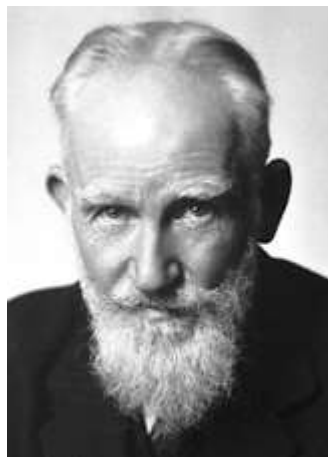


George Bernard Shaw as an Unknown Novelist

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G. B. Shaw

Courtesy: www.nobelprize.org

Abstract

This paper presents G. B. Shaw as a novelist which is not known to many readers. His early writing was novel writing. It paved a good path for the development of Shaw's skills in writing his plays of ideas. His novels are the roots for his off-shoot plays. His five novels are 'Immaturity' (1879), 'The Irrational Knot' (1880), 'Love Among the Artists' (1881), 'Cashel Byron's Profession' (1882) and 'An Unsocial Socialist' (1883). They are full of biting satire and carping criticism of all the ugly aspects of Victorian life.

Keywords: Pugilist, socialism, capitalism, motifs, carping criticism, salutary and grovel.

Introduction

G. B. Shaw, a prolific dramatist, came to the theatre with a moral purpose. He used drama for the purpose of bettering the lot of humanity. His plays sparkle with his brilliant wit. His humour is dry and intellectual. His characters are products of social forces. He was a skilled dramatic craftsman. But his novels have not received adequate attention till now. Historians of fiction hardly took notice of them. Therefore, it is salutary to attempt a critical review of the five novels of Shaw.

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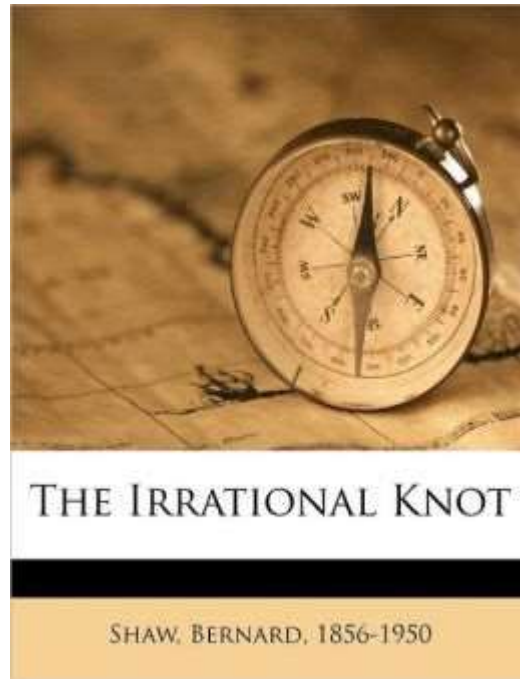
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Shaw's novels are very green things. They are very carefully written. They were written according to a definite plan. 'Five pages a day and one novel a year', says Bernard Shaw himself. They were all written in Shaw's early London years when he was still struggling to stand on his own feet. He wrote five novels. He began a sixth novel in 1888 but left it unfinished. He received rejection slips from all the publishers to whom he sent the five novels, one after the other. The social revival of 1880's gave birth to a number of propaganda magazines. Then Shaw became an ardent Socialist. So those magazines received his novels as worthy material, and Shaw's novels were serialized in them in the reverse order of their composition.

G. B. Shaw's Novels

Immaturity (1879) is the first novel of Shaw. It is true to its title, betrays the novelist's own immaturity and inexperience. Robert Smith, the hero of this novel, resembles the young Shaw in many respects. He is shy, self-conscious, and ill at ease with the women he comes across. He has read a great deal and is critical of people and events. As a clerk in a carpet company, he lives in private lodgings, when he meets Harriet Russell, the self-supporting milliner. He is rather enamoured of this new woman. But, in course of time, she marries a painter, who is "altogether different from the Pale Scholar". Smith leaves the carpet company on a point of self-respect, becomes the private secretary of an idle member of parliament, whose daughter, an incorrigible flirt, enchants him for a while. In the end, he meets Harriet to learn from her that he is only a boy - "Just a bad case of immaturity". The plot of this novel is not coherent and the interest is not quite sustained. But there are many amusing portraits of the Victorians types. Also there are many purposive discussions on marriage, art, music, literature and education.

The Irrational Knot



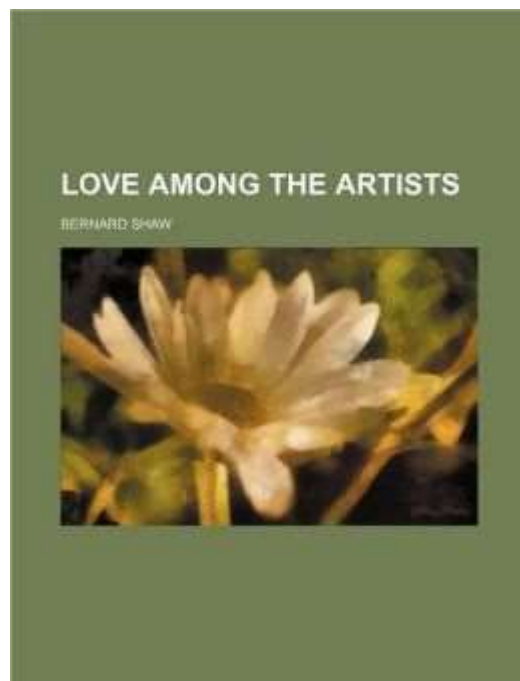
Soon after finishing his first novel, Shaw joined the debating club called the Zetetic Society where he learned to speak and argue, to be rational and practical. These attempts of Shaw are clearly seen in his second novel, “The Irrational Knot” (1880). This novel shows marked improvement in plot-construction, characterisation and in maintaining a balance between narrative and dialogue. The hero of this novel is an electrical engineer, Edward Connolly, who is rational and critical to the bone. He comes into contact with Marian Lind, an upper middle class girl, with all the inhibitions of her class. But these were only latent. When Connolly stabilises his position by the invention of the electro-motor, he marries Marian, facing a great deal of opposition from her father’s side. But soon he discovers that she is not quite the sort of woman he took her to be, and realises that an ordinary working girl would have shared his tastes and interests much better than Marian. She also feels unhappy with the intellectual machine she had married and so she links with Sholto Douglas, a conceited young poet of her own class though she rejected his proposal on two occasions earlier, she elopes with him to New York when a suitable opportunity arises. Now Connolly applauds her grit in running away and wants to make things easy for her by seeking for divorce. But Marian is not happy with Sholto. He was jealous of her and suspects her too often even during their voyage. On hearing that Connolly was seeking for divorce, Sholto quarrels with Marian and they part on bad terms in New York. She lives in some poor lodgings and cables the news to her cousin in London. Connolly guesses the hardships of a woman in a city, goes to New York and offers to take her back without any fuss. But she would not return since she was already with child.

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Shaw dovetailed skilfully into this main story, the story of Connolly's sister, Susanna and Marian's cousin, Marmaduke. Susanna earns her livelihood independently by acting in operas and ballets. She attracts Marmaduke. They live together as man and wife, without any formal ceremony of marriage, and they have a daughter also. But, Susanna becomes an incurable-dipsomaniac. Consequently her reputation on the stage suffers. When reconciliation with Marmaduke is found to be impossible, she leaves for the United States to accept a long standing theatrical engagement. She is a failure on the American stage; she begins to sink day by day and dies in the same lodging where Marian also lives, a few days after Marian's arrival. Later, Marmaduke consents to marry according to the wishes of his parents. Shaw claimed that the morality in this novel is original. He also claimed that he had anticipated the morality of Isben's "A Doll's House" in this novel.

Love among the Artists



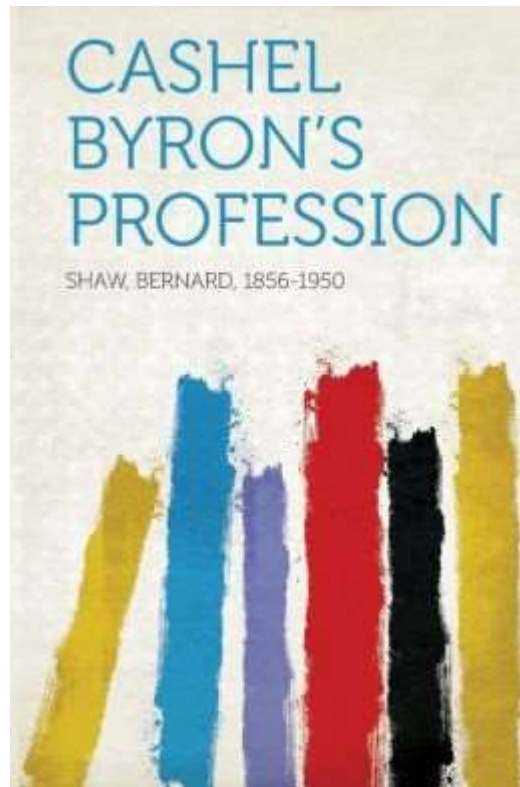
The third novel "Love among the Artists" (1881) was interrupted by an attack of small-pox which made Shaw grow his famous beard. It is the story of two artists, a Welsh Composer, Owen Jack and an actress, Magdalen Brailsford_who had to struggle hard against a Philistine public and the tyranny of a family of prudes respectively, to pursue their vocations independently. These two are contrasted against the Pseudo-painter, Adrian Herbert, and the commercial-souled, Polish pianist, Aurelie. Love inevitably plays a prominent part and there are mutual attractions and repulsions. In the end, however, the genuine artist remains un-

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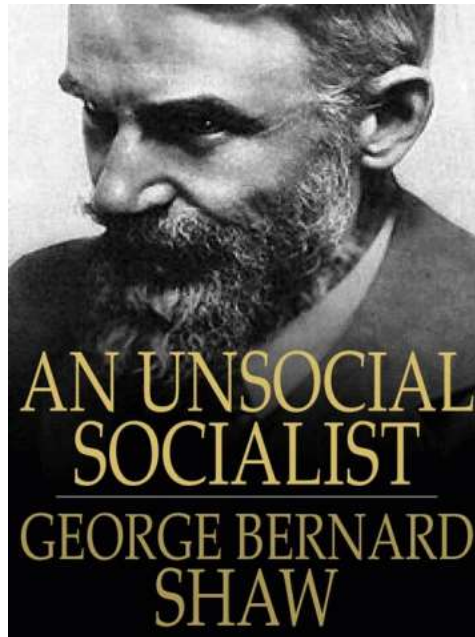
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married. This novel anticipates the motifs of “Candida”, “Man and Superman” and “Pygmalion”. Like a flower girl of the play ‘Pygmalion’, Madge takes lessons in elocution from Jack and becomes a first-rate actress.

Cashel Byron’s Profession



“Cashel Byron’s Profession” (1882), the fourth novel, was the most popular of Shaw’s novels. This is the story of an actress’s son, Cashel Byron who becomes a famous pugilist. He gradually works his way to Lydia Carew, the orphan owner of a large estate, with whom he falls in love. She is also in love with him. But his status is believed to be inferior compared to hers. Besides, he is engaged in a questionable occupation. These two complications keep the lovers apart for some time. They are getting over the dramatic appearance of Cashel’s mother who announces that Cashel is the sole heir to a big fortune. Cashel marries Lydia and forsakes pugilism for politics. Another most thrilling event in the novel is the actual wrestling contest at the Agricultural Hall between Cashel Byron and another champion, **paradise**. This is described in detail and was thoroughly enjoyed by the readers of the novel. It has autobiographical significance. Shaw practised boxing in his younger days. **What is this – Is paradise - name of a boxer in the novel?**



In the last novel, “An Unsocial Socialist” (1883), Shaw points out his new faith, Socialism. He had been converted to it just then by Henry George and Karl Marx. The hero of this novel Sidney Trefusis is the son of a capitalist. Educated in Cambridge, he presently understands that “Property is theft”. He preaches this with unabated passion and exposes the villainies of capitalism. He marries an intensely passionate girl of his own class, Hetty, but after a short period refuses to live with her on the plea that, in her bewitching presence, he cannot carry on his work of serving the cause of the workers. In his wanderings, he comes across a few aristocratic college girls with whom he flirts. His wife learns about this and hazards a journey to see him in biting cold. He pacifies her and sends her back. But she contracts high fever of which she dies shortly after her return home. The pompous funeral arranged by her wealthy and snobbish father, and his typically bourgeois reactions, are nauseous and intolerable to Sidney. Hence he boycotts the funeral, but erects a humble and cheap memorial which wounds the vanity of his father-in-law. But in course of time they are reconciled. Sidney takes a lead in the labour movements and dedicates his life to the amelioration of the condition of the workers. He gains a variety of experiences. He marries a second time a very clever and quick-witted girl and a cousin of his first wife, Agathawylil.

Everything in this novel - story, plot, and characterisation - is subordinate to the preaching of socialism. The title is appropriate because the hero is unsocial in his behaviour even towards his closest relatives. In his novel we have a clue to Shaw’s change-over to play-writing. Shaw visualised a bright future for the artist in a socialist state in this novel where the

hero declares: “Art arises when men rise and grovels when men grovel”. With the raising of living standards of the people, it is possible to improve the lot of the artists. Finally, Shaw brings forth the idea of a socialist state as a remedy for all the ills of the world. This theme of the novel later developed in the play “*The Apple Cart*” of Shaw.

Conclusion

All the above *five* novels were written in the prime of Shaw’s youth-between his twenty-second and twenty-seventh years. The subjects which interested him most at the time – marriage, the place of artists in society and the reorganisation of the society, found expression in them. We find traces of Shaw in almost all the heroes. Shaw also portrays the new women in Harriet Russell, Agathawylil, etc. There is in the novels a lot of ‘theatrical’ element which Shows that they are ‘a preparation for the plays’. Dialogue and discussion take the place of narration and description more and more as we proceed from earlier to the later novels.

All the novels were written in conformity with the Victorian novel. But they were full of biting satire and carping criticism of all the ugly aspects of Victorian life. They were daring exposures of the villainies of capitalism that partly explains why the novels were rejected by the publishers. Though the novels were rejected, they gave Shaw a good training in the art of writing, in inventing stories, in constructing plots and in creating characters. This training was responsible for Shaw’s extraordinary output. The playwright is not an isolated phenomenon or a sudden off shoot but quite a logical and natural growth.

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