

Humor in Selected Plays by George Bernard Shaw: A Study of a few Dramatic Devices

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Abstract

This study aims at showing some devices, which George Bernard Shaw(1856-1950) uses in his plays, that help in clarifying his sense of humor. Three plays have been chosen for that purpose; they are (*Man and Superman*), (*Candida*) and (*Arms and the Man*). The plays tackle some social sensitive affairs with Shaw's sense of humor. This manipulation of humor shocks the reader with unexpected possibilities. Nevertheless, the reader discovers upon reading the text that these possibilities are more real than reality itself.

One cannot help being impressed by the humor and wit of the Restoration drama represented by playwrights like William Congreve(1670-1729) and George Farquhar(1678-1707)which lead to trace these features in the comedies of the second half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, which are fairly charged with witty humors, particularly in Oscar Wilde's and Shaw's poignant plays. It is not this article's concern to affirm the fact that Bernard Shaw has been greatly influenced by the humor of the Restoration drama, nor to make a contrastive study of the sense of humor of the Restoration drama and the Victorian or the Modern ages. Nevertheless, it is found that Bernard Shaw is no less, or may be, even more proficient in his use of humor than the great playwrights of the Restoration age. The current study particularly aims at looking for the devices which Shaw uses in his plays and showing how they contribute to his sense of humor. Three plays have been chosen for that purpose, for their poignant wit and humorous tackling of sensitive social affairs. The plays are *Arms and the Man* 1894, *Candida* 1894 and *Man and Superman* 1901-03. This does not mean that Shaw's other plays are less witty; in fact, one has to choose among the plays. This could mean that the findings in this research are applicable to his other plays. Shaw's witty humor startles the reader/spectator into unexpected possibilities, which on reflection may be found reasonable. His dramatic technique throughout relies on

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startling; comic surprise replaces the tensions, suspense and expectancies of tragedy.

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If tragedy provides a good defense to man's dignity and glory, comedy may have an equal or a greater role in defending man's position in this world by using man's wit. *Leonard Potts 1966* defines comedy as an "expression of the natural modesty of man, mixing with his kind, and defending them and himself against megalomania, egoism, misanthropy and the other forces of disintegration inside human nature(105). In other words, comedy involves contest with the world using man's wit, power and luck. It provides an insight into existence and the human condition, and it deepens the understanding of life. If, in tragedy, supernatural powers decide the destiny of the character, the latter behaves in comedy in an unplanned world. *Epifanio San Juan 1967* mentions that comedy presents "an image of human vitality...amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence(200). Therefore, the progress and success of the workshop of comedy need the humor and wit of its own characters. In his 'Introduction' to *Man and Superman 1965*, A. C. Ward defines wit as "the ability to express serious ideas in brilliant and surprising phrases(211). *Abbotson 2003* states that Shaw, in his satire of the ills of society, is "decidedly comical"(241).

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Bernard Shaw seems to imply that comedy takes us closer to reality than does tragedy. In his book, *Bernard Shaw; A Critical View 1987*, Nicholas Grene believes that the comedian becomes in Shaw's case a "prophetic truth teller" and his output could pierce to the heart of the matter(157). Nevertheless, Grene has noticed that "the identification of truth with the clear, the demystified, the intelligible is one of the sources of our recurring sense of shallowness in Shaw(157). It is clear that this shallowness comes from his attempt to look frivolous while his intent is undoubtedly serious. In his book, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment 1981*, Colin Wilson gives an interesting interpretation of this assumed shallowness in Shaw: "When Shaw thinks in terms of ideas that are important to him the humor becomes their vehicle. When he decides to exercise his gift of humor on its own he not only tends to become trivial but to become subtly objectionable"(175). In fact, all the characters and situations are conceived in terms that give rise simultaneously to his humor as well as his ideas. *Michael Solomonson 1996* mentions that Shaw is "credited with creating the serious farce, a dramatic genre that inverts melodramatic conventions and utilizes comedy to promote serious views on public policy, social institutions, and morality"(54). In his book, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works 1981*, Archibald Henderson mentions that Shaw himself assures that his method is to say the right thing "with the utmost levity"(201). Shaw also states, "all the time the real joke is that I am earnest"(201). This playing and levity are not

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amusement because the latter implies relaxation whereas even the most funny episodes of Shaw's plays imply, to a certain degree, an instance of seriousness or reality. On the opposite side, amusement implies declivity from seriousness to mere frivolity.

One can assimilate Shaw's implicit intentions by listening to his witticisms and discussions. People may differ in their interpretation of the essence of his witticisms because Shaw, like all great comedians, particularly those of the Restoration age, cannot be convinced merely with normal discussions to show his humor. He usually resorts to certain indirect devices for that purpose, which will be clarified later. It is clear that Shaw believes that people could communicate by language, so he does not distrust the words as the absurdist whose discourse is distorted or fragmentary. The lack of communication in his plays comes from the disability of the characters to listen or to understand. So, some of his characters speak a clear language though sometimes fail to convey a meaning. He uses the words in a way that makes them ambiguous for their naïve users, but clear for his audience. He frequently gives us a conversation that notably plays with words. Words may hide the meaning more than they show it, and what the character says may differ from what s/he thinks of. Most of these characters are not superficial; they are usually intelligent and sophisticated. The development of the plot depends usually on the dialogue of these characters and their conscious and unconscious revealing of thoughts and facts.

In his book, *Bernard Shaw, Playwright: Aspects of Shavian Drama 1973*, Bernard Dukore quotes Shaw's statement that his plays are all talk "just as Raphael's pictures are all paint, Michael Angelo's statues are all marble, Beethoven's symphonies all noise"(37). His plays are made of people talking most of the time, and they seem never to be at a loss for words. This certainly leads to a certain limitation in the variety of his personae because it is not always possible to create different characters who all own the talent of conversing. But talented speech-makers like Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man*, Tanner in *Man and Superman* and Marchbank in *Candida* give us fluent, witty and striking conversations.

Discussion is a new technical feature that is first introduced to the European theatre by the Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen. This technical novelty transformed the drama from the conventional five-act play to a well-made play of an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and unraveling in the third. The unraveling of the action depends mainly on discussion. Nora, in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, stops her false dealing with her husband and decides to discuss all that has been going on between them. Following the example of Ibsen, Shaw makes the third part of some of his plays more effective by flavoring it with his witticisms. So the use of verbiage becomes one main

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device which helps the characters demonstrate their own witty sense of humor. A sharp example for this is Sergius's statement in *Arms and the Man*, "I won the battle the wrong way when our worthy Russian generals were losing it the right way"(73), where he might have meant: I won by chance and they lost though they made good plans. Jokes evaporate if they are explained, so Sergius's above statement flashes instantly and gives its content briefly. Therefore, words, only words might even cause a decisive turn in the action. The following conversation from the same play leads Raina to pass over from Sergius to Bluntschli:

Bluntschli: When you strike that noble attitude and speak in that thrilling voice, I admire you, but I find it impossible to believe a single word you say.

Raina: Captain Bluntschli!

Bluntschli: Yes?

Raina: Do you mean what you said just now? Do you know what you said just now?

Bluntschli: I do.

Raina: I! I!!!—How did you find me out?

(67)

It is not a well-made play by which the artifices of the plot are what ultimately achieve the turn. Raina's passing over is not a result of any arrangements of incidents, but of words and, only words.

Many of Shaw's characters are not always serious even if their words are taken seriously by their audience, or even if what they say is convincing. But it seems that they feel free and happy with their words, so for Marchbanks, "to be idle, selfish and useless: that is to be beautiful and free and happy"(*Candida*,78). This frivolity in Shaw's plays is not completely untrue. In his "Preface to Plays Pleasant" 1969 in *Candida*, Bernard Shaw admits that his wit is attacked by critics for they believe that it "lacks elevation of sentiment and seriousness of purpose"(14). He adds that they also believe that they cannot find under the surface of his witticisms any "coherent thought or sympathy"(14). Moreover, he states that they accuse him of

an inhuman and freakish wantonness; of preoccupation with the seamy side of life; of paradox, cynicism, and eccentricity, reducible, as some contend, to a trite formula of treating bad as good and good as bad, important as trivial and trivial as important (14).

From another point of view, Shaw's plays are attacked as being only didactic—may be because they rely mainly on discussion. But Margery Morgan, in his book, *The Shavian Playground: An Exploration of the Art of George Bernard Shaw 1974*, bestows the following virtue upon those plays: "A

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spontaneous sense of the inexhaustible resourcefulness of life and an ability to relax a little carelessly, a little playfully, in view of the infinitely extensive future lifting the burden of significance from each finite individual span”(343). *Bernard Dukore 1973* has noticed that Shaw regards comedy as “the most penetrating moral and intellectual analysis to the audience’s moral and intellectual dullness, of which it is unconscious”(197), which means that comedy for Shaw is a work of intellect. Although his plays are entertaining, they are thought provoking. In the three plays that the study tackles, it is noticed that Shaw exposes what he sees as the dangerously blinkered conventional attitude of people toward social affairs that are supported by class structures and false romantic ideals. The plays satirically target unrealistic views making those who hold them appear shallow, pretentious and prone to deceit. This is all done through his verbiage, which can be conceived of as one main device that tactfully presents Shaw’s humor.

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In the eighteenth century, the playwrights used dandies as main characters to exhibit a witty and humorous spirit. The dandy flouts and contradicts the conventional beliefs and customs of his society mainly for the sake of contradicting his people and showing that he is superior to them. But he does not intend to change his society for the better. Similarly, Shaw’s witty characters do not want to destroy the beliefs of their people; they want these opinions to be re-examined so that what is found conventional and dull might be set aside, and what is found vital and intellectual might be preserved. They sometimes want to affirm their own position and superiority and show the inferiority of others. It is noticed that dandyism in the above mentioned sense is ingrained in some of Shaw’s witty characters, particularly in their conversations and witticisms. Shaw’s characters always use epigrams to reveal their shocking or astonishing opinions. The dandy’s epigram is one main device in Shaw’s plays to reveal the witty sense of humor. An epigram is any elegant short statement that has a surprising end. In an epigram, there should be a discovery of some new and strange relation between things that are apparently different from each other. It is interesting that there is a little resemblance between the verses of poetry and brilliant epigrams in the sense that both bring the listener or the reader to a new field in which they discover new worlds and shadows to their notions. It seems that the playwright feels that his statements and epigrams cannot be so impressive unless they are composed cunningly and tactfully. The critics and playwrights of the Restoration age call this tactful ability for composition, decorum. In his book, *The Age of Wit 1650-1750* 1966, Judson Millburn thoroughly analyzes the techniques and mechanisms that generate wit in the comedies of the Restoration age. Reading Shaw’s plays will show that his wit is approximately generated by the same techniques. Millburn associates the wit of that age with decorum(120). He defines decorum as the “facility of expressing

ideas deftly and effectively”(120). Shaw seems to consider decorum as helpful especially in enhancing the comic spirit of a given epigram. So Raina, in *Arms and the Man* tells Bluntschli that she has only told two lies in her life, but she expresses herself in a nice style and a coquettish manner. He could not believe her and she protested that he was insulting her, so he expressed his admiration of the way she said it(67).

There are, of course, many devices through which Shaw achieves his comic effects. In his book, *The Comedy of Habit: An Essay on the Use of Courtesy Literature in A Study of Restoration Comic Drama 1964*, D.R.M. Wilkinson studies the comic elements in the comedies of the Restoration age, and deduces that the comedians of that age share certain devices by which the humor of the play is accomplished. This paper illuminates these devices that are found applicable to the selected plays by Bernard Shaw.

Wilkinson identifies “inversion” as the first device in which traditional values and dull opinions are turned upside down(100). By inversion, the character shows its “comic uncertainty about values”(101), so it liberates readers or the audience from conventional thinking. At the heart of inversion there is a “contradiction” with the “common sense and moderate reasonableness” and thus it gives a beautiful picture of a world which is different from the familiar world of people(*States*, 2005: 92). The conventional term used to signify this device is the paradox. In *Arms and the Man*, “inversion” pervades the whole play: The moment that Bluntschli enters Raina’s bedroom fleeing for his life, a conflict between the realistic and romantic view of soldiering begins. Bluntschli, the Swiss fugitive does not like to be killed if he can help it. Raina’s scornful answer is: “Some soldiers, I know, are afraid to die”(11). At this point, Bluntschli responds in a way showing Shaw’s mechanism of inverting; The behavior, which Raina considered total cowardice, is converted to a common virtue by Bluntschli: “All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me”(11). Raina reacts with discomfort at the collapse of her values, and Bluntschli gives her a consolatory explanation: “it is our duty to live as long as we can”(11). This explanation is paradoxically a mockery, for the supposed idealistic duty is only a disguise for the instinct of survival. Throughout the play, Shaw repeats Bluntschli’s explanation in different situations. For example, Bluntschli classifies soldiers into “old” (those who carry food and who in the charge avoid trying to fight), and “young” (those who carry pistols and cartridges and slash with their swords)(12). Whereas Raina groups soldiers into “brave” as the Bulgarians and “cowardly” as the Serbs(12). A character hardly noticed like Nicola is an extraordinary example of inverted values and of the use of inversion. In spite of his love to Louka, he seems more content to see her as his customer than to have her for his wife. Nicola can convert an insult into a commendation: told by Louka that he has the soul of a servant, he replies, “Yes, that is the secret of success in service”(58); told by

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Raina that he thinks of things that would not enter a gentleman's mind, he answers, "That is the Swiss national character, dear lady"(59). His technique is to make a virtue of what by the standards of the common people is a defect. By inversion, Shaw can present thoughts and opinions which can not be presented just as well otherwise.

It becomes clear now that The Shavian formula of inversion and of some other devices, which will be clarified hereinafter, aims at taking the generally accepted conventions of his society and turning them upside down. This is not done for pretended change; it is an indirect way to denude the hypocrisy ingrained in these conventions. It is sure that achieving such a mission needs some extraordinary devices. Shaw has certainly found his long pursued aim in the devices of the Restoration playwrights. By reversing the usual relations, Shaw wants to set everything back to its natural position, for he seems to believe that conventions, thoughts and feelings are turned upside down. This is revolutionary thinking achieved through revolutionary procedures, and Shaw's art for its all charming trappings is revolutionary.

Critics almost all agree that *Arms and the Man* is anti-romantic, but this study is trying here to show that it is romantic, but in an inverted way. One main reason for the play's attractiveness is its inverted or unusual romanticism. Bluntschli is foil for the romantic idealists. Sergius's romantic militarism is shown to be absurd beside Bluntschli's realistic attitude to business. It should also be noted that Bluntschli can beat Sergius in masculine accomplishment; when Sergius challenges him to a duel, Bluntschli accepts casually and when Raina tries to intervene, tells her: "No harm will be done: I've often acted as a sword instructor. He wont be able to touch me; and I'll not hurt him"(89). *Colin Wilson 1981* admits that "it was the superficial anti-romanticism of the plays that led Shaw's critics to accuse him of...changing his position so that no one was quite sure where he stood"(120). It seems to be Shaw's aim to make sure that no one in the play behaves as they are expected to: Bluntschli is a realist; he also admits to being a helpless romantic. Sergius is a romantic militarist; but he is also aware that he is a fraud. Raina is a sentimental girl; she is also a liar; when Bluntschli accuses her of being a liar, she tries to look innocent, and then suddenly laughs and admits it. It becomes clear now that the only rule in Shaw's creation of his comic characters is that they do not do the things that their counterparts in a romantic play would do: Romantic women are honest and solemn; Shaw's women are dishonest and flirtatious. Romantic servants are faithful and not very clever; Shaw's servants are disrespectful and more intelligent than their masters. Herein below are two quotations from *Candida* as examples of inversion or paradox: The first is Marchbank's question, "Do you think that the things people make fool of themselves about are any less real and true than the things they behave sensibly about?"(37) The second is Morel's statement, "So long as you come here honestly as a self-respecting, thorough,

convinced scoundrel, justifying your scoundrelism and proud of it, you are welcome... . I like a man to be true to himself, even in wickedness”(39).

Another device identified by Wilkinson is “imputing.” To impute is to “ascribe something that causes discredit by way of accusation,” or “to lay the responsibility or the blame for often falsely or unjustly”(*Webster New Collegiate Dictionary 2006*: 607). Bernard Shaw makes use of this device in most of his plays as a device to uncover unspeakable opinions about many affairs in his society; In *Man and Superman*, Don Juan describes a funeral as “festivity in black, especially the funeral of a relative”(118). He adds, “the death of any one we knew, even those we liked best, was always mingled with a certain satisfaction at being finally done with them”(118). We might connect imputation with another device, that is “disclaiming,” which Wilkinson defines as “a form of denying interest, seriousness or responsibility”(106). The comic character vacates the content of a claim by renouncing it. It is evident now that imputing and disclaiming are two sides of the same coin; one fills with a content and the other vacates it. Don Juan considers sincerity of a man to a woman as “to be so greedy for a woman that you deceive yourself in your eagerness to deceive her”(*Man and Superman*, 150-51). He says, “Beauty, purity, respectability, religion, morality, art, patriotism, bravery and the rest are nothing but words which I or anyone else can turn inside out like a glove”(154). Those same witty statements quoted above can be looked at as a type of what Wilkinson calls “confession,” for in confession “an ironic claim to unlikely virtues” is said “on the off-chance of being believed”(107). When the comic character confesses a truth or an opinion, he certainly aims at testing the opinions of others or making fun of them.

Sometimes the comic character resorts to belittle or make fun of what other people say by deflating it or reducing its significance. Notice how in *Candida*, Marchbank’s statement is deflated:

Marchbank: I would die ten times over sooner than give you a moment’s pain.

Candida : ...much good your dying would do me!

(71)

This deflating or undercutting is used by Shaw to work variations on the serious material. Thus, again in *Candida*, Morel’s earnest enthusiasm at the supposed conversion of Burgess to a “muddle hemploye[r]”(sic)”(61) collapses instantly as it becomes clear that Burgess has only changed his ways to get his “contrax assepted”(sic)”(61). The comic undercutting of Morel’s moral certainty anticipates the psychological undercutting of his husbandly assurance with regard to Candida. In *Man and Superman*, the Devil says the following sentence in which a notion is raised up then deflated; he says, “Englishmen never will be

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slaves: they are free to do whatever the government and public opinion allow them to do”(125).

The comic character may also give a sudden unexpected significance to a trivial or an ordinary thing, thus he belittles it even further. He may aim at contradicting our expectations. Here is a conversation between two characters in *Man and Superman*.

Ann : I am afraid I am too feminine to see any sense in destruction.
Destruction can only destroy.

Tanner : Yes. That is why it is useful. Construction cumpers the ground
with institutions made by busy bodies. Destruction clears it and
gives us breathing space and liberty.

(62-63)

In other cases, we notice the reduction of a charged expectation into nothing. The comic effect is created by the deflating of our expectation or of the character's. Notice this conversation from .

Sergius : ...I have allowed you to call me a blockhead. You may now
call me a coward as well. I refuse to fight you. Do you know
why?

Bluntschli: No, but it doesn't matter. I didn't ask the reason when you
cried on; and I don't ask the reason now you cry off.

(50)

The comic effect of this conversation comes from Bluntschli's linking two completely different things to reflect an incongruous picture. He may attach persons or things to trivial connotations, or he mixes something serious with another ridiculous as in what follows from *Man and Superman*.

Ann : You hated to be treated as a boy any longer, poor Jack.

Tanner: yes, because to be treated as a boy was to be taking on the old
footing. I had become a new person; and those who knew the old
person laughed at me. The only man who behaved sensibly was
my tailor; he took measure anew every time he saw me.

(65)

To conclude, it is clear that Shaw aims at ridiculing the conventions of his own society. To achieve this aim, he uses some extraordinary dramatic devices to reverse the usual relations of things and people. Then, he sets every thing back to its natural position. Thus, he presents a new humorous conception of the world. The current research tries to analyze these dramatic devices and show how they help in manifesting Shaw's revolutionary thoughts. One can expand the scope of this study by referring to the same devices in Shaw's other plays that are also filled with his sense of humor.

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روح الدعابة في مسرحيات لجورج برنارد شو: دراسة في بضع وسائل مسرحية

الخلاصة

تهدف الدراسة إلى إيضاح بعض الوسائل التي يستخدمها جورج برنارد شو (١٨٥٦ - ١٩٥٠) في مسرحياته و التي تساعد في إظهار روح الدعابة و السخرية فيها، و تمّ اختيار ثلاث مسرحيات لهذا الغرض و هي: (الإنسان و الإنسان المتفوق) و (الأسلحة و الإنسان) و (كانديدا). هذه المسرحيات تتناول مواضيع اجتماعية حساسة بروح الدعابة و السخرية. إن تلك الروح عند برنارد شو لتصدّم القارئ باحتمالات غير متوقعة لكن الأخير يكتشف من خلال النص المسرحي أن هذه الاحتمالات أكثر صدقا مما يتوقع.