

Bernard Shaw and Bertolt Brecht : The Unity of Opposites

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The dramatic conflict of *Major Barbara* written by George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) and the conflict of *Mother Courage and her Children* written by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) are fundamentally based on the Hegelian dialectics and specifically on the concept of unity of opposites. According to Friedrich Hegel's (1770-1831) theory a synthesis emerges out of the conflict of the contradictory forces (thesis vs. antithesis) as a correction and a resolution for these oppositions. (Egri: 1946, 50) In other words, a thesis gives rise to its reaction, an antithesis contradicts or negates the thesis, and the tension between the two is resolved by means of a synthesis. Hegel rarely used these terms himself: this model is not Hegelian but Fichteian. (1762 – 1814)

It is obvious that both Shaw and Brecht admire Lenin's words that it is impossible to recognize the various happenings in the world in their independence of movement, their spontaneity of development, their vitality of being, without recognizing them as unity of opposites.* However, the following example may illustrate the whole theory of the unity of opposites. When a human body is infected by a germ or a virus, the virus joins an inevitable conflict with the white cells which represent the protection system of the body. If these microorganisms get a triumph over the white cells, the result will be a disease. If the protection system is strong enough and ready to defeat and destroy the intruders, the result will be a healthy body. Dialectically speaking, the white cells represent 'the thesis', the virus represents 'the antithesis,' and the result of the conflict represents 'the synthesis'. And these are the basic constituents of the theory: thesis x antithesis = synthesis. In other words, the dialectic process states that for every truth there is an equally plausible opposite truth. Two viewpoints can be on opposite ends of the same pole and still be equally true. There is a North Pole and a South

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* See Bertolt Brecht, "Appendices to the Short Organum", Brecht on Theatr, p. 279. Brecht himself quoted Lenin's words in paragraph 73.

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Pole and an equator that meets in the middle. For every thesis, there is an anti thesis and a synthesis of the two opposites. For every up there is a down that synthesizes into a middle ground. There is a heaven and a hell with an earth in between that integrates the two. There is good and there is evil. The average person synthesizes those two polar aspects into an integrated life. There is a bright side and a dark side of human consciousness. There are God and angels on one side and the devil and his demons on the other. Nevertheless, there had been several different words for this phenomenon: paradox, contradiction, the opposing force, polar opposites, dualism and the dialectical process

Both dramatists belong to the theatre and drama of ideas, a dramatic school established by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906). It is, however, a drama of discussion as Shaw himself calls it, or, as Brecht calls a dialectical drama. The characters are no longer life-like characters who have the psychological depth of real human beings. Instead, each character represents an idea. This drama aims at portraying man from a social – historical point of view without sentimentalizing him. As a socialist propagandist, Brecht believes that portraying human behavior in such a way has “a decisive influence on the spectator’s own social behavior.” (Brecht: 1974, 101) Therefore, the emphasis is on the idea of the social function of character more than on the character as an individual. The conflict occurs between these contradictory ideas trying to reach a kind of conclusion or a synthesis. Their plays touched greatness by sparking political and philosophical debate. Using the stage as a forum to cross-examine society, they showed how theatre could serve ideal targets. The social and political problems are the essential thematic elements of this type of drama.

Thematic parallels are very palpable in *Major Barbara* and *Mother Courage and her Children*. Both plays share the same view that poverty and war are the outcome of capitalism which increases poverty and enhances war for its own materialistic benefit and exploitation. This theme in both plays is artistically carried out by the technique of unity of opposites as well.

Major Barbara (1905) is evidently considered a problem play, for it realistically deals with social issues related to Shaw’s contemporary British society. In the play, Shaw draws into question the validity of religious and charitable organizations, such as the Salvation

Army; he also ridicules the superficial family ties of the rich where nothing is sacred except money. Finally, the play has a socialist inclination, for it questions capitalism, especially the exploitation of the workers by large industrialists. In England, the common laborer was being badly exploited, due to the industrialization process. Horrible working conditions, low wages, and large-scale layoffs were the order of the day. As a result labor movements and worker unrest were widespread. This background is seen in the play, as the exploited and laid-off workers come into the Salvation Army Shelter. Furthermore, the play owes its origins to Shaw's personal experience, for he often observed the girls of the Salvation Army conducting meetings and judged them to be hypocritical.

The major character of the play, Barbara, is working in the Salvation Army, a religious establishment of charity, benevolence and humanity. Barbara is a name belongs to an early Christian martyr who was victimized and tortured by her fanatically pagan father, who was then killed by a bolt of lightning, an aspect of the story that made her the patron saint of artillerymen, gunsmiths and arsenals. Shaw's Barbara shares much with her religious prototype. She is upper-class, intelligent, modest and passionately devout. She has "escaped from the world into a paradise of enthusiasm and prayer and soul saving". (Shaw: 1966, 88) Her father, Mr. Andrew Undershaft, is a convinced pagan who declares, "I am a Millionaire. That is my religion." (Shaw: 1966, 47) He is the owner of a famous factory of ammunitions, a trade of blood, death and destruction. Unlike her father, Major Barbara as a moralist and an idealist elevates poverty and suffering. She feels that if the poor are treated kindly and given charity, they can turn them into good people, saving their souls. Undershaft believes that such views are hypocritical, for he has lived a life of poverty and knows its pain. During the course of the play, Andrew Undershaft makes her realize that her idealism must be tempered with reality.

Cusins is Barbara's fiancé. His life revolves mostly around Barbara and her needs and wants. He is very unselfish to his own demands. He is working as a university professor. Barbara believes that Cusins joined the army strictly because he had the same ideals and moral ethics she does. Because of this, she taught him how to march and

play the drum. Realistically, Cusins joined the army so he could get closer to Barbara.

Undershaft: I fancy you guess something of what is in my mind, Mr. Cusins (Cusins flourishes his drumsticks as if in the act of beating a lively rataplan, but makes no sound) Exactly so. But suppose Barbara finds you out!

Cusins: You know, I do not admit that I am imposing on Barbara. I am quite genuinely interested in the views of the Salvation Army. The fact is, I am a sort of collector of religions; and the curious thing is that I find I can believe them all.

(Shaw: 1966, 43)

These three characters represent Shaw's Trinity. Undershaft is the body, Barbara is the soul and Cusins is the mind. This is the social and political system Shaw dreams of. It is a very vague vision which may be applicable on paper but inapplicable in reality.

After a long absence Mr. Undershaft visits his family. A detailed dialogue takes place between Barbara and Undershaft which ends Act One with a bargain. He will visit the shelter of the Salvation Army to see what she is accomplishing if she will then visit his factory. On the one hand, there is Mr. Undershaft, who looks at life realistically and believes that poverty is a crime. He accepts that man must have money to take care of his basic human needs, and until those needs are met, man cannot have any intellectual or spiritual pursuits. On the other hand, Barbara discovers that the whole budget of the Salvation Army is coming from Undershaft money. When Mrs. Baines, the Manager of the Army, receives the money from Undershaft, Barbara immediately takes off the silver S brooch from her collar and pins the badge on her father's collar saying, "There! It is not much for £5000, is it?" (Shaw: 1966, 57) Barbara describes her feeling of this conversion from the Salvation Army to materialism to her sister Sara:

Yesterday I should have said, because I was in the power of God...But you came and shewed me that I was in the power of Bodger and Undershaft. Today I feel – oh! How can I put it into words? Sarah: do you remember the earthquake at Cannes, when we were little children? – how little the surprise of the first shock mattered compared to the

dread and horror of waiting for the second? That is how I feel in this place today.

(Shaw: 1966, 80)

Barbara's conversion is inevitable and necessary for she represents the faith in Shaw's Trinity. The body and the mind couldn't be effective without a soul. Undershaft confirms this necessity by telling Cusins, "We three must stand together above the common people: how else can we help their children to climb up beside us? Barbara must belong to us, not to the salvation Army." (Shaw: 1966, 47) Cusins, the mind of the Trinity, also assures this unity by telling Undershaft:

Mr. Undershaft: I am in many ways a weak, timid, ineffectual person; and my health is far from satisfactory. But whenever I feel that I must have anything, I get it, sooner or later. I feel that way about Barbara. I don't like marriage: I feel intensely afraid of it; and I don't know what I shall do with Barbara or what she will do with me. But I feel that I and nobody else must marry her.

(Shaw: 1966, 45)

The three agree that this unity is significant to achieve the final target of solving the problems that face mankind. This discrepancy between Undershaft and Barbara is viewed as the determining factor in their continuing interaction to find a new point of view that will incorporate whatever is true in the originals and combine and resolve them into a coherent synthesis. Undershaft's religion is incomplete without Cusins' intellect and Barbara's faith. Therefore, Barbara realizes that "turning our backs on Bodger and Undershaft is turning our backs on life." (Shaw:1966, 88) This interaction of Barbara (the thesis) and Undershaft (the antithesis) will inevitably produce Cusins (the synthesis). Cusins, in turn, will marry Barbara (the soul). Consequently he becomes the ideal representative of Shaw's future Undershaft, a mixture of both materialism and faith plus his own wit. This materialism will be controlled by wit and faith as Cusins assures this to Barbara and other characters by declaring that, "man must master that power first." (Shaw: 1966, 88)

Barbara's dialectical conversion is very realistic and based on logical justifications. She realizes that people went to the shelter

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because they needed food. Barbara also gains the knowledge that Cusins joined the army in order to get closer to her. This is indicated at the end of the play when Cusins openly admits to doing so. When she was thinking like an idealist she believed that simply saving someone would bring about the most effective change in his or her life. Now that Barbara is thinking realistically, she comes to basic understanding that there is a higher power than money, but money must come first. Mr. Undershaft proves this to her when he explains how Peter Shirley would be a Christian as long as he was receiving a paycheck.. If the weekly check disappeared: he would probably turn back to his principles. This shows that it is easier to thank God when the income is good and steady. Barbara always saw one side of the coin at the shelter because she only worked with poor people. After she saw the town her father built, which was wealthy and beautiful, she realized how much more of a difference that money played in people's lives. The shelter is a dreary and desolate place, but the town is vivacious, full of energy, and everybody seems happy. Happiness is the only thing that is wanted purely for its total worth; therefore it is the final goal in life. It supplies both the needs to the body and the soul.

This is also shown through a dialectical contradiction of good and evil. Barbara represents the good power since she saves the souls of the poor by providing them with shelters and food; whereas Mr. Undershaft represents the devil who tries his best to demolish and annihilate any goodness in the universe by selling armaments to combatants regardless of the morality of their causes. But in Act Two the good and evil are interwoven and interconnected when Mrs. Bains accepts the tainted money of Undershaft's weapons and Bodger's whisky. The sense of interconnection between good and evil is continued in the third act, where the readers discover the results of Undershaft's evil — clean, well-kept homes for Undershaft's employees. Through his weapons of death and destruction, Undershaft has saved his workers from the seven deadly sins of poverty; he has succeeded where the Army has failed.

Undershaft: I save their souls just as I saved yours.

Barbara (Revolted): You saved my soul! What do you mean?

Undershaft: I fed you and clothed you and housed you. I took care that you should have money enough to live handsomely – more than enough; so that you could be wasteful, careless, generous. That saved you soul from the seven deadly sins.

Barbara: The seven deadly sins?

Undershaft: Yes...Food, clothing, firing, rent, taxes, respectability and children.

(Shaw: 1966, 81)

Through the success of her father's morally questionable business, Barbara is finally able to see the moral complexity of the concepts of good and evil. She expresses her attitude by saying,

I was happy in the Salvation Army for a moment. I escaped from the world into a paradise of enthusiasm and prayer and soul saving; but the moment our money ran short, it all came back to Bodger; it was he who saved our people: he, and the Prince of Darkness, my papa.

(Shaw:1966, 88)

Barbara realizes that the real salvation comes through Undershaft and Bodger, but not through the Salvation Army. Christian organizations can surely be bought for the right price; all men, like her father, who deign to be good men only have the luxury of being so when they are wealthy.

What makes *Major Barbara* the most frightening of other Shaw's plays is that it is most uncomfortable for those in the audience who might usually emerge from a Shaw play with the warmest glow of vindication. It attacks, essentially, Shaw's own side - the decent, progressive people who feel guilty about exploitation, slums and misery and want to be nice to the poor. Shaw deliberately offends socialists, liberals and muscular Christians by choosing as his hero not just a capitalist, but the worst of all capitalists – Barbara's estranged father, the enormously wealthy arms manufacturer Andrew Undershaft, who shamelessly sells weapons to anyone who can pay and jeers at "Christmas card moralities of peace on earth". (Shaw: 1966, 82)

Bertolt Brecht was a committed Marxist and he intended his theatre to be dialectical because dialectics lies at the heart of Karl

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Marx's philosophical thinking and revolutionary politics. Consequently, Brecht adopts the technique of unity of opposites to construct his characters, stressing their contradictions with each other and with their situations, environment and circumstances. He realized that the key to drama lies in the conflict of opposites: one group wants one thing, another wants the opposite and the conflict between the two resolves itself in a third position.

Brecht's objectives when writing *Mother Courage and her Children* were to make people aware of two major issues facing society: war and capitalism. According to Brecht, people deserve the wars they get if they subscribe to a political system which is unfair and favours a specific sector of society, namely capitalism, in which it is up to the individual to secure his own means of survival. In other words, if the system is unjust in any way, war and conflict are predictable. For this to be understood, it would be essential that the audience sees the play for what it is, as opposed to becoming engaged in its story. This means that they would have to be alienated from the play, and made perpetually aware of it as a play and nothing more. To do this, Brecht transformed the spectators from what is familiar and expected into unfamiliar and unexpected avoiding any possible identification between the spectators and the characters. In this way, people were dialectically forced to confront the issues at hand and decipher the meanings behind what they were being shown through a series of contradictions.

In Brecht's studies of Marxism and revolutionary politics that led him to imagine a new kind of spectator. Traditionally the theatre audiences were content to accept the world depicted on the stage as a true picture of the world as it really is; something, which simply has to be accepted as natural and expected. Brecht wants a theatre that would show that in any set circumstances a number of different and contradictory options exist for the characters. And the job of the spectator is to judge the validity of the characters' selected course of action. This judgment is the synthesis or the resolution of those discrepant forces.

Eilif, in *Mother Courage and her Children*, joins the army without his mother's consent and become a cutthroat soldier. The General rewards him for one of his courageous deeds that he killed many Catholic peasants taking their cows for his hungry soldiers. The

General praises him by saying, “you’ve the makings of a young Caesar. You ought to see the king.” (Brecht:1988, 18) Eilif repeats the same deed but during a short peace interlude between the Protestants and the Catholics. He is now regarded as a war criminal and should be executed. Eilif is trying to justify his crime by saying that “It’s what I did last time, ain’t it?” (Brecht: 1988, 69) But the Cook answers him, “Aye, but it’s peace now.” (Brecht: 1988, 69) Eilif’s actions are antiheroic, directly contributing to the death and destruction of war. His behavior counters his sibling’s bravery, balancing the heroic with antiheroic actions. What Brecht points out is not the criminality of war but the ways (as Scene One sets out) that war creates its own system of order. Eilif’s heroic deed in wartime is a crime during peace.

As far as Eilif’s incident is concerned, the spectator in the Brechtian theatre is stimulated to draw his own conclusion (the synthesis) as in the following statement: killing innocent peasants is a crime whether it is committed during war-time or during peace-time. Eilif’s inability to distinguish between the moral values of war and peace leads him to his tragic destiny. Consequently, the synthesis is formulated in the spectator’s mind rather than it is mentioned in the text. Brecht differs from Shaw that the former does not establish any written synthesis in the text. Brecht establishes the first incident as a thesis; Eilif’s second a action during peace time as the antithesis; whereas the synthesis is left for the readers or the spectators to thin of. Therefore, most of Brecht’s plays are open-ended.

The main dialectical conflict is presented in Mother Courage’s character. She is caught in the contradiction between being a merchant and being a mother, between business and motherhood. It is about the inevitable loss that the mother suffers as she tries to negotiate these contradictory demands. She aims at exploiting war circumstances and to get money but without paying the price. But what happened indeed that Mother Courage sacrificed her children in order to make a living. Brecht uses the exceptional circumstances or war as a means of forcing the contradictions in her character to the surface; to dramatically confront and reveal the contradictions through the brutal event so the war. Mother Courage continually curses war yet embraces its circumstances for profit and survival. Peace means uncertainty and loss to her, and there is no profit in uncertainty. Of her two goals, preserving her family

through the war and turning a profit, she achieves neither by the play's end. All her children are dead, the canteen wagon is nearly empty, and she has little money. She is now resigned to hauling the wagon by herself.

She praises war when her business is being flourished, describing war as "Nice way to get living." (Brecht: 1988, 59) but she curses war when she counts her losses, "War be damned." (Brecht: 1988, 59) Brecht represents Mother Courage as a social phenomenon which always flourishes during wartime. She is a good representative of a bourgeois who wants to keep her family together and her cart moving. She advises her three children not to go deep in this war, but she is completely contradicting herself since her trade completely depends on the continuity of war. Hence, she cannot keep herself out of the war which will destroy her family. In Act one Mother Courage warns her sons, taking a sheet of parchment and tearing it into two, then she says, "Eilif, Swiss Cheese, Katrin! May all of us be torn apart like this if we let ourselves get too mixed up in the war." (Brecht: 1988, 9)

Mother Courage and her three children represent another dialectical technique of characterization in the play. Eilif, Swiss Cheese and Katrin stand for various excessive virtues during wartime and they are consequently killed by them. Swiss Cheese, the honest paymaster, refuses to hand over the regimental cash box to the enemies and is killed, although his mother could save him by paying the compensation on the right moment, but she hesitates and haggles too long on the amount of the ransom. Eilif is executed because of his heroic deed. Katrin, Mother Courage's mute daughter, is killed by the Catholics while she is beating a drum so as to awaken the sleeping citizens of Halle. This emphasis on the virtuous elements of Mother Courage's sons helps Brecht to establish and to stress the negative side of Mother Courage. Dialectically speaking, Courage's cowardice and viciousness cannot critically be grasped without her sons' virtues in the sense that Courage sacrifices and subordinates her family and her motherhood to her commercial inclination. Both sides, Courage and her Children are necessary to formulate the final effect of the contradiction (e.g. the synthesis).

Mother Courage is both hero and antihero; each of her positive actions has a negative complement. Brecht shows this duality as a

negative consequence of war. It is an unnatural vicious state in which common values are challenged at every turn; people are forced to act on both their good and bad impulses, in the hopes that a balance of the two forces will insure success. Mother Courage's behavior is driven by a need to survive during wartime, yet by the time the action in the play begins, it is clear her priorities on this matter have become twisted. She has equated the relentless pursuit of profit (her antiheroic side) with success and survival; she comes to believe that if she is profitable, it will allow her family to survive the war. She has allowed this side of her to rule each situation, despite what her heroic nature might dictate. Yet in the end her pragmatism and devotion to commerce leaves her emotionally and financially bankrupt. It is this last point that hammers home Brecht's primary theme in the play: war is pointless, it robs people of their humanity, and, ultimately, everyone involved loses. While gains may be made in geographic terms, humanity is left poorer for the experience.

To Brecht, the final synthesis the spectator may conclude is that, "if courage learns nothing else at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her." (Brecht: 1974, 229) In Brecht's plays the synthesis is always left to be formulated by the spectators. He felt that identifying such contradictions was an essential part of the theatre's role. In his mature work, however, this interest in contradiction and dialectic becomes more positive, and Brecht's reading of Voltaire and classical Chinese philosophy makes it into an exercise in clear thinking. Nonetheless, the point is that these many contradictions are not the result of poor characterization – rather, they are realistic portraits of the way that real people behave in a contradictory world.

In fact, Mother Courage is a walking contradiction. She longs for the war but at the same time fears it. She wants to join in but as a peaceable business, not in a warlike way. She wants to maintain her family during the war and by means of it. She wants to serve the army and also to keep out of its clutches. Dealing with war there is no compromise either death or life.

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برنارد شو وبيرتولت بريجت: وحدة المتضادات

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المستخلص

يتناول البحث أسلوباً مسرحياً فنياً متبعاً عند كاتبين معروفين وهما: برنارد شو، وبيرتولت بريخت في مسرحيتهما : الميجر باربارا، والام شجاعة. يعرف هذا الأسلوب الفني بوحدة المناقضات (الديالكتيك)، إذ يعمد الكاتبان المسرحيان في بناء أحداث المسرحيتين إلى سلسلة من التناقضات، والتي تلتقي وتتفاعل مع بعضها لتجد لها حلاً وخلصاً. ويشترك الكاتبان الاشتراكيان في رؤية واحدة في فهم النظام الرأسمالي، إذ يقود حتماً إلى الحروب والى نوع من الاستغلال والفقير. وترسخ بطله شو في النهاية إلى حقيقة إن النظام الرأسمالي لا يمكن تجاهله ولكن يمكن تعديله نحو الأفضل. كما أن بطله بريخت تعيش تناقضات جمة فهي أم ولها أولاد وتود أن تعيش على بقايا الدمار وتتنقل في الجبهات الساخنة لتبيع مألديها من خردة لقاء بعض المال، لكنها في الوقت ذاته لاتريد خسران أولادها. وهذا عكس منطق التاريخ فمن يحتك بدمار الحرب يجب أن يدفع الثمن. وتدفع البطله الثمن غالياً حيث تفقد أولادها الثلاثة في أتون الحرب التي كانت يوماً مصدر عيشها. تترجم هذه الثيمات إلى أحداث درامية من استعمال أسلوب وحدة المتناقضات لإبراز الشعور الإنساني، والدوافع البشرية المتناقضة تجاه توليد فهم ديالكتيكي منطقي للواقع .