

Introduction of the Play

"The Devil's Disciple" A Melodrama in Three Acts; Like several of Shaw's early plays, The Devil's Disciple first produced in 1897 and published in his collection Three Plays for Puritans in 1901 takes an existing popular theatrical form, in this case melodrama, and adapts it to serve Shaw's dramatic purposes. In the preface to Three Plays for Puritans he writes: It does not contain a single even passably novel incident. Every old patron of the Adelphi (a theatre which specialized in melodrama) pit would recognize the reading of the will, the oppressed orphan finding a protector, the arrest, the heroic sacrifice, the court martial, the scaffold, the reprieve at the last moment, as he recognizes beefsteak pudding on the bill of fare at his restaurant. As well as using the stock devices of melodrama, Shaw writes in the preface that he unashamedly borrowed from previous works, Mrs Dudgeon being drawn from Mrs Clennam in Dickens's Little Dorrit and Dick Dudgeon's willingness to go the gallows for another man deriving from Sidney Carton's sacrifice in A Tale of Two Cities. The play was given its first production in the United States and was successful there. When it was produced in England it had little success, the main reason probably being that the plot involves a British military defeat. Melodrama was attractive to Shaw at the beginning of his dramatic career because it incorporated certain ideals, attitudes, beliefs, values, which an audience would accept virtually without question but which he aimed to undermine. Thus he retains the form of melodrama but radically alters the content, his aim being to tackle the large numbers of shams, repressions, sentimentalities, insincerities, and ideal with which, he claims, the English identify and take

pride in. Two of the ideals that Shaw sets out to attack in this play are the ideal of the family and the ideal of marriage. The main character of *The Devil's Disciple*, Dick Dudgeon, is in revolt against the ideal of the family to the extent that he has rejected his own family. Identifying with the devil has prevented his spirit being taken over by his mother's life-denying religion. In the preface Shaw claims that it is the failure of marriage or the family that creates the idealization of them because idealists refuse to accept the reality of that failure and substitute ideals in place of the reality. Mrs Dudgeon is an idealist of this type, a person for whom marriage and the family have failed but who endeavours to hide this fact by turning them into ideals. She refused to marry the man she loved, Dick's uncle Peter, because he was irreligious and instead married a man she didn't love because he was god-fearing, but she refuses to recognize that this act destroyed any chance of a happy marriage and family life and condemns Peter and her son for their refusal to conform. The setting of the play is New Hampshire in 1777 at the time of the American Revolution. In the first act Dick Dudgeon's father has died and the action culminates in the reading of his will. Much to his mother's consternation, a former will is revoked in order that the house and the land belonging to it be left to Dick Dudgeon, the eldest son. At the end of the act Dudgeon asserts that he is rightfully called the Devil's Disciple much to the horror of Judith, the wife of the minister, Anthony Anderson. The second act is set in Anderson's house. Dudgeon calls at the minister's invitation. He is warned that he may be in danger as his uncle has been hanged by the British army. When the minister has to leave because he is summoned to go to Mrs Dudgeon who has been taken ill, Dudgeon and Judith are left alone together. The British come to the house to arrest Anderson, but mistake Dudgeon for him.

Plot of the Play

The Devil's Disciple is the only full-length play by G. Bernard Shaw set in America. It's a melodrama, though not without humor, particularly in the character of General Burgoyne. The play is important in Shaw's career in that, though it was the eighth play he wrote, it was the first--due to Richard Mansfield's original 1897 production in America--that was financially successful, helping to assure his career as a playwright. The play is set during the Revolutionary War and is the fictional story of Richard Dudgeon, an American hero. It was published in Shaw's 1901 collection *Three Plays for Puritans* (together with *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* and *Cæsar and Cleopatra*). A film version was made in 1959.

Plot

Dudgeon is secretly a rebel, and is considered by his family and friends to be the "Devil's disciple" because of his rebellious personality and unfaithfulness to religion. The main reason why he has turned so "devilish" is because of his rude and inconsiderate mother's rigid piety, which has deterred Dudgeon from following in her footsteps. In Act I, however, Dick returns home upon the death of his father to hear the reading of the will. His wickedness appalls Judith, the wife of the town's minister, Anthony Anderson.

In Act II, Richard is in fact the hero. While visiting Anderson's home, Dick is left alone with Judith while Anderson is called out to Mrs. Dudgeon's deathbed. Neither Dick nor Judith finds the tête-à-tête comfortable, but when British soldiers enter and arrest Dick, mistaking him for Anderson,

Dick allows them to take him away, knowing that they will hang him. He swears Judith to secrecy lest her husband give the secret away. But when Anderson hears what has happened, he seems to turn into a different man: calling for money and a gun, he rides away. Judith believes her husband to be a coward, while Dick, whom she despised, is a hero.

In Act III, Judith visits Dick and asks him if he has acted from love. He gently explains that he does not love her, but has acted out of an unexpected decency. During the military trial, Dick is convicted and sentenced to be hanged. This scene introduces General Burgoyne, a Shavian realist, who contributes a number of sharp remarks about the conduct of the American Revolution. Judith interrupts the proceedings to reveal Dick's true identity--but to no avail: he will be hanged in any case. News reaches Burgoyne that American rebels have taken a nearby town, so he and his troops are in danger. The rebels will send a man to negotiate with the British. The final scene of the play is the public square where Dick will be hanged.

Like Sidney Carton in Dickens's A Tale Of Two Cities, Dick prepares to meet his death. At the last minute, Burgoyne stops the hanging because the rebel has arrived. It is Anthony Anderson, who has become a man of action in an instant, just as Dick became a man of conscience in an instant. Anderson bargains for Dick's life, and Burgoyne, who has just learned that reinforcements that he had expected will not arrive, agrees to free him. As the Americans rejoice, the British go away, knowing that they face certain defeat.

Short Summary of the Play

The Irish Rep is doing its patriotic duty with a first rate production of the only play George Bernard Shaw set in America. It is pure Victorian melodrama but it is also quite funny, prescient and topical. Even more importantly, it is Shaw's warning about how Puritanical values bring misery. The self-described "upstart son of a downstart," Shaw has also been labeled "the world's most thorough playwright." To be sure, the "upstart," delighted himself by toying with every social, political, moral and ethical rebellion from here to Methuselah and back. In his most rebellious mood with *The Devil's Disciple*, he cleverly probed into the ceremoniously veiled presumptions about Godliness and devilry. Is it less than Godliness when the irreverent and incorrigible Dick Dudgeon, the black sheep of the family, not only takes an orphan under his wing but also takes the place of the purposefully dedicated Parson Anderson at the foot of the gallows? And what are we to make of the parson's quick decision to sell his Bibles in order to buy pistols so he, with the help of a neighboring band of patriots, can surround Burgoyne's army and effect Dick's release?

The play, which takes place in Web Sturbridge, New Hampshire, in 1777, concerns the conflict between the British and the rebellious colonists. The play begins with the news that the British have hanged two Dudgeon brothers as rebels, and the Dudgeon family gathers for the reading of the will, which leaves most of the property to Dick Dudgeon, a godless, dissolute man despised by the rest of the family. Anthony Anderson, the Protestant minister who consoles the vengeful

Mrs. Dudgeon, learns that the British intend to hang another rebel and, thinking that Dick is the intended victim, warns him. The British, however, have targeted Anderson and come to his house to arrest him. Dick is at the Anderson house with Judith, who hides her attraction to him by verbally attacking him; Dick is mistaken for Anderson and arrested. He does not reveal his true identity and is taken to jail and joined by Judith, who confesses her love for him. After Dick is tried and convinced, Judith tells General Burgoyne that Dick is not her husband, but the sentence stands. At the gallows Anderson, who arrives with a safe-conduct pass and demands that Dick be freed, saves Dick. Anderson has found his true calling as a soldier and offers to exchange occupations with Dick, who promises Judith that he will not tell Anderson about her infatuation. While the film retains many of Shaw's anti-British quips, mostly given to Dick and Burgoyne, there are some alterations to the plot. Through animated sequences, the play provides a historical context; and the play shows how the Americans' guerrilla tactics frustrate the British, to explain why Anderson is the intended victim (he buried Dick's father's body), and to show Anderson's development from minister to soldier as he becomes progressively involved in the battle and finally ignites the British ammunition dump.