



Research article

Paradoxes of a Conventional Society: A Study of Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* and Benard Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*

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ABSTRACT



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Drama is a cognitive process and means of concretely translating abstract ideas into reality. It provides a vent for dramatists to vividly capture the rhythms of life in their societies. From the eons of time, the modus operandi of drama has placed it on a pedestal of a gadfly that prods, points and comments on the realities of its time. It is, therefore, pertinent to say that the mind of the dramatist is fertilized by the various social, economic cum political realities that are operational within the domain of his/her existence. This study focuses on two English plays; namely Ben Jonson’s Elizabethan play, *The Alchemist*, and George Benard Shaw’s modern drama- *Heartbreak House*. The selection of these models is anchored on the staggering power of their authors to detect the symptoms of social diseases that are present in their societies at their moments of writing and which by their being exacerbated in our own time, appear transhistorical in nature. The objectives of this study are to highlight the contradictory qualities and properties (paradoxes) of a modern society; one that seeks growth in all ramifications (education, politics, science, among others) and yet finds solace in mundaneness as exemplified by the two plays. The second objective is to comparatively look at the realities in the world of the two plays and what is obtainable now in our own age. Therefore, the interpretation of the past and the new meanings of the present will be juxtaposed and evaluated. Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory will provide frame of reference for the study while interpretive approach shall be content analysis.

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1. Introduction

One significant and conspicuous trend in the early English drama is the eclectic and wide range of the plays of this period; for they are creatively knitted to reflect the tempestuous passions of the then fast-growing English society. Edith Hamilton (1973) avers that “The way a nation goes, whether that of the mind or that of the spirit, is decisive in its effect upon art” (38). She further states that “The spirit has not essentially anything to do with what is outside of itself. It is the mind that keeps hold of reality”. (38). It is necessary to note that the then English society was bipolar in nature, one marked by the intelligence of the university wits and scientists, yet on the flip side, we observe the asinine proclivities of the fast and furious, all kinds of moral oddities typical of an emerging society saturated in erraticism; indeed, a paradox. Scientific inventions, interesting explorations and educational writings resonated alongside bawdry and illicit gratification.

However, one remarkable thing about this period that fiddled between the Elizabethan age down to the modern age of English drama- to put in its perspective, from the 17th century down to the 20th century; is that it boasted of a conflation of amazing and witty playwrights. The revenge plays of Thomas Kyd, the eclecticism and sublimity of Shakespeare, the rage and

penetrating poetry of Christopher Marlowe, the well- made plays of Bernard Shaw, the highly- spirited comedies of William Congreve, the lofty and highly scintillating comedies of Ben Jonson, and the volatile criticality of John Osborne, among others, appropriate the creative versatile spirit of the playwrights who were ostensibly conscious of the dynamics of their societies. With specific reference to the Elizabethan period, Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb (1983) posit that:

The fifth century B.C. was such a period, and so was the Elizabethan England, when many elements- politics, exploration, literature, and learning-came together. In the same way the events combined to produce a favorable climate for the country, so they did the same for the playwrights of this period, who included not only William Shakespeare but Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and a number of others. (128).

Thus, because the then English society was in a state of flux, the drama of the epoch also captured the fleeting preoccupations of the age. However, it is necessary to also note that another factor that boosted the morale of this age was the contribution of the English state. Queen Elizabeth I who was at the helm of affairs during the golden age of the Elizabethan era, gave official patent

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to drama. She recognized and rewarded dramatists, court players and poets handsomely. Her largesse towards theatre inspired artists and in fact contributed greatly to the success of the age and beyond.

A society in the simplest of words is made of people, who share a lot of things in common, including language, dress, social norms and even artistic forms. More often than not, they share common interests and values. The root of the word can be traced to the French *societe* meaning company. And because the society and man cannot be separated, for man makes up the society and the society define man, Aristotle opines that man is a social animal. According to Robert MacIver and Charles Page (1973), the society can be defined as “a web of relations, a complex system of usages and procedures of authority and mutual aid of many groupings and divisions of control of human behaviors and of liberties” (2). For John Rawls (1971) the society is “a more or less self-sufficient associations of persons who in their relations to one another recognize certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them” (4). The two views demonstrate an obvious relationship, which is that society is about man and his interaction with all that surrounds him. But contrary to these two scholarly positions, this paper believes that despite the common interests that the society shares, it is also marked by conflicts, tensions and opposing energies. The paradoxical stance of the society as one that can be organized and still be chaotic and permanently unorganizable at the same time, is what informs the choice of the plays, *The Alchemist* and *Heartbreak House*, which this study seeks to investigate.

Today, the human society is marked by different characteristics and institutions like family, education, religion, economics and politics. The diverse interaction existing among these institutions dictate the direction the society will go. That is why a government that dabbles into dangerous politicking will create a decrepit society, or when education which is the basic institution of the society, created to feed the minds of individuals is affected, other institutions like politics and economics will be affected as well, for they all function with one another. From the foregoing, societies of the world appear to be living in a paradox due to one problem or the other. English society appears to be used in the idiom of the plays to reveal the seemingly contradictory qualities of not just the English society, but the individuals that make up the human society as seen via the prism of Bernard Shaw and Ben Jonson.

2. Theoretical Framework/Methodology

This study adopted the social learning theory as its theoretical framework. SLT as it is fondly called was propounded by Albert Bandura (1977). The theory is anchored on the belief that learning does not occur in a vacuum; but that it is influenced or stimulated by the experiences or information observed, imitated or modeled from the environment or by paying close attention to the behaviours of others. Bandura himself notes that:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (22).

This theory is apt for this paper because it is in tandem with the workings of how the dramatist operates or creates compelling stories. The dramatist is also influenced by the various happenings around him/her. This gives credence to the different

connotations given to different plays. A drama can be sociological because it looks at the world of men or historical because the drama draws its source materials from past events or feminist because it is concerned with the struggle and oppression of female folks, and so on. Therefore, this paper submits that the representations of men in the plays being examined are vivid pictures of what is obtainable in the then English society as perceived by the dramatists.

In terms of methodology, the authors adopted content analysis technique where the existents of the plays, notably language and the actions of the characters were subjected to rigorous interpretation in order to cause the plays to account for themselves.

3. Literature Review

Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Goerge Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* have been studied by many scholars from different perspectives to demonstrate that good and penetrating plays are inexhaustible mines for criticism (Jonson, 1610) (Shaw, 2002). Some of these scholarly works will be reviewed here to give a theoretical grounding to our study. In an article entitled, “Ben Jonson's *Alchemist* and the Early Modern Laboratory Space”, John Shanahan (2008) states that, “from the perspective of the audience, Subtle's 'laboratory' is no more than the many words used to evoke it... We do not see overtly proto – scientific work on stage though we hear a torrent of imposing jargon and see a frenzy of action.... *The Alchemist* does in fact have an integral part in revisionist histories of the formation of the early modern science. Shanahan (2008) further argues that the *Alchemist* produces new images of space and time and models new kinds of relationships useful for the conceptual development of laboratory experience (36). For Shanahan (2008):

In an age before the creation of purpose-built public laboratories as such, and while meditating on the nature of Alchemy and dexterity, Jonson suggested new conceptual possibilities in his innovative use of stage space. In so doing, he mapped out a corporate model of epistemology important for the creation of scientific societies (36).

Hazhar Ahmed (2021) in an article “Ben Jonson's theme of reality vs illusion with special reference to *The Alchemist*”, observes that the play shows the disparity between what people claim to be and what actually they are. According to him, people “either mask their identities deliberately or are made to forget their identities by others” (9). He notes that the audience feels impressed by Subtle being addressed as ‘Sovereign’ but the reality of his personality as revealed by Face during their quarrel was that he was a wretched fellow walking around food shops to find help for his empty stomach, and that, in fact, it was Face who provided him with the apparatuses with which he hoodwinks people. Therefore, Ahmed's submission indicates that the play is a work on identity crisis.

Furthermore, in her article, “Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* as a Social History”, Elizabeth Modupe Olaniyan (2014) posits that, *The Alchemist* is a work of social criticism, where Jonson reflected his observations of life in exhilarating London of his time. She states that in the play Jonson used his “comic sense” to look at the social economic and religious temperament of his age “delicately distorted in the oblique light of his personal and artistic creed” (489). The author's position is that the playwright draws his materials from the happenings in his time and, therefore, can be seen as a critical historian (Jonson, 1610).

In their scholarly paper entitled, "The Alchemist" as a Moral Comedy portraying Natural Follies: An Analysis of Ben Jonson's Poetic Justice", Shamaila Amir, Fayyas Ahmad and Muhammad Aurangzeb (2020) state that the play depicts a society that is depraved and wrapped, but which is consequently "deluded and impoverished by its own poor values" (2). For them, the play elaborates the idea that any society which engages its creative force-wit and ingenuity negatively, must be made to face its own contradictions in the most disagreeable way. They are of the opinion, for example, that Mammon's quest for inordinate wealth, power and sexual pleasure eventually becomes for him a dream that "end in smoke when an explosion is heard from inside the laboratory" (2). In fact, when Lovewit, the owner of the apartment returned and Subtle ran away, all his clients discovered to their shock that they have fallen victim of fraud by surrendering their resources to Subtle in the hope that he could use his fictitious philosopher's stone to meet their ambitions. Subtle himself never got a bit of the accumulated booty. Although poetic justice was kept faith with in handling most of characters of the play, Amir, Ahmad and Aurangzeb (2020) argue that in the case of the character, Face, "it seems that the requirement of poetic justice has not been met" (2). They believe that Jonson seemed to have lost sight of moral purpose by allowing the villain, Face to escape unscathed in the play. Womack (1986) suggests that allowing Face to go without retributive justice "weakens the moral effect of the play".

Atalay Gunduz (2017) in an article entitled "Benard Shaw's Vichian – Hegelian Hero in Heartbreak House" opines that:

Just like Vico and Hegel who believed that heroes play a major role in the formation of human history, Shaw introduces Hector with all the potential and capabilities of a hero who would be expected to play a formative role in one of the most dramatic phases of human history. Shaw's Great war play dramatizes his generation's heartbreak, the moral and political paralysis of the educated and cultured classes of Europe [Abstract].

Gunduz (2017) further observes that, "The ship – house in the play is the allegorical representation of Europe drifting to the rocks while the passengers and the captain are consumed in their domestic, petty, and egoistical whims and passions, wasting their good energies on trivialities but no one intervening" [Abstract].

In "Bearing Witness: Heartbreak House and Poetics of Trauma", Desmond Harding (2006) describes Shaw's Heartbreak House as a work on poetics of trauma. For him, the text is the playwright's "philosophical underpinning for the traumatic collapse of civilization...In particular, Shaw isolates the forces of unrestrained predatory capitalism, the cynical acceptance of the law of the survival of the fittest as a governing principle of human conflict; and the radical destabilization of religious faith as home-grown root causes for the cataclysm that engulfed Europe (17). These factors appear to be the reason all the characters in the play are disillusioned at one point or the other.

In an article entitled "Truncated Love in "Candida" and "Heartbreak House", Harold Pagliaro (2004) examines Heartbreak House from heterosexual perspective. According to him, *Heartbreak House* is a play of strong social message that works out its warning about humanity's social – economic disarray largely in terms of failed human relations, with a strong emphasis on heterosexual relations". (210). He argues that Shaw "uses unsatisfactory relations between people especially between sexes to represent" the unstable pivot upon which the society stand. He is of the view that Heartbreak House is "obviously a complex metaphor standing not only for Western Europe with emphasis

on England, but for the whole world, as Shaw in several instances has his characters suggest" (210).

4. Textual Analysis and Interpretation

The play, *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson is considered the high-water mark of Ben Jonson's comedy. Written in the year, 1610; it captures the shenanigans of three con artists. Jeremy who will later assume the character named Face, Subtle who will later assume the character of an alchemist and Dol Common a prostitute. The three, under the leadership of Face who is in charge of the house, dupe unsuspecting victims, because his boss Lovewit is forced by a plague to flee London to the country side.

The play unfolds with Face (Jeremy the butler) and Subtle arguing on how to share the riches they have acquired, and the subsequent ones they hope to garner from their over ambitious and gullible clients. After much haggling, Dol Common persuades them to look on the brighter side, work in concert, and con more people, as partners in progress do not put a wedge on each other's way.

The first victim Dapper, is a lawyer's clerk who wishes Subtle to use his supposed necromantic skills to summon a "familiar" or spirit to help in his gambling ambition. Their second gull is Druggier, a tobacconist, who is keen to establish a profitable business. After this, a wealthy nobleman, Sir Epicure Mammon arrives, expressing the desire to gain himself the philosopher's stone which he believes will bring him huge material and spiritual wealth. He is accompanied by Surly, a smart man, who questions almost everything he perceives. Surly, however, suspects Subtle of being a thief. Mammon accidentally sees Dol and is told that she is a Lord's sister who is suffering from madness.

Subtle contrives to become angry with Ananias, an Anabaptist or Puritan, and demands that he should return with a more senior member of his sect. Druggier returns and is given false and ludicrous advice about setting up his shop; he also brings news that a rich young widow (Dame Pliant) and her brother (Kastril) have arrived in London. Subtle and Face have no option than to plan their exit, for it is obvious that their chicanery is over.

Lovewit interrogates the neighbours as to what has been going on in his house during his absence. Face is now the plausible Jeremy again, and explains that there cannot have been any visitors to the house he has kept locked up because of the plague. Surly, Mammon, Kastril and the Anabaptists return. Face tells Subtle and Dol that he has confessed to Lovewit, and that officers are on the way; Subtle and Dol have to flee, empty handed.

The victims come back again. Lovewit has married the widow and has claimed Mammon's goods; Surly and Mammon depart disconsolately. Kastril accepts his sister's marriage to Lovewit. Lovewit pays tribute to the ingenuity of his servant, and Face is left with no option than to seek the audience's sympathy.

In some literary quarters, it is believed that the works of playwrights are a signature of their period of writing, and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* is a typical example. The witty shenanigans of Face, Subtle and Dol Common, apart from reflecting the temper of the age and society are also reflective of Johnson's life. According to Elizabeth Olaniyan (2014):

The modern world, as it is known today, was then beginning. In the midst of this exhilarating time, came Ben Jonson. His nature was in accord with the critical view of life. Everyday activities as they passed before his keen observation fell into their places until the world was reduced to categories and the people in it to types (2).

To further illuminate this point Norbert Oyibo Eze asserts that “Ben Jonson lived a tempestuous life. In 1597, he was imprisoned for his involvement in a satire entitled *“The Isle of Dogs* which the authorities declared seditious (74). Eze further remarks that “The following year, he killed a fellow actor Gabriel Spencer in a duel in the fields of Shoreditch and was tried for murder. He escaped the gallows by pleading the *benefit of clergy*” (74). However, Jonson was “thrown into the prison but when he was released, he was given a felon’s mark on his thumb” (74). Furthermore, as gleaned from *The Alchemist* above, there is no gainsaying that the play captures the follies and avarice of man, especially in a fast-growing world like London where the zeitgeist of the age was self-aggrandizement, where all that man sought was to increase his power and clout in an aggressive and ruthless manner irrespective of the cost. The prologue of the play summarily captures its significance, for in a poetic style, Jonson states that:

Fortune, that favours fools, these two short hours, we wish away, both for your sakes and ours. Judging spectators; and desire, in place, to the author justice, to ourselves but grace. Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known, no country's mirth is better than our own: No clime breeds better matter for your whore, bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more, whose manners, now call'd humours, feed the stage (40).

The prologue suggests that Jonson attempted to mirror existence in London, a society where sexual gratification and all forms of tomfoolery have eaten deep into its fabrics. For example, Sir Epicure Mammon, a very wealthy old man is still not satisfied with all he has acquired. He wants to be young again and believes that the philosopher’s stone will help him to achieve that. And like a youth still reveling in his exuberance he will have his way with any woman of his choice and cure all plagues. He tells Captain Face:

SIR EPICURE MAMMON: For I do mean to have a list of wives and concubines, equal with Solomon, who had the stone alike with me; and I will make me a back with the elixir, that shall be as tough as Hercules, to encounter fifty a night. Thou'rt sure thou saw'st its blood?

FACE. Both blood and spirit, sir (70).

The characters of the three con artists Face the housekeeper, Subtle his partner in crime and Dol Common a prostitute and all who come to them for help, from Dapper the lawyer’s clerk who wants a magic that will allow him win at gambling, to Druggier, a tobacco man who wants his business to blossom, to the bawdry desires of Sir Epicure Mammon, and the greedy desires of the Saints of Amsterdam, Ananias and Tribulation and the rest, show not only the decadence of a conventional society, but also the range of the different sectors of the society that are deeply corrupt and decomposing. Druggier, for example, represents the rot in the business sector. Today, even in Nigeria, very many businesses are built on deceit. Business men and women cut corners to maximize profit; very few are patient enough to build their business from the scratch. In almost all societies, including ones considered to be civilized, very many business men join evil cults or belong to secret societies that they think will help boost their businesses. As gleaned from the play, the conversation between Subtle and Druggier below explains this:

SUBTLE: Well Your business, Abel?

DRUGGER. This, an't please your worship; I am a young beginner, and am building Of a new shop, an't

like your worship, just at corner of a street:—Here is the plot on't. And I would know by art, sir, of your worship, which way I should make my door, by necromancy, And where my shelves; and which should be for boxes, And which for pots. I would be glad to thrive, sir: And I was wish'd to your worship by a gentleman. One captain Face, that says you know men's planets, and their good angels, and their bad.

SUBTLE: I do, If I do see them (59)

The above shows that Druggier was sent by Face to Subtle. He lied to Druggier that Subtle can conjure spirits through necromancy and persuade them to help his business thrive, and the desperate Druggier falls prey. One shocking thing about this chicanery pulled on Druggier is that seeking wealth through metaphysical means is common and the fact that Jonson was able to paint this picture in *The Alchemist*, a play set in London as far back as the 17th century, shows that it is ubiquitous and that drama is a veritable vent for social history.

Another relatable picture painted by Jonson is that of the Saints of Amsterdam who are symbolized by Ananias and Tribulation Wholesome. The playwright used these characters to project the joke and deceit in the world of religion where religious leaders parade themselves as saints but who in reality are charlatans who go as far as seeking diabolical means to deceive their unsuspecting followers. The duo seeks the philosopher’s stone in order to increase their followership. Even when Ananias tries to persuade Tribulation Wholesome that Subtle’s art is evil and shady, Tribulation is hell bent on getting the philosopher’s stone to further their cause. For Tribulation, the end justifies the means. This is the case with the so-called men of God or religious leaders who globally dabble into all kinds of immoral schemes to swindle their gullible adherents.

Jonson’s sense of picturization is apt because the characters of Ananias and Tribulation are created to ridicule the Puritans, a group of protestant religious sect who were at loggerheads with the English dramatists. They criticize dramatic offerings of their time as immoral and antithetical to the teachings of Christ, yet they perpetrate evil in their corners. According to [Olaniyan \(2014\)](#):

These two characters’ hypocrisy highlights the central objection of Jonson and his contemporaries, as Puritans’ objections to their plays were based around the idea that the plays were immoral, yet they could be immoral as long as it benefited God. This dislike of hypocrisy, and degrading representation of Puritan, becomes an even stronger theme in one of Jonson’s later works (495-496).

Jonson’s use of symbolism in the play is very striking. Jeremy the Butler adopts the name Face which symbolizes the disguises of men, the different shades and hypocrisies of people. Druggier the tobacco man signifies his profession as a vendor of drugs. Sir Epicure Mammon embodies the mundaneness of this world. An epicure is one who finds solace in food and drinks, while mammon espouses excessive love for earthly wealth. Mammon needs an elixir of youth to be able to perform an incredible feat of sleeping with fifty women a night. It is pertinent to know that Jonson used this metaphor to demonstrate the extent to what sex can drive men to do. Sex is posited in the text as a major social problem which has continued to push people into uncharitable actions. Mammon seems to have unquenchable appetite for sexual gratification as some of us do today. Lovewit, the real owner of the house who comes to resolve the conflict and tension in the play, is a man with a milk of kindness. He embodies his name a charming but a riveting cunning man. He married the rich young woman Kastrill whom Face proposed to

him and apparently forgives Face, which suggests that he might inherit the entire profit at the end of the day or share it with his butler Jeremy alias Face. This act by Lovewit shows that even the elite are not left out in this large scheme of chicanery. He weighs his options and smartly opts for what suits him, a reality prevalent in most societies.

Published in 1919, George Bernard Shaw's play *Heartbreak House* symbolically captures the dwindling English society via the prism of Captain Shotover's family. It reflects the complications of this family, cocooned in deceit, lies, intrigues and disguises. The play unfolds with Ellie visiting Hesione Hushbabye her friend, who is the daughter of Shotover, and the wife to Hector who deceived Ellie with a false profile as an adventurer with the name Marcus Darnley. Ellie falls in love with Hector, oblivious that he is married to her friend, who is her host.

Subsequently, the play reveals more characters, including Ellie's father, Mazzini Dunn, a failed businessman, and Boss Mangan, an entrepreneur. The captain's second daughter, the practical and beautiful Ariadne, arrives at the house after twenty-three years of absence. She is followed by her lovesick brother-in-law, Randall. A final character, burglar, intrudes late in Act II.

The play's characters can be listed into a few distinct categories. The Captain, Mangan, and Mazzini represent Britain's industry, riddled with incompetence and charlatanism. Ellie, Hesione, Ariadne, Hector, and Randall symbolize Britain's idle aristocracy and middle class, too distracted by coquetry and self-indulgence to take notice of the important matters of state. Nurse Guinness and the burglar represent Britain's working class, serving at the whims and caprices of the rich, and fighting for survival. Actually, the play's basic aim is to bring to the fore the intrigues of love, filial relationship and the seemingly, irredeemable English society in the face of war. Shaw's intention is to cause the audience to recognize the recklessness that led England into war. By the end of the play, the characters care so little for England and for their own lives that they wholeheartedly welcome death.

Regarded as one of the greatest comic playwrights of his time, Bernard Shaw's sense of humour and the creative documentation of his world and the things beyond it is superb and commendable. Shaw adeptly flaunts not only his creative range, but also his imaginative prowess in *The HeartBreak House*. He captures the political climate of Europe in the face of a looming World War I, using the dilemma of a deeply agitated family as a microcosm of bringing a weary England to a comic light. The setting of the play is in a somewhat ship-like house of Captain Shotover and his family. The inhabitants are distracted and clumsy like the condition of the ship itself. This picturization by Shaw symbolizes what Norbert Oyibo Eze refers to as "Europe that is spiritually dead" (136). The angry utterance of Lady Utterword when she steps into the disoriented house explains this:

LADY UTTERWORD: (sitting down with a flounce on the sofa). I know what you must feel. Oh, this house, this house! I come back to it after twenty-three years; and it is just the same: the luggage lying on the steps, the servants spoilt and impossible, nobody at home to receive anybody, no regular meals... (38)

The house here can be likened to any society, but in the context of this play, the English society. Captain Shotover, the leader who is supposed to provide a sense of direction, is old and fumbling, and only concerned with his 'seventh degree of concentration' which is revealed at the end of the play to be mere alcohol consumption. His poor leadership as the head of the family symbolizes the lackluster attitude of the English aristocrats towards the state, and Shaw is able to relay this message vividly through the character of Shotover. According to Louis Cropmton:

Shaw's avowed literary strategy, as we have seen, was to appeal to the most highly developed taste of the intelligentsia he was attacking. Shaw knew that Captain Shotover, his spokesman in the play, must first of all, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, hold his audience spellbound if he was to strike home with his message. As Shaw himself put it, "The funny old captain, having lured them into his ship by his sallies, ties them up to the gangway and gives them a moral dozen (155).

In addition, the characters of Captain Mangan and Mazzini espouse the incompetence of the dwindling industry of the then English State. For Mangan who parades himself as a competent business man while speaking to Shotover as seen in the conversation below; turns out to be utterly penniless:

MANGAN: I don't boast. But when I meet a man that makes a hundred thousand a year, I take off my hat to that man, and stretch out my hand to him and call him brother.

CAPTAIN SHOTOVER: Then you also make a hundred thousand a year, hey?

MANGAN: No. I can't say that. Fifty thousand, perhaps. (64).

According to Robert W. Corrigan (1973), *Heartbreak House* is a dramatization of "how some of the basic assumptions of the western world were all too rapidly disintegrating and how they were finally destroyed in the First World War" (161). Hector's advances to Ellie his wife's friend and his subsequent deep and protracted kiss to Lady Utterword affirm Shaw's feeling that "man is not so much a creature of reason as a victim of irrational and unconscious forces which exist and operate within and outside himself" (161). A major assumption of the western world then was that rationalism was the dominant mode of existence. But Hector's inability to delineate the boundary of marriage and friendship [his inordinate sexual escapade] is a testament of a world that is morally bankrupt.

However, the plot also reveals the love intrigues woven around the characters of Ellie, Mangan, Hesione and Hector Hushbabye. Ellie's father wants her to marry Mangan whom he considers successful, but Ellie is in love with Hector who was later revealed to be married to Hesione. These deceptions and web of lies and intrigues by the characters also symbolize the confused state of the English society. Hector for one, lies to Ellie that he is one Marcus Darnley, who knows neither his father nor mother and was abandoned at birth. Ellie falls in love with him for his sweet talk of high adventures. At a point he even makes a pass at Lady Utterword, his wife's younger sister. The conversation between the two below pictures this:

HECTOR: Quite. I am deliberately playing the fool, out of sheer worthlessness.

LADY UTTERWORD: (rising brightly) Well, you are my brother-in-law, Hesione asked you to kiss me. (He seizes her in his arms and kisses her strenuously). Oh! that was a little more than play, brother-in-law. (She pushes him suddenly away). You shall not do that again.

HECTOR: In effect, you got your claws deeper into me than I intended (76).

One character that embodies the definition of a paradox is Billy Dunn. A thief caught trying to loot the family and instead of him to plead guilty and beg for mercy like any sane person in a conventional society will do; he threatens the family to turn him

in, for he knows that the aristocrats will do nothing but release him eventually. This speaks volume of a lawless, weak, English society; a vivid picture of the lax attitude of the English society before the war.

The play is replete with a lot of paradoxes; firstly, the character of Hector Hushbabye acts as a daring and adventurous person to Ellie, but on the other hand, he appears to be a liar and a confused fellow. Just like his son-in-law Hector, Shotover portrays himself to be a strong retired Captain as painted by the burglar:

THE BURGLAR: Well, it's no use my telling you a lie: I can take in most captains, but not Captain Shotover, because he sold himself to the devil in Zanzibar, and can divine water, spot gold, explode a cartridge in your pocket with a glance of his eye (120).

However, as events unfold, he is reduced to nothing but a drunken, clumsy old man. Also, Mangan who poses as a successful industrialist is eventually revealed to be a broke eccentric. Shaw in fact, portrays a lot of pictures that appear contrary to common sense in the play, from characterization to dialogue, plot and most importantly symbolism.

Comparatively, especially in terms of the realities evident in the world of the plays, *The Alchemist* and *Heartbreak House* depict the temper and social values characteristic of the epochs and societies they represent; but the issues they raise are still well and alive globally, even in our own time. The plays attacked the social and cultural status quo of the English society with vivid illustrations that are relevant and applicable to modern situations. The characters created by Jonson and Shaw as seen in the plays share common social traits. The disposition of Face, Subtle and Dol Common in *The Alchemist* as greedy, cunning and materialistic as seen in their dealings with their gullible clients is not different from the disposition of the characters in *Heartbreak House*. Characters like Captain Mangan a failed businessman who claims to be rich; Hector who tricked Ellie into a love relationship while already espoused to Hesione, the burglar who is no respecter of the law, all represent not only the rot prevalent in the various periods of English history, but also the spiritus mundi of our contemporary age. The play paints a picture of a world tottering into the abyss of no return. According to Eric Bentley (2008):

Heartbreak House might be called the Nightmare of a Fabian. All Shaw's themes are in it. You might learn from it, his teachings of love, religion, education and politics. But you are unlikely to do so, not only because the play is an argument in their favour. It is a demonstration that they are all being disregarded or defeated. It is a picture of failure (140).

The chaotic state of affairs anticipates social upheaval which at the end of the play leaves everyone more disturbing than the beginning. The melancholy strains of Randall's flute, the explosions in the skies and the detonated dynamite, all leave us with an impression of a dying society.

5. Conclusion

The Alchemist and *Heartbreak House* are exciting works that creatively employ diverse approaches, paradoxes, innuendos and personifications along other dramatic elements to mirror not only the English society but the shenanigans of man in general. The human traits of pretense, manipulation, deception, unpredictability, jealousy, greed, inordinate political, economic and sexual desires – the pool of all these negative traits and ,

according to Ossie Enekwe (2007), "psychological factors not easily perceptible" (10), which dominate human life, have been explored by Jonson and Shaw in penetrating dimension in their plays *The Alchemist* and *Heartbreak House*, in order to show how drama is co – extensive with life in human society. Both playwrights demonstrate that drama is not just a pleasant stupor according to Gorelik. It seeks to taste behavior, influence life, and tranquilize the people against anxiety and solitude. Gorelik (2027) is cited by Enekwe to have said that drama "picks up our unclear thoughts and carries them onward to clarity". It causes us to laugh at our foibles or gaze at them in awe in order to impel us to improve and stabilize our society.

Apart from being subsumed in social history, these two plays appropriate the enduring stance of drama as a timeless extension of who we are as humans. What the two texts show in diverse ways is that lust for wealth, political power as well as sexual gratification are trans historical, bypassing limits set by any historical paradigm. The troubling picture painted in the two texts is that of the Machiavellian world where the vanities of human society are let loose and each person seeks to take undue advantage of the other. The study suggests that in spite of man's claim to rationality, the plays posit the human world as being morally bankrupt and withering away owing to irreconcilable ideas and irresolvable differences fostered by the humankind.

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