

The Devil's Disciple George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin in a family belonging to the Irish Protestant gentry. Apart from the musical education he received from his mother, he was practically self-educated. At the age of 20 he went to London and set to work as a novelist. He wrote five novels in all, but none of them made him famous. In 1884 he joined the newly formed Fabian Society, a large society of socialistic intellectuals whose leader he was between 1884 and 1900. He edited *Fabian Essays* (1887) which was influential in forming socialist opinion in Britain.

Before starting his career as a dramatist, G. B. Shaw wrote much theatre and music criticism for a number of papers. In 1891 he published *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, a study on the Norwegian dramatist whose plays of social criticism impressed him very much for bringing a new perspective in drama. In Shaw's plays though it is the ideas and not the characters that really matter, his characters do not talk in order to define themselves but to make speeches.

He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925.

His most famous plays are probably: *Man and Superman* (1903); *Major Barbara* (1905); *Pygmalion* (1912); *Heartbreak House* (1917); other plays: in *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) - *Widower's Houses*; in *Plays for Puritans* (1901) - *The Devil's Disciple*; *Caesar and Cleopatra*; other plays after 1918: *The Art Cart*; *In Good King Charles's Golden Days*.

The Devil's Disciple, written in 1897, is the first of the *Plays for Puritans* (published in 1901), followed by *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899).

In order to give his criticism a note of harmlessness, Shaw sets the action of the play in New England, back in the year 1777, during the rebellion of American colonies against British dominion. Probably, no description of that year is better than Shaw's: "*The year 1777 is the one in which the passions roused by the breaking-off of the American colonies from England, more by their own weight than by their own will [...]*"

At the beginning of the play we are introduced to Mrs. Dudgeon - sour, shrewish and stupidly puritanical. The situation in the Dudgeon family is rather tense: Peter Dudgeon, Mrs. Dudgeon's brother-in-law, was hang on the public gallows as a rebel and his 'irregular child' Essie was brought into the house. On top of all the disgrace, the death of Timothy Dudgeon, Mrs. Dudgeon's husband, comes as a terrible shock to her. An equally trying circumstance is the reading of the will, which takes place in an atmosphere of chilly puritanism. It is the moment when the *devil's disciple*, Dick Dudgeon, comes in. Inevitably, the will reveals that Dick is now master of the house. The play nearly reaches a climax when Richard explains to his awe relatives that he used to pray secretly to the devil - "*he comforted me, and saved me from having my spirit broken in this house of children's tears. I promised him my soul, and swore on oath that I would stand up for him in this world and stand by him in the next. That promise and this oath made a man of me.*"

Minister Anthony Anderson and his pretty young wife Judith also appear in act I. Their attitude towards Dick Dudgeon is very much the same as that of the others: disregard and contempt, probably mixed with some pity. But is it only the second act that really makes the two leagues confront each other. At the minister's invitation, Richard calls on the Andersons and stays on for tea, while Anderson goes off to comfort Mrs. Dudgeon, who is dying. When Judith begins to pour out her loathing of Dick, the British soldiers arrive and mistake Dick for Anderson and arrest him. Their intention is to hang someone as an example, regardless of his being innocent. Dick tells Judith to find her husband and get him out of harm's way. She kisses him before the soldiers take him away, in order to make things seem as natural as possible. She immediately faints. When Anderson returns, she cannot tell him what happened and for another quarter of an hour he goes on believing that it was Dick that the soldiers came for. The tension mounts and this is Shaw's skill as a dramatist is at its best. For it is Essie who rushes into the house and reveals what really happened. When Anderson realizes the absurdity of the facts, his true character suddenly emerges; he turns into a man of action, leaps on his horse and leaves without any explanation. This makes Judith believe that he has simply deserted Dick, which brings her to despair.

The third act, actually the best in the play, turns all the anxieties and tensions into melodrama. Judith visits Dick in prison, tells him of her husband's flight and begs him to save himself. He keeps up to his usual sarcasm and tells her that his death will not by any means break her heart. Judith, with her hands on his shoulders and looking intently at him, whispers an ambiguous question: *"How do I know?"*. At this stage Dick makes the speech that is the point of the whole play: *"What I did last night, I did in cold blood, caring not half so much for your husband, or for you as I do for myself."* This is the true revelation of Dick's inner, natural Christianity, a value that Shaw poses against the false kindness of those who call themselves good Christians before having done anything to prove their good-heartedness.

The trial scene that follows is another wonderful example of the clash of egos - this time, Dick and General Burgoyne. The latter is cultured, intelligent and with a vein of self-mockery, an ideal partner for Dick's witty replies. The trial scene is a masterpiece in terms of witticism and irony with sarcastic overtones: BURGOYNE: *"[...] Let me persuade you to be hanged, Mr. Anderson."* RICHARD: *"[...] Hang me, by all means."*

In the end, Richard Dudgeon is not hanged because Anderson himself comes with a safe-conduct at the last minute. He explains that he has found his true profession due to this trial, which has shown him that he is a soldier at heart, not a clergyman. The play ends with Dick being carried off in triumph on shoulders of the townspeople, after promising Judith - who is ashamed of having doubted her husband - that he will never tell what happened in prison.

Characterization

The so-called 'melodrama' is a very subtle combination of romantic scenes viewed from a completely unromantic perspective and of gradually accumulated tension. The center of these swirls is Richard Dudgeon, the rejected eldest son of the recently widowed Mrs. Dudgeon. He has offered his life to the devil out of a very powerful need to oppose the hypocrisy and false dignity of his puritanical family. Dick is a rebel and this is what brings about the clash of egos mentioned before. For Dick's 'glory' as a rebel is displayed at the level of discourse. His humorous and gradually sarcastic remarks are

every time a delight for readers. He seems to possess the art of turning any absurdity into a laughing stock.

But Dick Dudgeon is not only an outcast, a terrible nonconformist. He eventually proves to be a far better Christian than anyone else in his family, and he even surpasses minister Anderson when it comes to endangering his life in order to save the minister's. He is honest in everything he does starting with his rebellion and up to the confession that he makes to Judith when she visits him in prison and desperately wants to know why he pretended he was her husband.

The noble human capacity of doing good is unspoiled in him. He is the only one to regard Essie as a fellow human being, not to speak of his readiness to sacrifice his life for the mere reason that another man's life is worthier than his own.

In the end, Richard's idealism proves not to have harmed anybody. He is rescued by Anthony Anderson just two minutes before his execution and this puts an end to British dominion as well.

Style, language

The play is written in such a manner as to more or less give the impression that each character has his own speech to make. The language therefore is sometimes quite elaborate and sententious.

What is also remarkable is Shaw's inexhaustible wit, the way in which he mixes irony, sarcasm and absurdity into a juicy piece of dialogue.

We should also mention, as it was one of Shaw's constant concerns, the simplification of spelling for such words as: *don't, can't, hadn't, wont, youre, theyre, theyve, theyll, thats, theres, dunno* (i.e. "don't know").