

**Diagnosis And Prescription In Henrik Ibsen's Ghosts And
Bernard Shaw's Major Barbara**

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Abstract

As it is often the case in many fields of study, a master is not known except through his follower(s). The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it aims at demonstrating that the younger Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was a true disciple of the elderly Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and secondly, that the former was not only a mere imitator but he was as well, a provider of alternative solutions to some of the issues raised by his master. Put differently, this inquiry sets out to show that Henrik Ibsen submitted social issues to debate to which his follower-George Bernard Shaw suggested practical solutions.

Most of Ibsen's critics as a matter of fact consider him as an ambivalent and lopsided writer. For example, Professor Hu Shi characterised the playwright as "a dramatist who points to the illnesses of society without being too eager to prescribe a cure" (qt by Eide 186). To Eric Bentley, "Ibsen's art is limited to posing problems" (581), and for IgnaStinaEwbank the playwright's works are, "open to contrary interpretations" (24).

Ibsen himself is reported to have once responded to those who accused him of having "an uncompromising and destructive philosophy" stating, "his task as he conceived it was to point out weaknesses of social fabric of the society and leave constructive philosophy to those who were not dramatist. (Sharp, 3). His concern he noted in another occasion was to "diagnose and leave the cure to others. (Ibid, 3). The 'cure' to some of the issues raised by the playwright were, as mentioned above, to be suggested by his ardent follower-G.B. Shaw.

Shaw was indeed a disciple of Ibsen recognised hypothetically by many critics. Commenting on the writings of prominent Victorians, Martin Stephen opines that Shaw "was a notable

critics as well as a dramatist heavily influenced by Ibsen.(110).In his general introduction to the works of Bernard Shaw, A.C. Ward intimates that, “Shaw made up his mind to do in English what Henrik Ibsen had been doing in Norwegian since about 1875” (ibid,110). Shaw considered himself the self appointed spokesman for the Norwegian playwright in England. He took it upon himself to give lectures about Ibsen in the early 1880s to the Fabian society. (Ledger, 52).Shaw like Ibsen satirised middle class socio-political values using the realistic mode. One of the focal middle class social issues he criticises like Ibsen in his drama is conventional Christian religion. Focus in this paper will therefore not only be on demonstrating how the two playwrightssatirised conventional Christian religion but more importantly, on what Shaw suggests as an alternative religion. The plays will be studied taking into account New Historicists premise that literary texts are submissive cultural artifacts that offers genuine radical critique of the socio-political and religious ideologies of the time and place where they were produced. As Stephen Greenblatt notes in his essay titled “*Towards a poetics of Culture*”, New Historicism among other things seeks to demonstrate how literary texts in dialectical fashion both represent a society’s behaviour patterns and shapes or alters that cultures dominant codes. (qt by Kreiswirth, Martin and G. Michael).

Ibsen in his play titled ***Ghosts*** demonstrates that religion in its conventional form acts as a hindrance to the individual’s search for self realization and fulfillment. The playwright’s indictment of conventional Christian religion is seen in the oppressive and hypocritical attitudes of his clerical figures. Through the use of what Northrop Frye calls “sophisticated irony.” Ibsen paints a very bleak picture of religion. Pastor Mander in ***Ghosts*** is portrayed as the chief representative of institutionalized religious morality of self-sacrifice on earth in anticipation of a blissful and more fulfilling life in the hereafter. The negative and annihilating effects of traditional religious morality are felt more by women who are expected to remain submissive to their husbands a prescribed in the Bible:

Wives, submit to your husband as to the lord for the
Husband is the head of the family as Christ is the head
Of the church...now as the church submit to Christ, so
Also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Eph, 5-21-24).

Both Pastor Manders and Parson Rorlund in *Ghosts* and *Pillars of the Society* respectively do everything to ensure that women remain under the whims and caprices of men. We see Parson Rorlund in Act one of *Pillars of the Society* reading from a book titled “Women in the service of Society” to a group of women dubbed “the society for moral delinquents.” The Parson does this in order to uphold the women’s dedication to work for the interest of the family and society at large. Rorlund tells the women that they who stay indoors to study the Bible are far better off than those who go to the street and get distracted by their petty concerns. The kind of moral doctrine Rorlund preaches here resonates with middle class patriarchal ideology of feminine self-abnegation. This, according to Marxist feminists, is a chauvinistic ideology that helps to keep the women ignorant of the ways of the world. Religion is used here as an opium of society and as such, it must be discarded.

Pastor Manders on his part in *Ghosts* cautions Mrs. Alving against reading books that contain intellectual ideas that may deter her from completely dedicating herself to the service of family, society and God. Pastor Manders equally forces Mrs. Alving back to the unbearable conditions of her marital home when she attempts to escape. He tells the desperate woman that her attempt at running away constitute a betrayal of her divinely ordained duties as a wife. He passes the following judgment on her:

All your life has been possessed by a rebellious spirit. Your
Natural inclinations always led you towards indiscipline and
lawlessness. You could never tolerate the slightest restraint.
You always disregarded your responsibility carelessly and
unscrupulously as though it was a burden you had to cast
aside. It no longer suited you to be a wife so you left your
husband. The cares of motherhood were too much for you.
You sent your son away to be brought up by strangers (76)

The Pastor value a woman insofar as she remains submissive and loyal to her husband. Christian religious morality represents what the German philosopher-Nietzsche calls “a slave morality.” The man of God tells Mrs Alving that “a wife is not appointed to be her husband’s judge. It was your duty to humbly bear the cross which a higher will had seen fit to assign

you. But instead you hazard your good name and very nearly ruin the reputation of others” (Act 2, 228).

The church it should be noted here is seen as an instrument of state that helps in the subjugation of the individual, especially the woman in the family. Mr Alving is not allowed to take a personal decision because that is against religious laws as pastor Manders will have us to understand. The image of God that the pastor paints for Mrs Alving is that of an autocratic father who demands blind obedience and fulfillment of all duties. He is a God who does not care about people’s lives and happiness. Mrs Alving is expected to remain submissive to her husband as prescribed by church laws. Disgusted with the overwhelming influence of Pastor Mander on Mrs Alving, George Moore wrote in his notes about the play asking:

*Who is there, I ask, who could utter one word in praise
or even in mild defence of the dreary old bore who spoils
so far as it is possible the first and second act with such
Intolerable sermonising as will empty the church of any
nonconformist Minister (185)*

The rhetorical question points to the fact that Moore like Ibsen was not at all happy with Pastor Mander’s chauvinistic and hypocritical doctrine. The man of God as a matter of fact ‘spoils’ both Act one and two of **Ghosts** with his insistence on conventional impracticable principles of “law and order.” His preaching and what he stands for Mrs Alving says “are artificial and dead.” Even Torvald Hemmer in **A Doll’s House** expects religion to act as a guide to his wife-Nora when the latter attempts to abandon him and children. Fade up with the obnoxious Christian religious rules; both Nora and John Rosmer in **A Doll’s House** and **Rosmersholm** turn their backs on religion. Rosmer resigns as a man of God after realizing that religion does not really help in the alleviation of human suffering. He decides to put humanity at the centre of all his actions, rather than pay lip services to Christian dogmas that do not in any way mitigate human predicament. The early 19th century American feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton quotes Charles Kingsley in her essay titled, “The Introduction to the Women Bible” to have remarked about the condition of women in the family stating that “this will never be a good world for women until the last remnant of canon law is swept from earth.” (Cady, 401).

Ibsen's clerical figures are essentially hypocritical given the weaknesses inherent in conventional Christian religion. Men of God as prescribed by religious dogma have as a duty to teach, guide, and govern the flock entrusted into their hands. They are equally expected to shun materialism in all its forms and act as pacesetters or role models in society. But Pastor Manders falls short of all these signposts. He does not come up well as far as his pastoral duties are concerned. Instead of studying the Bible which is supposed to be his main working tool, Manders spends his time running from one place to the other as board chair in secular organisations around town. The Pastor's hypocritical and incompetent status is seen when faced with Oswald's incestuous act with his half sister-Regine. Scandalized by her son's abominable and immoral act, Mrs Alving runs to her so called "spiritual adviser"-Manders, for counsel. But to her greatest surprise, the man of God shamelessly says "I have no experience in such things...I wish I knew what to suggest, I don't feel competent to deal with a crisis of that sort"(Act 1, 78). Incest is a serious social evil that is condemned in the Bible in the following terms, "you shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father, or your mother, whether born at home or abroad."(Leviticus, 18:9). It is rather ironical for a pastor to declare that he is incompetent in such a social issue. A true Christian Minister will not hesitate to refer his Christians in such trying moments to the section of the Bible which condemns such devilish acts. Pastor Manders' inability to advise leaves one with the impression that all what he preaches and stands for are false and unfounded.

Pastor Manders' hypocritical behaviour I am eager to say here is as a result of the too dogmatic Christian religion doctrine. It has not got a human face. That is to say, Christian religion does not take into consideration the reality of human nature. Human beings are by nature born materialistic. Pastor Manders finds himself in a dilemma of fulfilling religious obligations and responding to his innate desires. In other words, traditional Christian doctrine fails to make the distinction between natural human desires and established religious morality. What Ibsen is seemingly saying in his drama is that any religion that cannot come to terms with daily human problems and only helps in the suppression of the individual is irrelevant and therefore needs to be reformed.

Like Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw in Major Barbara indicts conventional Christian religion. This is seen in the conflict between the powerful business magnet-Andrew Undershaft on the one hand and his daughter-Barbara on the other hand. Barbara is the leader

of the Salvation Army which preaches the Christian doctrine of self sacrifice on earth in preparation for heavenly bliss after death. Barbara's West Ham Salvation Army camp is a sharp contrast to her father's St Andrews Perivale gun manufacturing town. Members of the West Ham Salvation Army live in abject poverty. Most of the time they sleep in the cold and with empty stomachs. Undershaft cynically tells Barbara that her followers live basically on "bread and treacle" and are "forced to kneel down from time to time to thanks heaven for it." (Act 3:142). Undershaft sarcastically further notes that "it is cheap work converting starving men with a Bible in one hand and a slice of bread in the other."(Ibid, 142).

As an alternative to the life-denying Christian religion preached by Ibsen's clergy men and Barbara, Shaw in **Major Barbara** proposes a new human-centred religion that falls within the framework of his "life force" philosophy. The "life force" religion is one that pushes humankind towards ultimate evolution as sophisticated free thinkers. William Irvine in the universe of Bernard Shaw provides a summary of the central idea in the Shavian life force religion as follows:

*Life began when the life force entered into matter and guide
The molecule into organic form. The life force is mind plus up-
Ward striving will...in man it is highly self conscious...essentially
Shaw's religion of life force is an effort to enlist the religious
Sense of mankind in the service of evolutionary progress (242).*

Shaw's life force religion draws from French philosopher-Henri Bergson's *élan vital*. Shaw like Darwin, Nietzsche and other prominent 19th century Christian religion critics found the whole notion of faith, that is believing without prove unrealistic. The idea that there is a well-wishing God in heaven upon whom humankind depend is challenged by Shaw. In fact, some critics have noted that Shaw did not believe in an existing God. According to Shaw, the life force is a combination of will and impulse that can improve on the lot of mankind. In the **Quintessence of Ibsenism** Shaw says:

When you get this conception of the universe, you become
religious, you perceive that this thing people have always
called God is something in yourself...your purpose in life is

simply to help on the purpose of the universe (113).

To Shaw, the 'life force' comprises reason; instinct and evolution and it is this that makes man a God. Shaw intimated that man should always try to assert his individual will wherever he finds himself using the life force. In a 1907 sermon at Kensington town Hall in London Shaw exhorted:

When you are asked where is God who is God, Stand up and say
I am God and here is God...not yet completed but working for the
good of the whole society and the whole world, instead of merely
looking after my personal aim (6).

The Shavian 'life force' gives man a stature and right in himself as the expression of the divine. Shaw's world view though evolutionary, gives validity, if not divinity to human beings and human life. Instead of blind faith in God, Shaw has faith in the potential of man, what he referred to as "creative evolution." This belief is set forth in Don Juan in the Hell dream sequence of **Man and Superman**.

In a postscript of the preface, Shaw stated the evolutionary theme of the third Act of **Man and Superman** by (him) twenty years later in the preface to **Back to Methuselah** where it developed as the basis of the religion of the near future. In **Major Barbara** Shaw juxtaposes the materialistic yet realistic Undershaft with the religious idealist Barbara. Like Ibsen, Shaw found the conventional Christian doctrine that poverty is a virtue or prerequisite for salvation and wealth, fallacious. The Bible abounds with passages that accept poverty as an integral part of salvation. For example the Bible says, "It is much harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle". (Matt: 19: 23-24).

While Barbara and the Salvation Army work on the premise that faith in the omnipresent God is all that is essential in life, the realists represented by Andrew Undershaft work on the thesis that money is the root of all virtue and poverty, the worst of all crimes. Undershaft, it should be noted here is the mouthpiece for Shaw in the play. He intimates that Christian religious morality is of no use to him. He outrightly tells Cousin that "the poor pretend that poverty is a blessing." According to Undershaft, poverty stands on the way to a decent life and religion. In his words, you must first acquire enough money for a decent life and power enough to be your own master. (Act 2:94). Undershaft contends that poverty should be resolutely stamped out

and prevented as a disease fatal to human society. When Barbara asks him what his religion is, he says without any hesitation that “my religion, well my dear, I am a millionaire, that is my religion. (Act 1:88). The life-force religion advocated by Shaw in the character of Undershaft is the type that fits the immediate facts of life and enhances human welfare. Force is must therefore learn to give material welfare to her religion, for a man who is not sure of his next meal will be less interested in religion. Barbara must equally recognize the fact that the first condition of life is the preservation of the self. She must also acknowledge that true religion can only flourish in a comfortable mind and that the souls which her religious faith struggles to save are inhabited by human bodies and as such, material needs must be satisfied and not denied. Religion must indeed fit the facts of life here and now. Both Ibsen and Shaw like Stuart Hall were of the opinion that religion must endeavour to ameliorate the deplorable human condition of the present instead of focusing on some unknown distant happy future. The ethics of humility preached by Christian religion is presented as an obstacle to progress. As long as the masses are brainwashed into believing, like Peter Shirley that the rich are evil, and the poor good, poverty shall never be eradicated and honest religion will never be successfully practiced.

We set out at the beginning of this paper to defend the thesis that elderly Norwegian dramatist-Henrik Ibsen in his plays submits social issues to debate whereas his follower, the younger Irish playwright-George Bernard Shaw suggests alternative solutions to the issues raised. The study has demonstrated that Ibsen in his social prose drama, **Ghosts** in particular, satirizes conventional Christian religion given its oppressive life-denying doctrine but does not provide in concrete terms any alternative religion. Though following in the footsteps of his master by writing satirical realistic prose dramas of ideas, Shaw as discussed above went a step further to prescribe the practical religion of the ‘life force’ for the wellbeing of humankind. Shaw’s ‘life force’ religion has been portrayed as a practical religion that takes into consideration human nature and its longing for a more fulfilling life. As a visionary, Ibsen however envisaged a new society, what he fondly referred to as “the third empire” in his world historic drama, **Emperor and Galilean**. But unlike Shaw, Ibsen did not explicitly give any name to an eventual new religion in his utopian future society.

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