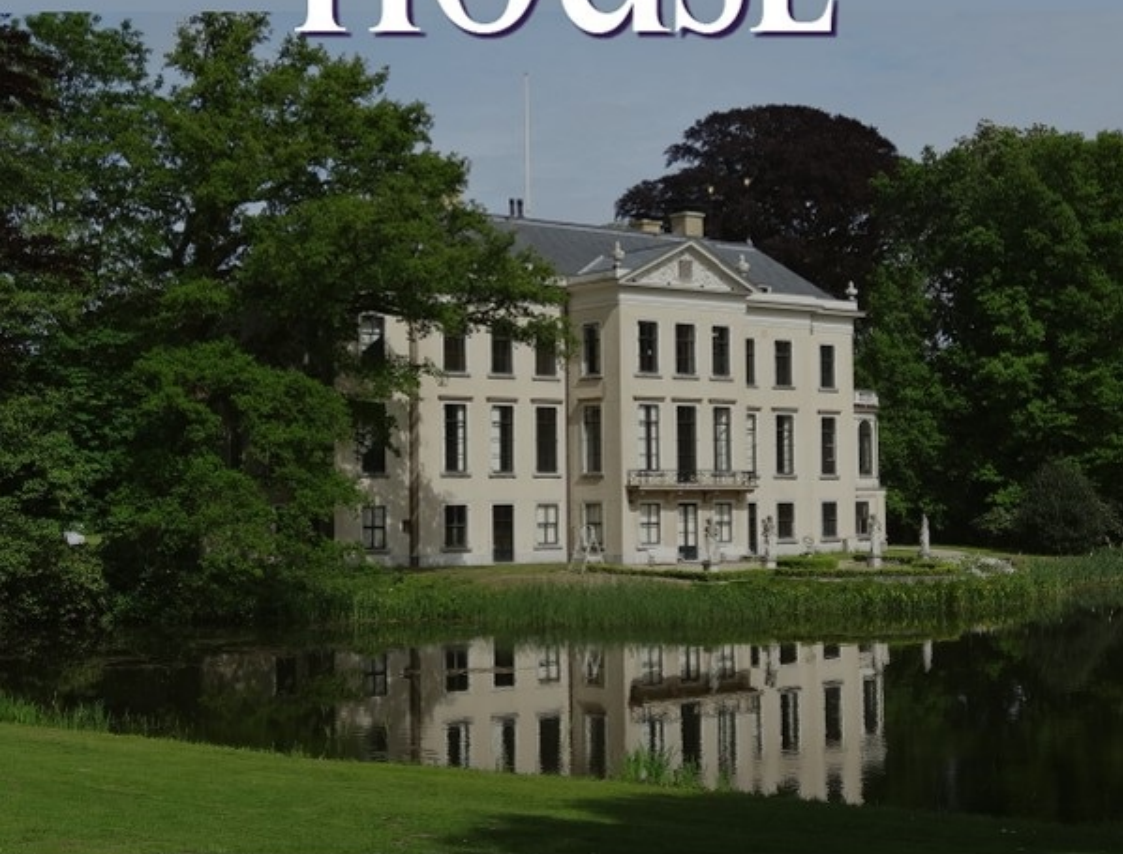


Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

HEARTBREAK HOUSE



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Heartbreak House

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Premiere: Garrick Theatre,

New York, 1920

Roundhouse Theatre, Bethesda, 2003

David E. Scharff

Heartbreak House, a rather long 3-act play, was written sometime in 1917-1918, about the time Shaw turned 60, two thirds of the way through his remarkably long life. It came after a crescendo of productivity, culminating in the most psychological of his plays, *Pygmalion* which won the hearts of the English speaking world and is the one for which he is best known, First performed in 1913, *Pygmalion* may have best expressed Shaw's dynamics, and autobiographical elements of some difficulty for him, and yet had an

immediacy and warmth of feeling that is entirely lacking in *Heartbreak House*. Shaw saw the opening production of *Heartbreak House* only once after opening night, and emotionally rejected the production. I think of *Heartbreak House* as the rejoinder to the heartwarming *Pygmalion*. *Heartbreak House* is a rejection of the heart altogether, in the guise of a social drama spiced with the Shavian wit for which he is best known. Shaw draws the characters not as full-blooded people but as cartoons of roles within a social reality meant to be manipulated by wit and circumstance. His parody of English upper class life mocks and celebrates English upper class society so vividly that it has generated the widespread feeling that indeed no-one of that class does, did, or had done anything useful in living memory.

In *Heartbreak House*, Ellie Dunn, a child-like woman of marriageable age, visits the home of a higher class family. Ellie, her awkward uptight father, a failed idealist called Manzini Dunn, and her untrustworthy middle-aged fiancé, the industrialist Boss Mangan are invited just before World War I to one of Hesione Hushabye's dinner parties at the home of her father Captain Shotover, a man who has an interest in dynamite. Shotover believes her to be the child of another Dunn who was with him in the navy. Enter Shotover's rich daughter, an enticing woman from whom he has been estranged and Billie, a burglar, also by the name of Dunn, who just wants to be looked after, and who uses the pranks of a 6 year-old to get himself incarcerated in a jail as the place where he is most likely to get taken care of. Shotover is a man who

thinks that the natural life of an adult's affection for his children is 6 years, and after that, children should take care of themselves. Not surprisingly, Shotover's daughters are heartless. Ellie's social status will profit by her marriage to Mangan a wealthy industrialist, but she is in love with Hesione's romantic husband, and yet by the end of the play she makes the unlikely choice of loving Captain Shotover. Having faced a life decision of social import, Ellie makes an emotional choice, giving up her financial security with Mangan for Shotover, who she thinks is the only one who really cares, is too old to impose sex, and knows about selling his soul to the devil while not really doing so. But Ellie's solution is a ridiculous fantasy, even while the world turns to its destruction.

Let me first trace some of the themes of the social drama, themselves complex ones which some people find tedious. Shaw took on all the conventions of the day – marriage, the role of class in English society, hypocrisy, and the destructiveness of war. He was a socialist although not a Marxist, believing in planned evolution to socialism, not in revolution. He satirized almost everything. This play is rife with amusement and social irony, the characters best understood as embodiments of social positions and roles. There is Mangan the industrialist and politician who turns out to have the heart of a child longing for a mother; Ellie, the child who reveals an inner steeliness not expected in the first act; Hector and Hesione, a couple who were once passionate but have by now settled into a gentle, if socially

outrageous, accommodating relationship, trying in backhanded ways to give moments of pleasure to others by arousing momentary excitement for them or attempting to plan their lives. Shaw gives us a cartoon of a supposedly caring parental marriage whose provision for the family they assemble for the weekend makes a kind of sense in the couple's own terms but to us is a farce.

In the production that I saw at Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda the director cut some of the material to shorten this very long play. Perhaps the intention was also to cut down on pedagogical language that is heavy-handed. But the director's choice of cutting the dialogue designed to carry the social argument then focused the play on the personalities of the characters. Although editing may make the play more accessible, it is actually hard for the audience to follow the logic of the social argument without the fuller script.

At the end of Act I, Shotover, Hector and Hesione are discussing how Hector's inventions, which are supposed to support the family, have not brought in enough money, the full script brings out the social irony in the comic interpersonal situations:

Hesione Hushabye (an ironic name for the soothing mother she tries to be) says to Shotover, "Living at the rate we do, you cannot afford life-saving inventions. Can't you think of something that will murder half Europe at one bang?"

This idea makes Shotover's interest in dynamite that produces the final explosion more thematically cohesive. Here he says back to her, "No. I am ageing fast. My mind does not dwell on slaughter as it did when I was a boy." She suggests he invent a harpoon cannon he has had in mind. "No use," says Shotover. "It kills whales, not men."

She says, "Why not? You fire the harpoon out of a cannon. It sticks in the enemy's general; you wind him in; and there you are."

Shotover replies, "There is something in it. Not to wind in generals; they are not dangerous. But one could fire a grapnel and wind in a machine gun or even a tank. I will think it out."

With this kind of dialogue that is not about character but about social irony, not comedy but the tragedy of man's destructiveness to man, the ending makes sense – an explosion that does away with the two characters who represent two of Shotover's ideological enemies: the exploitative industrialist and the burglar who once did him out of his stores and set up shop, and who now makes a living breaking into houses and tricking people who are easily duped because of their innocent charitable instincts. Dramatically it's farce, but primarily it's social commentary.

This play is widely held to be a social drama, and can be analyzed from that perspective more usefully than from the personal and autobiographical

psychoanalytic perspective on the inner life of individuals and of relationships, which Shaw employs only for the sake of social arguments. Social reality is, after all, embedded in our individual psychologies, brought to us originally by our experience with parents and other important figures in our lives. Such issues as the relationships between the sexes, hate and war, the idleness of the upper classes while Europe destroys itself, and so on, are at the most important levels, deeply personal to us. This play was understood as a ringing castigation of a British intellectual society that carried on as if immune to the awful destruction of the war. Shaw courageously spoke frequently and actively against that war – to the great diminishment of his previous popularity. But what I find so interesting in this play is the way that the apparently ridiculous quality of the interactions belies the intensity of the personal relationships and serves as a rejoinder to the fantasy solution found in *Pygmalion*.

Let us turn to Shaw himself. Shaw's mother was extremely negligent of him, and his father was an unsuccessful drunk. He longed to be loved by his neglectful mother, and he lived with her in hope until he married at 41. When he was a youth, his parents brought in a Professor of Voice to live with them in a threesome (Silvio 1995). This man became Shaw's first mentor and the model for Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*. Briefly sexual before marriage at 41, Shaw was chaste afterwards. He remained for many years in this a-sexual marriage in which his wife supported him and did not require him to be

sexual with her provided he was not sexual with anyone else. Years later, he fell in love with Mrs. Pat Campbell, and wrote ardent letters to her

In a letter to Mrs. Pat, Shaw wrote, “I seldom dream of my mother, but when I do, she is my wife as well as my mother. ... I [take] it as a matter of course that the maternal function included the wifely one...What is more, the sexual relations acquire... all the innocence of the filial one, and the filial one all the completeness of the sexual one . . . if circumstances tricked me into marrying my mother before I knew she was my mother, I should be fonder of her than I could even be of a mother who was not my wife, or a wife who was not my mother” (Holroyd 1988, p. 20). Shaw had the play *Pygmalion* in mind throughout the 15 years of his relationship to Mrs. Pat, but she finally lost patience with him for staying with his wife, who was mainly a mother to him. This was also a time of serious illness for his mother.

In the final throes of his relationship with Mrs. Pat, Shaw wrote *Pygmalion*, and recruited her for the role of Liza. I see Liza as a female alter ego of Shaw, like him, mentored by a voice teacher, a child who will live with Higgins and Pickering in a threesome, as Shaw predicts in his epilogue to *Pygmalion*. I see Henry Higgins as both a callous mother and a father who makes his own child into a wife and mother without involving sex – a magical solution. When Shaw finally wrote *Pygmalion*, he did it in a hurry. He had resisted Mrs. Pat’s pressure for physical intimacy, and then only before the

opening of the play did he decide he wanted to physically consummate the relationship. But by then she was fed up, and a week before it opened, she ran off and married a young aristocratic military officer. The play was a huge success, but Shaw hated the production and, because he was so embittered, saw it only once after the opening night. He was deeply disappointed at the loss of his only true love. No magical solution there. Although Liza stayed happily with Higgins and old Pickering, Mrs. Pat left Shaw for a young man. Resentful at her rejection, he experienced once again the lack of affection from Mrs. Pat that he had felt from his mother during childhood.

So to the current play, *Heartbreak House*, written in the years after Shaw's heartbreak. Shotover is the cynical idealist spokesman for Shaw. Shotover presides over a house run by heartless daughters, who care for him while he takes care of the household by fanciful inventions that bring in the money. Shaw's inventions, his plays, possess social dynamite that is intended to explode the evils of social inequity and those who perpetrate them. Shotover is continually supporting his household by his inventions. These inventions remind me of the inventive plays of Shaw that support his house in his old age as he continually tries to set things right in the world, while becoming increasingly cynical about the possibility of doing so. I see this play as an antidote to the failed fantasy solution of writing *Pygmalion*.

In *Heartbreak House*, Shotover, a man who seems totally dismissive of

family values, seems to be the character Shaw consciously identified with. Shaw rejects many other aspects of family life in this play, including the care of children, an intimate loving couple, and a consummated marriage. There are no children in the play, and the adult children all turn against their parents in one way or another. Coming at the end of his only great love and his most successful period of playwriting, Shaw's own heartbreak is immense. His loss is reflected in the ironies of all loving relationships drawn in this play. The irony is that Ellie's symbolic marriage to Shotover while rejecting real marriage is actually the kind of marriage Shaw wanted, and for him it was neither ridiculous nor unrealistic. *Heartbreak House* is an attempt to portray and rectify Shaw's own disappointment.

The play makes several formulaic equations: of age and wisdom, and of youth and guile. All women are cast as one or another form of dominating manipulator to be fought off. Nevertheless, woman is not the chief enemy of sensible man. Rather it is the evil industrialist, who uses men up without scruple, enslaving them through both their innocence and their industry. The men are liars. They have to lie to please the women with their seduction and flattery. The women who believe these liars are fools who need to grow up to more wisdom. Those who seem innocent are treated as in need of enlightenment by the tea and sympathy of the cynical old captain.

Shaw is not trying to manipulate character to show psychological truth,

but in his terms a truth deeper than psychology, and he does it with that tool that is perhaps richer to us than the submerged truths of human character – language. Shotover, who is continually putting a shot over across everyone’s bow, says things that ring true despite their paradox, and because of their paradox. This is the language of social truth, an aspect of psychology that we have not been used to acknowledging or recognizing in the dream of the theater. Admittedly it is a social truth of a man with a social message. This is not a play of discovery through character as revealed in interaction. Because of the social urgency Shaw expresses, the speeches become longer, more polemical as if to educate or persuade. As I said earlier, some of these speeches, which come at the end of Act I, were cut from the performance I saw, perhaps in order to decrease the sense of social cause and increase the sense of realism in the characters. I see these speeches about social exploitation as expressions of the social unconscious (unconscious ideas widely shared in a culture).

Look at Ellie, the most manipulative of the women, posing as the most innocent, working to fool even her friend Hesione who is more cynical than them all, and a match for the exploitative and cynical Mangan. Ellie has two fathers, the crooked Billie who robbed Shotover and would do it again, and an innocent father who was exploited and robbed himself. Both fathers are in relationships of robbing, and it is Ellie’s intention both in innocence and in cynicism to get her own back through sex and seduction, offering Mangan the

youth and innocence he has exploited in the father.

The first act sets up the problem of the exploitative men and the innocence of women, all threatened by the social machinations of industrialism that is out to exploit everyone who is blind to what is going on, with only the aging and cynical Shotover standing between both family and strangers against looming destruction and doom. Then the rest of the play rings changes on this theme. It is not until Shotover, the captain who deserves his fate and who drinks his rum to achieve the 7th degree of concentration, delivers his epilogue that there is a degree of farcical resolution. Shotover becomes the one person Ellie can trust, a father and a mother who has been referred to as a “mummy” in lines about her spiritual marriage to him.

This farce of a conclusion tells us this has all along been a play about numbskull behavior among upper class Brits who fiddle away their days and nights away. The talk about the price of a soul, a selling out so no one wants for gloves, is now also about a population that sells itself for comfort, for a pretense of love, for time that has no value. The Hushabye couple’s shameless serenity that seems to provide a modicum of peace at the center of the play is revealed as a complacency that is at the heart of the social difficulty. When complacency takes the place of facing the truth in our personal, social or political lives, we face disaster. It is not only Mangan and Dunn who are blown up. They take the lead in a parable about what society is heading towards and

what we are saving our dynamite for.

We have to acknowledge that there is a pervasive truth to Shaw's pessimistic cynicism. All of us pose and present our false selves to the world. When we go to sleep and trust in Providence, when we assume there is a reality to our good intentions, when we become complacent in the thought that goodness is a benign condition, it is then that we truly invite trouble. Goodness is not totally benign. It has its match in the cynical exploitation of others. Being asleep at the switch makes for the surest course for the rocks and opens individuals and society for real social difficulty.

This is a play about social and national character. Each dramatic character gives voice to certain general qualities in interaction. That makes *Heartbreak House* a morality play with a gentle, only mildly disturbing ending. We do not care much about Mangan and Dunn who get blown up. We forget that they stand for us. Everybody is in a way waiting for a violent ending that could just as easily have come to them. Everyone's worst nightmare is spoken for by Manzini being stripped naked socially. Maybe the Captain will get more dynamite and the whole population will return to a life a little heartbroken. They will still have pointless lives because they have not learned from experience. They have not learned to feel, think, share, and care about the world beyond themselves. In this group and in the cynicism of this farce, it's not as bad as it could be. Quite comfortable, really!

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