

B.A - Part-III

English Hons

Paper - VIII

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Problem Play

Problem play is a type of drama that developed in the 19th century to deal with controversial social issues in a realistic manner, to expose social ills and to stimulate thought and discussion on the part of audience. The development of the problem play towards the close of the Victorian age was closely related to the growth of the realistic movement in the field of English drama. According to Albert Guerard, "The problem play is the presentation of a contemporary question through realistic technique." The dramatists of the problem play were preoccupied with the vital problems of contemporary life and morality, and the drama which was directly inspired by the social ferment of the time, could be effective only if it adopted a realistic form or medium. No serious analysis of the issues or problems facing society could be possible, as long as the dramatists ignored the facts and conditions of life as they actually existed. The new dramatists made a conscious effort to deal with the social problems of the time, howsoever repellent they might be to the puritans.

The term 'Problem play' was coined by Sydney Grundy who used it in a disparaging sense for the

intellectual drama of the nineties, which he believed was marching to its doom in the hands of a coterie of enthusiastic eccentrics. The problem play is supposed to have arisen out of the sentimental drama of the eighteenth century, and has often been identified with 'serious drama', a dramatic form distinctly serious but not tragic that aims at presenting life's blend of smiles and tears. It is believed that problem drama differs essentially from tragedy even though it deals with serious issues. It normally exhibits ideas, situations and feeling that lack tragic dimensions. It is distinguished from comedy, not only by the lack of episodes designed simply to amuse, but on account of its serious temper and didactic aim. Prof. W.W. Lawrence believes that it has no kinship even with the so-called tragi-comedy which lacks the necessary seriousness and is on the whole "not analytical but theatrical." The earliest forms of the problem play are to be found in the work of French writers such as Alexander Dumas, who dealt with the subject of prostitution in "The Lady of the Camellias" (1852). Other French playwrights followed suit with dramas about a range of social issues, sometimes approaching the subject in a moralistic, sometimes in a sentimental manner.

The most important exponent of the problem play, however, was the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, whose work combined penetrating characterisation with emphasis on topical social issues, usually concentrated on the moral dilemmas of a central character. In a series of plays, Ibsen addressed a

range of problems, most notably the restriction of women's lives in *A Doll's House* (1879), sexually transmitted disease in *Ghosts* (1882) and provincial greed in *An Enemy of the People* (1882). Ibsen observed that the modern man is confronted with various social, political, racial, legal and domestic problems and so he thought that he could present modern life best by discussing various problems in his plays. His dramas proved immensely influential, spawning variants of the problem play in works by George Bernard Shaw and other dramatists.

G.B. Shaw :- In England, George Bernard Shaw became the chief disciple of Ibsen. He wrote very interesting comedies dealing with the problems of love and war (*Arms and the Man*), prostitution (*Mrs Warren's Profession*), slum landlordism (*Widower's Houses*), evolution (*Man and Superman*), marriage (*The Philanderer*); phonetics (*Pygmalion*), and democracy and constitutional monarchy (*The Apple Cart*). Shaw's plays became very popular with his audiences as well as his readers.

Ibsen and Shaw are, however, quite different from each other in their approach to drama. Ibsen made his characters discuss a problem from all points of view and left the reader free to judge what was right. Shaw, on the other hand, only presents his own point of view. His plays are sermons or lectures and not discussions at all. His aim is not to make us think but to convert us to his point of view. It is the drama of ideas but only the ideas of Shaw are presented forcefully.

John Galsworthy :- He is a celebrated exponent of the problem play which in his hand became a powerful instrument of social criticism. In the words of Albert, "Galsworthy was a social reformer, objectively and impartially posing a problem, showing always both sides of the question, and leaving his audience to think out the answer." of his best plays *The Silver Box* deals with the inequality of justice; *Strife* with the struggle between Capital and Labour; *Justice* with the cruelty of solitary confinement, *The Skin Game* with the different values of the old aristocracy and the newly rich businessman; *Loyalties* with class loyalties and prejudices.

Harley Granville Barker :- He also made a vital contribution in the domain of the problem play, who discovered his true bent after trying his hands at several farcical pieces, such as *Frounella* and *The Harlequinade*. His main problem plays are *The Cherrying of Ann Leete*, *Voysey Inheritance*, *Waste* and *The Madras House*. In the words of Albert, "Granville Barker's few plays are of considerable significance in the theatrical history of our period. . . . His plays are discussions of contemporary problems and his themes include the marriage conventions, the inheritance of tainted money, sex, and the position of women."

The problem drama of England was unquestionably the fruit of a strong dissatisfaction with the existing conditions of life. It directed attention to the facts and problems of social life and depicted the misery and suffering wrought by the cruel forces and conventions of society. The problem playwright censured the existing

social system, its rigid laws and straightlaced codes of conduct and belief. Some of the problem plays proved so effective that they imbued men's minds with a passionate resentment against social injustice. Justice mobilized public opinion in favour of prison reform and hastened legislative action. No doubt, the problem plays were produced in large number, but since 1920, its supremacy came to be challenged by the revival of the historical and imaginative drama, and above all, the poetical drama and the experimental play.

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