



Research Paper

## George Bernard Shaw's Last Plays: a Thematic Study

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In the nineteenth century drama had disappeared from the literary scene. It is true that Shalley, Keats, Byron and Browning had written many poetic plays but they were not very successful on the stage. The theatre going public was not attracted by the poetic plays of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century thousands of Farces and melodramas were produced but no superior dramatic genius had adorned this age. Ibsen arose in Europe as a great revolutionist in the dramatic world. When his plays were staged in London they were vehemently criticized but Shaw welcomed the plays and called them the harbingers of new drama. In order to popularize the plays of Ibsen, Shaw wrote his famous critical treatise, Quintessence of Ibsenism which is a heroic defence against the prejudice about Ibsen. By example of Ibsen, Shaw decided to enter in the field of drama so that he could train and teach the twentieth century.

By 1930, Shaw's prolific output of dramas had made him famous throughout the world. In spite of his criticism as a buffoon or a joker, he established his fame as a first rank realist in the field of drama. The last phase of Shaw begins with *Too True to be Good* which he began to write in 1931. Up to 1930, Shaw was writing with his full dramatic and literary powers but after having written *The Apple Cart* and *Saint Joan*. His powers were declining yet his ideas and thinking faculty were not showing any weakness. St Joan Ervine thinks that the last period of Shaw begins with nineteen thirty one. Commenting on this point Ervine observes, "G.B.S. was now beginning to slacken; and there was a perceptible decline in the quality of his place. Formerly, e had been prolific and speedy in his output, but now he began to take things more easily. He was 73 when he wrote *The Apple Cart*, which was the first full length play he had written since *Saint Joan*. He did not make another play until, somewhere between Corsica and Sardinia. He began to write *Too True to be Good* on March 3,1931." The opinion of Ervine in the lines quoted above is not very sound because G.B.Shaw was definitely showing maturity and sharpness of thought in his last plays. The prose works and the prefaces written during the period are full of deep thought and keen observation.

Shaw began his dramatic career in 1891 and continued to write plays up to 1950. The whole of Shaw's dramatic career has been divided into four parts; the first period from 1891 to 1900; the second period from 1901 to 1920; the third period from 1921 to 1931 and the last period from 1931 to 1950.

In all these periods, Shaw social, political, religious and scientific themes. The plays of Bernard Shaw which he wrote between 1931 to 1934 are *The Apple Cart*, *Village Wooing* and *On the Rocks*. *Too True to be good* was written in 1931 and it was produced in New York at the Colonial theatre in February, 1932. The play *Too True to be Good* has thematic importance because Shaw has taken up the degradation and deterioration of the rich persons who have obtained riches only to indulge in passions, pleasures and luxuries. This play is a story of three reckless young people who come in the possessions of unlimited riches and set out to have a complete life of pleasures using all the modern machinery of pleasure so that they could realize the highest point of gaiety and happiness in this life. The three reckless young people are referred to Miss Mopply (the patient) who is a daughter of a millionaire, of Mrs Mopply . The second is, Susan Sweetie Simpkins (the nurse) who later in the play is called Countess Valkrioni and third is Popsy (the Burglar) alias, the honourable Aubrey Bagot. This reckless character Aubrey is the son the Elder who is really the portrait of Dr. W R Inge, the gloomy dean of St Paul's whom Shaw regarded as a great intellectual of England.

The plot of this play centres around the three reckless characters. The first character Miss Mopply is shown in the beginning of the play as a patient of measles while she is not suffering from any disease at all. The mother is so anxious about her daughter, Mopply that she presses the doctor to give her injection of anti-measles vaccine. Being a millionaire, Mrs Mopply is willing to spend any amount of money for the pretended disease.

She says to the doctor, "It was so unexpected! Such a crushing blow! And I have taken such care of her. She is my only surviving child; my pet, my precious one. Why do they all die? I have never neglected the smallest symptom of illness. She has had doctors in attendance on her almost constantly since she was borne."

The second reckless character is the episode of Sweetie. She is a philanderer. In the beginning, she acts like a nurse in the nursing home where Miss Mopply is being treated as a patient of measles. There she becomes an accomplice in kidnapping of Miss Mopply so that she can get a large ransom from the richest woman Mrs Mopply, the mother of Miss Mopply. Aubrey is one of the conspirators in this crime of kidnapping. After the kidnapping of Miss Mopply who is feigning as a hostage. These three brigands reach a beautiful Island where three soldiers of the play, Colonel Tallboys, V.C., D.S.O., Private Napoleon Alexander Trotsky Meek and Sergeant Fielding are already present. On the Island Sweetie's flirtation and sensuality come into the forefront. Sweetie was already in love with Aubrey and in this courtship both of them had spent large amount of money which they had collected from the sale of pearl necklace which was stolen by Miss Mopply from her mother. On the Island, Sweetie changes her love from Aubrey to the Sergeant but her mind in love affairs is quite inconstant. She expresses indifference to Colonel Tallboys. Aubrey and Sweetie had been developing love for each other but Aubrey expresses his dislike in these words, "I could be happy as a Buddha in a temple, eternally contemplating my own middle and having old priest to polish me up every day. But Sweetie wants a new face every fortnight. I have known her fall in love with a new face twice in the same week (turning to her) woman; have you any sense of the greatness of constancy."

In the end the Sergeant promises to settle down with Sweetie so that he may be free from this constant problem of desire for company of women and adventures in sexuality. It can be seen in the following dialogue between The Sergeant and Sweetie, "The Sergeant: Neither is it mine. As a single man and a wandering soldier I am fair game for every woman. But if I settle down with this girl she will keep the others off. I'm a bit tired of adventures. Sweetie : Well, If the truth must be told, so am I. We were made for one another, Sergeant : what do you say ? The Sergeant : Well don't mind keeping company for a while, Susan, just to see how we get along together."

The third reckless character in this play is Aubrey, the son of The Elder, who is the portrait of W.R. Inge who had been the Dean of St.Paul from 1911 to 1934. In this play Aubrey has been shown as a burglar and man of very mean character. He is one of the three most corrupt characters in the play. Miss Mopply exposes the character of Aubrey. Even his father, The Elder is most dissatisfied with his dissolute and profane life. In the third act Elder rebukes his son in the following speech, "A saint! Say rather the ruined son of an incorrigibly, superstitious mother. Retire now from the life you have dishonoured. There is the sea. Go. Drown yourself. In that graveyard there are no lying epitaphs. (He mounts to his chapel and again gives way to utter dejection.)"

Aubrey has spoiled his life so much that that the father becomes pessimistic about his belief in science. He condemns determinism and gives up atheism. He is hopeless about the life and future and future prospectus of his son. This reckless boy delivers the last closing speech of this play. After his father, The Elder has advised him to take the profession of preaching rather than stealing and committing other crimes, Aubrey remembers the teaching of the Bible which his mother had inculcated in him and he becomes wiser and gives us his view of degradation of manners and human souls in the following speech, "naked bodies no longer shock us: our's sunbathers, grinning at us from every illustrated summer number of our magazines, are under than shorn lambs. But the horror of the naked mind is still more than we can bear. Throw of the last rag of your bathing costume; and I shall not blench nor expect you to blush. You may even throw away the outer garments of your souls: the manners, the morals, the decencies. Swear; use dirty words; drink cocktails; kiss and caress and cuddle until girls who are like roses at eighteen are like bettered demireps at twenty two: in all these ways the bright young things of the victory have scandalize their dull old pre-war elders and left nobody but their bright young selves a penny the worse. But how are we to bear this dreadful new nakedness: the nakedness of the souls who until now have always disguised themselves from one another in beautiful impossible idealism to enable them to bear one another's company ."

In the beginning of the preface, Shaw gives his own views on the theme and characters who are the symbols of his ideas. Sweetie and Aubrey are the symbol of the idea that lasciviousness in love is to be rejected and the life force dictates that we should take up the other challenges of life. When Sweetie begins to be amorous, The Sergeant says, "her love is of no consequence." He had read the Bible and The Pilgrim's Progress which set him thinking that the problem of love in marriage has to be considered from the view point of Creative Evolution. He knows that women are all very well in their way but the Sergeant has nothing to say against this belief. This idea springs in the mind of Sergeant that marriage is an impersonal institution. In the preface to the play, he raises many questions regarding richness and poverty. He believes that our social system is unjust to the poor but it is cruel to the rich. People are wrong to think that riches can bring happiness to those who possess unlimited wealth.

The next play is Village Wooing which was written in 1933. The contents of the play are based on his own experiences and tribulations as a passenger on a luxury cruise. In this charming short comedy there are two characters A and Z. This small play is full of fragrance and wooing and courting. The play begins when A who is a writer sitting on a deck chair on the luxury ship. In the meantime just a garrulous young woman, presentable but not aristocratic begins to converse with him. The writer thinks that it is an interruption and he ignores her.

In the first conversation both of them exchange personal knowledge about their life and professions. Towards the end of the first conversation the woman Z reveals that she won the first prize in the newspaper competition. Her mother wanted to say that money but the woman did not agree with the mother and she wanted a thrifty husband both of them talk on the pleasures of marriage. The woman is after the marriage. But writer (A) is after completing his work. Therefore, the proposal of marriage is not accepted by the write. This scene shows that the man who is a widower has set his heart and mind on completing the book. He is really the creation of life force which tells him that he should not marry again but devote himself to reading and writing .

The views of both (A) The writer proprietor and (Z) The shop assistant on the purpose of life are different. The writer tells the village lady that young person's always keep before them the idea of adventure, hardship, care, disappointment, doubt, mystery, danger and death. Then both of them discuss the issue of marriage. Here Shaw expresses his anti romantic attitude to marriage. He thinks that marriage is not a personal thing but it is a device invented by man and life force for the shape of continuation of human race.

Shaw has examined various forms of marriage which have been in practice since the ancient time of civilisation. He has come to the conclusion that the love is the cosmic force by which life force attempts to preserve human race. For life force monogamy is the best form of marriage. Other forms of marriage are the aberrations of human passion.

The above view of Shaw has been modified and reoriented at the end of the short play Village Wooing where the writer and the village woman discuss this point like serious thinkers on the future form of marriage.

Thus in this comedy Shaw has brilliantly discussed the issue of marriage through satire, laughter and wit. Shaw has succeeded in changing the conception of marriage in which a man and a woman agree to live as companions just as Shaw had lived himself as an affectionate companion of Charlotte. Although he was married to her but remained throughout his life a celibate. As far as his relationship with Charlotte was concerned, St. John Ervine has actually quoted the words of Bernard Shaw in the following extract with Charlotte as his affectionate wife, "As a man and wife we found a new relation in which sex had no parts. It ended the old gallantries, flirtations and philandering for both of us. Even of these it was the ones that were never consummated that life the longest a kindest memories."

### ***On the Rocks***

*On the Rocks* was begun immediately after *Village Wooing* in 1933. In 1931, Shaw had visited Russia and been impressed by a dictator's ability to get things done quickly by the simple process of cutting through red-tape and tradition. The impact of his visit to Russia on Shaw was so deep that he wrote *On the Rocks* as an extravagant commentary on western democratic form of government. Therefore, the theme of this play is that democracy as an institution has many weaknesses. The theme is also religious because it has Shaw's commentary on the last day of judgement. The play focuses on a British Prime Minister who is a character in the play so burdened with work and so bound with routine that he has no time and energy left to govern the country. The cabinet consists of the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers who are a collection of noddles and neuropaths.

The play begins in the cabinet room of Ten Downings Street. The Prime Minister whose name is Sir Arthur Chavender is wasting his time over a late breakfast and reading Times. The White Hall in the Prime Minister's residence is full of a large number of unemployed workers. When the workers' deputation lead by the labour leader Hipney comes and enquires what the Prime Minister intends to do about the striking workers of a very big factory. Sir Arthur is at a loss to answer the query. But nobody knows how to solve this problem. The Prime Minister is in grip of economic forces and problems that are beyond human control. The government has done everything possible to save the people from extending the unemployment benefits to the utmost limit of England's national resources .

The third and last act shows that democracy is down and out. The play shows the political wisdom of Shaw. The play shows that Shaw was contemptuous of democracy and could not resist himself from condemning the Labour Government under Ramsay Macdonald which was totally inefficient to deal with the problems of labour and working class. It was the period of great depression throughout the world and the economy of various democratic countries were collapsing. In America the President Roosvelt has drawn up the programme of the new deal, but dare was not remedy for England or other European countries where the people were admiring the rise of dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini, Kamal Ataturk, Stalin. Shaw compared the democracies and the dictatorial countries and began to conclude that dictators were better than democratic leader like Macdonald or Chamberlain.

Thus *On the Rocks* is a play deals with the defects of modern democracy specially parliamentary democracy in England. parliamentary democracy has serious defects because it suffers from red-tapism, inertia and listlessness about the future of a country. Its electioneering methods are more defective. But Shaw was thinking of these inner weaknesses of parliamentary democracy in England and his mind was imagining the suitability of Presidential system of democracy

### ***The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles***

After the political play *On the Rocks* Shaw wrote *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*. In this play Shaw attempted to take up a religious theme on the veracity of the last Day of Judgement of which Christianity and Islam are great supporters and believers. The play takes up the theme of the Day of Judgement and discusses the rationale of the Day of Judgement and concludes that the Christian view of the Day of Judgement suffers from over credulity. The followers of Christianity have taken the Day of Judgment as a religious doctrine because of their credulity and complacent faith in Christianity. In fact the Day of Judgement is being enacted every moment and every day of our lives.

In this play there is a garden which contains four shrines marking the corners of the square. In the two shrines there two girl goddesses named Maya and Vashti who sit cross legged and at the other two shrines two youthful gods are sitting in the same fashion whose names are Janga and Kanchin. A young clergyman wanders into the garden looking like a stranger when he catches the sight of four figures he is very much surprised. There are six persons who come out into the garden and begin to talk to the clergyman who tells them that has come to *The Unexpected Isles* after being released by the kidnappers. He is a British citizen whom Shaw has called the Simpleton. These six citizens are really the members of a marriage group which sets the aim of reforming the coming generations through eugenics. But clergyman refuses to join the group. Shaw turns to the east and wants to correct the society through eugenics which is the science of correcting future generations. Group marriage is a thought of the genetic thought.

The third theme in the play is British imperialism. Although *Unexpected Island* is in the Pacific but it stands for the British Island where anything unexpected can happen. The British empire was on its last leg when the was being written when India which was the biggest country of the British empire, had waged war against British rulers right from 1857 which we call the First War of Independence. Shaw has always been a great supporter of colonial freedom. His own country Ireland was under the British rule. For the freedom of which he wrote a political play *John Bull's other Island*.

In this play he makes reference to India which has attained independence and Dominion Status under the British crown. The following speech of Pra in the second act of the play is very prophetic, "The insight you obtained into eastern modes of thought has enabled you to govern the eastern crown colonies with extra ordinary success. Downing Street hated you; but Delhi supported you; and since India won Dominion Status. Delhi has been the centre of the British Empire. You, Hyering, have had the same diplomatic success in the east for the same reason. But beyond this we have been unable to advance a step. Our dream of founding a millennial world culture: the dream which united Prola and Pra as you first knew them, and then united us all six, has ended in a single little household with four children, wonderful and beautiful, but sterile."

Thus we can say that the three themes although presented very humorously are interconnected.

### ***The Six of Calais***

Shaw wrote one of his shortest plays *The Six of Calais* in 1934. This can be regarded as a chronicle play dealing with the life of Edward III who was the king of England from 1327 to 1377. He married Philippa of Hainault who also takes active part in the play. It was during his reign that independence of Scotland was recognized and nine years later began the Hundred Years War with France. His reign is memorable for the heroic achievement of Edward the Black Prince. During his rule many famous battles were won at Crecy Poitiers. But during the last days the Black Prince died and the British forces had to withdraw from France. The play is a chronicle in which Edward III is shown at Calais on the last day of the siege. In the short preface Shaw has shown that Edward III was not great and strong like his grandfather Edward I.

*The Six of Calais* is a medieval war story which does not contain any moral but Shaw's desire for portraying Edward III as a king who had the ambition of ruling over France. His son the Black Prince so called because he used to put on black armour; fought so violently that he won many battles and was just near the point of winning whole of France and to make it a part of English Kingdom but due to the looseness and weakness of Edward III's mind he has to return back from the battle fields of France quite disappointed and defeated. Here Shaw is thinking of a contrast between the play *Man of Destiny* and *The Six of Calais*. In *man of destiny* Shaw has proved that "Napoleon succeeded not because he had greater soldierly than other generals but because his view of life was not coloured by conventional standards of right and wrong, decency and indecency."

In this play Shaw has shown that the name and fame of Napoleon were really the result of his self control which is proved by the fact that he did not bother about his family affairs especially about his wife's adultery. He showed indifference to his wife's misconduct because his military genius guided him to ignore such trivial incidents. He was a true product of life force. On the other hand Edward III was a henpecked husband who had great attachment and love for his wife Philippa. Shaw has written most of his plays with the purpose of the application of life force or creative evolution to the incidents of real life. But this play shows to us the weaknesses and short tamper of Edward III. This fact interferes with his royal life and heroism. His wife Philippa tells him to show mercy to those six persons of Calais who came to the king's camp. These six citizens

are having halters and iron keys in their hands. Their leader Eustache De St. Pierre kneels at the king's feet. They lay their keys on the ground, they are totally upset. The king is angry with the leader of the six, St. Pierre. The king holds a dialogue with them,

“The King: - And now fellows, what ye to say to excuse your hardy and stubborn resistance for all these moments to me, your king?

Eustache :- Sir, we are not fellow. We are free burgesses of this great city.

The King :- Free burgesses! Are you still singing that song? Well, I will bend the necks of your burgesses when the hangman has broken yours. Am I not our over lord? Am I not anointed king?” When the king is threatening them with dire consequences the queen interferes and pleads for mercy to the recalcitrant six citizens of Calais because they are in a very big plight. When the king orders that the six ill behaved persons should be hanged, the queen requests the king for mercy.

Even in Caesar and Cleopatra a historical play Bernard Shaw has portrayed the character of Caesar as a man of great self- control and self-abnegation. It is by self-control that he becomes the conqueror of the whole world. In this drama Caesar places before himself the aim of conquering Egypt and returning safely to Rome. But Edward III, has no character of a soldier which Caesar posses. Caesar had in his heart an occult aim of finding and traversing the radiance of mystery. But Edward III has lost self-control and loses victory of France.

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