

THEMATIC AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF BERNARD SHAW'S PLAYS

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Abstract

This article explores the dramatic artistry and thematic preoccupations of Bernard Shaw, focusing on his critique of societal norms, exploration of human relationships, and innovative narrative techniques. Drawing on a selection of his most significant works, this analysis contextualizes Shaw's contributions to modern drama and his lasting legacy.

Key words: societal norms, sociopolitical, dramatic tension, philosophical discourse, social mobility, theatricality.

INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) remains a pivotal figure in modern drama, renowned for his incisive wit and intellectual depth. Shaw's plays serve as vehicles for his sociopolitical commentary, challenging established norms and conventions. His unique synthesis of comedy, philosophical discourse, and dramatic tension revolutionized the theatrical landscape of his time.

This study examines key plays such as *Pygmalion*, *Arms and the Man*, and *Major Barbara*, analyzing how Shaw's themes and techniques reflect his intellectual engagement with contemporary issues. The article also addresses his influence on modern theater.

Key Themes in Shaw's Plays

Social Critique and Reform

Shaw's works often expose societal hypocrisies and advocate for reform. For example, *Pygmalion* (1913) critiques class distinctions through the transformation of Eliza Doolittle, challenging the perception of social mobility. Shaw's use of humor allows him to address these weighty issues without alienating his audience¹.

The themes in *Major Barbara* (1905) delve deeper into the morality of wealth and philanthropy, questioning the ethics of charity funded by armaments. As Cohen

¹ Shaw, G. B. (1913). *Pygmalion*. Penguin Classics

(1998) observes, “Shaw’s plays serve as a mirror to societal contradictions, forcing the audience to confront uncomfortable truths².”

Human Relationships and Power Dynamics

In *Arms and the Man* (1894), Shaw deconstructs romanticized notions of war and heroism, portraying realistic human relationships. The interaction between Bluntschli and Raina demonstrates how pragmatic values can subvert idealistic illusions³.

Shaw’s nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics is particularly notable. In *Pygmalion*, the evolving relationship between Higgins and Eliza underscores themes of autonomy and mutual respect, subverting traditional romantic expectations.

Innovative Narrative Techniques

1. Dialectical Approach

Shaw often employs dialogue as a dialectical tool, engaging characters in debates that reveal ideological conflicts. This technique transforms his plays into intellectual arenas, as seen in the verbal sparring between Andrew Undershaft and Barbara in *Major Barbara*.

2. Subversion of Genre Conventions

Shaw’s manipulation of traditional genres enhances his thematic impact. By blending elements of comedy and tragedy, he challenges the audience’s expectations. *Arms and the Man*, for instance, mocks romantic melodrama while delivering a profound critique of societal values.

3. Characterization and Realism

Shaw’s characters are multidimensional, reflecting both individual complexity and societal archetypes. His depiction of Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* exemplifies this balance, as she transitions from a flower girl to a self-assured individual, embodying the potential for personal growth within rigid social structures.

Shaw’s Influence on Modern Drama

Shaw’s integration of intellectual discourse and theatricality has inspired generations of playwrights. His emphasis on social issues paved the way for dramatists like Bertolt Brecht, who similarly employed theater as a medium for societal critique. As Holroyd (1988) notes, “Shaw’s plays represent a bridge between traditional Victorian theater and the politically conscious dramas of the 20th century⁴.”

Moreover, Shaw’s advocacy for theater as an educational tool resonates with contemporary movements in drama therapy and social justice theater. His legacy

² Cohen, D. (1998). *Bernard Shaw and the Drama of Ideas*. Cambridge University Press

³ Shaw, G. B. (1894). *Arms and the Man*. Penguin Classics.

⁴ Holroyd, M. (1988). *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*. Chatto & Windus.

endures in the continued relevance of his themes and the enduring popularity of his works.

Conclusion

Bernard Shaw's plays are a testament to his intellectual rigor and dramatic ingenuity. By addressing timeless themes with humor and insight, Shaw challenges audiences to reevaluate their beliefs and assumptions. His innovative narrative techniques and commitment to social critique have cemented his place as a luminary in modern drama.

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