Saint Joan Study Guide

Saint Joan by George Bernard Shaw

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Contents

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* was first produced in New York City in 1923 and in London in 1924. Shaw published it with a long Preface in 1924. When word came out that Shaw, who was known as an irreverent jokester, was writing about a Christian saint and martyr, there were fears that he would not be able to produce something appropriate, but the early reception of the play was generally favorable, although some commentators criticized him for historical inaccuracy and for being too talky or comic. Over the years, the play, a rare tragic work in his generally comic oeuvre, has been seen as one of his greatest and most important. It has been hailed as being intellectually exciting and praised for dealing with important themes, such as nationalism, war, and the relation of the individual to society. The play solidified Shaw's reputation as a major playwright and helped win him the Nobel Prize in 1925.

Being at least in part a tragedy, though with comic moments, *Saint Joan* is part of a shift in Shaw's work from his earlier optimistic comedies to a more melancholy attitude, perhaps in part the result of his reaction to World War I.

Although he had been thinking about Joan of Arc as early as 1913, Shaw did not actually begin writing the play until 1923, three years after Joan's canonization. He consulted many earlier works on Joan, including the transcripts of her trial. In fact, he modestly said that he had done little more than reproduce Joan's own words as recorded in the transcripts; however, that statement is unfair to Shaw, who left a distinctive Shavian touch on the story of the martyred saint.

Author Biography

Shaw was born in Dublin on July 26, 1856. His family was of upper-class ancestry, but had fallen on hard times. Perhaps as a result, he developed a lifelong interest in poverty and other social issues. Eventually, after moving to London in 1876, he joined the Fabian Society, an organization of intellectual socialists. He wrote and lectured for the Fabians on many issues of the day, and many of his creative works, including his five unsuccessful novels and his many successful plays, dealt with such topics as slumlords, prostitution, and women's rights, usually in a light-hearted manner. His plays in general are witty and paradoxical discussions of ideas, in some ways just an extension of the political debates he liked to engage in as a member of the various debating societies to which he belonged.

Throughout his career, Shaw was known as an irreverent skeptic, and he was not a believer in any orthodox religion. However, influenced by the writings of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, he developed a theory of what he called the Life Force: an irrational force at work in the universe that guides social evolution by entering the consciousness of certain superior individuals. Despite his socialist views, Shaw was a great believer in the importance of superior individuals or geniuses and, especially after experiencing the popular anti-German hysteria during World War I, had a low opinion of the common people and a distrust of democracy. In fact, in later years, Shaw became quite sympathetic to dictatorial regimes, such as the Soviet Union and Mussolini's Italy.

Shaw was much opposed to war, and when World War I broke out, he published an antiwar pamphlet that caused him to be greatly criticized. He was also critical of English rule in Ireland, and spoke out against the execution of the leaders of the Irish uprising against the English in 1916. He also defended Roger Casement, an Irishman executed for treason that same year.

Shaw had been thinking of writing a play about Joan of Arc for many years and finally did so at the urging of his wife in 1923, three years after Joan was canonized as a saint. The play earned him enormous prestige and contributed to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925. It was also one of his last major works, though he lived for another twenty-seven years, dying at the age of 94 on November 2, 1950 in Ayot Saint Lawrence, Hertfordshire, England.

Plot Summary

Preface

Shaw begins his preface to *Saint Joan* by announcing that Joan, though a professed Catholic, was in fact one of the first Protestant martyrs as well as being an apostle of nationalism, a Napoleonic military strategist, and a forerunner of feminism. He adds that by claiming to be in direct contact with Heaven and by acting in a condescending way to men in authority, she created so much resentment that it is no wonder she was burnt.

Of course, he says, Joan was not really guilty of the charges of witchcraft and improper behavior leveled against her, but it is not necessary to prove this nowadays because posterity has vindicated her. Nowadays it is necessary not to defend Joan, but to avoid romanticizing her. She was not a pretty village lass, as some have described her, but a genius and a saint. And she was not an ignorant beggarmaid or servant girl, but came from a higher social class and was even an intellectual, despite being illiterate.

Joan's visions and voices, Shaw says, were not signs of madness, witchcraft, or sainthood, but simply the sort of inspiration that often comes to people of genius. She was quite sane, and proposed quite sensible policies, even if her imagination tricked her into thinking that those policies were being conveyed to her by visible saints. As for Joan's belief in baptism and other Catholic rites, which the modern age condemns as superstition, Shaw says that we have our own superstitious beliefs (such as the "gospel" of scientists like Louis Pasteur and belief in the Oedipus complex).

Shaw criticizes earlier writers for saying Joan's judges were corrupt scoundrels. On the contrary, he says, her trial was as fair as modern trials, perhaps even more fair. It was the later trial, the one that exonerated her, that was corrupt.

Shaw argues that since Joan refused to accept the authority of the Catholic Church, the Church was within its rights to excommunicate her; that would have been a reasonable punishment. However, to burn her was a horrifying thing that cannot be defended.

On the other hand, Shaw says, if the Church had merely excommunicated Joan and allowed her to continue to promote her views outside the Church, that would have meant tolerating a danger to society, and societies have the right to refuse to tolerate such dangers. Society is founded on intolerance, he says, though he also says that all improvements result from tolerance, especially tolerance of apparent heresies like Joan's because heretics, if they are persons of genius, promote views superior to those found in organizations. Shaw adds that toleration increases and decreases depending on circumstances, and says that the modern era is not necessarily more tolerant than the Middle Ages.

Shaw ends his Preface by saying he has presented the Middle Ages more accurately than Shakespeare did, but adds that he has deliberately introduced some anachronisms

to make the events intelligible. He also rejects suggestions that the philosophical portions and the Epilogue of the play be cut.

Scene I

Scene I opens in a castle in France in 1429. Robert de Baudricourt is berating his steward because the hens are not laying eggs. The steward blames Joan, whom Robert has refused to see. He now decides to see her, and she convinces him to supply her with a horse and armor, and some men, so that she can go convince the Dauphin to raise the siege of Orleans, with the ultimate goal of driving the English out of France. Joan tells Robert that this is the will of God as conveyed to her in messages she receives from Saints Margaret and Catherine. Robert thinks Joan may be mad, but also thinks that her talk of doing God's will may inspire the troops. Immediately after he agrees to help her, the steward rushes in to say that the hens have started laying again.

Scene II

Joan arrives at the court of Charles, the Dauphin. Charles is being bullied by his advisers, but insists on seeing Joan, about whom he has received a glowing report from Robert. There is also news of another of Joan's supposed miracles: causing the death of a soldier who refused to stop swearing. Joan arrives at court and is able to recognize Charles even though he has changed places with one of his courtiers. Joan gets Charles alone and is able to inspire him to authorize her to take control of the army to raise the siege at Orleans.

Scene III

Joan arrives at Orleans eager to lead the troops into battle. Dunois, the commander, tells her they cannot attack until the wind changes. Joan agrees to pray for such a change, and before they can even get to the church, the wind does change.

Scene IV

The Earl of Warwick, the English chaplain de Stogumber, and Bishop Cauchon meet in a tent in the English camp to discuss recent English defeats and the role Joan played in them. Stogumber demands that Joan be executed as a witch. Cauchon says she is a heretic rather than a witch; his main concern is with the threat her individualist views pose to the power of the Church. Warwick is concerned that Joan's views would strengthen the royalty at the expense of the feudal aristocracy. Though calmer than Stogumber, Warwick is set on executing Joan and pressures Cauchon to agree. Cauchon balks at being used this way and says he wants to make sure that Joan's soul is saved.

Scene V

Charles has just been crowned in the cathedral at Rheims, thanks to Joan. Joan now advises him that they should continue the war and take Paris. Charles and his advisers are appalled. Even Joan's friend Dunois tells her that she is being reckless. The Archbishop accuses her of the sin of pride, which he says will lead to her destruction as in a Greek tragedy. He adds that if she persists in setting herself up above the Church and the military, she will find herself alone. Joan says she will be no more alone than France is or God is, and she will have the love of the common people to support her.

Scene VI

The trial scene. Rouen castle, 1431. Several of the judges and assessors do their best to convince Joan to recant to save herself, but she obstinately refuses to pledge absolute obedience to the Church. Only when threatened with execution does she change her mind, saying it is only sensible to avoid being burnt. But when she realizes that she will still be imprisoned for life, she tears up her recantation and is led away to the stake. The Inquisitor, who had warned the court of the seriousness of Joan's heresy, now tells Cauchon that Joan was innocent. Stogumber, who was furious when it seemed Joan might escape burning, and who all along has demanded the harshest penalties for her, stumbles in from the execution full of remorse. He says he never realized what he was actually demanding when he called for her execution. The Executioner enters to tell Warwick that Joan's heart would not burn. Warwick wonders if they have heard the last of her.

Epilogue

It is now twenty-five years after the execution. Charles is brought news that a second trial has exonerated Joan, and then Joan herself appears to him in a dream, along with many of the other characters from the play. A gentleman from 1920 appears, announcing that Joan has been made a saint. Everyone kneels before Joan and praises her. She asks if they would like her to come back to life. Disconcerted, they all say that would not be a good idea. Joan is soon left alone, and wonders when the world will be ready to receive God's saints.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

The play opens in the French castle, Vaucouleurs, on a river between Lorraine and Champagne in the year 1429. A military officer, Robert de Baudricourt is incredulous and angry at his steward because there are no eggs for his breakfast. According to the steward, the hens are not producing because of the presence of Maid Joan who is waiting at the door of the castle to see Robert. Ultimately, Robert is convinced to receive Joan who is able to convince the officer to provide armor and a horse as well as the assistance of a few of his best men. Joan's pleas are successful; the young girl is confident that she will be able to reach the Dauphin and convince him to raise a siege at Orleans to drive the English out of France. Robert is taken in by the persistence of the girl but finds her assertions of hearing the voices of Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine more than a bit preposterous. Thinking that Joan is mad, Robert reluctantly releases provisions and wishes the girl success in her mission. He hopes that her fervor and talk of God may be just what the troops require to bolster morale and purpose. Content in this mini victory, Joan leaves the castle. The steward returns to inform Robert that the hens have again begun to lay eggs, proving to Robert that Joan is indeed sent from God.

Scene 1 Analysis

Joan's presence and countenance radiate confidence borne by divine province almost immediately in the play. There is superstition that the hens cannot lay eggs because she is nearby. The officers and soldiers seem taken in by her although they cannot quite define the source of her powerful pull on them. It is also established that Joan is from a bourgeois family, not quite noble, but certainly not a peasant - a fact that makes her requests and mission harder to dismiss. Shaw also establishes the idea that Joan's contact with saints establishes her Catholicism, but this also opens her up to skeptical thought. Historically, it's important to note that in 1429, much of France was controlled by England and the siege at Orleans was a major turning point in the Hundred Years War that returned France to its people. Joan's efforts to encourage the siege are pivotal to the success of the siege.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

The Archbishop of Rheims and the Lord Chamberlain de la Tremouille await the arrival of the Dauphin in a castle in Chinon. There is discussion of the dour state of France from the perspectives of the church and the military for which the two men are responsible. Soon the men are joined by Gilles de Rais, an officer also called "Bluebeard" because of his dyed facial hair. Bluebeard brings news of Joan's approach to the castle to seek an audience with the Dauphin. Bluebeard tells the men of Joan's military prowess as well as her spiritual fortitude demonstrated by the drowning of a man who refused to stop taking the Lord's name in vain. Joined by the ineffectual Dauphin, who is in financial debt to the powerful men who surround him, the men hatch a scheme to try to trick Joan so that she can identify the true Dauphin instead of Bluebeard. Joan gains entrance to the throne room. She identifies the true Dauphin who is encouraged by her convictions that the Dauphin will regain France and be officially crowned in the Cathedral of Rheims. Buoyed up by Joan's attentions, the Dauphin removes the men from his presence so that he is alone with Joan who inspired the young Dauphin to bestow complete authority of the army to her control. The other high-ranking officials are called back into the room to hear that they will now follow and answer to this young woman. Incredulous, the men fall to their knees as Joan raises her sword, praising God and asking for victory in the upcoming siege.

Scene 2 Analysis

This scene establishes Joan as a military leader, confirmed by the ineffectual and financially drained Dauphin. Royal power is all the Dauphin has left since his funds are depleted and forces him to borrow from the men who bully him for their positions. Joan's fervor and messages from God are the signs that the beleaguered Dauphin has been awaiting and he gladly relinquishes the military power to her. The theme of feminism begins to surface in this scene as the people at court scorn Joan for her boyish hairstyle and clothing. Joan is unmoved by the comments, giving herself to a higher purpose and conviction that gender roles do not apply when the cause is in the service of God and country.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

The commander of the French army, Dunois, laments his bad fortune at being stalled at the Loire River at Orleans and unable to cross and defeat the English army. Being so close to victory or defeat is driving Dunois to the point of madness. Dunois desperately needs a westward wind so that his troops may attack the ships that would be hastened by a favorable wind. Joan is anxious to attack the close enemy, but Dunois holds her in check because of unfavorable wind conditions. Agreeing to pray with Dunois for a change in their fortunes, Joan agrees to accompany the French leader to a church. The wind quickly changes in their favor before the pair can even reach the building.

Scene 3 Analysis

Joan's power has risen significantly now that she has acquired an army and the authority from the Dauphin to lead it into Orleans. The fact that the young woman has gained access to leaders is evidence of her reputation for physical prowess and spiritual courage. While the men in the castles debate her authenticity, the men in battle welcome Joan and her powers, regardless of their source. Moved by the courage of her convictions, Joan exhibits otherworldly behaviors and characteristics which speak to the issue of her entrée into sainthood and the performance of miracles.

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

In an English army camp, a nobleman and a chaplain bemoan the army's continuing list of defeat at the hands of the French army led by the French girl, Joan. Convinced that Joan is a witch, the two men discuss a plan to have her burned for what they consider supernatural powers. A bishop who contends that Joan is a heretic, not a witch, joins the men. The bishop is more concerned with Joan's individualistic views and the threat that she could pose to the Catholic Church. The fact that Joan has aligned herself as an individual with the French king also poses a threat in that individual citizens could be strengthened at the expense of the feudal system. Ultimately, the nobleman and the chaplain declare their intentions to have Joan executed while the bishop holds out hope for the salvation of her soul.

Scene 4 Analysis

Joan's individualism and sense of nationalism have created powerful forces among the English church and state officials. Joan is labeled a witch partly for her unprecedented prowess, her strong sense of feminism and her religious fervor in favor of her country. Joan's driven sense of individualism threatens the church and state infrastructure because of the charismatic traits that may cause common individuals to defect, weakening the feudal economy. Her charisma and legendary exploits are also perceived as a threat to the feudal system as the official's fear.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

The Dauphin has been crowned in the cathedral at Rheims, due to Joan's intervention and military success. As Joan and Dunois contemplate the future in the vestibule of the cathedral, Joan's passion for war for the sake of France rises in favor of returning home to a pastoral life of boredom. Continuing the war is her suggestion now to the new king and his advisors. Even though the men are Joan's staunch supporters, they feel that they must warn her of the dangers of continuing. Surely Joan must have had enough battle especially in light of all that the French have accomplished with her help. The men also relate the story of a young woman who was burned at the stake at the University of Paris simply for standing up for Joan's cause. The young warrior is not to be swayed and persists in her single minded pursuit of war, this time with the objective of moving on to Paris to release it from English hold. Now even Dunois, Joan's dear comrade from the siege at Orleans, cautions that any attempt for Paris now is purely reckless behavior and an unnecessary risk. The Archbishop warns Joan of the perilously close approach of the sin of pride as the young woman delineates her military successes. Charles, the new king, regretfully advises Joan that the state coffers are empty and there would be no funds for paying a ransom should she be captured in any new battle. Joan is fixed on her plan to liberate Paris and ignores the admonitions of her colleagues who are caught between fear for her life and awe for her convictions.

Scene 5 Analysis

Joan has altered the course of history for France through her military conquests, but her biggest contribution may be her ability to inspire others to greatness. The Dauphin is now king; France is driving the English from its soil and even the clergymen are forced to examine their beliefs. As in most cases of genius, the people who surround Joan are alternately in awe and in fear of her single-minded passion. Unfortunately, people need to destroy what they don't understand. There is foreshadowing in the scene when Joan's colleagues admonish her about the young woman burned at the stake in Paris. Joan, however, is still fueled by her victories and the conviction that protection from God will remain hers as long as devotion rules her actions. The young warrior moves forward with the zeal also attributed to single minded genius.

Scene 6

Scene 6 Summary

In May of 1431, English bought Joan from the Burgundians to try her for heresy and witchcraft. The trial is entering its eleventh week at the Rouen castle where the young warrior has been imprisoned. Prior to Joan being brought into the courtroom, the noblemen and church officials debate the girl's crimes and weigh the consequences. The church officials believe it their duty to try to save Joan's soul, yet they are willing to hand her over to secular authorities should Joan not recant her sins and risk excommunication due to violations against the Catholic religion.

Joan's demeanor during the trial is consistent with her stance throughout her life. Thoroughly convinced that she hears the voices of saints who encourage her on her missions for France, Joan refuses to recant in order to avoid punishment. An additional charge of dressing in men's clothing is also brought against her but she explains that away as being a practical matter of appropriate attire for battle and imprisonment in a men's prison. Weary of Joan's obstinacy, the church officials threaten torture and make one last plea for the girl to sign the papers admitting to heresy. Relenting in an attempt to escape torture and death, Joan signs the document but immediately tears up the recantation when it is fully explained that the alternative is life imprisonment. This act leaves the authorities no choice but to excommunicate Joan and condemn her to death, She is immediately led to the stake and burned.

After Joan's death, the men who condemned her have second thoughts about their actions having never witnessed such a cruel execution and not realizing the horror. The men are moved to further remorse upon hearing from the executioner that Joan's heart would not burn nor would it sink in the river. The men wonder whether this is an indication that Joan will never completely die.

Scene 6 Analysis

The mix of English noblemen and French clergy who preside over Joan's trial symbolize the battle between church and state. The English want Joan executed for her participation in battles against their armies and the French want her excommunicated for her perceived violations against the church. To a degree, each side tries to present a logical and fair case against the girl, but ultimately the fear of something they don't understand pushes all the men to agree to her annihilation. The combination of Joan's genius, passion and feminism is a fatal mix for a young woman in this medieval age. Sensibilities like Joan's are just beginning to be fully understood and tolerated today nearly 600 years later. Unfortunately Joan suffers the fate of most people of gifted vision and purpose by being brought down by those who are threatened or who just don't understand. Clearly Joan was ahead of her time both spiritually and politically and paid the ultimate price for her convictions.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Twenty-five years after the execution, King Charles receives news that a second trial has exonerated Joan. Puzzled The King is awakened by a dream that includes Joan as well as other characters important to her life and particularly her trial and execution. Each of the men has been impacted in some way from participation in the excommunication and death of the young warrior. Some are continually tormented with remorse while some have been punished by citizens in support of Joan. The men's discussion of their own personal trials is interrupted by the appearance of a man dressed in the clothes of the 1920's who has come to tell the group that Joan has been canonized. Joan is pleased and a little embarrassed at the news and at the display of these powerful men kneeling to honor her. As much as they revere her, they do not think that her coming back to life would benefit any one of them. Each man exits the dream leaving Joan alone to ask God when the world will be ready to accept saints.

Epilogue Analysis

The anachronism of the appearance of the man from the 1920's into the medieval period dream is a tool to validate Joan and vindicate her in the presence of those who betrayed and executed her. The author's glimpse into the fate of the men who tortured and killed the girl also provides some sense of justice for the horrendous act carried out in the name of God. While it is gratifying to realize that the deed did not go unpunished, it is Joan who continues to have the final stamp on her life as well, as her death, through the validation of sainthood.

Characters

Archbishop of Rheims

A political prelate who bullies the Dauphin and is shrewdly cynical about miracles. He is moved at first by Joan, but later reproaches her for pride, seeing her views as a threat to the Church.

Bluebeard

Bluebeard is Gilles de Rais. A frivolous young courtier, sporting a dyed blue beard.

Peter Cauchon

Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, presides over Joan's trial along with the Inquisitor. Earlier, he discussed Joan's fate with Warwick, her other major antagonist. Unlike Warwick, however, Cauchon in Shaw's play (as opposed to the Cauchon of history) is scrupulously fair and merciful, and sincerely wants to save Joan's soul. However, he is also seriously concerned about the threat posed to the Church by her belief in her private judgment. At the trial, he strives to get Joan to recant and is disappointed when she refuses to declare absolute obedience to the Church.

The Chaplain

See John de Stogumber

Charles

Called the Dauphin (that is, heir to the throne), but actually he is already king, though not yet crowned. He is a timid young man, reluctant even to try being brave and assertive against the bullies at court, but Joan puts some spirit in him for a while, getting him to support her plans for raising the siege at Orleans and crowning him in the cathedral at Rheims. When she wants to attack Paris, however, he reverts to timidity and will not support her; instead, he is eager to sign a treaty. In the Epilogue, however, he seems stronger again: he is called Charles the Victorious and leads his men into battle. But he remains skeptical of idealists who try to change the world.

Clerical Gentleman

The Clerical Gentleman arrives back in 1456 from the year 1920 to announce that Joan has been made a saint.

John D'Estivet

The prosecutor at Joan's trial, D'Estivet is defensive about the proceedings, declaring that they are not motivated by hate, and saying that everything has been done to give Joan a chance to escape execution.

The Dauphin

See Charles

Robert de Baudricourt

The local squire where Joan lives; Joan's father owes allegiance to him. Though blustery, he is a weak man and is easily convinced by Joan to give her the men and horses that she wants.

Richard de Beauchamp

See Earl of Warwick

de Courcelles

Courcelles is a priest who serves as an assessor at Joan's trial. He is earnest and strict in his adherence to the rules and advocates torturing Joan, not so much out of bloodthirstiness as because it is customary.

Eertrand de Poulengey

A dreamy gentleman, vassal to de Baudricourt. A convert to Joan's cause.

John de Stogumber

Stogumber, the chaplain to the Cardinal of Winchester in England, is Joan's most vehement antagonist, largely because, like her, he is a nationalist, only on the English rather than the French side. He excitedly demands that she be burned as a witch for her part in the recent defeats suffered by the English and says he would like to strangle her with his own hands. But when he actually sees her burnt, he undergoes a remorseful transformation and becomes a preacher against violence, warning people not to advocate extreme measures whose nature they do not truly understand.

Jack Dunois

Commander of the French troops at Orleans. A dedicated soldier and wise strategist, known as the Bastard of Orleans, he adopts Joan's ideas about waging war for a national cause rather than for feudal ransoms. He becomes Joan's friend, but also becomes resentful of her when she seems to forget that his military leadership played a role in their joint victories.

Earl of Warwick

An English nobleman and one of Joan's major antagonists. He is much more suave and diplomatic than the English chaplain, de Stogumber, but just as dedicated to having Joan executed. He has none of the scruples expressed by Bishop Cauchon; he will pay lip service to saving Joan's soul, but he wants to make sure the Church condemns her body to be burned. He sees Joan as a threat to his side in the war and as a more general threat to the power of the feudal aristocracy.

The Executioner

The Executioner reports to Warwick after the execution that Joan's heart would not burn.

The Inquisitor

This is John Lemaitre, the mild and elderly but firm agent of the Holy Inquisition who presides over Joan's trial with Cauchon. He is impatient with the assessors who want to bring trivial charges against Joan. He focuses on the heresy charge, and makes a long speech warning of the dangers of heresy.

Joan

Known also as the Maid, Joan is the dominant figure in the play. Even when she is offstage, the other characters discuss her, and when she is in the scene, she takes charge: she knows what she wants and at least in the first half of the play is able to achieve it.

Joan is no frail, delicate woman, and has little interest in traditional womanly things; instead, she wants to be a soldier and she has a large political goal: to free her country from the presence of the English. She is also extremely pious and believes she is being directed by saints to carry out God's will. She is strong-willed, persistent, and inspirational; she is even able to lend courage to the timid Dauphin. Perhaps because she is still not even twenty, she is brashly impatient, even reckless, and does not understand all the ways of the world. She is surprised that her achievements inspire

resentment and does not understand why she is condemned as a heretic. She has a touch of genius about her, but she is also a bit naive.

La Hire

A captain in the army and a loyal follower of Joan's. He is as eager as she is for battle.

La Tremouille

Lord Chamberlain at the Dauphin's court and commander of his army. He bullies the Dauphin. He has difficulty reading and is not as shrewd as the Archbishop.

Martin Ladvenu

The most compassionate of the assessors at Joan's trial. He draws up the recantation statement and gets her to sign it in an attempt to save her life.

The Maid

See Joan

Soldier

The soldier shows up in the Epilogue to report that although his generally sinful life has condemned him to hell, he gets a day off each year for having given Joan two sticks as a cross before she was burnt.

Steward

De Baudricourt's steward. He cringes before his master, but is inspired by Joan.

Themes

Treatment of Geniuses and Saints

What the play seems to demonstrate is that the world is not very accepting of exceptional people like Joan. Joan has accomplished great things: won the battle of Orleans and several other battles, inspired the French troops, put courage into Charles and gotten him crowned as king, and so forth. And yet she encounters resentment from those she helps and is eventually condemned to death as a heretic for refusing to accept the absolute authority of the Church. Her mystical connection to the saints in Heaven might have been regarded as something admirable, but instead she is killed for it. When she is safely dead, people worship her, but those same people flee in horror at the suggestion that she might come back to life, just as her supporters fled in her lifetime when she proposed to push past a certain point. The point seems to be that we are uncomfortable with exceptional individuals; we may tolerate them for a while, but in the end we wish to be rid of them though once we are rid of them, we find it safe to speak admiringly of them.

Individualism Versus Authority

The play poses difficult questions about the relation of individualism and authority. On the one hand, there is the supreme individualist, Joan, who follows her private judgment in defiance of the authorities. Joan is such a charismatic figure in the play that it is hard not to side with her and then to want to side with the individualist, rebellious approach to life. Shaw does say in his Preface that individual geniuses see more than others and are of a higher caliber than the leaders of organizations. On the other hand, in the same Preface, discussing the characters of William Shakespeare, he associates individualism with selfishness and irresponsibility. And in the play itself (in Scene IV), Bishop Cauchon warns that Joan's doctrine of individual judgment will lead to the triumph of "every ignorant laborer or dairymaid" over "The Church's accumulated wisdom and knowledge and experience, its councils of learned, venerable pious men." Perhaps individual judgment is to be respected only when it is the judgment of an exceptional individual like Joan, when it is the judgment of a genius or a saint, but, as Cauchon says in the Epilogue, human beings cannot distinguish saints from heretics.

Nationalism and War

Joan is associated with the doctrine of nationalism several times, especially with the idea that France should be for the French, England for the English, and so forth. She is also associated with modern approaches to warfare, renouncing the old, feudal ways in which ransoms were sought, in favor of a more serious, dedicated approach, in which soldiers fight to the death for a cause such as nationalism. Because of Joan's charismatic appeal, the temptation is to support what she supports: these new attitudes

to nations and war. On the other hand, the other highly nationalist character in the play, Stogumber, is portrayed as a dangerous extremist. And Bishop Cauchon, in Scene IV, says that nationalism leads to war and destruction. Again, it is hard to know which side Shaw wants his audience to be on.

Feminism

One of the charges against Joan is that she dresses in men's clothes and engages in traditional male pursuits, notably soldiering. Shaw in his Preface is dismissive of historians who do not think women capable of genius in the "traditional masculine departments," and the play seems to speak in favor of a woman's right to pursue whatever career and lifestyle she chooses and not to be bound by traditional notions of women's roles.

Miracles, Faith, and Sainthood

The miracles in the play are all capable of rational explanation: hens stop and start laying eggs for a variety of reasons; natural causes can explain the shift in the wind; and as the Archbishop says, Joan's ability to distinguish Charles from Bluebeard may merely mean that she has heard them described. But whether they have a supernatural basis or not, Joan's miracles do inspire faith and win her followers. It is Joan's ability to inspire that is perhaps her most miraculous power; putting enough courage into Charles so that he lets himself be crowned king is a large-scale miracle, as Joan says herself. It seems that what is truly miraculous is the inner power of a genius like Joan, who can move men and change the course of history.

Style

Setting

Saint Joan is set in France in the period 1429-1431, with an epilogue set in 1456. Four of the scenes are set in castles in the northern part of the country, including the castle occupied by the court of the Dauphin in Chinon and the castle in Rouen where Joan's trial takes place. One scene takes place in the cathedral at Rheims where Charles is crowned, another takes place on the banks of the Loire River in the French military camp across from Orleans, and one (the so-called Tent Scene) takes place in a tent in the English camp.

Structure and Tone

In his Preface, Shaw suggests that his play is divided into three parts: "the romance of [Joan's] rise, the tragedy of her execution, and the comedy of the attempts of posterity to make amends for that execution." The first three scenes depict the rise, showing Joan's successes and "miracles" in a lively manner. In the next three scenes, the play becomes darker: Joan's enemies plot against her, her friends desert her, and she is put to death. The Epilogue for the most part restores the light tone of the early scenes as it depicts Joan's posthumous triumph, but it does end on a plaintive note, with another desertion of Joan.

Genre

There has been much debate about whether Shaw's play is a comedy or a tragedy. It certainly has elements of both. There are humorous, even farcical moments, as in the opening scene about the hens that will not lay eggs, or the moment when Robert de Baudricourt looks up apprehensively to see if there really is a halo over his head. There is a jaunty tone in the opening scenes and again in the Epilogue, but a much darker tone in between, and Joan's death can be seen as the fall of a tragic hero. On the other hand, the play does not end with her death, but with a mostly light-hearted presentation of her posthumous vindication. At least one critic has said that the play is best described as a tragicomedy.

In his Preface, Shaw calls the play a tragedy, but mainly in an attempt to distinguish it from melodrama. His point is that he is not telling a story of evil villains and a pure saint, as in a melodrama; instead, he wants to show how a murder can be committed by "normally innocent people," that is, by honorable characters who are not villains. He also notes that there is an element of comedy in the tragedy.

If the play is a tragedy, at least in part, then there is the question of whether Joan is a tragic hero in the traditional sense of being a character of high standing who falls because of some tragic error she commits. Joan is not of high social standing, but she

does rise to a powerful position, and she is accused in the play itself (by the Archbishop) of suffering from one of the traditional tragic flaws of Greek drama: hubris, or pride. She herself admits to vanity in wearing a gold coat into her final battle, an action that made her easily singled out and captured. And especially in the later scenes she does seem to lose some of her earlier humility and become a bit overbearing: giving orders to the Archbishop instead of falling on her knees before him. Of course, she has been brash and self-confident all along; those are some of her strengths, but it is typical of tragedy to have the hero's tragic error stem from his own strengths. Joan has other flaws as well: her inexperience and simplicity, her impatience, and what seems like an excessive enjoyment of soldiering. These may all be said to bring her down. However, the play's emphasis is actually less on the personal errors committed by Joan and more on the sociopolitical forces that surround her. The Church, the English, and the feudal aristocracy want her removed; they are the main causes of Joan's fall, along with the desertion of Joan by her supposed friends in the French camp.

Symbols

The fact that Joan's heart will not burn suggests that, as is said at the end of Scene VI, her execution is not really the end of her. And indeed Joan reappears in the Epilogue in a sort of resurrection.

This quasi-resurrection of Joan makes her seem something like Christ. And there are other suggestions in the play that Joan functions as a Christ figure: more than once it is suggested that a character may play the role of Judas in relation to her; Stogumber says the onlookers who laughed at her burning would have laughed at Christ; and in the Epilogue, on hearing that it took the burning of Joan to save Stogumber, Bishop Cauchon wonders if a Christ must perish in every age to save those (like Stogumber) who lack imagination.

Anachronisms and Discussions

Saint Joan features long philosophical discussions typical of Shaw, most notably in the Tent Scene, in which characters use historical terms like Protestantism and nationalism that were not yet in use. Shaw's purpose in using these devices is, as he says in the Preface, to help the audience to better understand the medieval period and the forces at work that bring Joan down.

Historical Context

Joan and Her Times

Shaw follows the historical record fairly closely in describing Joan's career. Just like the Joan in the play, the real Joan of Arc was a farmer's daughter who, dressed in men's clothes and aided by Robert de Baudricourt, won the ear of the Dauphin and was instrumental in lifting the siege of Orleans. This action is generally seen as the turning point in the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between England and France; England at that point controlled most of northern France, but after triumphing at Orleans in 1429, the French went on to push the English almost completely out of the country.

The Hundred Years' War, though it began in part because of the complications arising from feudal landholding in which English kings held lands in France as vassals of the French king, led to the growth of nationalism, the strengthening of royal power, and the weakening of the feudal nobility and the whole feudal system the very things Warwick fears in the play.

While Warwick fears nationalism, Cauchon fears Protestantism, a force that did not really exist until a century after the time of Joan. But there were forerunners of the Protestant Reformation even before Joan's time, most notably the Englishman John Wyclif (1328-1384) and the Czech Jan Hus (1369-1415), both of whom Cauchon mentions (in Scene IV). Wyclif and Hus both questioned the ultimate authority of the Church, somewhat like the way Shaw has Joan question its authority, although Wyclif and Hus subordinated the Church to Scripture rather than to mystical contact with saints in Joan's manner, and modern critics say Joan did not intend to be a reformer or to challenge the Church's role in the way that Wyclif and Hus did.

Shaw and His Times

Shaw wrote *Saint Joan* at the same time that T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and other modernists were writing in experimental forms about an incomprehensible universe, but Shaw was no modernist. Indeed, it is a curious fact about his Preface that in it he more than once compares life in Joan's time with life in the nineteenth century, as if he were still writing in the nineteenth century instead of in 1924.

Shaw was very much a man of the nineteenth century, influenced by one of the major nineteenth-century beliefs: socialism, in its Fabian form. Fabian socialism, which became influential in England in the 1880s and 1890s, advocated a gradual, non-revolutionary reorganization of society to create a Utopian society in which poverty and excessive individualism, profit-making, and competition would be eliminated.

Of course, Shaw could not help but be influenced by developments in the early years of the twentieth century, and he was especially affected by World War I. The first World War was notable for the large-scale destruction and loss of life that it caused and also

for the nationalistic propaganda associated with it. J. L. Wisenthal, in *Shaw's Sense of History*, says Shaw's negative feelings about World War I are reflected in *Saint Joan*, for instance, in Cauchon's remark in Scene IV about how the division of united Christendom into nations would cause the world to perish in war.

In 1916, Irish rebels led a short-lived uprising (the Easter Rebellion) against British rule in Ireland. The rebellion was suppressed and its leaders executed, much to the dismay of Shaw. In *Saint Joan*, the struggle to push the English out of France may echo the Irish struggle to push the British out of Ireland.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks came to power in the Russian Revolution and dedicated themselves to establishing socialism in Russia by whatever means necessary, including methods reminiscent of the medieval Inquisition. Shaw was quite sympathetic to the Bolshevik enterprise, and even sent Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, an autographed copy of *Back to Methuselah*, the play he wrote before *Saint Joan.* Arnold Silver, in *Saint Joan: Playing with Fire,* suggests that there is sympathy for the Inquisition in *Saint Joan* because of Shaw's growing sympathy for the dictatorial methods being used in Russia.

In 1903, Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union to win the right to vote for women. Over the next decade this group (called suffragettes) picketed and protested, winning partial voting rights for women by 1918. There is no evidence that Shaw modeled Joan on Pankhurst or her followers, but the belief in equal rights for women that underlay the woman's suffrage movement also underlies Shaw's play.

Critical Overview

Even before *Saint Joan* first appeared on stage, it inspired commentary. At least one critic worried about how Joan would fare in the hands of an irreverent writer like Shaw, but when he finally saw the play he was pleased by Shaw's treatment of the subject. The play had successful first runs in New York in 1923 and in London in 1924, running for 214 and 244 performances respectively. An early production in Paris was also a great success, even though Shaw had previously not been very popular in France. However, Shaw himself was not pleased with the French production because it made Joan a weaker, more victimized character than he had envisioned her to be. There were also successful early productions in Berlin, Moscow, Madrid, and Tokyo. Overall, *Saint Joan*, though something of a departure from Shaw's usual comic output, solidified his reputation as a great playwright.

On the other hand, the early critics did not all write favorably about the new play. There was a great deal of negative comment about Shaw's use of history: many historical inaccuracies were pointed out, and his anachronistic use of terms like Protestantism and nationalism was criticized. The well-known medieval historian Johan Huizinga said Shaw had not succeeded in reproducing the medieval atmosphere, despite his claims to have done so in his Preface. Many critics disliked the Epilogue, saying its comic character did not fit the tragic events depicted in the preceding scene. One critic, though, said it was the tragic events that did not fit; seeing the play primarily as a comedy, he said the Epilogue was appropriate, but Joan's execution was out of place.

The mix of comedy and tragedy in the play inspired criticism, as did some of the more farcical elements in the story. The French critics, who generally praised the play, found the comic depiction of Charles and his court unacceptable. Shaw himself referred to the opening comic scenes as "flapdoodle" (in a letter cited by Nicholas Grene in *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan*), but he said Saint Joan was generally "a magnificent play" (in another letter, cited by Stanley Weintraub in Saint Joan Fifty Years After) and an "act of respect" for Joan (cited by James Graham in *Saint Joan Fifty Years After*).

Other commentators have also found much to praise in the play. In *Saint Joan Fifty Years After,* Desmond MacCarthy wrote in awe of how the play lifted the audience on "waves of emotion to be dashed on thought." He called it intellectually exciting and emotionally moving. The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello praised its poetic emotion, though he found Joan's character too simple and preferred the character of Stogumber, a view not held by many, Stogumber being seen by others as too extreme to be believable. Later writers have also praised the play, seeing it either as Shaw's greatest, or at least his most important, play because it deals effectively with important themes. Some have even ranked it with Shakespeare's tragedies. It is also seen as being part of a new development in Shaw's work, a shift towards a more melancholy, less optimistic attitude, coupled with a friendlier attitude towards authority, all this stemming in part from his reaction to World War I.

The play itself had no problems with the censors, unlike Shaw's earlier play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. However, a screenplay of *Saint Joan* that Shaw drafted in the 1930s was never produced because the Catholic Church put pressure on the Hollywood censors not to approve it.

The issue of whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy has exercised many commentators. Some see it as a traditional tragedy with Joan causing her own downfall because of the hubris of which she stands accused by the Archbishop. Others say that Shaw does not agree with the Archbishop and that Joan's pride is a positive quality in the play. One critic, while unsure whether Joan's pride qualifies as a tragic flaw, says the play is a tragedy in the Greek manner because Fate, in the form of the social forces arrayed against Joan, brings about the catastrophe. Another critic, noting how the fairly happy ending in the Epilogue follows the unhappy ending of the previous scene, suggests that what Shaw has produced is a tragicomedy.

The critics have also disagreed about whose side Shaw is on in the play: Joan's or her opponents' . Eric Bentley writes that Shaw is actually on both sides. Arnold Silver says Joan represents the younger, rebellious Shaw, while Cauchon is the older, more authoritarian Shaw. But most critics see Shaw as being on Joan's side.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, he discusses the underlying philosophy of Shaw's Saint Joan.

Saint Joan is full of surprises. The first surprise is that a nonreligious writer like Shaw (at least nonreligious in a conventional Christian sense) should even write on a topic like this: the martyrdom of a Christian saint. Indeed, when it was first announced that Shaw, the "professional iconoclast," was writing on Saint Joan, at least one critic worried that the play would not be properly reverent. And critics in France, before the French version opened, were similarly nervous about how the irreverent Irishman would treat their national heroine.

But the critics were all satisfied, at least on this point: Shaw, the mocking non-Christian, produced a completely sympathetic portrait of a Christian saint. Except in a way the saint is less Christian than Shavian: Shaw's Joan does hear Heavenly voices, it is true, and ends up a martyr, but she is no shrinking, timid victim (except in the French production, which displeased Shaw immensely). She is an active warrior saint, keen to go into battle, strong and clever, ready with a pert reply when challenged. For instance, when told (in Scene I) that the voices she says are from God actually come from her imagination, she says: "Of course. That is how the messages from God come to us." Commentators have disapproved of this line, saying the historical Joan would never have spoken like that. Probably true. But the line is very revealing about the nature of the Shavian Joan: she is as witty as her creator, a genius just like him, though a somewhat untutored genius, whose inexperience contributes to her downfall.

Not that it is clear that even an experienced genius can triumph in our world. As Shaw says in his Preface, even the experienced Socrates was forced to drink hemlock. The world cannot tolerate its geniuses; superior men and women make others feel inferior and resentful, and so the superior ones end up being condemned to die, just as Joan is condemned to die by the Catholic Church and its Holy Office of the Inquisition.

But here is another surprise from Shaw. In both the Preface and the play itself, Shaw is at pains to say that Joan received a fair trial at the hands of the Church. He goes out of his way to present a flattering portrait of Cauchon, one of her chief judges, even though the historical record suggests he was unscrupulous and corrupt, not the merciful and fair-minded defender of the Church that Shaw makes him out to be. How can Shaw, the professional rebel and defender of Joan, be sympathetic to the Inquisition, that instrument for suppressing individual rights, for maintaining dictatorial rule, and stamping out new thoughts, the instrument that sent Joan to her death?

According to Louis Crompton, in *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan,* Shaw is not actually sympathetic to the Inquisition at all; he is merely warning us that individuals may believe themselves to be right and still do evil things: "the most nefarious

institutions and their administrators always seem perfectly justified in their own eyes and in the eyes of most onlookers."

But Shaw is actually more sympathetic to the Inquisition than Crompton suggests, saying in his Preface not that Joan was executed by a nefarious institution but by "normally innocent people in the energy of their righteousness." And though Shaw says that executing Joan was a horrible action, he suggests that the Church was within its rights to punish her in some way, perhaps to excommunicate her, because societies have the right to set down laws and have them obeyed: "society must always draw a line somewhere between allowable conduct and insanity or crime, in spite of the risk of mistaking sages for lunatics and saviors for blasphemers." He even says, "We must persecute, even to the death."

In *Saint Joan: Playing with Fire*, Arnold Silver sees this persecuting side of Shaw as reflecting his growing disillusionment with democracy and his simultaneous attraction to dictatorial regimes like that of Lenin's Bolsheviks in Russia. It is certainly true and this is another surprise that Shaw takes a shot at democracy in his Preface, saying, somewhat bizarrely, that the Catholic Church is in practice a democracy, and therefore flawed, because the process of selecting bishops, cardinals, and the Pope is one of "selection and election ... of the superior by the inferior (the cardinal vice of democracy)." The result is that the leaders of the Church cannot match geniuses like Joan who are self-selected rather than elected by their inferiors.

But what is notable here is that Shaw is calling the Church, the persecuting agency, a democracy. He is not contrasting dictatorship and democracy; he is associating the two. The actual contrast in the play is between the dictatorial orders of a democratic organization like the Church, on the one hand, and the rights of individuals on the other. It may be commonplace nowadays to associate individual rights with democracy, but Shaw is actually placing these two concepts in opposition to each other. On the one hand, there is the democratic organization of the Church, representing the people and society as a whole, and on the other hand there are individuals with their own private interests. What Shaw is doing is opposing collective rights to individual rights, and saying in his Preface that in many cases society is justified in putting its collective rights ahead of individual rights. This sounds like Shaw the socialist speaking, not necessarily Shaw the lover of dictators.

As a socialist, Shaw was impatient with individual rights and individualism. In the Preface, in his discussion of Shakespeare's plays, he specifically derides the individualism of the middle classes. He describes Shakespeare's characters as being "individualist, sceptical, self-centred ... and selfish... without public responsibilities of any kind" and says that "that is why they seem natural to our middle classes, who are comfortable and irresponsible at other people's expense."

Shaw also seems critical of the individual rights of the working classes, another surprise, given that as a socialist, one would expect him to be supportive of the rights of laboring people. However, Shaw was never that close to the masses; instead of joining the proletarian Social Democratic Foundation in the 1880s, he joined the intellectual

socialists in the Fabian Society. And as noted above, he was no great fan of the power of "inferiors" to elect their superiors. It is notable that, in his Preface, Shaw goes out of his way to emphasize that his heroine is not a mere laborer, but comes from a higher social class. And in the play itself (in Scene IV), Cauchon worries that Joan's assertion of the right to follow her private judgment may lead to the thrusting aside of the Church and its accumulated wisdom "by every ignorant laborer or dairymaid." This will lead, he adds, to blood and fury and devastation as well as to national conflict and destructive war.

Now, this is Cauchon speaking, not Shaw, but Cauchon's two speeches on these topics are so powerful that they seem to reflect Shaw's own views, and indeed, they meet with no rebuttal in the play.

All of this leads to seeing the following set of conflicting attitudes in the play. On the one hand, Shaw seems to be asserting the right of society through institutions like the Church to set down laws that must be obeyed and to persecute "even to the death" those who break those laws. Shaw seems to be strongly asserting the collective rights of society against individual rights, and seems to be opposed to allowing such rights to either the selfish middle classes or the ignorant working classes. He also seems to be attacking nationalism and the horrors of war.

At the same time, he has created a very sympathetic heroine who stands preeminently for individual rights, at least for her own right to judge God's will for herself in accordance with her private visions. Moreover, this heroine is a strong nationalist who wants France for the French as well as an advocate for a more serious, that is, a more destructive, approach to warfare.

How can these contradictory ideas be reconciled? How can Shaw be both for and against individual rights, for and against nationalism and war?

Some, like Eric Bentley, in *Bernard Shaw*, say that in fact Shaw was on both sides of the individual rights issues. Arnold Silver says that there are two Shaws in the play: the young, rebellious supporter of individualism (represented by Joan) and the older, grimmer supporter of authoritarianism (represented by Cauchon). On the issue of nationalism and war, J. L. Wisenthal, in *Shaw's Sense of History*, says Shaw supported Joan's spirit and power but not the causes she used that spirit and power to advance.

There is something in all these views, especially in Wisenthal's. There is a sense in the play (and the Preface) that Shaw supports Joan because she is a genius, one of those rare people who help advance the "creative evolution" of the human race. From one perspective, then, as Wisenthal says, it matters less what specific policies Joan favored; the point is that such geniuses are important leaders for others to follow. It may also be that Shaw, who saw history as progressing through stages, accepted the nationalist stage promoted by Joan as a necessary stage in humanity's progressive development. Or he may simply have been thinking of the society of his own day: in Shaw's view, modern society had to be transformed; he was a supporter of those who can transform societies; and therefore he would be drawn to Joan because she was one of those who

brought about a transformation, even if the specific nature of that transformation was not one he favored. In other words, Shaw was in favor of rebels and geniuses and that he would support them whatever specific proposals they were advocating.

This support for geniuses also may be the key to explaining the apparent contradiction between Shaw's support for Joan's individual rights and his opposition to individual rights for others. Shaw's basic philosophical attitude as it emerges from this play seems to be the following: There are a few self-selected geniuses in the world who see further and probe deeper than other people, and whose ideas are more advanced than those to be found in organizations representing the people at large. It is important to respect, tolerate, and even celebrate these geniuses, for it is through them that society advances. Society's organizations should give them free rein.

At the same time, the bulk of the population, not being geniuses, should not have the same rights as the geniuses. The "ignorant" working classes and the "selfish" middle classes should follow the rules established by society's organizations.

So there should be order and discipline for the majority (imposed by organizations representing the majority) and free rein for the small minority of geniuses. Unfortunately, this system is not often found. It is hard to recognize a genius, for one thing. As Cauchon says in the Epilogue, "mortal eyes cannot distinguish the saint from the heretic." Or perhaps it is not so much that geniuses cannot be recognized as that they inspire fear, as Shaw says in his Preface. Then instead of following them, the people or their organizations put them to death. After they are dead, they may be worshipped, as Joan is in the Epilogue, which suggests something hopeful, but if the genius threatens to return to life, as Joan does, the ordinary people are most unhappy. As Charles says in the Epilogue, "If you could bring her back to life, they would burn her again within six months."

Still, Joan does triumph in a way. Though burnt at the stake and not wanted back on earth, the causes she advocated do win out. The English are pushed out of France, warfare becomes more modern, and the individualism she represents in Shaw's play becomes the dominant ideology of Western society. Shaw's geniuses may exert influence even though they die; there is thus some optimism present even though the play ends with Joan's lament about the earth not being ready to receive God's saints. The saints may rule from Heaven.

Source: *Sheldon Goldfarb, in an essay for Drama for Students, Gale Group*, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Collis argues that Saint Joan is not only a "religious play," but also a play about "military Genius."

We turn to *Saint Joan.* It is generally regarded as a very religious play. True, there are many clergymen in it and a lot of talk about God and much wrangling over theology, but it is very difficult to understand how Joan of Arc qualified as a saint. She was a military genius. This is very rare, even among men can you think of a military genius during World War I? For an uneducated country girl to have possessed it is extraordinary indeed. But what has this to do with religion? The French novelist, Huy smans, has expressed the regret that Joan of Arc ever rose to wrest France from the Normans who were seeking to preserve her racial and prehistoric unity with England, and thus handed her over to Charles VII and his southerners. The advantage of the union of France and England for the world generally would have been incalculable (and incidentally, the Mediterranean population of France and the Mediterranean population of Ireland would have rendered impossible an 'Irish question'). And indeed, anyone today walking across the soil of France between Passchendaele and the Somme, knowing that beneath his feet lie nearly a million British dead who were comrades of the French, might well endorse this view. At any rate the claim seems to me by no means outrageous that when the peasant girl from Lorraine with her hallucinations galvanized into action the nerveless arms of Charles she inflicted a blow upon the progress of the modern world which may never have been exceeded.

It is hard to see exactly where her sainthood comes in. She was a martyr, certainly, to outward cruelty and inward folly. I am fond of the Epilogue because of its splendid rhetoric. But it is confusing. Near the end the various parties praise Joan. Each in turn kneels in praise. Indeed they give her a very good hand. But when she asks if they would like her to come back to earth, each makes an excuse and discreetly withdraws. We are supposed to think ill of them for this. But why should they want her back? She was not a saviour with a gospel of salvation; she was not a philosopher with a solution to the riddle of the world; she was not a moralist with a message for mankind. She was a soldier. Why should they want her back unless they had some military coup in mind? When they have all departed she has the nerve to kneel down in a holy manner and to ask God how long it must be before this beautiful earth is ready to receive its saints.

Source: John Stewart Collis, "Religion and Philosophy," in *The Genius of Shaw: A Symposium*, edited by Michael Holroyd, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979, p. 86.

Critical Essay #3

Saint Joan is said to be the ' *'climax" of Shaw's career. Hill explores this concept through examination of the play.*

Though in form *Back to Methuselah* and Shaw's next play stand in sharp contrast, they are similar in two ways both reflect the pressures of the war period on their creator and both deal with religious themes. Shaw once said *Saint Joan* would not have been written had he not visualized the subject as relevant to "a world situation in which we see whole peoples perishing and dragging us toward the abyss which has swallowed them, all for want of any grasp of the political forces that move civilization."

Other authors had written of the Maid, among them, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Southey, Schiller, Andrew Lang, Mark Twain, Tom Taylor, Percy MacKaye; but Shaw did not learn much from these predecessors in the field. He felt that Voltaire and Shakespeare did Joan an injustice. Mark Twain's *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* Shaw regarded as a romantic creation, "an unimpeachable American school teacher in armor." He learned little, if anything, from Twain's book. The direct source of the play is T. Douglas Murray's *Jeanne D'Arc,* a work that centers on Joan's shrewdness and courage in her trial. On reading it, Mrs. Shaw urged her husband to write a play about the subject, and he readily acceded. It was the second time her direct suggestion bore fruit, the first being *The Doctor's Dilemma*. Shaw not only read Murray's account, he also thoroughly studied the case in Quichert's transcription of the trial in 1431 and the rehabilitation proceeding in 1456.

In its form, *Saint Joan* is a chronicle play like *Caesar and Cleopatra*, which it resembles also in having as its central figure a character with the attributes of a Superman. Joan exemplifies the strength, the faith, and the wisdom of Shaw's concept of the race that must supersede *homo sapiens* through Creative Evolution if civilization is to be saved. *Saint Joan* is also like *Caesar and Cleopatra* in presenting a main character to whom all the other persons in the play most of them types are contributory. Just as Britannus, Rufio, Appollodorus, and even Cleopatra herself are significant chiefly in letting Caesar shine in all his glory and wisdom, so De Baudricourt, Warwick, Dunois, De. Stozomber, Cauchin, the Inquisitor, the Dauphin, and all the others keep the spotlight on Joan. So skillfully does Shaw write, that she is (in Louis L. Martz's words) "the simple cause of every other word and action in the play."

Shaw describes her in the preface as a peasant girl, soldier, "Protestant martyr," yet "a professed and most pious Catholic." She was also "one of the first apostles of nationalism, and the first French practitioner of Napoleonic realism in warfare." "The pioneer of rational dressing for women," Shaw continues, "she refused to accept the specific woman's lot, and dressed and fought and lived as men did." She defied popes and patronized kings. "As her actual condition was pure upstart, there were only two opinions about her. One was that she was miraculous: The other that she was unbearable."

She was a Protestant because she insisted that her religion came from God, not from the Church, as she trusted her inner Voices rather than the traditional dogmas of Catholicism. This left the Church with nothing to do, as Shaw said, "but to burn her or canonize Wycliff and Hus." Shaw had no doubt of her sanity. "Joan must be judged as a sane woman in spite of her voices," he said, "because they never gave her any advice that might not have come to her from her mother wit exactly as gravitation came to Newton." Like Shaw's Caesar, she was a natural, unpretentious person. She spoke in dialect at times and called the future king Lad and Charlie, thereby showing her disregard for titles, officialdom, and worldly station. Her naturalness in speech and behavior (indeed, she talks and acts like a twentieth-century young woman) is part of her charm and appeal.

Though Shaw creates her as a person without sexual attraction or interest, he is careful not to make his Joan a supernatural, self-mortifying saint. Gallant and heroic as she is, she is not the all-perfect protagonist. Charismatic, she has strong power over men "from her uncle to the king, the archbishop, and the military General Staff." She is not without human weaknesses such as stubbornness, conceit; and she has a marked pride in what she conceives to be her God-given capabilities. Shaw portrays her as neither a melodramatic victim nor a romantic heroine.

As there is no conventional heroine in *Saint Joan*, neither are there any villains. In all his dramas Shaw presents his characters, as he saw his contemporaries and historical figures, as mixtures of both good and evil. Accordingly, Joan's judges are not portrayed as incarnations of malice that are bent on sending her to the stake. The Catholic Church is not the villain, and nowhere in the play does Shaw condemn or ridicule the Church, as he sometimes does in his earlier polemical writings. In the trial scene, which is central, Shaw presents both sides of the case, a fact which Eric Bentley praises as adding power to the drama.

Saint Joan is Shaw's nearest approach to tragedy; but it is not tragic in the classical or Shakespearean sense; it is more like the tragicomedies of Ibsen or Chekhov. The controversial epilogue, which brings Joan back to earth for her 1920 canonization, detracts from the tragic effect. Moreover, just as in *Hedda Gabler*, society is to blame for the tragedy of a wasted life; and Shaw makes it clear that the tragedy lies not so much in Joan's fate as in the failure of her society the establishment of Church and State to accept and understand her. Indubitably, Joan is one of Shaw's great evocations. "She is," as an astute German critic declares, "the last and most radiant in the long gallery of women that testify to his deep reverence for the high function of the feminine element in life."

This play is the climax of Shaw's career. Though he lived on for more than half a century, nothing that he did afterward is of comparable importance.

Source: Eldon C. Hill, "The Climax of a Career," in George Bernard Shaw, Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 131-33. Weintraub, Stanley, "Bernard Shaw's Other Saint Joan," in *Saint Joan Fifty Years After*, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 233.

Adaptations

Shaw himself drafted a screenplay for *Saint Joan* in the 1930s, but no movie was made of it, owing to pressure from the Catholic Church. Shaw's screenplay, edited by Bernard F. Dukore, was published in 1968 by the University of Washington Press.

A movie version of the play was later made based on a screenplay by Graham Greene. Directed by Otto Preminger, this 1957 version starred Jean Seberg as Joan, Richard Widmark as the Dauphin, Richard Todd as Dunois, Anton Walbrook as Cauchon, and John Gielgud as Warwick.

There was also a television version of the play in 1967, starring Genevieve Bujold as Joan and Roddy McDowall as the Dauphin.

The Media Resources Center at the University of California at Berkeley lists a version of the play read by Siobhan McKenna as Saint Joan.

Topics for Further Study

Read some biographical material on Joan of Arc. In what ways does Shaw's Joan differ from the Joan of history?

Compare Shaw's treatment of Joan with the way she is portrayed by other writers (e.g., Mark Twain, Andrew Lang, Voltaire). Also, look at how Shaw (in his Preface) says these other writers portray Joan; is he fair to the other writers?

In what circumstances is it appropriate to defy the authorities in Joan's manner? If a citizen disagrees with government spending policies, does s/he have the right to refuse to pay taxes? Would it have been proper to disobey the apartheid laws in South Africa or the anti-Semitic laws in Nazi Germany, or to defy the tanks in Tienanmen Square? How about protesting against the Vietnam War?

To what extent do Joan's own failings contribute to her downfall? To what extent do external forces cause her downfall?

Is Joan a failure in the end? Does she achieve something? What?

Whose side is Shaw on in the play? Joan's? The Church and Cauchon' s? Both? Neither? Explain.

Compare and Contrast

1400s: The Hundred Years' War, and increases in royal power and economic development, lead to the growth of national feeling and modern nation-states.

1923: World War I, which itself resulted from nationalist clashes, gives rise to a number of new nation-states, encouraging national rivalries.

Today: With the end of the cold war, which had suppressed many nationalist rivalries, old and new conflicts between nations and ethnic groups have come to the fore.

1400s: The Catholic Church is the dominant religious and political force in the Western World.

1923: The Catholic Church retains its dominant religious role in some parts of the Western World, including France and southern Europe, but elsewhere (England, the United States) it has no such dominant status.

Today: The Catholic Church, like other churches, has tried to modernize itself to broaden its appeal in an increasingly secular age.

1400s: In the traditional medieval world, individuals have few rights.

1923: In the capitalist democracies, individual rights are enshrined in law and the economy, but various socialist groups call for putting collective rights ahead of individual ones, a philosophy that the Communist Party in the newly formed Soviet Union is trying to put into practice.

Today: With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of most socialist states and movements, capitalist individualism holds sway in much of the world, though kept in check to a certain extent by governmental regulation and certain political movements, such as environmentalism.

1400s: In the traditional medieval world, women have few political or economic rights, and are confined to a few traditional roles.

1923: Women have won some property rights, and some have won the right to vote; some women have entered traditional male spheres, but the division into male and female spheres remains largely intact.

Today: Feminism has had a large impact on Western culture. Women have entered more and more traditionally male occupations; laws have been enacted guaranteeing them equality or priority in employment; many no longer feel obliged to follow the traditional paths of marriage and motherhood, or seek to combine such paths with professional careers.

What Do I Read Next?

Caesar and Cleopatra (1901), an earlier historical play by Shaw, focuses on the heroism of Julius Caesar.

Major Barbara (1905) is another play by Shaw about a heroic female: this time, an official in the Salvation Army and a social reformer.

Androcles and the Lion (1912) is a play by Shaw about miracles, martyrs, and Christians.

Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc is Mark Twain's loving portrayal of Joan, first published in 1896.

The Maid of Orleans is Voltaire's irreverently ribald account of Joan's story, first published as *Lapucelle d'Orleans* in 1755.

Joan of Lorraine (1946) is a play about Joan by the American playwright Maxwell Anderson.

Saint Joan of the Stockyards (1931) is a play by Bertolt Brecht that combines elements of Shaw's *Saint Joan* and his *Major Barbara*. Brecht's Joan is a member of the Salvation Army trying to do good in Chicago during the Depression.

Henry VI, Part One (1623), by William Shakespeare, is about the Hundred Years' War and contains a negative portrayal of Joan.

Further Study

Allmand, C. T., *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, 1300-1450*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

This text provides information on the historical background to Joan's career.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *George Bernard Shaw's 'Saint Joan*,' Chelsea House, 1987.

Bloom's book is a collection of essays on the play dating from 1955 through 1984.

Gies, Frances, *Joan of Arc: The Legend and the Reality*, Harper and Row, 1981.

Gies presents a study of Joan's life and the literature about her.

Holroyd, Michael, *Bernard Shaw*, 5 vols., Chatto and Windus, 1988-1992.

Holroy' s book is the major modern biography of Shaw.

Irvine, William, *The Universe of G. B. S.*, Russell [and] Russell, 1968 (first published in 1949).

Irvine's work is a study of Shaw's philosophical and political views.

Silver, Arnold, Saint Joan: Playing with Fire, Twayne, 1993.

In this book, Silver gives a full-length study of the play.

Weintraub, Stanley, ed., *Saint Joan Fifty Years After*, Louisiana State University Press, 1973.

Weintraub assembles a collection of essays on Shaw's play. This book includes several early reviews and essays from the 1920s.

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Bentley, Eric, *Bernard Shaw*, 1856-1950, New Directions, 1957.

Crompton, Louis, "A Hagiography of Creative Evolution," in *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan,* edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1987, p. 47.

Graham, James, "Shaw on *Saint Joan," in Saint Joan Fifty Years After*, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 17.

Grene, Nicholas, "Shavian History," in *George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1987, p. 121.

Huizinga, Johan, "Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan," in Saint Joan Fifty Years After*, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 54-85.

MacCarthy, Desmond, "*StJoan*: The Theme and the Drama," in *Saint Joan Fifty Years After*, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 31 38.

Pirandello, Luigi, "Bernard Shaw's *StJoan," inSaintJoan* Fifty Years After, edited by Stanley Weintraub, Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 23-28.

Shaw, George Bernard, *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue*, edited by Dan H. Laurence, Penguin, 1957.

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Wisenthal, J. L., *Shaw's Sense of History*, Clarendon, 1988.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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