The Dilemma of Recantation and the Quest for Lamarckian Ideal in Saint Joan

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Abstract

The mind-blowing confession and the subsequent recantation is a hard riddle to solve in Shaw's Saint Joan. The scene has already been dealt with in detail, but, to our knowledge, very little has been said about Lamarckian perspective which can brilliantly demystify the conflicting voices of the protagonist. This study highlights the dramatic worth of recantation scene and applies the literary parameters of Lamarck's theory of evolution as a tool for analyzing the conflicting attitude of Saint Joan. The study, however, does not recognize the scientific principles of Lamarck. It takes the aesthetic and literary dimensions of the theory which the researchers have borrowed from K M Newton's analysis of Lamarckian and Darwinian evolution and which they have duly acknowledged in the text of the paper.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, Saint Joan, Recantation Scene, Literary interpretations of Darwinism and Lamarckism

Introduction

The recantation scene in *Saint Joan*, no doubt, occupies a pivotal position in the play. It will not be an overstatement to contend that the proper understanding of the play is tethered to an intelligent comprehension of Saint Joan's fluctuating stance between confession and the subsequent repudiation of her spiritual voices. The dénouement in the play actually happens when she retracts from her recantation after having been sentenced to lifetime imprisonment. The scintillating withdrawal may not be in accordance with her heroic stature but no sensible reader can skip the motive behind her weird retraction. It also leads to the domain of Shavianism: what are the characteristic traits of Shavian heroine? Does Shaw want her survival even if it wears out her grand dignity as a heroine? Or does he try to present an iconoclastic notion of heroism rooted in anti-conventionalism? This paper attempts to answer the aforementioned questions by using the philosophical framework of Lamarckian evolution. The study also makes a reference to Darwinism and concludes with an assertion that Shaw's approval of Lamarckism and his repugnance of Darwinism were essentially on philosophical terms, never on scientific grounds.

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Literature Review

The recantation scene has been the source of literary disagreement among the critics. Critics opine differently regarding the controversial decisions of Joan's choices. Leon Hugo (1971) considers it an artistic error on Shaw's part: "Why at this most important point has Shaw deserted the Joan of the play and superseded her by this poetaster?" (p. 132). Louis Martz refers to it as one lapse in her confidence and describes it as her only real error in the play. Louis Crompton (1971) takes Joan's retraction as her love for freedom and Shaw's staunch contempt for inhumane imprisonment followed in the modern so-called liberal society:

> "When she thinks she can escape death by signing a recantation she sensibly signs it. The anger she shows on discovering that her choice lies not between the fire and freedom, but the fire and prison, matches Shaw's own contempt for a society that cages men and women without thinking twice about it" (p. 212).

But the Lamarckian perspective has received very slight attention in the large corpora. This study aims at answering the question of Joan's recantation and assumes that Joan is a typical Shavian heroine who believes in the malleability of human self. If understood within this spectrum, Joan will accurately be liberated from some of the stereotypical notions attached to her by different critics.

Darwinism and Lamarckism within Literary Frameworks

Before we undertake the Lamarckian analysis of the recantation scene, it will be advisable to have some understanding of the literary dimensions of the two theories. K.M. Newton (1986) in "Shaw and Tragedy" contends that Darwinian characters operate within two existential ethics: passivism and tragic choice. A character following the Darwinian mode of life will either inertly yield to the circumstances or will take a very fatal option when the former seems impossible. Such characters are governed by the rigidity and immutability of self. Hence, the self-world relationship is, by and large, a pretty hard nut to crack. It is always tempting for Darwinian characters to sacrifice life for principles when they are placed between- Scylla- and- Charybdis- like situation. This scheme of life views humans as passive victims of circumstantial happening and treats them as mere puppets having no inner voices.

King Charles in *Saint Joan* can be taken an excellent example of such passive adaptation. He says: "I don't want to kill people: I only want to be left alone to enjoy myself in my own way… I want to sleep in a comfortable bed, and not live in continual terror of being killed or wounded. … I can tell you that one good treaty is worth ten good fights. These fighting fellows lose all on the treaties that they gain on the fights" (p. 974). Joan, on the other hand, epitomizes a dynamic spirit who regards such passivity with contempt. She says, "I am frightened beyond words before a battle; but it is so dull afterwards when there is no danger: oh, so dull! dull! dull!" (p. 985).

Evolution for Lamarck is characteristically an active rather than a passive process. It was, in fact, the principle of free will in Lamarckism that struck Shaw: "Turning from the

simple truth of Lamarckism to the mechanical rationalism of Natural Selection is very unpromising" (Smith, 1995, p.8). Shaw was immensely impressed by the optimistic strain of Lamarckism which discerned individuals as overridden free capable of overturning any environmental mishappening. Lamarckian self is infinitely malleable and hence can attain compatibility in any changing circumstance.

Shaw on Darwinism and Lamarckism

Darwin's theory of evolution had groundbreaking effects not only in scientific but also in literary circle. While countless Victorian writers imbibed Darwinian spirit, Shaw outrightly rejected it and supported Lamarckian spirit in his writings. Stanley's (1982) comments about Shaw's plays that Shaw tried to put "new theoretical wine in familiar bottles, and finely aged wine in new and unfamiliar bottles…. The result was often a play which by orthodox, contemporary standards only baffled orthodox contemporary critics" (p. 230), can safely be applied to Shaw's approach towards evolution. The Darwinian doctrine of "survival of the fittest" was contrabalance to Shaw's pacific vision as such survival was achieved at the cost of human life. It also accentuated belligerent tendencies in species and increased their vulnerability. This tenet equipped species with a killing license and provided room for the obnoxious ideology of might is right. Such vicious cult finds no space in Shavian world where survival is achieved through intellectual supremacy. That is why Du Cann (1963) says that Shaw abhorred physical courage and never pretended to possess any. Shaw once very proudly declared that during shooting or other violence, he would be found under the bed and he would only come out when all the violence was over and genuine constructive business started (p. 108).

David Daiches (1956) points out the same anti-Darwinian strain in Shaw and says that Darwin's reductionism and fatalism was the negation of Shaw's optimistic outlook of the world. The process of natural selection mitigated the role of volition and intellect in human life and presented a very bleak picture of the world based on chance happenings. Shaw could never accept the proposition that organisms are devoid of free will and are incapable of bringing about any positive changes within themselves.

Shaw as an Iconoclast

Since enough has been said about the theoretical framework, now the current study will focus on Joan's retraction. As there is there is no final version to any literary piece, the current Lamarckian analysis of the scene claims to be very tentative. Shavianism, as a matter of fact, always welcomes fresh perspectives as Wilson (1969) comments that Shaw as a writer can never be formularized (p. 94). Similarly, Colbourne (1949) says that Shaw consistently told us that we can get from his plays what we bring to them (p. 77).

George Bernard Shaw in the "The Revolutionist's Handbook," gives vent to his idiosyncratic view of life through an axiom: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man (p. 238)." Shaw believes that only unreasonable people can render any constructive services for humanity. He, as Owen

(1915) states, was unconventionality personified. The same maverickism can be witnessed in his approach to the concept of evolution.

Lamarckian Perspective in Saint Joan

The recantation scene provides further support to the Lamarckism of Shaw. He, perhaps, wants us to see Joan's fluctuation between confession and retraction within Lamarckian parameter. Joan's abrupt relapse when she is declared a heretic and about to be burnt on the stake is actually her quest for the survival of her life. She declares, "I have dared and dared; but only a fool will walk into a fire: God, who gave me my commonsense, cannot will me to do that" (p. 998). The lines suggest that she prioritizes life over her principles. This outlook makes her a true Lamarckian where life concedes greater significance over the worldly principles. Darwinians, on the other hand, equate life with principles. She is a Shavian unreasonable person who refuses to succumb to circumstantial forces, and makes the maximum use of her credentials in order to bring the world to her ideals.

The initiative that Joan takes to transform herself from a simple village girl to a charismatic soldier testifies the view that she can undergo any possible change with an eye on gaining command over the world. In *Preface to Saint Joan*, Shaw elaborates the genius of Joan and says that Joan is a *"*person who sees farther and probes deeper than other people and has a different set of ethical valuations from theirs, and has energy enough to give effect to this extra vision and its valuations in whatever manner best suits his or her specific talents" (p. 20). Joan is a type of bohemian girl who disregards the codified set of morality and designs her own ethical standards for exercising her genius. Carpenter (1969) contends that Shaw as a dramatist loves to smash conventional notions of heroism. He makes his characters super attractive and irresistible by making them non-conformists. Adams (1971) also says the same point and believes that Shavian characters are tagged as immoral for they subvert from the established code of mannerism (p. 45).

If Joan had ended her life on the stake without sorting out a reasonable way to subdue the antagonistic forces, she would have been a Shavian reprobate guilty of impracticality. This would render her a very spontaneous heroine having a sentimental outlook and one who is incapable of revolting against the established societal norms. But Shaw reminds us that thoughtless pursuit of ideals can be as tragic as thoughtless violation of them. As already mentioned, Shaw was fascinated by the exercise of intellectual supremacy in Lamarckism. Joan also follows the suit and attempts to ensure a rational correspondence between her *self* and the circumstances. Unlike Shakespearean heroes, death never beglamours her and she is very unromantic about it. Shavian heroes attain the heroic stature through the use of their intellect, never through unnecessary longing for death.

Shaw as an evolutionist believes in the ascendancy of human beings on the evolutionary ladder. The appetite for knowledge is the character's quest for evolution. And Joan's voices and visions, in fact, are the projection of her desire for evolution as Shaw points out in *The Preface* (p. 28). And this evolution can happen provided that the character does not adhere blindly to the traditional ideals of the society. It tantamounts to relinquishing the conventional outlook and striving to lay out the canvas of

intellectualism and anti-sentimentalism. The symbolic acts of dressing up in men's attire, the renouncement of farm life for military and her refusal to submit to gender-based roles verify the notion that Joan is passing through the climactic phase of her evolutionary process.

When towards the end of the play Joan chooses death, it is not because she is committed to her egoistic principles or any other purpose or because she realizes her erroneous decision of renouncing her voices in order to save her life; she chooses burning on the stake simply because she cannot get life on her own terms; life that is considered worthy. Historically, when La Hire, her military colleague, had failed to rescue her, she recanted and Shaw comments: "nothing could be more sane or practical. It was not until she discovered that she had gained nothing by her recantation but close imprisonment for life that she withdrew it, and deliberately and explicitly chose burning instead" (*The Preface*, p. 32). Alfred Turco (1976) contends that Joan's retraction validates that life is more than an act of self-sacrifice. It points to the fact that principles are not preferable to life. In the end, when Joan willingness embraces death it is because she disgusts the terms on which life is offered to her (p.128). This recantation is the not just a skin-saving step but a voyage towards perfection: the will of evolving and completing her own potential as Aristotle calls it in his theory of potentiality. So, instead of labeling her a "naïve idealist" as Margery Morgan (1972) does in *The Shavian Playground*, she is a thoroughgoing pragmatist who firmly believes that life should be sapped to its last drop and like Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man* says: "It is our duty to live as long as we can" (p. 95). Her ebb and flow between confession and repudiation is, in reality, her quest for preserving her life within the framework of Lamarckism. That's why Shaw in *the Preface* declares her a woman with sound intelligence who very meticulously calculates her moves and wards off impulsive decisions. Sally Peters' (1998) comments in "Shaw's life: a Feminist in Spite of Himself" provide another support to this view: "She [Joan] is both practical and passionate by nature, a woman whose virginity stems from strength, not from mere Victorian purity" (p. 22). Joan is not ideals addict. For her the world is an arena for gaining a superb command over the opposing forces. Her credentials as a pragmatist leave little to imagination. Cauchon also validates her practicality when he argues that her victories prove that "she has a better head on her shoulders…" (p. 981). She, like Charles in *Good King Charles's Golden Days,* boasts: "I keep my head on my shoulders. It takes a man of brains to do that" (p. 197).

Conclusion

Shavian dramas place super emphasis on survival but this survival has some watertight boundaries. It denounces the mundane principles but acknowledges self-recognition. Joan struggles for her life but she never treads the path which damages her *self*. Her recantation is a step towards claiming life as a supreme gift and her pursuit of preserving her life. But when the unique gift of life is offered as alms lacking her ideals, she feels no hesitation in declining such unworthy offering and happily goes on the stake for burning.

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