



THE IMPACT OF PROBLEM PLAY ON THE MODERN AGE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

‘Problem Play’ is a form of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the wider movement of realism. A very characteristic feature of the problem play is that it deals with problematic social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting points of view within a realistic social context. Far from being plays with fatal flaws, as one might imagine from the name, problem plays are actually plays which are designed to confront viewers with modern social problems. Typically the theme of the play is socially relevant, and the characters confront the issue in a variety of ways, presenting viewers with different approaches and opinions. After seeing a problem play, one is supposed to be filled with interest in the topic at hand and hopefully inspired to enact social change.

INTRODUCTION

A problem play is a play which deals realistically with a contemporary social, economic, political or moral problem. Whereas the plays of Shakespeare, Eliot and Fry and other dramatists deal either with the mental or psychological or spiritual problems of men, the plays of Galsworthy and Shaw deal with modern men’s social problems. Sydney Grundy was the first person to coin the term ‘problem play’ to describe the intellectual drama of the period between 1890 and 1920. In the words of Martin Ellehange, the problem play was the term used for “the new realistic and intellectual drama that developed in Europe in the later half of the nineteenth century especially for the English Variety” (53).

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The concept of problem plays arose in the 19th century, as part of an overall movement known as 'Realism'. Prior to the 19th century, many people turned to art as a mode of escape which allowed them to look outside the world they lived in. In the 19th century, however, art began to refer to social inequalities exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution. Though the idea of creating problem plays was popularized in the 19th century, numerous works were retroactively termed problem plays. Several Greek playwrights, for example, works of Shakespeare like *Measure for Measure* which has Biblical themes of justice and truth, or *Troilus and Cressida* which confronts viewers with in fidelity, sexuality and betrayal. Many regarded Henrik Ibsen as Master of the problem play.

Essentially, problem plays are a form of commentary on the societies they are performed in because social problems are often universal across cultures and eras, many people find something of themselves in the characters and struggle with this revelation. This new type of problem play which emerged in the modern age is based on social criticism laying focus on contemporary social problems that involve relations of husband and wife, parent and child, employer and worker, thereby throwing light on various aspects of society, the miserable inequality between the rich and the poor, the troubles of the lower and working classes, marital relations and sexual morality, crime and punishment, tyranny of the majority, ills of the legal system etc. Most of the problems arise out of the social maladjustment, involving the clash of one social group against another or of the individual against the social machinery, which is pitiless, inhuman and almost inexorable so that once it has been set in motion, it will roll on its destination crushing the poor and innocent under its heavy wheels.

Truly speaking, in a problem play, it is neither the Fate nor the Flaw in the character that causes tragedy but socially, its institutions and organizations do cause the tragedy. The individual is crushed under social machinery. Even when the conflict arises from the narrowness or selfishness of individuals, the dramatist is generally inclined to blame the social set up which is responsible for breeding such outlooks. No serious analysis of the issues of problems facing society could be possible, as long as the dramatists ignored the facts and condition of life as they actually existed. Ibsen's understanding of human problems is something unique. Shakespeare never questioned the established tenets and beliefs of the existing society as Ibsen did. There were more social abuses in Shakespeare's England than in Ibsen's Norway. Nobody ever came out of a theatre after the performance of a play by Shakespeare, feeling compelled to reconsider his basic concepts of life. Yet that was the effect of Ibsen's social plays on his contemporaries. Reading a play by him or witnessing a performance of it in the theatre was like reading Darwin or Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud. Nowadays we tend to regard his later plays as his greater plays dealing with human and social problems. It is just because Ibsen's superior quality was his understanding of the human mind and his ability to portray its depths and nuances, and because he did this as surely in the



social plays as in everything else he wrote, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* remain as hypnotic plays.

As a great dramatists of the twentieth century, Bernard Shaw was a disciple of Ibsen. Like Ibsen, Shaw used the drama as a medium for ventilating his ideas. He is said to have rejected the thesis of art for art's sake. "His plays are a continuous record of the long struggle between artist and moralist" (Ward 32). In the words of Prof. Nicoll, "Shaw has thought more vigorously, more alertly, and with more penetrating insight about the social problems of our day than any other living author" (79). His dramas are 'ceaseless dances of thought'. His best – known plays are *St. Joan* *Man and Superman*, *Arms and the Man*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *The Apple Cart*. Gillet says, "He blew away the Victorian cobweb. He modernised the traffic of the theatre. He set men's mind to work on new lines. Apart from the tendency to wordiness which has been noted, Shaw's influence on the theatre has been all to be good" (46).

Shaw's fundamental aim in his plays was the bettering of the lot of humanity. Scoffing at the romantic view of life, he examined man and his social institutions with intellectual courage and shrewd, irrelevant insight, slum-landlords, prostitution, marriage-conventions, social prejudices, the romanticised soldiers, the medical profession, the religion, the glamorous historical figure – these are some of the people and things which came under the microscope of his rationalism. ... Religion was the main theme of his later plays. It is said that in characterization, in the variety and vividness of his characters, he is next only to Shakespeare. His characters are the products of social forces and some of them are mere mouthpieces for his dramatic theories. Many of his characters are built with Dickensian skill around one idiosyncrasy, and Shaw is an apt caricaturist.

The great Norwegian dramatist Ibsen was the pioneer in the problem play. But though Ibsen repeatedly dealt with the problem of the individual in relation to social environment, it was always with attention concentrated on the individual. Usually, Ibsen limits his problem to relations within the family. His chief interest is always in the individual and the solution lies in freeing the individual from fettering traditions. His *A Doll's House* is a problem play which does not offer any ready-made solution to the problem with which it deals, but a dramatist is not bound to offer solutions. Ibsen presents the problem and leaves the solution to the readers. The problem is, what is the position or status of a woman vis-à-vis her husband and her home? The play does not deal with the rights of women in general; nor does it advocate the emancipation of women in the sense in which we understand the word "emancipation". It merely shows us the said consequences of the subordination of married woman to the control of her husband. The play focuses our attention on the conjugal life of a middle class couple and shows us the relationship existing between the husband and the wife and the possible consequences of that particular kind of relationship. The play deals with the



predicament in which a married woman finds herself on account of the excessive control which her husband exercises upon her; and it shows the method which the woman employs in order to get out of that predicament. Marriage is thus very much the theme of the play and Ibsen therefore appears here as dramatist of social realities'. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and *The Pillars of Society* are the plays which deal with the domestic and societal problems.

John Galsworthy is a celebrated exponent of the problem play which in his hand became a powerful instrument of social criticism. In the words of Albert, "Galsworthy was a social reformer, objectively and impartially opposing a problem, allowing always both sides of the question and leaving his audience to think out the answer. His chief protagonists are usually social forces in conflict with each other and the human figures in his drama, though real enough and very true to ordinary life, are studied more as products of these forces than as individuals who are of interest for their own saka. To this extent, they are types. But in spite of his apparent detachment, Galsworthy obviously feels a warm sympathy for the victims of social injustice, one especially for the poor and downtrodden, and the underlying warmth of this drama is one of the qualities which distinguishes him most clearly from Granville – Barker. Of his best known plays, *The Silver Box* deals with the inequality of justice; *Strife* with the struggle between capital and labour; *Justice* with the different values of the old aristocracy and the newly rich businessman; *Loyalties* with class loyalties and prejudices; and *Escape* with the inadequacy of the administration of justice and the attitude of the different types of people towards an escaped prisoner.

Then, Granville Barker also made vital contribution in the domain of the problem play, and he discovered his true bent after trying his hands at several farcical pieces like *Prunella* and *The Harlequinade*. His main problem plays are *The Marrying of Ann Leete*, *Voysey Inheritance*, *Waste* and *The Madras House*. In the words of Albert, "Granville – Berker's few plays are of considerable significance in the theatrical history of our period. He carried the pursuit of realism and naturalism farther than any of his predecessors and his plays come closer to ordinary day-to-day existence, with the futility of which he is much concerned. His plays are discussions of contemporary problems and the inheritance of trained money, sex and the position of women" (62).

The problem play of England was unquestionably the fruit of a strong dissatisfaction with the existing conditions of life. It directed attention to the facts and problems of social life and depicted the misery and suffering wrought by the cruel forces and conventions of society. The problem playwright censured the existing social system, its right laws and straight laced codes of conduct and belief. Some of the problem plays proved so effective that they imbued man's minds with a passionate resentment against social injustice. *Justice* mobilized public opinion in favour of prison reform and hastened legislative action. Similarly Clemence



Dane's *A Bill of Divorcement* led to the recognition of persistent certified lunacy as one of the grounds for divorce. No doubt, the problem plays were produced in large number, but since 1920, its supremacy came to be challenged by the revival of the historical and imaginative drama and above all, the poetical drama and the experimental play.

To conclude, the problem plays are said to have been an apt vehicle for depicting the problems of day-to-day life.

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