

CHAPTER II

BERNARD SHAW AND HIS LIFE

In biographical approach, we learn that an author's biography has close relationship with his works. Literary works might be an expression of the author's thoughts, ideas or experiences in life. Starting from that point, in this chapter I will write about the biography of Bernard Shaw as one way to go deeper into his works especially Major Barbara. I will discuss it with the two theories that I use in this thesis i.e. the expressive and mimetic theories.

The use of those two theories is suitable with the biographical approach in analysing the problem. Shaw had experience in life which urged him to write Major Barbara - the biographical approach. In the play, he expressed his ideas about his hatred to poverty - the expressive theory. Poverty itself is a reality in life and Shaw reflected the reality in his play - the mimetic theory. We will see the relation further in this chapter.

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856 the son of George Carr Shaw, a man incapable in running a business and a confirmed drunkard. His mother, Lucinda Elizabeth Gurly Shaw was a singer who took part in amateur performance. Therefore since his childhood, Shaw had been familiar with music. Shaw was the third child and only son. As in Major Barbara, the family consisted of one

boy and two girls.

His parents took less attention to their children, so young Shaw was mostly cared by the servants. His nursemaid used to take him into the Dublin slums, in order to visit her friends. There the boy became acquainted with the dirt, disease, and the very bad condition that dealt with poverty. Seeing the slum people did not inspire him with pity, but with a desire to eliminate the condition. Later, he reflected his profound conviction that such deplorable conditions should be corrected in his works, in this case Major Barbara.

From the above paragraphs, we learn that during his childhood, Shaw had been acquainted with poverty. He used to be taken into the slum area by his nursemaid. This experience was then expressed in his work Major Barbara. Shaw took the reality about the bad of poverty as his theme in the play. We can regard this as imitation since we ourselves find that poverty really exists in our society. The reason why Shaw 'imitated' this reality cannot be separated from his biography.

When Shaw was sixteen, his mother and sisters left Dublin and went to live permanently in London as a professional music teacher since she found that her husband was a drunkard and incapable of earning money to provide her and the three children.

Shaw experienced a limited formal education. He studied Latin grammar privately from an uncle and was

later sent to Wesleyan Connexical School, later known as Wesley College, in Dublin. He worked for five years in the office of a Dublin land agent. Getting only a little salary, he went to London and joined his mother in 1876. His unsatisfied to his parents made him having an opinion that extraordinary independence of mind and spirit enabled him, as a man, to look upon mankind and its affair without being swayed either by custom or by other people's conventional ideas of right and wrong. Here we can see that since his early days, Shaw disliked the conventional ideas of the people.

His dislikeness of the conventional ideas supported him to express his own opposing ideas in his plays. Hence, we see the relation between Shaw's biography and the expressive theory.

In London, Shaw read widely in the British museum, tried unsuccessfully for many years to make himself into a novelist. The love of music that he got from his mother was useful. He became music critic of the *Star*, a London evening newspaper, (under the pseudonym of Corno di Bassetto) from 1888 to 1890 and of the *World* from 1890 to 1894. Both as a music critic and few years later as a critic of plays for the *Saturday Review*, a weekly periodical, he wrote essays of a very high quality which are still read and praised more than a half century after they were first printed.

After settling in London, Shaw spent ten years

depending on his mother since he found difficulty to live by writing. During those years, he was laying the foundation of his career, joining political societies, and addressing public meetings, sometimes at street corners. One day in September 1884, he went to hear Henry George, an American economist, who wrote a well-known book, Progress and Poverty. This was a turning point in his life. It converted him to socialism, provided him with a mission and made him a revolutionary writer. Almost at once, he joined the Fabian Society. About Fabianism, it is stated in Shaw, Arms and The Man, Notes :

Fabianism being the British type of socialism adapted from that of Marx. It sought to "Reconstruct society in accordance with the highest moral principles" and to do away with the shocking contrast between the very rich and the very poor. (1959:7)

Shaw was also interested in other movements formed to correct social evils. He became a skilled and effective speaker for these groups and often talked to street-corner crowds in poor districts. He thus came frequently into contact with the Salvation Army missionaries holding their meeting in the same location. Shaw was pleased with the rousing hymns played by the Army's bands.

Years later, after he had achieved a reputation both as a music and drama critic and also as a playwright, he was annoyed when a journalist made a mockery to Salvation Army music. He wrote a tribute to defend his old

acquaintance. As a result, he got a grateful invitation to attend the Army's next band festival in Claphan Hall. He then suggested that perhaps the Army might be able to use short plays to interest its potential converts. He offered technical assistance but nothing came as the result of the offering. Shaw kept thinking more and more of the Army's operations and made them as dramatic material. He finally wrote Major Barbara for which the Army lent uniforms as costumes.

Up to this part, the relation between Shaw's experiences in life and the theory of expression and imitation is more clearly seen. Shaw wrote Major Barbara as a result of his acquaintance with the Salvation Army. He liked the Army's music but he did not like the way used by the Army in saving the soul. That is why in Major Barbara he expressed his own ideas in opposing the Army's way. He combined his ideas in the play with the reality in life that he once ever met in his own life - poverty.

In his early years as a socialist Bernard Shaw believed that if the condition of civilized societies was to be improved, it must be done through equality, reducing various ways which make fortunes of the rich in order to help and uplift the poor. Hence, we learn that Shaw was interested in social problem especially poverty. Therefore he stated in Major Barbara that poverty is a crime that must be abolished.

I have written that Shaw's youthful experiences

helped to create the horror of poverty in Major Barbara. Furthermore, there is an evidence that Shaw's attitude toward religion went back to his childhood impressions.

The Shaws were Protestants in largely Catholic Dublin. Shaw's father sometimes talked of the Bible with sardonic humor, suggesting a skeptical attitude. His mother also did not pay attention on imposing any firm of beliefs upon the children. there were family prayers for a time and also Sunday school, but Shaw, around his twelve, had left the Christian religion as was practiced by the churches. He believed that the churches had strayed far from the teachings of Christ. Ruth Adam in What Shaw Really Said (1966:21) stated :

Shaw's religious training supplied all the ingredients most likely to produce a fully-fledged atheist. His parents supported their church entirely for the sake of social status. His religious insruction consisted of learning texts by heart and being forced to sit through a long dull service without ever feeling personally involved.

Although he would not call himself a Christian, many of his strongest convictions and most of his personal behavior were those of a religious man. He was vegetarian. He drank no alcohol and smoke no tobacco. He was kind and generous to his friends but he opposed charity on the ground. He insisted that it is the duty of all men to make the world a better place to live in. All these beliefs, though Shaw said that they were based on reason not on faith, could be said that they had the force of a religion.

The above statements also became the background of Major Barbara in which he attacked some concepts in Christianity. He refused the form of giving charity on the ground like Barbara and the Army did.

Shaw's popularity as an active dramatist began in New York and Germany in the middle nineties, several years before his plays came to be the vogue in the London commercial theater. His first play Widowers' Houses (1892), was an attack on slum landlordism. In Arms and The Man (1899), he attacked the romantic view on war and hero worship. His play Mrs. Warren's Profession (1902), an exposure of prostitution, was banned by the censors for many years. In You Never Can Tell (1899), he talked about women's freedom which was considered as a taboo at that time. The medical profession was the object of his criticism in The Doctor's Dilemma. Shaw's plays were astonishing at that time. A play on such subject - about a genuine social evil - was something entirely new in the English theatres. Yet the plays were not popular because some of them attacked the bases of society and the habits of long years. Shaw's unique characteristic was not only seen in the theme of his plays but also in his way of writing. He refused to use the apostrophe in colloquial phrases. So he would write *dont*; *cant*; *Ive* instead of *don't*; *can't* or *I've*.

Shaw went on writing plays about real human problems. In 1898, six years before writing Major Barbara, Shaw

married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a wealthy Irish woman who shared his intellectual interests. Neither was under forty when they got married but the two seemed to live in harmony until her death in 1943 at the age of 86.

In 1903, Shaw wrote Man and Superman, referred to his belief in the *Life Force*. Then in 1905 he wrote Major Barbara. The latter had close relationship with the two earlier plays i.e. John Bull's Other Island (1904) and Man and Superman as stated by Bernard F. Dukore, in Shaw's "Big Three" (1984:33) as follows :

In the latter respect - but only I must caution, in that respect - one can consider *Man and Superman*, *John Bull's Other Island* and *Major Barbara* completed in three successive years beginning in 1903 - to constitute a trilogy.

During the time when Shaw wrote Major Barbara, poverty could be found everywhere in England. Joan Thellusson Nourse in G.B. Shaw's Major Barbara stated that during the time Shaw wrote Major Barbara

...there was a great deal of dire poverty. By 1905, charitable groups, largely religious were trying to alleviate the misery. And there were those who felt that the government should do more to help out the unfortunate and abandon the earlier *laissez faire* or let alone policy that tended to favor the wealthy. the effort made, however, had still by no means come close to eliminating the evils. (1965:70)

By presenting Major Barbara, Shaw wanted the public to think more about the problem of poverty. Shaw stated

that an atmosphere of dirt, disease, and over-all misery would not support the best development of an individual.

Major 'Barbara took its first performance on 28 November 1905. Rumors had indicated that this play was about the Salvation Army. Among the notable audience were the Prime Minister, *Arthur James Balfour*, and the conservative leader. There was also the presence on box of seats of several Salvation Army Commissioners, in uniforms.

In 1912 Shaw wrote Pygmalion, based on the education of a girl who cannot speak good English. It made him the most popular playwright in the country. The play has been made into a very successful musical comedy, My Fair Lady. Shaw received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925. He still wrote many plays as well as critics.

Shaw died on November 2, 1950 at the age of 95 because of a fall in his garden. At his own request his ashes are resting with those of his wife in their own garden at Ayot St. Lawrence, rather than in Westminster Abbey.

In Shaw, we indeed find that the biography of an author has close relationship with his works. Shaw had an experience with poverty (the biographical approach) - then he expressed his idea to eliminate the condition in his play (the expressive theory) - by taking poverty as the real thing in life as his theme (the mimetic theory).