Shaw’s ability to create fantasy.

Indeed it is suggestive of an exquisite imaginative fecundity of Shaw. Thus, by skillfully interweaving this piece of fantasy with the drama Shaw has made wonderful admixture of realism and fantasy. “Without this scene Man and Superman is merely a comedy, the story of a marathon man-hunt on the part of a woman. With this scene alone it attains the dignity of a philosophy”. In stage representation this scene proved to be exceptionally effective and Shaw himself intended it to figure as a vital and inextricable part of the drama. The entire scene is laden with philosophical ideas of almost encyclopedic magnitude. Prof. A. C. Ward has made an illuminating comment on the merit of this scene; “Among the many conversation – pieces in Shaw’s plays
this is supreme. In sustained brilliance of argument in paradox and wit and humor, it is unsurpassed in dramatic literature. Yet these are no more than its raw materials”.

The scene is conspicuous for its verbal music. It is a marvelous tour de force of discussions, capable of enthralling the listeners by its sheer power of enchanting music apart from the merit of rich philosophical undertone. The meaning underlying this scene is of no mean importance. Commenting on the musical aspect of this scene, Prof. A. C. Ward says; “Passages of Mozart’s music bridge the gap between the actual and the drama state as the scene begins and great chords roll out later”.

The metaphorical value of the scene deserves a more careful attention. The dialogue in Hell is obviously metaphorical. It provides subtle intellectual exercise. But Shaw has lifted intellectual arguments and philosophical speculations to the plane of music. The dream-sequence represents the mental turmoil of Tanner who at the concluding part of the Second Act, is found to undergo great mental conflict. He is afflicted by doubts and fears. Contrary to the denizens of Hell and the Devil who are exclusively romantics, involved in the endless pursuit of pleasure. Don Juan finds no happiness of pleasure. To him pleasure is ephemeral, although it is seemingly attractive and winsome. Don Juan craves for blessedness, a life of contemplation and not of sensuous enjoyment. He is horrified at the prospect of an eternal pleasure. In close resemblance with Aristotle, Don Juan prefers to conceive life intellectually and not sensually. Aristotle has opined that true happiness “does not lie in amusement; it would indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one’s life in order to amuse oneself”. The Hell is replete with elfin enchantments. It is a veritable bower of bliss, a pleasant grotto of sensuous delights. But it is absolutely unfavourable for the satisfaction of the soul. The conflict between these two different and interdictory strands of thought constitutes the sine qua non of the Hell scene. Heaven has been viewed as an unending contemplation of reality. Unlike Hell and the sensual life therein which is devoid of any aim or purpose, the life of the mind has a definite goal and a decisive aim. It aims at the furtherance of knowledge.

The Hell-scene is not an extraneous in the pattern of this drama. It is a forum for the discussion of the kernel of the Shavian thought which comprises the motif of the play. This is not an ordinary scene of dramatic interlude. It is an interlude which serves an important purpose in the play. It deals with topics of exceptional seriousness. But the most important point which deserves to be noted here is that the scene effervesces with the revolutionary views and ideas of Shaw himself. It bears the
impress of Shaw as an iconoclast striving hard to break the bondage of conventionality.

Like all Shavian plays, Man and Superman is also didactic. The serious philosophical arguments have been made palatable through the medium of Comedy. This is the device by which Shaw arrests our attention. He unreservedly manifests his method of presenting ideas with pleasure, equivalent to that of a Comedy. Theatre, according to Shaw, had been a legitimate or fitting platform for the propagation of his ideas, however, propagandizing they might be. But it also clung to the belief that the place voicing forth his ideas must necessarily be dramatically successful. The characters, situations, dialogue and thought-contents should be cogent and consistent. Thus jack Tanner arouses much fun and humour as he, after having tenaciously maintained a deep misogynistic outlook, ultimately submits himself to the enticement of Ann. “The ironic use to which Shaw puts these characters is given larger philosophic scope in the third Act. The dream-sequence is commonly referred to as ‘Don Juan in Hell’. Here Ramsden the substitute father of the modern play is metamorphosed into Ann’s real dead father who denies unreal obligations and responsibilities and takes the Devil’s side. The Devil appears as a loquacious hypocritical sentimental Victorian gentleman with many good arguments as well as good tunes, defending pleasure against the onslaught of the intellectual Juan. Jack’s ancestor Juan here pursues, not women, but the higher good, form which women are merely an unnecessary distraction. Ana even after death, clings tenaciously to the same Victorian decorum as her descendant, Ann, some of which is frankly hypocritical, but some of which is undeniably practical and Shaw says, a way of fulfilling a necessary higher function. These characters are Ann and Jack, only older. There is the implication in the third Act that Juan does not relent but will continue his solitary speculations. But it is left as an implication while the last word tantalizingly is Ana’s as she rushes off in determined pursuit of a father for the Superman.” This Act is kind of play-within-a-play, a rhetorical drama which is nearly always omitted from performance and from some editions of the play on grounds of length, but is simultaneously integral to the play and has life and cogency enough to withstand quite separate presentation, just as Acts I. II and IV constitutes a clear, complete, separately sustained play without the especially philosophic operatic third Act.”
George Bernard Shaw as a Dramatist:
“For art’s sake alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence”

Before George Bernard Shaw started his career as a dramatist, the English drama had already entered into a new phase of development under the influence of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. The romantic tradition of the Elizabethan drama which held the English stage for more than three centuries began to lose its influence from the middle of the nineteenth century. “Is drama to be limited to the surface characteristics of a life that is no longer lived in surface, or will drama reflect in form and substances the deepest life of the time?” This was the question which vigorously agitated the mind of the mid-Victorian dramatists. They finally realized that the new drama had a serious purpose to server and it should be brought in line discarded the romantic tradition of the Old English drama and accepted the real and serious problem of the age as the themes of the new English drama. In the absence of any British playwright to supply them with motive and model they drew inspiration from the continental playwrights particularly from Ibsen who had already made social problems of his time the subjects of his plays.

By the time young Bernard appeared on the scene of the English drama, Ibsen had been sufficiently known to the English playwrights and his creative influence felt by them. “Ibsen had taught men that drama, if it was to live a true life of its own, must deal with human emotions, with things near and dear to ordinary men and women. Hence the melodramatic romanticism and the chill pseudo-classic remoteness alike disappeared in favour of a treatment of actual English life, first of aristocratic existence, then of middleclass lives, and finally of laboring conditions. With the treatment of actual life the drama became more and more a drama of ideas, sometimes veiled in the man action, sometimes didactically set forth. These ideas were for the most part revolutionary, so that drama came to form an advanced battleground for a rising school of young thinkers. Revolt took the form of reaction to past literacy models, to current social conventions and to the prevailing morality of Victorian England.” They were T. W. Robertson, A. W. Pibero and Arthur Henry Jones. They wrote plays both of social interest and literary merit for the first time in
England in imitation of the continental playwrights and initiated the movement for a new type of play called “The Naturalistic Play”. The plays written by these three playwrights contained “the rudiments of an Ibsenist motive” but they could not attain the excellence of an Ibsenist play. These plays are characterized by an abundant display of “artificial sentiment, verbal polish, and cynical elegance.” Whatever be their defects, it is true that they rescued the English drama from a state of chaos and set it on the right course. Along with these plays of social interest appeared also the plays of Oscar Wilde who wrote on the principle of “art for art’s sake” and attained considerable popularity at the time.

George Bernard Shaw

When young Bernard came to London this movement for the new drama had already set in. He got the movement quite ready for him. He at once plunged vigorously into the movement and made himself known first as a dramatic critic and then as a dramatist. He was a staunch champion of Ibsen and his new drama. He was a formidable opponent of the pure aesthetic principle of art. He vigorously denounced the “art for art’s sake” attitude prevailing at the time when he started writing Plays. His watch word was “art for art’s sake”. “For art’s sake’ alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence” said he. He was “a natural literary artist fettered by reforming zeal,” and his plays were “a continuous record of the long struggle between artist and moralist”.

George Bernard Shaw was an artist by nature but a propagandist by profession. He subordinated his artistic ability to his moral purpose. Thinking that “the stage was the finest platform in the world,” he “climbed on to the stage. Taught himself the dramatists job, and in addition to being a great controversialist became am almost supremely great dramatist.” His Drams are vehicles of propaganda and his characters are “mechanical mouth-pieces” to express his own views on social, political, religious and moral problems of the age. He sought for and achieved a significant and harmonious union of literacy and theatrical qualities.
H. Pearson has made the following estimate of Shaw’s achievement as a dramatist: “From 1895 to 1898 Shaw, as a dramatic critic, ceaselessly attacked fashionable drama of the age, championed Ibsen, prepared the way for his own comedies and incidentally wrote the wittiest and most provocative essays in the history of journalism. His attack was successful. The so-called ‘well made play gave place to the drama of ideas, and the Shavian Theatre was finally established in the early years of the present century.’

At first the London managers would not look at George Bernard Shaw’s plays. Instead of the denouements and state situation and commonplace sentiments to which they were accustomed, he gave them social satire, unconventional philosophy and brainy dialogue. One of his early plays was booed and brainy dialogue. One of his early plays was booed, another was censored, a third failed. Still he pegged away, and when his chance came in 1904 at the Court Theatre, he produced his own comedies, trained his own actors and created his own audiences. After that the London managers clamored for his plays. But the critics, uninfluenced by box-office considerations, were not so easily persuaded, and for more than a generation many of them went on repeating that his plays were not plays; an attitude he derisively encouraged by calling them conversations, discussions, history lessons, and so on. What made his works so novel was that he revived the classical technique of play writing, applying it to modern problems; he adopted the method of the Greek dramatists in order to deal with the topics of the hour. While the essence of his plays is as original as Shaw himself, their novelty lay in the fact that he used the theatre as another man would use a newspaper, a pulpit, or a platform; many of his comedies are half-sermon, half-debate, and every conceivable subject is discussed, from love. Marriage and family life to religion, science and politics, his laboriously acquired knowledge of social conditions, and his creed as a socialist informing most of them. Being an inspired dramatist, not a manufacturer of entertainment, he did not plan or plot his plays in advance. While engaged on them he never saw a page ahead and never knew what was going to happen. The forms they took were inevitable, though he worked as carefully at the writing of them as the most industrious craftsman.”