



BERNARD SHAW'S MAJOR BARBARA: PRESENTATION OF THE SALVATION ARMY

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ABSTRACT

The play "Major Barbara" centres round the work being done by the Salvation Army, and gives a penetrating analysis and evaluation of its work and its weaknesses. Major Barbara is the first great work of art in which this missionary organization has been glorified and the value of the noble work being done by it has been stressed, though not for a moment does Shaw, the realist, shut his eyes to its short comings, and weaknesses. The Salvation Army is a Christian missionary organization founded in London in 1878 by William Booth. He called it 'Army' because he visualised it as a militant organization waging war against all kinds of sin and social evils. Hence its dignitaries used titles of military origin. Its motto 'blood and fire', inscribed on its flags referred to the Christian belief in the redeeming power of the blood of Christ and in hell fire as the penalty for unrepentant sinners. The Salvationists had no doubts that, "Devil is the Enemy", but Shaw shows in the play that the real Enemy is Poverty—an evil which results from social injustice, not from supernatural mischief. In the present paper the author has shed light on Christian religion in its more militant aspects, and this be done through a presentation of the day to day working of the Salvation Army. Its different characteristics have been stressed through three different characters, earnestness and ecstasy through Major Barbara, its innocence and courage through Jenny Hill, its practical good sense through Mrs. Baines, and its exuberance through Adolphus Cusins. Shaw's treatment of the Salvation Army is remarkable for its fidelity, for its candor and for its effectiveness. The researcher has stressed all this in the paper, by giving a glimpse of its day to day working. He has also focused on the central weaknesses of the Salvation Army. Just as it is wrong to suppose that theatre-goers are ribald and profane people, so also it is wrong to suppose that religious enthusiasts are passionless and so uninteresting. It is this heresy, which Shaw tried to demolish through his presentation of the Salvation Army in the play.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the English drama, Shaw occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English theatre for over sixty years and his influence, name

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and fame were all pervasive. He built up his own theatre, “the theatre of ideas”. His is the longest career in the British Theatre, for his first play, *Widowers’ Houses*, was begun as early as 1885 and his most recent work *Buoyant Billions* appeared in 1949, over sixty years later. Throughout the whole of the intervening period, he was engaged in dramatic production, and apart from his work as a creative artist, he made contribution of outstanding importance as a critic. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* had an important effect on the development of Ibsen’s reputation in England, while Shaw’s weekly articles in the *Saturday Review*, collected in 1931 as *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, are at once the most brilliant and the most painstaking series of criticism ever written. Shaw’s plays, as a whole, give the impression of his creative powers working in a spontaneous unity. His dramatic output forms a coherent whole. In his long dramatic career, more than twice the length of Shakespeare’s, Shaw displayed the many-sidedness of his genius in a great variety of ways.

Major *Barbara* is a play about money. It is a passionate denunciation of poverty. It reveals the materialistic pessimism of Shaw. Here he depicts poverty as the epitome of all vices. People say that poverty is no crime : Shaw says that poverty is a crime, that it is a crime to endure it, a crime to be content with it, that it is the mother of all crimes, of brutality, corruption and fear. Here the dramatist shows that even the noblest enthusiasm of the girl, who becomes a Salvation army officer, fails under the brute money power of her father who is a modern capitalist.

The Salvation Army: Its Exuberance

The fact is that Shaw was a rationalist and he subjected everything to the acid test of reason. He accepted what could stand this test, and rejected the rest. In the present play the author has shed light on Christian religion in its more militant aspects, and this be done through a presentation of the day to day working of the Salvation army. Religion and religious people were considered dull and cheerless, so he has stressed the exuberance and gaiety of the Salvationists. He has shown the Salvationist, “repudiating gaiety and courting effort and sacrifice, yet always in the wildest spirits, laughing, looking, singing, rejoicing, drumming, and tambouring : his life flying by in a flash of excitement and his death arriving as a climax of triumph”.

The Salvation Army is a Christian missionary organization founded in London in 1878 by William Booth. He called it ‘Army’ because he visualised it as a militant organization waging war against all kinds of sin and social evils. Hence its dignitaries used titles of military origin. Its motto ‘blood and fire’, inscribed on its flags referred to the Christian belief in the redeeming power of the blood of Christ and in hell fire as the penalty for unrepentant sinners. William Booth also wanted to take much of the gloom and boredom out of religion, and also



to attract attention to the work being done by the army. Hence it was that its members would march out to their meetings, singing and dancing to the playing of the drum, the concertina and the tambourine. They were deliberately clamorous and exuberant to stress that the Christian message was, “glad tidings of great joy”. Shaw has stressed all this in the play, by giving us a glimpse of its day to day working.

Criticism of the Army : Shaw’s Originality

When Shaw wrote the play in 1905, the Salvation Army was not taken seriously although over twenty-five years had passed since it was founded. Says A.C. Ward, “The several church and chapel-going denominations looked askance at what happened to them to be a regrettable want of decorum in its meetings. The tambourines and concertinas, the coronets and drums, the flags with the blood-and-fire motto, the jaunty hymn-tunes, the converts’ uninhibited public confessions of past misdeeds, the handclapping as a rhythmical ground-bass to the singing, the begging for pennies, the shouts of ‘Glory hallelujah’, the marching and counter marching—all seemed blatant and vulgar to those who took it for granted that religion and respectability were inseparable, and indeed, identical. To hooligans and drunks and mischievous children of the streets, the Salvation Army open-air meetings were still fair game for ribaldry and horse-play. In the play Barbara cuts regular Salvation Army jokes and her lover, Adolphus Cusins, kisses her across a large drum. All this offended the devout, but Shaw did not mind it, and presented its working realistically and factually. His was the first influential voice to speak for the Army and to show that the Salvation Army had restored joy to religion and proclaimed a triumphant faith which must be cried about in ecstatic phrases, not murmured and muttered in set terms.

Its Central Weaknesses

The Salvation Army was a militant organization, its purpose being to wage a high-spirited warfare against the Enemy. The Salvationists had no doubts that, “Devil is the Enemy”, but Shaw shows in the play that the real Enemy is Poverty—an evil which results from social injustice, not from supernatural mischief. The Salvation Army preached and gave charity—food and shelter—to the poor and wretched. Shaw declared that the food and the shelter, even though given out of pure-hearted compassion and Christian fellowship, became in practice a bribe which led those who received it into a hypocritical pretence of religious conversion in order that they might get the bare necessities of life in this world and the promise of eternal bliss in heaven hereafter. That is to say, they embraced or pretended to embrace Christianity because they were getting some material benefit here and the expectation of endless benefit to come. Shaw condemned this as mean bargaining with God. This, in view of Shaw, is the central weakness of the Salvation Army. It encourages



hypocritical and false confessions like those of Snobby Price and by suggesting that a criminal act may be undone by confession encourages crime. Therefore, poverty must be eradicated first, and religion and salvation in the real sense would come afterwards. It is easy to convert poor starving people with the “bribe of bread and the bribe of Heaven”, it is more difficult to convert and save well-fed and decently clothed people like the workers of Sir Andrew Undershaft.

The Charge of Brutality: Shaw’s Realism

Act II of the play which takes place in the West Ham Shelter of the Salvation Army is a masterpiece. Shaw had always been dubbed a blasphemer, and now the scene also exposed him to the charge of brutality. In this scene Bill Walker brutally assaults the Salvation girl Jenny Hill, and then the old woman Rummy. This was regarded as extremely brutal and Shaw was condemned accordingly. However, such incidents are a daily occurrence in the life of drunken and poverty stricken downs and outs, and it is a measure of Shaw’s boldness and realism that he introduced them in the play. Moreover, they were necessary to show the tact and skill with which Barbara works upon poor Bill and makes him realize the error of his ways. Shaw’s treatment of the Salvation Army has immortalized Booth’s organization. Writes J.T. Grein “If ever the purpose, the inner working of the Salvation Army were brought before the eyes of the public in candid pro and contra, this tour de force was achieved by Mr. Shaw”. Major Barbara—the woman Salvationist—is the spirit, the soul, the greatness of General Booth’s gigantic achievement. And better than processions, better than sermons, newspaper appeals, and private letters of omniscient wise-acres, will it bring home to the hearer what is the actual state of the submerged, what is done to raise them, and what remains to be done in order to strike at the root of the question. Shaw’s treatment of the Salvation Army is remarkable for its fidelity, for its candour and for its effectiveness.

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