



## Fragrance of Deliverance in the Slough of Agony in George Bernard Shaw’s *The Devil’s Disciple*

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### Abstract

The Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw has been ranked by many as the greatest English playwright since Shakespeare and he is also the fine successor and the loyal disciple of Henrik Ibsen. *The Devil’s Disciple*, published in 1897, is one of Shaw’s three “Plays For Puritans” and his only full-length play with a purely American atmosphere which stabilized his career as a successful dramatist in English stage. *The Devil’s Disciple* shows the sense of resentment and fear that were felt during the American Revolution towards Britain’s imperialism. This study intends to search into the world of American colonists and manifests their sense of fear, meanwhile, focuses on the protagonist, Richard, who with the stability on his false identity jeopardizes his life in search of freedom for his nation in order to free them from the shackles of Britain.

**Key words:** Nation; Self-sacrifice; Deliverance; The devil’s disciple; Britain; Imperialism

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### INTRODUCTION

This study begins with a concise look at Shaw’s endless

interest in criticism of his contemporary drama and society, which is followed by a close scrutiny of the play through the concept of deliverance; finally, it arrives at its conclusion by bringing to life the dominant feature of the play, which show that the importance of existence is valued in a free and democratic atmosphere.

To see or not to see, to bear or not to bear the cruelty of the conquerors, one thing remains the same: there has to be somebody to awaken his fellow beings from the deep slumber of negligence, who wait for a Godot as their savior. Richard in this play serves as that somebody. He is an outcast known by the people of his town as the Devil’s Disciple, and he himself claims to be so. Though, throughout the play he proves his bravery by underscoring Anderson’s identity to indirectly acquaint him to raise a rebellion against their foreign conquerors. By leaving his footmark in Anderson’s heart he makes him believe his role in leading the history of a nation to glory.

Indeed, Shaw reproaches the imperialistic ways of Britain by showing America as an example of a dominated country among all the other dominated nations where people sense the fear whenever they come across a British soldier. Indeed, they are afraid of being sent to the gallows, which is set at the center of town to make an example of what the British call as “rebels” and is aimed to put fear into the heart of those who seek freedom for their nation. He anticipates a future for the world where the cloud of colonialism casts its eternal shadow over those who are considered the “weak” and are always expected to obey their cruel and unfair rules.

By browsing through the crinkled and dusted pages of history, we may witness all the moments of agony of people who were the slaves of their foreign conquerors. This play brings to light the issue of freedom of a nation dominated by Britain.

One man rises to stand against all the sufferings caused by this issue and awakens his compatriots from the slumber of ignorance. He makes an attempt to unite his

compatriots in order to release their body and soul from slavery.

According to Bullock (2003), by using the principles, Life, Liberty, and Property of John Locke, a nation is impressed to devote his life to the realization of freedom from the shackles of the imperialism of Britain, and to do so it takes a long way which necessitates the importance of self-sacrifices of those who are ready to give it all to be free.

## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Innes holds: "Shaw could be seen as the father of modern British drama, having created the conditions that attracted later authors to write for the theatre" (1998, p. xvii). George Bernard Shaw as a sympathetic critic of our time always deals with social evils of the current world, particularly, Britain. He attempts to guide the thinking of common mass toward an intelligent and at the same time responsible outlook at the issues of their time. Griffith explicates: "Shaw was a willing convert. Poverty and lack of social standing, his radical temper and compulsive intellectualism, all conspired to impress on him the truth of his most fundamental critique of established values, structures and practices" (1993, p. 26). He uses comedy to meet an end and the laughter in his comedies is a cry against social, economical, and political conventions of his time. He changes the course of English drama by condemning the credo of "art for art's sake" an idea held by the aesthetic artists of his time most importantly his compatriot, Oscar Wilde. He is widely against the "well made" but empty, merely entertaining plays which were dominant in 19th century on English stage, Sulleiman holds: "George Bernard Shaw thought that there was no sense in writing something for mere entertainment, what he wrote had to serve a higher purpose and encourage people to think rather to sit and be content to be entertained" (2010, p. 59). Shaw introduces a drama inspired by the bleak world of his audience and he is always sympathetic to them. The sincerity of tongue is one of Shaw's inseparable characteristics; in all his plays poetic justice in criticism can be seen clearly. Though he may put his plays in different times and space (like *The Devil's Disciple*), his focal point is the portrayal of his Age in a comic context by bringing to life poverty, social evils, hypocrisy and power exploitation of the authorities. Bloom comments on Shaw: "In all his endeavours he demonstrated an indefatigable zeal to reform existing social conditions, sterile theatrical conventions and outworn artistic orthodoxies" (2011, p. 131).

## DELAIVERANCE OF SHACKLED SOULS AND BODIES

*The Devil's Disciple* is an example of the self-sacrifice

of a man who is reportedly attached to no specific, stable idea, though it attempts to go beyond the limited time and space where judgments about anything may prove myopic. It is the story of an endless passion for freedom of a person who uses his sufferings as a ladder to break the fetters of slavery.

Richard's chaotic sense of protest of Richard against the tyranny of Britain is easily felt in most parts of the play. With the belief of "never say die" he strongly waits for a day when he can see his nation free from the yoke of colonialism. He aims to show his compatriots that his death should serve as a lesson for them, which means freedom cannot be achieved easily. It might demand lives.

In the following quotation it can be seen that death is sweeter to him than living in agony of domination. He is in fact a step further from Burgoyne when he encourages him to speed up his execution as soon as possible.

Burgoyne: Have you anything more to say, Mr. Dudgeon? It wants two minutes of twelve still.

Richard: (*in the strong voice of a man who has conquered the bitterness of death*) Your watch is two minutes slow by the town clock, which I can see from here, General. (Shaw 1897, p. 66)

Act one of the play mostly circles around the death of Timothy Dudgeon and his new will which gives his estate to his oldest son, Richard. All the issues start on act two when Richard and Judith are left alone in the house, and Richard comes to know that she is in love with him. Richard, after being arrested unknowingly in place of Anderson, gives some tips to Judith to convey to Anderson and keep him posted about his intention, "Tell him that I am steadfast in my religion as he is in his, and that he may depend on me to the death" (p. 35). Richard in fact has successfully done his job, because as soon as Richardson finds out what Richard has done, he never discloses his secret to Judith and keeps his secrets untouched.

Anderson: Now listen, you. If you can get a word with him by pretending you are his wife, tell him to hold his tongue until morning: that will give me all the start I need.

Judith: (*solemnly*) You may depend on him to the death.

Anderson: You are a fool, a fool, Judith. You don't know the man you are married to. (p. 43)

When Judith offers her hand to Richard by saying that if they reveal his real identity, the British will exonerate him, he is not shaken and remains determined to do something for his country:

Judith: Don't you see that I can save you?

Richard: How? By changing clothes with me, eh?

Judith: No: by telling the Court who you really are.

Richard: (*frowning*) No use: they wouldn't spare me; and it would spoil half of his chance of escaping. They are determined to cow us by making an example of somebody on that gallows today. Well, let us cow them by showing that we can stand by one another to the death. That is the only force that can send Burgoyne back across the Atlantic and make America a nation. (p. 46)

Richard, also known as Dick, is always ready to give a helping hand to others, no matter what happens to him; he

is stable in his beliefs. Burton opines:

Dick stands for practical, healthy goodness, the goodness that does things and enters into red-blooded human relations; his apparent impiety is only a sound, honest nature's protest against cant, hypocrisy, formal show, and sham. And he is capable of the greatest self-sacrifice when a test comes. (1916, p. 91)

When he was in prison he confessed that his sole goal was nothing but acting as a caring and responsible citizen, who cannot stand injustice and imposed slavery. He was ready to do anything in order to prevent something disastrous for his fellow citizens. He was fully determined to sacrifice his blood to bring a spring of the fragrance of life to his fellow beings, who are helplessly dominated by the cruel dominant acting super powers.

Richard: What I did last night, I did in cold blood, caring not half so much for your husband, or (*ruthlessly*) for you (*she droops, stricken*) as I do for myself. I had no motive and no interest: all I can tell you is that when it came to the point whether I would take my neck out of the noose and put another man's into it, I could not do it. I don't know why not: I see myself as a fool for my pains; but I could not and I cannot. I have been brought up standing by the law of my own nature; and I may not go against it, gallows or no gallows. (*She has slowly raised her head and is now looking full at him.*) I should have done the same for any other man in the town, or any other man's wife. (Shaw, p. 48)

Here we can see that Richard is by all sorts fancy-free, for he denies his love for Judith. He is, in fact, a patriot totally different from the general's outlook about patriotism; consequently, he goes beyond those restrictions, which are set to intimidate him and put him in a state of indecision. To him, if he were to make this sacrifice for anybody else, it would not affect his final decision, since his real interest has always been to do something for his country.

In the moment when everything is set for the execution, the devil's disciple, although, claimed by people around him and he himself too that he is attached to the teachings of evil, shows the Christians around him the otherwise: "Amen! My life for the world's future" (p. 67). Burton asserts: "Dick Dudgeon is a creature who follows his instincts and so connects with life force. Conventionally, superficially viewed, it appears an attack upon religion; it is in reality an attack upon the immoral masking behind a quasi morality" (1916, p. 91). In the end Anderson comes to scene and repays Richard for the sacrifice he made to go beyond the limits of fear:

Anderson: (*between Judith and Richard*). Sir, it is in the hour of trial that a man finds his true profession. This foolish young man (*placing his hand on Richard's shoulder*) boasted himself the Devil's Disciple; but when the hour of trial came to him, he found that it was his destiny to suffer and be faithful to the death (Shaw, p. 68) and he later calls him the "Reverend Richard Dudgeon" (ibid).

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## THE MANIPULATION OF PEOPLE

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To dedicate one's life in believing that the right people hold the crown of power and are enthusiastic towards a

bright future for their country makes one feel certain that everything is alright. One is warned in this play that this may not be so and, instead, things may be completely otherwise way around. This study does not simply focus on the ceaseless struggle of a nation towards freedom, but also the wise criticism led by Shaw to the exploitation of power by the authorities and their manipulation of the public opinion in order to bring into picture an illusion of reality. Russell (2002) asserts that:

Respect for the liberty of others is not a natural impulse with most men: envy and love of power lead ordinary human nature to find pleasure in interferences with the lives of others. If all men's actions were wholly unchecked by external authority, we should not obtain a world in which all men would be free. The strong would oppress the weak, or the majority would oppress the minority, or the lovers of violence would oppress the more peaceable people. I fear it cannot be said that these bad impulses are *wholly* due to a bad social system, though it must be conceded that the present competitive organization of society does a great deal to foster the worst elements in human nature. The love of power is an impulse which, though innate in very ambitious men, is chiefly promoted as a rule by the actual experience of power. In a world where none could acquire much power, the desire to tyrannize would be much less strong than it is at present. (76)

Shaw's main focus is on his contemporary society, which suffers under the taint of corruption and injustice.

At the moment of execution, Judith tries to convince the Sergeant to take the money and let her observe the execution; although he takes it, he denies it:

"Judith: Will you take these two silver dollars and let me stay?  
Sergeant: Me take money in the execution of my duty!" (p. 63)

When the chaplain tries to gain control over the so-called devil's disciple, Richard retorts him by condemning their cruel manners, which are practiced in the name of Christianity and divine will:

The Chaplain: (*gently reproving Richard*). Try to control yourself, and submit to the divine will. (*He lifts his book to proceed with the service*)

Richard: Answer for your own will, sir, and those of your accomplices here (*indicating Burgoyne and Swindon*): I see little divinity about them or you. You talk to me of Christianity when you are in the act of hanging your enemies. Was there ever such blasphemous nonsense! (p. 64)

Shaw targets the hypocrisy and tricky games of the political authorities, the church, and the papacy in exploiting and shackling the minds of the common mass by leashing them to the well-trodden path of the highly-practiced fossilized metanarratives, which push them towards the summit of their ill-omened goals.

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## CONCLUSION

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Every challenge meets its own reward and man is alive with hopes. This hope makes man overcome his fear and walk pluckily on the perilous path with hazardous death traps. Undoubtedly, Richard is a man of high spirits and even when the string of his life is about to be torn, he does

not intend to give in to defeat and fights to reach the sweet taste of freedom. Indeed, in the history, those names are remembered who do what the majority avoids, whether moral or amoral. Richard is that kind of person in this play, since he does what the whole town is intimidated of and that is what ,which makes him unforgettable in the minds of his fellow citizens.

In a world where the brutal rules of jungle are applied to control the thinking social animals, the governments find the opportunity apt enough to tear one another apart in order to show their supremacy or dominate other nations unfairly to fulfill their capitalistic and imperialistic goals. The art of "struggle for existence" has surely found its way to human societies from the world of animals, and the weak is mercilessly suppressed so that the strong ones can attain their goals. This study attempted to draw an imaginary picture of the history of a nation, whose perseverance and endeavors paved the path to the deliverance from the fetters of colonialism. This poem by William Blake (1999, p. 8) may aptly put a conclusion to our study and remind us of our forgotten human side:

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
All pray in their distress,  
And to these virtues of delight  
Return their thankfulness.  
For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is God our Father dear;  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love,  
Is man, his child and care.  
For Mercy has a human heart  
Pity, a human face;  
And Love, the human form divine;  
And Peace, the human dress.  
Then every man, of every clime,

That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine:  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.  
And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew.  
Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell,  
There God is dwelling too...

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