

Political Drama: The Apple Cart

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on 26th July, 1856. He was an Irishman, son of George Carr Shaw. His father was the youngest son in the family of thirteen children. His father was a minor officer in the Dublin law court. Mother was an Irish landowner. His father was drunkard and couldn't earn enough money for the family. Carr Shaw had three children: one son and two daughters. Bernard Shaw learnt music from mother who was a good singer and musician. He himself became a clerk and cashier in a land agent's office. At the age of 73, Bernard Shaw wrote *The Apple Cart*, and its first performance was at the Polish theatre, Warsaw in June, 1929. Being a bag of stage tricks, Shaw has subtitled it 'A Political Extravaganza'. There is hardly any plot in it. Shaw has made up the deficiency of the story by introducing two interesting and exciting incidents: the interlude and interruption of true American Ambassador in the scene. Both these incidents are wholly irrelevant in the play.

Plot of the drama

Shaw's play 'The Apple Cart' (1929) not only combines the realm of political satire and futuristic visions but is still amazingly topical and accurate in its predictions (Shaw has placed the drama in a removed time—forty years in the future). The plot primarily exists as a framework for Shaw's satire. In the first half we meet two of the king's secretaries who introduce the general setup of the play. Then follows a long interview between the king of England, Magnus and the Labour leader, Mr. Boanerges. The first half culminates (develops) in a stormy meeting of the king, prime minister and cabinet during which the prime minister gives the king the ultimatum to remain as king with no power whatsoever, without even a veto, or else the cabinet will resign in mass. At the centre of the play is an extended interview between the king and his ambitious mistress Orinthia, a model of everything a ruler should not be, no matter how alluring (attracting). After this, the play parallels the first half with the introduction of Jemina, the king's United States wishes to rejoin the Commonwealth. This part is certainly an amazingly imaginary interesting prediction. The second half culminates in another stormy cabinet meeting during which the king answers the ultimatum with one of his own, declaring his own abdication from kingship and forming a political party and taking participation in the election so that he can win and form a cabinet under his primeministership. The king's ultimatum is so forceful in nature that the cabinet, particularly Proteus, the Prime minister withdraws the ultimatum. Thus, the play ends without any

particular result, except the resolution of the political crisis between the king and the cabinet.

Significance of the title 'The Apple Cart'

George Bernard Shaw has taken the title 'The Apple Cart' to signify the condition of the government under a certain leader, or rather a strong man. 'The Apple Cart' consists of a driver and lots of apples being carried on the cart. The cabinet of ministers functions the same role of the Apple Cart. In the play, there is a tussle between the king and the prime minister (Proteus) as well as other ministers. It is to decide who will drive the Apple Cart (government) - King Magnus or the prime minister Proteus. Both of them are stronger in their position. King Magnus is rather wise and clever than PM Proteus. It is true that if two men are on the same horse riding, only one is allowed to sit on the front. But the question arises who will sit on the front? In case of resignation from any one of them, it may upset the cart. The title itself is remarkable for political significance. Proteus plans the 'Ace of trumps', i.e. the threat of abdication. In fact, both of them know that they have to keep on driving the cart anyway. Shaw, in his preface, has said for the background of the play. One of his friends, who was an engineer, proposed to transport all the breakages in cheap price if the government assented. The government, instead of giving the tender of the work to him, passed the tender of other person at expensive price. This company was The Breakages Limited. Therefore, Shaw suggests here by the Apple Cart that in a democratic system the government is simply a cart which is used by the prime minister in benefits of own interests. There is no interest of running the cart wisely and with honour of the nation. The cart is full of demagogues (politicians) who humbug the public and all the time they try to upset the cart.

Characterization:

1. King Magnus: The king Magnus is a wise man. His wisdom is perceived throughout the play. There has been crisis after crises, but he has been able to tackle all of them actually. The king is well known for his tactics. The new minister Mr. Boanerges has heard about him, but yet he is highly persuaded by the cordial approach. The king is the most prominent character in the play. He is most dominant and magnificent character. He has been described to be the tallish studious looking gentleman of 45 or thereabouts. His etiquette manner is very skeptical. Boanerges says that the ceremony cuts no ice with him. Yet he is deceived. The king has the upper hand. The king has good experience of politics. He has strong insight and better foresight. For him, a king or any official is only an India rubber stamp, but not wholly, because he or

she is a living soul too. So this theory breaks down in every real emergency. He knows that everybody flatters the king, and often he is made a scapegoat and puppet. Though a king has less power than a republican, his position is secure. He is quite clever to impress the new minister by introducing him with the princess. That's the popular tactics known to the ministers, too. They laugh when they hear about the introduction. Proteus says that the king is as artful as the very devil. He is a superior player in the cards game (i.e. politics). Magnus has been exercising the constitutional right of royal veto too. But it becomes a crisis from the cabinet side. He believes that the royal veto is essential for check of any danger, but that is opposed by the ministers. Magnus shows the corruption that often happens in offices, but others ignore. They wish to make the king totally dumb and disabled by the means of ultimatum. The king, very skillfully and diplomatically, diverts the case to the parliamentary decision whether they will approve of cabinet government or monarchical government. He persuades the ministers that certainly he will lose the favor. He speaks splendidly to convince them advantages and disadvantages of different political systems as well as human attitudes. He plays with the affairs of Orinthia just like a young lover, but never lets her have upper hand. He proves his strong devotion to his married queen though she may be a cabbage, not rose, in opinion of Orinthia. He loves his nation with true soul that we can see when he refuses to shift the throne to Dublin. He has victory over the crisis, not by greater astuteness, but because he has the ace of trumps in his hand and knows when to play it. The king stands for royal dignity, respectability and tactics.

2. The Prime minister proteus: Proteus is a fool and very aggressive personality in the play. He has been subdued by the corruptive attitudes of the ministers. As all the ministers are indulged in unacceptable and disgusting manners of tempers, bullyings, sneerings, swearing, kickings and vulgar other activities, the prime minister is seen as useless horse-tamer. No any horses are in his command. He is over ambitious for power. That's why Proteus and Boanerges argue sometimes for power. He is conscious of the king's tactics, and tries to overcome him. He often threatens for resignation, and tries to hold the situation in his favour. Crisis, ultimatum and bitter and sometimes unreasonable arguments are brought ahead to reduce the king's power to the India rubber stamp. Magnus flatters him, and makes him believe that he is really superior. Proteus often becomes the subject of hysterics. He holds his claim that there must be restriction in the king's side. He loses no opportunity of disparaging the throne 'once for all'. His counter article in newspaper usually brings a crisis against the king.

Proteus has over confidence and as he has defeated all other parties and while the country was run by the king, he wants to bring the king into his confidence. But he has no right sense of right decision in right time. He is proved as democratic humbug, not responsible to the king, the public or the kingdom. Solution of the crisis is not brought out in the hall, but walking out in tempers and having private discussion. Private meeting and talk with king Magnus in the second act of the play brings up the resolution. The king and the prime minister's privacy is scandalous. Magnus believes that Proteus is clever fellow and he is to beat him, but it would give him no satisfaction to beat him. This statement reveals Proteus's true nature. There is cynical tone that he is really very foolish. He is responsible for going to upset the Apple Cart. Finally, he is easily defeated. The game turns in favour of the tactful king. The same threat of resignation, arc of trumps applied by Proteus is used by the king in turn. Proteus realizes that the king is able to make a treachery in the scene, and therefore, he surrenders himself. He tears out the ultimatum and quits the meeting.

Also face the election rather than staying as weak and dumb king. He also surrenders himself helplessly.

The king's response to the cabinet's ultimatum as revealed in the Apple Cart

The ultimatum contains three conditions:

1. The king should not make any speeches
2. The king should not talk about the veto power anymore
3. The king should not give any articles to the newspaper or he should not run the paper from behind the palace.

This ultimatum is given by the cabinet to make the king merely a puppet. When the king realizes that they are determined and insist on the ultimatum, he talks to the prime minister in private. Then he comes back to address the cabinet frankly that he is a human being. He is a king, not a puppet, and the king must work unlike the puppet. The cabinet should consider their own situation where they will be without the king. The king himself has only two options - either he should abdicate or accept the conditions and become a puppet in their hands. He is obliged to decide the same day. Most of the things that he spends are to convince the cabinet that their position is stronger than the king. He convinces them that their success is certain if they insist. The king encourages their excitement and when they are going to lose their patience, he surrenders. He asks time until five o'clock to consider his decision. Policy behind this speech and time is only to prepare the situation favourable to him. He uses his skill for the card that the prime

minister has already applied. That's why he does not alert them with any hints that he is going to play their own trick. After lengthening the time for decision, he finally brings them into unexpected confusion by the declaration of the abdication. He uses the same conventional treat-tit for tat, and he is successful too.

Humorous argument between Sempronius and Pamphilius on the death of Sempronius's father

The beginning conversation between Sempronius and Pamphilius is very humorous and ironic as well. Sempronius's father was a naturalist. He attended and arranged many ceremonies. He had arranged the last two coronations. He was behind the scenes with all royal people. Though he was behind, he believed they were all real. His father died of solitude. He couldn't bear to be alone for a moment. It was his death to him. It so happened that he swam to an uninhabited island after the yacht (boat) struck a reef. He was alone in the island, no one to play cards with and no church to go to. Pamphilius recites a poem in praise about nature of uninhabited island. But, says Sempronius, nature to him meant nakedness and nakedness only disgusted him. He relates the argument with politics. They say that where there is nothing the king loses his rights. Where there is nothing a man loses his reason and dies. So his father died. Very humorously Pamphilius adds that in that palace that "when the king's letters are not ready..... a secretary loses his job". Overall meaning of this conversation is that a king must have people and kingdom for rule. A man must have people and place around him for his reason and survival.

Endgame Summary of Endgame

The setting for Endgame is a bare room with two small windows situated high up on the back wall. This is a shelter for the four characters; the rest of the world is supposed to be dead. The right window looks out over the earth, and the left window looks out over the sea. [Hamm](#) is onstage, seated in chair, and covered with a sheet when the play opens. [Clow](#) enters and proceeds to set up a ladder so he can look out both windows. Once he has completed this ritual he leaves the room and goes to his kitchen.

Hamm wakes up wanting to play games. He whistles and Clow immediately appears. They discuss Hamm's eyes, which Clow has never looked at. Hamm asks Clow to put the sheet back over him, indicating that he wants to go to sleep. Clow refuses, and Hamm threatens not to feed him anymore. Clow says that then he will die.

Hamm finally asks Clov why he does not leave. Clov indicates that he is trying to leave, and that someday he will. Hamm then wants to know why Clov will not kill him. Their conversation is stunted by the fact that whenever one of them makes a statement, it is countered by the other person. The first speaker then agrees with the counter argument, meaning that the conversation immediately ends.

Hamm's father, [Nagg](#), lifts the cover of his bin and appears, his face white. Hamm immediately curses him, calling him, "Accursed progenitor!" Nagg wants his pap, but instead all he gets is a biscuit to gnaw on. Clov then "bottles" him by pushing him back down into his bin. Hamm wants Clov to sit on top of the bin, but Clov indicates that his legs are so bad that he cannot sit down.

Hamm then comments that nature has forgotten them. Clov argues that there is no more nature. When Hamm points out that they are aging, Clov comments that then nature has not forgotten them. This brief conversation is indicative of their constant wordplay. Hamm then asks if it is time for his pain-killer, but Clov tells him it is not yet time.

After Clov returns to his kitchen, Hamm leans back in his chair and tries to sleep. Nagg emerges again and knocks on [Nell](#)'s bin. She emerges as well. Nagg asks her for a kiss, but they cannot reach each other because the bins are too far apart. They start to recall past events and remember losing their legs in the famous accident in Ardennes. They then complain that the sand in their bins does not get changed often enough. Nagg offers Nell a bit of the biscuit, but she refuses.

Hamm wakes up and tells them to be quiet. Nell asks if Nagg has anything else to say to her, and when he does not, she tells him she is going to leave him. He asks her to scratch him, but since she cannot reach him, she refuses. He then tries to tell her a joke about a tailor. She recalls the first time he ever told her the joke. Nagg soon starts to tell it.

The joke is about a man who orders a pair of trousers from a tailor. After waiting several days he returns, but they are not yet finished. Every time he goes back to get his trousers, the tailor gives him an excuse about why they are not yet finished. Finally the man explodes in rage and says, "In six days...God made the world...And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!" The tailor replies, "But my dear Sir...look at the world...and look at my trousers!"

Hamm orders Nagg to be silent and whistles for Clov. He orders Clov to chuck the two bins into the sea. Clov goes over to Nell and feels her pulse, and after she utters the final word, "desert," he pushes her back into the bin. He then tells Hamm that Nell has no pulse. Hamm, after making sure both Nagg and Nell are back in their bins, asks for his pain-killer again. Again, Clov refuses to give it to him, saying it is too early.

Clov then pushes Hamm's chair around the room in a circular fashion. Hamm says, "Right round the world!" and wants Clov to "Hug the walls." Clov finally pushes the chair up against the wall and Hamm knocks on it. After declaring that the bricks are hollow, Hamm demands to be put back in his spot. He carefully, and comically, forces Clov to put his chair in the dead center of the stage.

Hamm then wants to know about the weather. He makes Clov get the ladder and look at the earth. Clov says he sees "Zero...zero...and zero." Hamm then demands that Clov look at the ocean. The only thing Clov sees is that sun has gone down and that it is gray outside.

Clov suddenly realizes that he has a flea. Hamm says, "But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!" Clov gets some flea powder and pours it down his pants until he is sure that he killed the flea. Hamm then decides that he wants to leave the shelter. He orders Clov to build him a raft so he can leave "tomorrow." He then asks for his pain-killer again, but again Clov refuses to give it to him.

Clov discusses leaving Hamm again, but as before he is not ready to go. Hamm reveals that he, "was a father to [Clov]." This comment makes their relationship unclear; is Clov a servant or Hamm's son? Hamm then demands his dog, which turns out to be a toy dog that is missing a leg. Hamm makes Clov hold the dog in a begging position so that he can pet him. He then orders Clov to get his gaff. Clov comments, "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. Why?"

Hamm takes the gaff and tries to push himself with it, but he soon gives up. Hamm relates a story of a madman who used to look at the world and only see ashes. He then asks Clov how he will know the difference between Clov leaving him or Clov dying in the kitchen. Clov indicates that if he dies, the place will stink. Hamm then points out that the place stinks already.

Hamm orders Clov to think of a solution. Clov decides to set the alarm clock as a sign that he has left. If Hamm hears the alarm, he will know that Clov is gone, whereas if there is no alarm, then Clov is dead. He quickly tests the alarm to make sure it is working. Hamm asks for his pain-killer, but Clov will not give it to him.

Hamm then says that it is time for his daily story. This is a semi-biographical story that Hamm invents a part of every day. Clov wakes up Nagg and Hamm bribes his father into listening to the story. The story consists of Hamm, a prosperous man with money and food, watching a man crawl towards him on his belly. The man petitions Hamm to save his little boy. He explains that everyone is dead in his hometown except for his little boy, whom he wants Hamm to save before the boy starves to death. Hamm gets extremely angry with the man for asking for food, but when he calms down he offers the man a job. The man accepts and then begs to have his child with him. Hamm ends the story at that spot.

Clov returns from the kitchen and informs Hamm that there is a rat in the kitchen. He has tried to kill it, but without success. Nagg then demands his sugar-plum, which is what Hamm promised him if he would listen to the story. Hamm insists that they pray first. After some silent prayer, Hamm comments, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" Hamm then tells Nagg that there are no more sugar-plums. Nagg comments that having such an ungrateful son is "natural" given that he used to ignore Hamm's cries when Hamm called for him as a child. Nagg then knock on Nell's bin, but when she does not appear he disappears back into his own bin.

Hamm tries to touch the toy dog again, but is has fallen to the ground. Clov picks it up and gives it to Hamm before starting to clean up the floor. Hamm orders him to stop cleaning up and makes Clov drop all the things back onto the floor. Hamm then recounts the story he told to Nagg; Clov compliments him being able to continue the story.

Hamm has Clov check on Nagg and Nell. Clov says that it appears as if Nell is dead, whereas Nagg is merely crying in his bin. Wanting some light, Hamm has Clov push his chair to one of the windows. He does not feel any light and orders Clov to move him to the other window,

the window that looks out towards the sea. Hamm finally gives up when Clov tells him there is no light.

Hamm then calls to Nagg. Clov goes over and speaks to Nagg, who refuses to come out of his bin. Clov soon leaves, and Hamm delivers a long soliloquy. He remarks that when he ends his story, he might start another one. At the end of his soliloquy he whistles for Clov, and is surprised when Clov appears with the alarm clock.

Clov indicates that he has not left yet. Hamm then asks for his pain-killer and is excited to learn that it is the right time for it. However, Clov cruelly tells him that there is no more pain-killer. Hamm is crushed to learn that he will have to suffer without any pain-killer, and in the meantime Clov hangs up the alarm clock.

Hamm then orders Clov to look at the earth again. Clov dutifully climbs the ladder, but accidentally looks out of the left window and sees the ocean. He first thinks that the land is under water before realizing that he is at that wrong window. He goes over to the other window and climbs up, but Hamm requires that he use the telescope. Clov climbs back down the ladder and searches for the telescope.

While Clov is searching, Hamm demands his dog. Clov angrily takes the dog and hits Hamm on the head with it before handing it to him. Clov finally finds the telescope and climbs the ladder with it. He looks around and surprisingly spots a small boy. Clov immediately picks up the gaff with the intention of killing the boy, but Hamm stops him. Clov is surprised, and asks, "No? A potential procreator?," indicating that the boy is a threat because he might reproduce.

Hamm tells Clov, "It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more." He then makes Clov leave the gaff. Clov hands Hamm the gaff and places the alarm clock on Nagg's bin. Hamm begs him to say something before leaving, and Clov eventually starts a speech that Hamm quickly cuts off.

Hamm then asks Clov for a last favor, but Clov has already left the room. Hamm starts to talk to himself, and while he speaks Clov silently returns, dressed for all weathers. Hamm continues to speak, and he soon whistles for Clov, who still does not move. Hamm then throws away the dog and tosses the whistle to the audience. His last act is to cover his face with his handkerchief and sit motionless on his chair.

Cyclical, Repetitive Nature of Beginnings and Endings

Endgame's opening lines repeat the word "finished," and the rest of the play hammers away at the idea that beginnings and endings are intertwined, that existence is cyclical. Whether it is the story about the tailor, which juxtaposes its conceit of creation with never-ending delays, Hamm and Clov's killing the flea from which humanity may be reborn, or the numerous references to Christ, whose death gave birth to a new religion, death-related endings in the play are one and the same with beginnings. While Hamm and Clov are in the "endgame" of their ancient lives, with death lurking around the corner, they are also stuck in a perpetual loop that never allows final closure—Hamm claims he wants to be "finished," but admits that he "hesitate[s]" to do so. Just as death cannot arrive to seal off life, neither can Hamm or Clov escape to close the book on one existence and open another—note Clov's frequent failed attempts to leave the room (and his final return after vowing to leave) and Hamm's insistence on returning to the center of the room. Nell's death may be

an aberration in a play where death seems impossible, but since she is the one character who recognizes the absurdity of the situation, perhaps she is rewarded by dying.

Several of Beckett's dramatic designs elucidate this notion of a circular existence. As mentioned above, Hamm has a compulsive need to return to the exact center of the room after Clov takes him on chair-rides. His oblique comments about the environment—beyond the hollow wall in their hole is the "other hell"—suggest an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, another work that used images of circularity. And just as Dante's infernal images emphasize the eternal misery of its inhabitants, Beckett's characters are stuck in eternally static routines. They go through the "farce" of routine actions, as they call it, because there is nothing else to do while they wait for death. Even the environment around them is static; everything outside is "zero," as Clov reports, and the light, too, is forever gray, stranded between light and dark. Beckett also makes use of repetitions to underscore the cyclical stasis in *Endgame*. The play systematically repeats minute movements, from how many knocks Hamm makes on a wall and how many Nagg makes on Nell's ashbin to how many steps Clov takes. The repetitions prohibit the discernment of meaning, since there is never a final product to scrutinize. At the start of the play, Clov questions when individual grains become a "heap." In his view, the heap is "impossible"; any single grain is not a heap, and a "heap" is just an accumulation of single grains. When Hamm later considers how individual moments make up a life, the analogy should hold—it is an "impossible" life, consisting not of a life but of discrete moments, until death terminates it. At one point, Hamm excitedly believes he is "beginning" to make some meaning out of the environment, but he will keep *beginning* to make sense of it and never *finalize* the meaning.

Emptiness and Loneliness

The constant tension in *Endgame* is whether Clov will leave Hamm or not. He threatens to and does sometimes, but he is never able to make a clean break. Likewise, Hamm continually tells Clov to leave him alone but pulls him back before an exit is possible. Both wonder out loud why they stay with each other, but both men give reasons in long monologues for why they put up with each other: their empty lives are filled only with unyielding pain, and none of life's typical consolations help them—there is no cure for being on earth, as Hamm often says. One of the unspoken themes in the play is that having someone else around, even an irritant, helps assuage that pain. But Hamm and Clov's unwillingness to face this pain alone somehow makes the pain greater, and their complementary, dominant-submissive pairing (a staple of Beckett's plays) highlights their numbing dependency. Beckett has compared Hamm and Clov's tense co-dependency to his own relationship with his wife in the 1950s; both wanted to leave the other, but were afraid to. Nagg and Nell have a happier marriage in part because Nell, at least, is willing to accept that they cannot rely on each other (she calls their futile kissing routine a "farce") and must exist in their separate ashbins.

Theatre of the Absurd

Beckett was one of the lynchpins behind the French theatrical movement called the Theatre of the Absurd. The Absurdists took a page from Existentialist philosophy, believing that life was absurd, beyond human rationality, meaningless, a sentiment to which *Endgame* subscribes, with its conception of circularity and non-meaning. Beckett's own brand of Absurdism melds tragedy and comedy in new ways; Winnie gives a good definition of his tragicomedy when she says, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett believes this was the most important line of the play). Self-conscious form in the theater was another feature of Absurdism, and there's no shortage in *Endgame*, from Clov's turning the telescope on the audience to Hamm's showy references to his own acting. But Beckett's self-consciousness is not merely for laughs. Just as the characters cannot escape the room or

themselves, trapped in self-conscious cages, neither can the audience escape their lives for a night of theatrical diversion